Chains Adventurous - Dimensions In Time

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Chains Adventurous - Dimensions In Time

by nvzblgrrl

Summary

Spacemen, time travel, extra-dimensional entities, unexpected developments, and personality clashes don't exactly make for a relaxing vacation, but beggars and Jumpers (and sometimes Time Lords) can't be choosers. Warnings for violence, language, and the occasional unpopular opinion. Not Ten/Rose. A rewrite of Chains Adventurous - Adventures In Time And Space.

Notes

A rewrite of Chains Adventurous - Adventures In Time And Space

Text Key

"Audible speech."
'Directed thought, telepathic speech.'
Military personnel intermingled with plainclothes advisors and civilian scientists in a space intended for half the number of bodies present. The noise of a dozen telephones being picked up, put down, and dialed mingling with the clatter of three times as many keyboards only added to the tense atmosphere as the brainpower of half a dozen separate organizations was set to figuring out the situation.

Americans might have referred to the space as a 'war room'. Barely separated from the controlled chaos by a thin pane of glass, Harriet Jones, Prime Minster decided she would rather call it a 'command centre'.

First contact – or at least, first 'official' contact – did not immediately justify the trappings of war, no matter what President Winters and his right-hand slime seemed to think. It had been a British satellite on a British broadcast, which meant that Britain had first crack at it, no matter how badly the so called 'Leader of the Free World' wanted to be responsible for cocking it all up.

Not that Harriet Jones would have faulted some outside help, given that all they had figured out about their imminent 'guests' was that they were going to arrive in approximately five hours and didn't speak English.

Still, Torchwood had oh-so-generously given her a call and the donation of a universal translator that would be arriving shortly, so they weren't completely out of their depth even if the other offer they'd pushed forward was far from comforting. Rather, it felt like a darker threat than the aliens up above.

Harriet dismissed the thought as the UNIT officer in charge of this particular operation entered her little room again. Major Richard Blake was a large man of a largely professional demeanor, but he was one of her favorites out of all her UNIT contacts, never mind the Torchwood set, if only because he didn't idle with nonsense and secrets more than his job required.

"They'll be here in five hours, Minister Jones," he said.

Anything else he could say was cut off by the sound of a phone ringing, not from the main area, but from the very room they were sitting in. Her personal mobile, in fact.

A lump of lead settled into her stomach, only to shift slightly as she noted the caller display coming up blank. Not a call from home then. That would have been the last thing she needed tonight.

"Bad news, Minister Jones?" Major Blake asked.

"A poor sort of Christmas present, I would think, but I will be finding out shortly," she said before picking up the call. "Harriet Jones, Prime Minister."

"I know who you are," the caller said, cutting her off before she could ask who they were and how they got this number. "They're called the Sycorax."

The voice was unfamiliar, but the accent was easily identifiable as Scottish. Highlands, if Harriet recalled correctly, which when paired with a voice that seemed to play hopscotch between being 'comforting' and 'intimidating', created something that demanded attention just by existing.
"Excuse me?" she asked.

"The aliens that hijacked your broadcast, yes, the unpleasant looking fellows in red," the mystery caller said again, as if speaking to a simple child, their voice buzzing around the R's like an agitated bee hive. "They are called the Sycorax. An interesting, if somewhat… unpleasant species to deal with."

"How do you –," Harriet began to ask before shaking her head. This could be the lifeline they needed, the edge that information granted. "I'm putting you on speaker," she said before motioning for an aide to bring over an appropriate speaker. "Run a trace while you're at it," she whispered.

"Their chosen… aesthetic is very distinctive," the caller continued, their cool tones filling the room easily now that the phone was attached to the appropriate equipment. "Admittedly, it is hardly possible to produce a universal encyclopedia, given the length, breadth, and duration of history, let alone the interference of however-many time travelers mucking up the history and altering timelines so certain things exist and others don't, but my… experience leaves only one other group given to the blood-bone-and-voodoo look and – believe me – if the Faction Paradox was the one knocking on your door, your world would have been over ten times before tea-time yesterday and twice before tomorrow."

Somehow, the idea that things could be infinitely worse was not a comforting one. "Back to the subject of these… Sycorax. What do they want?"

There was barely a pause between the question and the answer, but it was enough to let the word that followed fall with the weight of the world.

"Everything."

The bustle had filled the command centre stilled as every head seemed to turn towards the glass-partitioned room and the phone that lay on the table within.

"They want your land, your minerals, your precious stones," the caller said, their words as cold and dark as the echo of leaden coffins closing in the depths of ancient catacombs, not even the buzz of that Scottish accent around the R's softening the facts as they were delivered. "Every possible resource that could be squeezed from this rock – be it oil, water, or blood – they want. Including you. This is no compliment; the Sycorax are slavers. To them, you are chattel and fit for all that implies."

Some of the aides and scientists looked sick at this declaration and not all of them were the image of youthful idealism. Harriet Jones might have been one of them if she'd never encountered the Slitheen. No, the universe at large had already disabused her of the notion that it was a 'nice' place.

"Do you know how they intend to go about it then?" she asked. "They only have one ship. What capabilities are we dealing with here that one ship is deemed sufficient to conquer an entire planet?"

The caller chuckled, a low rolling sound that had more in common with a landslide than human mirth. "A good question, Harriet Jones, Prime Minister. Here's the short answer; they don't. Not without playing dirty."

"And what's the long answer?" one of the scientists – ah, yes, Mr. Llewellyn from the Guinevere-1 Project – asked.

"The Sycorax are lazy. Rather than learn a modicum of the local history and custom, they make like most imperialists; come in with a show of power, cow the masses, and make their outrageous demands. Never cared for that sort, coming into someone else's house assuming they know best
when all they have is a misplaced and overinflated sense of nationalism."

A few agents, mostly ones that Harriet Jones recognized from the Torchwood 'donation', stiffened. The speaker, not being physically present to see the reaction to their words, continued.

"Unfortunately for you, their show of power isn't one that you can easily countermand. Tell me, have the Type-A Positives started acting strangely yet?"

"What does that have to do with –"

"Their demands?" their mysterious caller finished. "You have them outnumbered, outgunned – not that they'd know that, what with the lack of research –, and nearly all of their weapons are exclusively intended for close combat. To make a hostage demand, one needs a way to impose a threat. Without weapons, that leaves something that cannot be so easily countered."

"Biological warfare?" Major Blake offered.

"A good guess, but a bit... oh, there's a lovely term I've heard on Earth for the idea I'm trying to vocalize here, ah… ass-backwards for those interested in a healthy slave-population, wouldn't you agree?" they said. "No, they have another method of taking control of the situation, one that will hand them control of approximately a third of your population."

"Hypnotism?" someone asked from the back.

"Aight, who the fuck invited the bloody Master to this little questionnaire–" a different voice from their caller muttered over the speaker before being cut off. Harsher, younger, and definitely British compared to the softer Scottish tones of the voice Harriet was already calling 'The Professor' in her head.

"Of a sort," the cooler voice said as they resumed control of the phone. "It's called 'blood control' and they're using the blood sample that you sent off in your ill-fated probe as the keystone to their plan. Used correctly, it can be a powerful method of control, capable of giving those under its control complex commands... so long as those commands don't run counter to the subject's basic instincts."

Harriet Jones swallowed down the dread that was building in her lungs. "And those commands would be?"

"Climb on top of the tallest thing you can and wait."

I was waiting.

Technically, 'I' was on the phone, but it was a different 'me' doing the talking. Zeke was a different life with a different mind, different thoughts, and a different voice that nevertheless was part of the same pattern as the human called Delaine, even if he had been into it in a different way than most of the others.

I could have given the information myself, yes, but Zeke was native to this universe, in a roundabout way. Plus, I trusted him. Between that, his silver tongue, and a mind sharper than most laser beams, I had no issue letting him have full control over 'our' body for the interim, even if it was a small hassle maintaining the balance needed to stop myself from slipping back into the driver's seat.

After all, doing that allowed me to deal with another problem.

I gave Gemma another imaginary kick to the head, which worked since both of us were currently in
an imaginary state. "Who the fuck invited the Master?" I snapped. "That's what you felt so compelled to fuck-up this delicate balancing act for? A cheap shout-out quip based on a TV show that doesn't even exist in this 'verse?"

Gemma gave me a look. "Like you and the rest haven't done the exact same thing."

"I think the difference between that and this was that 'that' involved the person who was supposed to be in control trying to be funny or relieve stress while 'this' was stupid and an interruption of something kind of important to unfuckulating the timeline," I said as I crossed my arms and rolled my eyes. "'Who the invited the Master'…"

"Y'never complained about my quips when I had primacy," the young witch muttered.

"Being on the shit list of every creature that's ever crossed a Constantine, you got a pass. Plus, you got a fair corner on acerbic wit and sarcasm; it's just when you try to be anything outside of that, it sucks," I said. "Now, shut up, I think Zeke's just about done teaching his 'class'."

I pushed away from the middle-ground of my mind, the sounds of the waking world coming back as if I had been underwater and was just now resurfacing.

"– know this?"

"You could say I have approximate knowledge of many things," Zeke and I said together.

'Welcome back', he thought as we reached synchronicity again. 'I trust there will be no more interruptions from the mixed nuts?'

'It's a peanut gallery, and no, there will not,' I agreed.

"How?" someone said. Not Harriet Jones, but one of the others in the room. Torchwood or UNIT, I wondered absently. In the end, it really didn't matter, though I had less love for the former.

"My means are beyond you, my methods the stuff of madness, my theories suspect, and I suspect that if you could see my tie, you wouldn't like that either," Zeke said. "But the Earth is protected, and not just by the likes of UNIT and Torchwood. You can put faith in that. Code Nine arriving in time with our hostile party, by the way. Thought you would like to know. Goodbye, Minister Jones."

The Time Lord dropped the phone back onto the hook and, for the brief moment we were both in and out of control of our body, shuddered. Then it was just me in the driver's seat again. Just as the system was designed.

'What's your plan now?' Zeke asked as he settled back into his place in the 'backroom' of my mind.

'To find a good place to sit of course. I wouldn't want to miss the main event,' I thought as I stepped out of the public telephone box and tuned out the other voices. Thankfully, the street was empty; one of the few perks to being out alone late on Christmas Eve.

I let Zeke's body change into my own regular shape; roughly about the same height but a noticeably skinnier frame, though a lot tougher by Asgardian default. The feeling of change was almost non-existent in between those shifts, at most it was the burn of melting wax running alongside the inside of my bones as strands of hair altered their composition from relatively short curls to a longer, lazier tangle of chaotic and uncoordinated waves.

I reached up to tangle my fingers in it with a grimace. "That asshole keeps resetting the length," I muttered, making the mental note to whip out a knife or a razor as soon as I had a spare moment, a
cutting implement, and a mirror.

'Didn't you have something to do? Someplace to be?'

I rolled my eyes at the impatience. Ordinarily, I would have just summoned one of my bikes from the warehouse, but there was a call for stealth tonight. Not ordinarily my wheelhouse of operations, being something of a bruiser and leg-breaker in function, but it was a rare day when any of us got what we wanted.

I pulled on the coat, making sure it was securely in place before I launched myself off of the pavement, landing on one of the rooftops nearby for only a second before darting to the next.

'Flying would be faster,' one of the others said.

'Yeah, but I'm not the best at happy thoughts,' I replied as I leaped across a particularly long gap with all the effort most people put into stepping over a crack. The resistance as I touched down on the other side was a passing presence, but reassuring in its own way. 'Especially since I don't think Selby came with me this time.'

The voices in the back of my mind turned slightly worried, but for now, his absence was survivable in the way a dislocated arm was. It hurt and it wasn't particularly fun, but I wasn't actively dying. Just miserable.

There was another reason why I wasn't flying apart from personal preference; like the motorcycles, it had a way of garnering attention. Except instead of people complaining about the noise to police, it was radar monitors alerting the air force. And on a night when an alien invasion was in the air, travelling by rooftop at night with only the light of a cat's grin moon to guide me, invisibility was my greatest ally.

What I would do after this encounter with the Sycorax…

Well, I'd always been one for winging it. I'd figure it out.

For now, I was free.

This regeneration was highly irregular.

The Doctor hated the phrasing immediately. 'Highly irregular', yech. Officious, snotty, and oh so very stick-in-the-muddy, all within the space of two words. It'd be the sort of thing that an officiant of the most boring stripe would say when asked to speed things up in a time of crisis and that was not very Doctor-y.

Unless this latest incarnation was going to head that way, though the fact that he'd responded to the thought so negatively seemed to point in the opposite direction. Just as well; he'd always been against that sort of thing and it was at least one sign of something that was staying the same. No need to go off the Valeyards – no, not the Valeyard, the rails, the rails – just yet. The Valeyard may or may not be later and may or may not be avoidable, but it was certainly not a problem for this model.

If the Doctor had any choice in the matter, it wouldn't ever be for any model that followed his either.

Still, this regeneration was different. The Vortex energy was overloading the circuits, melting parts of his brain the moment the regeneration was done stabilizing them, and he should have had at least a version of consciousness… well, a while ago. It was hard to tell if it should have been minutes or hours, because even the usually impeccable time sense of a Time Lord was skewed, winding too fast
or too slow and sometimes vanishing all together as he bobbed through different levels of his consciousness.

Memories mingled with dreams and forebodings, warnings from past selves merging with absolute nonsense and nightmares.

Games where the rules changed at every turn, spiders crawling out of every possible crack to envelop him in their tickly embrace as their mother and master came out of her hole to feast before the world flipped, dumping him into the canals of Venice.

The Doctor gasped as he finally managed to clear his head of the water and then slipped back under as a gigantic raven with a ball and chain locked around its angle swooped down at him, the bright orange of its prison clothes whipping in the wind.

Instead of sinking further, the skin of his back hit freezing cold metal. His clothes had disappeared in the transition from one dream to the next, the only indication that there was anything on any part of his body was the whisper of a thin white sheet above him and the feeling of fine, rough-grained twine tied around his toe. The Doctor raised his hands to pull himself up, only to bang his elbows and wrists against a stainless steel ceiling only a handful of inches above the table he lay on.

An old memory of claustrophobia crept in, drawing the walls of the freezer – it had to be a freezer, why was he in a freezer – closer and closer until it was a metal coffin pressing up against his sides, his chest straining against cold steel with every desperate breath –

"Oh, we can't have you giving yourself a heart attack on account of some silly little nightmare. No, that would be boring, even if you do have one of those to spare."

The voice was a collection of shattered glass in every possible color assembled into the shape of words and shoved into the ears of everyone who had to listen and upon being exposed to its very unnatural sound, and even the disappearance of that crushing pressure couldn't change the fact that the Doctor was terrified.

There was a short list of things that terrified the Doctor by this point in his lives. Most of them were abstracts or situational. Claustrophobia, the death of a companion, the death of his TARDIS. But the ones that came with names could be counted on his hands, depending on the week. Davros, maybe. The Master, variable.

This thing fit into neither of those categories, and the Doctor knew that if he was calling anything sentient 'a thing', it was either because he didn't – or couldn't – understand it or that it had gone far past the boundaries of being anything else.

What it was – in a strictly visual sense, because he still didn't have anything beyond 'thing' – was a cross between a corpse, a wax-model, and a mannequin, the proportions just far enough off to cross out 'human' entirely.

It had the approximate shape down; two legs, two arms, a torso, a head, the appropriate number of digits – well, at least when it came to the hands, as it was hard to tell anything about the feet with the shoes on. It just did everything else wrong.

The most attention grabbing thing, after that voice, was the face or lack thereof. If not for the way the mouth parted so smoothly with those needle teeth just behind its 'lips', the Doctor might have mistaken it for a minimalist commedia mask rather than the thing’s 'true' face.

The hair over that was a shiny purple-black that belonged to wigs, the translucent paper-white skin
clung too tightly to limbs too thin for any living human, and for all the Adam's apple in that pale throat bobbed and danced as the creature twisted its head around in that birdlike fashion, there was no blood moving in those veins.

"Why are you here?" the Doctor asked, watching the neck. The black pits the creature called eyes would give nothing away, but maybe that bobbing, dancing thing would.

"What an elementary question." A shiny purple tongue, so deeply colored as to almost be black darted out between its shark-like teeth to swipe across its lips. "To be amused, of course. Why is anyone else?"

A sense of distaste settled in the back of the Doctor's mouth. It was in his mind and while he wanted to shove it out, there wasn't anything he could do. His latest personality wasn't set yet; the boundaries of his mind were too soft and ill-defined to have anything so concrete as a 'defense'.

"And what's so amusing about me?" he asked.

"Many things. Your mutable nature, your travelling ways… your insistence on 'pacifism'." The word was almost said like a joke. "And put in the right context, your face as well."

Something about that ticked at a box of danger, making the fact that the Doctor was in no position to do much of anything irrelevant. "You won't take my body," he said, scrambling to his feet and readying what control he had over his mindscape.

The thing moved, closing what gap there had been between Time Lord and elder nightmare in a heartbeat. "I'm not interested in your body," it said around that black, needle-y grin as it pressed a long fingernail into the Doctor's forehead. "I'm just making sure neither of the players in this show gets the idea to run away."

The thing stabbed its fingernail through the skin and into the Time Lord's brain and the Doctor knew no more.

Five hours. I could have walked like a normal person and still made good time, but there was something to be said for showing up to a party early. It gave me time to plan and time to get a measure of the situation.

The fact that I'd set up shop in the belfry of what was easily London's most famous landmark didn't hurt either. For all this Christmas was darkened by the assholes descending from space in their ugly piece of crap rocket rock, the holiday still held the chance of being a bright one… at least for a few that somehow escaped the event unscathed. People were still going to die, I noted. Exposure, bad falls, existing conditions exacerbated past the point of no return… some people might even try to pull themselves free from the equipment keeping them alive in their quest to reach the rooftops. Others not affected by the blood control might take advantage of an opportunity to make a murder look like an accident. Others… well, they would take their awakening on the edge of a roof as a sign that they needed to take that last step themselves.

Whatever the cause, there was no question that people would die today, and those that didn't stood a fair chance of having Christmas become the anniversary of a loved one's death.

So that meant ending this game as quickly as possible.

First there was the enemy. The Sycorax ship was an ugly thing, interrupting the otherwise perfect witching hour, but it also lacked any clear point of access from the outside. The fact that it was also hanging a few miles above London limited my options even more, because even if it came even
lower to the ground, getting up there would require teleportation or flight proper, the last of which would definitely be noticed by everyone, even if I borrowed a set of wings for the venture. The first required some idea of where to land.

Second, there was something wrong with this universe and I needed to figure out what.

'Excuse –'

I cut Zeke off. 'Not like that. It just… feels wrong. Like I'm missing pieces just by being here, and not just because of Selby.'

As a demonstration, I tried calling on the Rider. The spirit had been bound to my soul and part of our shared metaphysical self for millennia and had never resisted my call since our joining.

Yet, I was getting all of – "Nothing," I said, watching my hand spectacularly fail to catch fire. "There's no magic."

That was a pain in my ass, because it meant I was suddenly short a whole lot of options and right before a crisis just beginning to commence. I ran through a quick battery of tests, just to see what I did have left.

The results were pretty clear, though surprisingly schizophrenic.

Psychic powers were fine, spirit-based abilities were in the clear, and anything that ran off life energy worked like a charm, but anything that was solely classified as 'magic', be it ritualized, wild, or somewhere in between, was right out.

"So Block-Transfer Computations and the Termina Masks are fine, but Wingardium Leviosa is going out of line?" I asked the empty air as I stopped pulling for an energy that simply wasn't there. It was like someone had gone back to the beginning of the Doctor's universe and beat the concept of magic like it like an unwanted step-child until it died.

'They do have a fairytale on Gallifrey, about how Rassilon and his fellows excised all irrationality from the universe,' my personal Time Lord replied.

'But souls are rational?'

'I don't think even Rassilon would have dared to tamper with those.'

Something twitched on the edge of my consciousness and I looked down at the city. Small figures were climbing up to stand on the edges of buildings, shoulder to shoulder as they looked up towards the sky.

The Sycorax had begun their play and I had about five pieces of a plan. I shoved most of the artifacts back into the warehouse, trading them for pieces of a more electronic nature. Then, I started to take them apart, quickly putting together a cheap – by my standard, at least – general use signal scanner with a small screen.

As to where to aim it? UNIT had a base of operations in the Tower of London, if I recalled correctly. Something to do with an Archive…

'The Black Archive, but not until the 50th anniversary, I think.'

'It's their fucking London HQ, you inconsistent fuck.'
'Wasn't their headquarters at this castle-looking manor in the classic series?'

'Thank you for the correction, oh wise and all-knowing peanut gallery', I snapped back before tuning them out again. It wasn't like I had watched the series within recent memory. So, UNIT HQ. Of all the transmissions going in and out, I just needed to find the one that went straight up and required a babel fish to understand, trace the signal to where it was coming from, and...

What, use that to teleport directly into the probe they were using the broadcast in the first place? Yes, that would be a pleasant experience, not to mention an *impeccable* display of stealth and cunning.

I needed a better plan.

I started fiddling with the scanner, upgrading the scanner to all kinds of energy, primarily those associated with teleportation.

Trace the signal. Figure out both ends of it. Piggyback the transmat as it picks up Harriet Jones and her entourage, preferably in a form suited for stealth, and land where they did. From there, observe, protect, and gather information so that I could calculate the next stage.

There, *that* was a plan.

I had a dozen methods I could use to follow the teleport and a Termina Mask in mind for the last. I could trade control over to one of the others who had equally suitable forms, but once was quite enough for one evening.

'It's morning.'

'Shut up.'

Setting down my messily assembled scanner, I reached into the subspace that connected my warehouse to my reality and started mentally flipping through the different 'catalogues' before finding what I wanted.

The Twili mask was one of my Termina set, and while I didn't always appreciate the way it somewhat overwrote my personality with the thief whose soul it had been crafted from, that side effect would work in my favor tonight. After all, the thief wasn't the one who had nightmares about a man who shared the Tenth Doctor's face.

'Again, morning.'

'Again, shut up!'

I would call the transformation 'magic', except that it worked in this universe. Maybe it simply translated the transformation as me borrowing the Twili's bio-data or something similar to what the Zygons did. Whatever the Doctor's universe thought of it, I knew it as a tool that could be used to great effect.

The mask itself, despite the weight of its origin and abilities, was very light in my hands. Part of me recalled an old theory about the relative weight of a soul being approximately 21 grams, but my better sense shushed it.

I had things to do that were more important than trivia hour.

As if on cue, there was a shift in the atmosphere, breaking me out of my thoughts as a couple hundred windows shattered from the sonic boom.
'They called it a sonic wave on the show.'

I'm calling it bullshit. The show implied that every window in London exploded, but the physics don't work. Sonic booms break windows, yes, but rarely and most commonly at extremely low altitudes. I lifted up my thumb to gauge the distance between the Scyorax ship and the horizon. And they're not even close to 'kind of' low. It's not even approaching the idea of low. That's a couple thousand feet up, so barring deliberate action – which I wasn't, considering who we were talking about –, it was an example of impossible physics.

And on a separate but wholly related note: what an ugly piece of shit to be roaming the universe in. Alright, I would concede that running around in a retrofitted asteroid might be count as efficient camouflage – IN SPACE – and that fitting said asteroid with nasty looking spikes and such was a valid form of intimidation display, it still didn't change the fact that it was ugly and inefficient.

Another relatively minor reason why I wouldn't be terribly upset when Torchwood blew the slavers up, I supposed.

The scanner beeped. Alien frequency detected between UNIT HQ and the Sycorax Vessel, range and intensity in keeping with teleportation technology. Traced and locked.

"It's show time," I said as I slipped on the mask and felt the basic structure of my body change again for the second time in so many hours. Before the change was even complete, I was gone, leaving the belfry of Big Ben empty save for the odd nesting bird.

Teleportation was a surprisingly painless form of travel, Harriet Jones noted as the light overtook her and carried her away. Almost as simple as riding a lift, as long as you ignored all the things that could possibly go wrong between Points A and B. Of course, she would have liked it better with a dash of forewarning and if the ultimate destination wasn't the proverbial 'belly of the beast'.

The reality fit the imagery of the idiom well. Whatever modifications the Sycorax had made to their asteroid in making it space-worthy, a 'clean and inviting interior décor' was not among them. Poorly lit and cramped, the room they'd arrived in was roughhewn from the existing rock with only the odd device implanted through the rust-red stone giving away the intelligent and deliberate design behind it.

Well, that and the horde of skull-masked, saber-rattling aliens hissing and spitting at the humans in their midst. Major Blake barely reacted, while the other two in their party cringed back from the display.

Harriet Jones steeled herself. She did not have the luxury of panic. She was the representative of Earth and Prime Minister of Great Britain. She would not cower in the face of the unknown or the likes of the Sycorax. Even if she wished the Doctor was here to help, she would perform her duty with all the dignity she had. She had survived the threat of World War Three, survived the Slitheen, survived being promoted to the most powerful political position in her country, and she would survive this.

It was no different than dealing with most politicians, she told herself, except the politicians only wanted the facilitation of their own agendas rather than the enslavement of humanity… alright, perhaps the comparison was just a bit too far of a reach. On the other hand, there were probably a few people Harriet Jones had known in office who would have found the Sycorax good company.

The sea of Sycorax parted to let another through. There was little difference in the appearance of this one to the others, though Harriet Jones supposed it would be more apparent to one familiar with the
species and culture. She, for one, wasn't interested in breeding that sort of contempt with them.

It spoke in its harsh tongue, the guttural growls and spittle-flinging snaps nearly incomprehensible until her aide, Alex, referenced the Torchwood translator.

"Er, we're to go down the hall and be presented to their chieftain, Fadros – I can't pronounce this, I can't even manage Polish surnames..." Alex murmured before trying again. "Fadros Pallu... Pallujika? No, Pallujikaa. Fadros Pallujikaa, Master of Chains, Great Slayer, Chief of the Halvinor tribe."

"He has many titles for a man of so little scruples," Harriet Jones replied as they began to walk through the narrow hallway towards... what? Some arena, where they would be shown more of what their invaders were capable of? Or would it just be a straight threat of 'surrender or die', given from on high?

Through holes in the inner walls of the ship, various Sycorax – masked and unmasked – leered, hammering on the walls with sword pommels and fists as they spat out what she could only assume were alien profanities as the human delegation was paraded by.

"I haven't been treated to this much meaningless pomp and circumstance since my last visit to the American President," Harriet Jones quipped, trying to soothe the fear thrumming through her veins. If something went wrong...

"Fear not," someone whispered. "And don't react."

English. Oh, how Harriet had come to love the sound of the language in the short time she'd been surrounded by the harsh tongue of the Sycorax. "Where are you?"

"I'm walking in your shadow, Minister, at your side and at your back," the voice – female, airy, too close to be telling anything but truth – said. Harriet almost turned to look and she had a feeling that Llewellyn did, but the voice hissed, "Invisible and unseen. Do not call their attention to the discrepancy."

"Did the Doctor send you?" Harriet whispered as Major Blake asked, "What's your plan?"

"I sent myself," she replied. "And my plan is to remain unseen and unheard. An observer unless called to act. To preserve your lives or end theirs."

"Why?"

"I have no love for slavers, regardless of their species. If you do not trust me, trust in that."

"Can we not appeal –" Llewellyn began to ask before their shadow cut him off.

"To what? Empathy? Morality? Honor? Articles of war? Common human decency?" the unseen woman asked, the low volume of her voice doing little to hide her scorn. "You know what they are; they're slavers. Empathy, decency, and morality are not within their books. Honor exists between equals and so do articles of war. The Sycorax do not see you as that. To them, you are chattel, born to serve, obey, and play the part of Christmas dinner if the mood takes them."

As the scientist wilted, the woman seemed to regret her little speech, her somehow tangible presence quavering before settling on a much gentler tone.

"You have a... commendable outlook, Mister Llewellyn, trying to find the noblest traits in those so different from yourself. It is mere bad luck that your first encounter with the greater universe would
be the likes of the Sycorax. Please… save your faith for those that deserve it. The universe is not so hopeless."

In that moment, Harriet Jones almost had a question. Not a 'Who', but rather a 'How'. How did you know Llewellyn's name, she wanted to ask, but before she could, their march came to an end and the question was swallowed up by dread as Harriet beheld what could only be the most important room on the Sycorax's ship.

It was massive, a veritable cathedral crafted from the stuff of a hundred thousand nightmares. Every curve of the domed ceiling was embellished by buttresses and braces of rusted iron and bones from creatures of worlds Harriet Jones would never see. Blobby sections of metal dotted with green-yellow crystal, served as stained glass high above, while red, globous lights provided illumination nearer to the 'ground'. Between those two extremes hung red, ragged tapestries, some plain and some adorned with lines of symbols she could only assume were representative of the Sycorax's written language.

"Pallasite."

She almost turned to look at Llewellyn. "What?"

"The… the windows, they're pallasite. It's a class of meteorite, stony-iron blend, specifically olivine in an iron-nickel matrix," the scientist explained. "The gems aren't supposed to be as large as that, only a centimeter or so across, but these are unmistakably pallasite meteorites. You can tell from the Thomson structures —"

"I'm sure this is fascinating, Mr. Llewellyn, but the fate of the human race is at stake here, so please save the science for later," Harriet said, movement among the Sycorax horde drawing her eye.

From the mob stepped what Harriet Jones could only assume was their leader. She recognized the curved rib-bone and the strange bird skull on his woven necklace from the broadcasts, along with the other bits of bone and ivory in his collection. Unlike the other Sycorax, who seemed to exist in various stages of undress and armoring, Chieftain Fadros was clad in long red robes in different shades of dark red that left nothing but his head and hands exposed to any elements he might encounter.

Staring down his nose at the human delegation, the Sycorax leader spoke but two syllables, the guttural scratch of the last drawn out to rattle in the air. "Welcome… slaves," Alex read off of the translator.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the rewrite, beta'd by littleditto. Without their help, there would be a lot more typos, grammatical errors, and just general confusing combinations of words cluttering up the page. Hopefully I'll be able to work with them for a long time.

This rewrite is being done not only to assume a more mature tone for the story, but also to include more canon material and original content, which will include entire 'episodes' created from scratch. To those of you fond of the original: I will not be deleting it until
this iteration of the story surpasses it in the story. Hopefully this version of the story does not disappoint.

As of 9/2/2017, this chapter has been updated to plug up some plot holes that came up at a future point in the text. Also to improve quality a bit.

The 'sonic booms breaking windows' counter-argument comes from Mythbusters and a 2014 article on the BBC News website titled 'Sonic Booms: Who Foots The Bills When Buildings Go Bang?'

The identity of 'Zeke' is spelled out in a later chapter, but there are enough clues that someone familiar with the show could hazard a good guess now.

It is 'canon' that magic does not exist in the Doctor Who 'verse because Rassilon used time travel to retcon it from their universe (part of exiling 'irrationality' from the universe). Xenophobic and generally unpleasant, Rassilon also killed off most of Gallifrey's population in an attempt to render the rest immortal via the ability to regenerate. Then, in what is generally accepted as a dick move, he deliberately induced a limit on the number of regenerations.

There will likely be more Highlights of Rassilon in the Author's Notes of future chapters.

The Termina Masks are a reference to The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, though this set has been created for a planned story in this series (set previous to this one, obviously).

Twili are a race in the games currently exclusive to the Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess game. I'll cover their abilities in the next Author's Notes.

All the stuff about meteorites that Llewellyn was talking about is referenced from Wikipedia's articles on Pallasite and Widmanstätten patterns / Thomson structures (there are two different names for the same thing, due to a technicality and some really complicated history concerning dead couriers and the importance of documenting your shit), which are accompanied by some pretty killer pics.

The Sycoraxic names are… weird, because according to the TARDIS wikia, 'Fadros Pallujikaa' is a translation of 'Tribal Leader', but links directly to an article referring to the specific character? I don't know, I'm just going to roll with it because I didn't want to just type 'the Sycorax leader' over and over again.

On the other hand, I kind of like that another Sycorax from one of the comics is literally named 'The Witch Bitch' (in Sycoraxic, it's Haxan Craw), but it's also sort of treated like a title since she addresses a companion as 'the human Haxan Craw'.

Anyway, feel free to ask any questions in the comments / review section. I will either answer them in-story or in the next Author's Notes. Reviews, criticisms, and commentary are, as always, welcome.
"Do not break ranks, no matter what buttons he tries to press," the living shadow at their backs warned. "That's what their sort look for; the weak, the compassionate, and the defiant. It makes an impression when they are broken. Don't give them the opening."

Harriet Jones steeled herself again before stepping forward. "Harriet Jones, Prime Minister," she declared.

The Sycorax rolled his eyes as it growled something that Harriet suspected as a very familiar response before adding something else at the end, sweeping its hand over a large, ominously illuminated button that stood to his right. Was this the centre console of the 'blood control'?

"We know who you are," Alex read off of the translator, confirming the suspicion before faltering. "Surrender or they will die," he finally managed.

Somehow, she'd expected that. The canned line and the demand for an immediate surrender, it was somehow all old hat despite coming from the mouth of an extraterrestrial slaver.

"Stall for time," the shadow whispered.

Oh, she'd been planning on doing that anyway. To get more information, allow others to devise a counter, or to give the Doctor time to arrive and save the day… that was all Harriet Jones had at the moment. A distant hope.

"In the event of that surrender, which I am not giving at this time, do I have the guarantee that you will not kill those people anyway?" Harriet Jones asked, "What is your word worth to… I believe the term you used for us was 'chattel'?

Fadros Pallujikaa, Master of Chains, Great Slayer, and Chief of the Halvinor tribe smiled, his skinless lips peeling back from his teeth in something that might have been mistaken for a threat display until a laugh burbled out of his throat, quickly followed by an amused string of Sycoraxic.

"So you aren't completely stupid.' His words, Prime Minister, not mine," the aide added quickly.

"It would be a very sorry state for the Earth if I was," Harriet Jones said, refusing to break eye contact with the Sycorax leader. "I ask you again; in the event of the surrender that you seem so desperate to receive, what guarantee do we have that you will not kill those people anyway? What is your honor worth to the people of Earth, 'Master of Chains'?

The leader looked down at her before speaking.

"The dead make poor slaves," Alex translated. "But I will not hesitate to unleash the… final curse if you do not give us our full desired price. Half sold into slavery or a third dies and we take what we please. A…" he hesitated, swallowing before finishing reading off of the small screen. "A… good trade, is it not?"

Before Harriet could answer, something started beeping to the side. A few of the Sycorax ran to it, chattering to each other excitedly before the mood suddenly jumped towards panic. Was it something gone wrong with their ship or a scanner picking up the presence of another vessel? The last thing
they needed was another invader, even if it was a party opposed to the Sycroax. The collateral
damage could be catastrophic.

One of the Sycorax that had run over to check the scanner ran back, screaming at the human
delegation.

"The noise… the-the beeping. They say it's… machinery," Alex said, his eyes darting from the
translator to Harriet's quickly as more words flew across the screen. "Foreign… alien machinery.
The're accusing us of hiding it. Conspiring with their enemies."

Was it Torchwood, UNIT, or someone else?

"Conspiring with whom?" Harriet Jones asked, fighting down her immediate concern. Steel, steel.
The world wasn't over yet. Not while she was still here to buy time. "You surely know that the Earth
has no alliance with any other worlds. Why else would you target us?"

Fadros stared her down, lips peeled back in a noiseless snarl before he issued a command that Alex
quickly translated.

"Bring it on board."

There was a minor flurry of activity as the other Sycorax went about the task of activating their
teleporter again, the strange light that had heralded Harriet's own trip flickering through the air
diffusely as the technology scrambled to gain a fingerhold on its target.

"Bravo Bravo Charlie, the Doctor is coming," Harriet's shadow whispered into her ear and her heart
leaped as the light began to congeal into a distinct shape, large and square. Thank God… wait, was
that an old Police Box?

What?

The door cracked open as a familiar blonde peered out, only to yell as the Sycorax pulled her out and
threw her at the other humans present.

"Get off me–!"

"Rose? Rose! I've got you," Harriet Jones said as she caught the young woman.

"Harriet Jones," the blonde replied around a short-lived smile before another person ran out of the
suspect Police Box and into the waiting arms of the Sycorax. "Mickey!" Rose yelled as she ran over
to the young man.

"There's a Rocky Horror joke to be made here," her shadow muttered.

Harriet found herself oddly calm for a moment despite the increasing pressure of the situation. "Do
try to contain yourself until the immediate crisis is over," she said dryly.

"My whole life is a crisis," the stranger at her back replied, falling silent as Rose returned, her friend
Mickey held close to her body.

"Rose, where is the Doctor?" Harriet asked as soon as she was close enough to catch the whisper.
"Is he with you?"

Rose hesitated. "No. No…"

Her heart fell. So they were doomed then.
"Oh ye of little faith," her shadow said. "The Doctor's here, even if his face is different. Until then, you have me."

Rose jerked back. "What—"

"Shh, blondie, I'm on your side," the shadow said, her shadowy voice still a whisper. "Time boy's still out from the regeneration, yeah? Happens when you scramble around every atom in a person's body along with every facet of their personality. He'll be up and about before long though."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm older than you. And I believe my cue to reveal myself is… imminent." With that, the sensation of a presence at Harriet Jones' back disappeared, only the slightest ruffle of a breeze giving away that anything had been there to begin with and any chance to ask Rose what she knew was cut off by the Sycorax leader's latest announcement.

"The yellow girl," Alex translated. "She has the clever blue box. Therefore, she speaks for your planet."

"Oh, now that's rubbish," a familiar voice called down from the ceiling, though in an infinitely more playful and mocking tone. Where, Harriet Jones couldn't say, because it filled the space easily and sent every head turning in an attempt to pin down the source. "You bring aboard Prime Minister Jones under the tacit understanding that she is the one who will be deciding the fate of the Earth and its people, and then… long after your ‘negotiations’ have begun, you bring in another party with no experience in this arena and grant her the choice of selling half the world into slavery—"

"What?"

"—despite her now obvious ignorance of the entire issue, solely based on her possession of a piece of alien technology. Now, tactically speaking, it's an effective albeit dick move, but one that only works as long as you have the upper hand. But when you have the likes of me lurking in the shadows—"

The shadows on the ceiling seemed to shift like living creatures and Harriet Jones swore she could see a pair of red and yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness of a nearby alcove for a moment, a wide slash of white underneath them that could barely be considered a smile.

"—well, you could say that it's downright stupid."

"Where are you, beast?" Fadros yelled, the Sycorax's words somehow turned into coarse-accented English. "Who are you to spout such bravery from the shadows?"

"He's talking English," Mickey said, dumbstruck.

"Why's he speaking it now?"

"TARDIS translation's back," Rose murmured in realization. "That means…"

"Just follow the sound of my voice, bone biter," their unseen friend called, pulling Harriet's attention back upwards as the shadow's voice seeming to dance around the room again. There was a dark, nearly mirthless chuckle as the Sycorax snarled, his eyes searching around fruitlessly for a shadow amongst shadows. "Oh, have these shadows offended? Do you not care for the name? Then I will ply you with more; nail nibbler, backstabber, oath breaker, honorless hound!"

"Speak again, trickster, within striking distance!" Fadros snapped, pulling a whip from his belt, a crackle of lightning following the motion. "Else I will punish the humans for your cowardice whilst
"You were saying something about hiding?" the former shadow said as she wrapped the whip around her arm, clearly unbothered by the sparks of electricity arcing from it with every movement. "No, I wasn't hiding in the dark. I *am* the dark. I am the stuff of nightmares, oh mighty chieftain, keeper and taker of slaves. I am Justice. Vengeance. And you, slaver, who preys on the weak and relies on deception to ply his trade, have awakened my ire."

The alien – there was no mistaking her for anything but – was elfin, both in proportion and features, with long pointed ears, ash grey and black piebald skin, and large red eyes set in yellow sclera, but what really seized Harriet Jones' attention was her hair.

The closest comparison she could make to the color was flame, and the way it seemed to dance and glow from the electricity flowing through it, it might as well have been fire playing the part of a demon's mane. Oh, one could pick out a handful of long braids writhing like snakes in the midst of the firestorm, but it only added to the image of a demon faced creature coming up from the depths to collect a price, one that was going to be exacted from the Sycorax.

As the Sycorax leader tried to take his weapon back, pulling uselessly at the handle, the shadow alien twisted her arm around to secure her grip on it.

"I've been lead to believe your people enjoy trial by combat," she said, punctuating the sentence with a sharp tug. "I also understand that your language doesn't make a discrimination between the words 'argue' and 'fight'."

She gave the whip a squeeze and the handle in Fadros's hands inexplicably exploded into a shower of sparks, flame, and some dripping substance that sizzled against the Sycorax's flesh like acid.

"So," the shadow-woman said around a grin far too full of pointy teeth as her foe clutched at his newly ruined hand. "Let's argue."

The Doctor was introduced back to the waking world by the sensation of a crippling hangover, which was understandable given that a few hours ago, his brain was undergoing a neuron implosion. His head was still aching and there were parts of him that definitely wanted to remain in the horizontal position, but the pain in his head was quickly alleviating as the smell of… was that tea?

Superheated infusion of free radicals and tannins, evaporated and suffused through the air. Yes, that was just the thing that would stabilize the brain-forming process enough for the regeneration energy to finish up with the rest of it without collapsing the existing structure. How many hours did he have left before that fizzled out and he could start hammering out the edges of his new persona? Two, three?

He rolled over onto his stomach, grimacing at the sight of an energy converter shorting out beneath the grated floor as the last dregs of someone's tea dribbled out of the thermos laying on its side above it. One more reason not to let companions snack in the console room. At least it was a relatively easy fix, even if the TARDIS didn't perform the repair herself.

…wasn't there something else he needed to do? Ah, it would come to him, the Doctor thought as he pushed himself upright and walked over to the TARDIS doors, pulling them open to see –

Two aliens circling each other, one clearly Sycorax – how many centuries had it been since he'd encountered them? Oh, so many – and one… very different, with the orangey-est hair he had ever
That was a word right? Orangey-est?

Regardless of if the Doctor's chosen descriptor was cromulent or not, the two aliens in the circle clearly knew what they were doing as they exchanged a few blows before returning to the process of slow circling, only to go into another exchange a few passes later. On the outside of the match stood a group of humans, Rose and Mickey among them, looking very uncertain as the match failed to progress beyond the 'occasional swats at the other bloke' stage.

Oh, it was an invasion, was it? To be decided by the victor of a fistfight? That would probably be the thing he needed to do.

He walked past the crowd, only a few Sycorax really noticing that yet another creature had emerged from the TARDIS, and bumped his arm against Rose.

"Did you miss me?" he asked as she spun around. The Doctor flashed her a grin as he gestured to himself, puffing his chest out slightly as to show her the best angle. "So, what do you think?"

"It's… different."

"The jimjams could stand to go," Mickey said over her shoulder.

"Good different or bad different?" the Doctor asked, ignoring Mickey's comment. Clothes were easily changed, especially when one had access to a wardrobe bigger than Mickey's entire flat.

"Just… different," she said lamely.

Hmn. "Am I… ginger?" he asked, stealing a glance at the explosion of luminous orange-yellow hair to his right. He honestly had no idea what species that alien was. Shadow Kin perhaps? He remembered them as having a bit more smolder and smoke. "Mind, I wouldn't be offended if I'm not on that one's level, but please tell me that–"

"Sorry, no. Just sort of brown."

"Oooh, I wanted to be ginger," the Doctor pouted, pulling a strand of the 'sort of brown' hair out to where he could see it. "I was almost ginger once, ended up going dark half-way through that one. And the other time… ugh – do you know what it's like going through a life with chestnut curls and ginger sideburns yet somehow that's the one thing about your face that nobody comments on?"

Rose's stare was all the answer he needed to that one. Right, not a Time Lord, hasn't regenerated, wouldn't know what it's like, Q.

"Excuse me," Harriet Jones said, casting a slightly confused glance in the Doctor's direction. "But who is this?"

"Harriet Jones, MP for Flydale North… or is that Prime Minister now?" the Time Lord asked, breaking out into a grin as he took and shook her hand with both of his. "I'm certainly rubbish with time for a time traveler, aren't I? Ah, but it'll work itself out after a bit. Still getting all the odds and bobs sorted out on this model."

At the look of pure confusion on her face, he released her hands to point at his face. "It's me, the Doctor? New face since you last saw me in Downing Street. Oh, that was an unpleasant business with the Slitheen, but you weren't all that frightened of them, were you, Harriet Jones? No, just scared of your mother ending up all alone."
Harriet Jones stepped back, a visible surprise written in her eyes. "It… so it is you. Oh my god."

"Yeah, it's the Doctor," Rose confirmed. "The old one kind of… exploded."

"If I'd exploded, there'd be a much bigger mess in the TARDIS. Things would have been on fire and then we would have crashed."

"We did crash."

The Doctor resisted the desire to point out that he had far worse landings that did count as proper crashes, seeing as it probably wasn't fair to bring up either occasion as he hadn't really survived the events in the first place. "Anyway; same me, new model, not exploded quite yet. Correct me if I'm wrong; the Sycorax here are invading—"

"To collect slaves."

"Yes, they do that," the Doctor said, eyeing the match-up in front of the crowd. Whatever the other alien was, they were holding back. Teasing or simply waiting for something else? "And that one?"

"She's with us," Harriet Jones said, tilting her head slightly. "I thought you knew her."

"Why would I?"

"Well, she certainly knew you," Rose said, a touch sourly. "Talking about 'regeneration' and all that, told me off for giving up on you."

Now that was interesting and plenty of reason to get more intimately involved in this event. The Doctor stepped forward, past the crowd, into the circle of combat, and in between the fighters with his hands raised.

"Is violence really the answer here?" he asked.

Everything stopped as everyone turned their attention on him. Apparently the answer to that question had been 'yes', though his interruption had apparently thrown that into some doubt. He just shrugged, sticking his hands down in his pockets as he scuffed his slippered feet along the floor.

"Who are you?" the leader asked. He was favoring his right hand, the Doctor noticed. Burns, bad and recent. How had that happened?

"I'm just asking," the Doctor continued, ignoring the question. "Seems a rather backwards way to do things – can I ask if the terms of this duel were set? Honor match and all that to decide the fate of a planet, you wouldn't think to be so careless…"

The alien girl tilted her head back as she slid out of her combat stance, her bare feet barely making a whisper against the stone floor. There had been a strange flicker in her eyes, one that was quickly thrown away and replaced by a certain casual cockiness. "Oh, I was just waiting for you. With your pedigree as defender of the Earth, I wouldn't want to be the one to step on your toes. If you care to negotiate the terms with the Sycorax…"

"Who are you?!" the alien in question yelled.

"Yes that is the question of the day, and yes, I do care to. I'd love to. I love negotiating… do I? Well, at any rate, I love talking. That much is clear. Still need to catch up on the rest of it, but at least I've got the gob for the job," the Doctor said as he ran his hand along the edge of his jaw. Not bad bone structure, at least from feel alone.
"I demand to know who you are!" the Sycorax roared.

"I don't know!" the Doctor snarled at the alien, sending everybody present scuttling backwards. The anger quickly dissolved back to a self-aimed annoyance as he murmured, "Oh, lovely. Rude, not ginger, and bipolar. Real winner this regeneration is turning out to be. Anyway," he said, raising his voice again. "In the event you haven't been paying attention; I'm the Doctor. You may have heard of me."

The collective Sycorax horde stepped back away from him.

"Exactly what you heard and from who is up in the air, but you clearly have heard of me. That's good. That means I can tell you to leave this planet alone and you just might have the sense to listen," he said, walking around the little arena, staring down the crowd as he simultaneously looked for anything important.

Sycorax, blood-control, there had to be an apparatus around here somewhere – ah, the Doctor thought as he finally spied a likely suspect. There we go.

"I'm known for a few things," the Doctor said as he began to walk towards the big red button. "Mostly for trouble, saving the day, ruining evil plans, bold and occasionally questionable fashion choices," he turned around to face the crowd again, letting his hands fly around with his speech. So long as they were distracted by the talking, they weren't paying attention to the walking.

"But beyond that… you should ask 'what's this model like?' Because that's the little detail that can decide how terrible your day is going to be. I've been cold and calculating, hot-blooded and bombastic… I've been an absolute madman when the mood suited me. But today, you have the rare occasion of hearing me ask that question of myself. What sort of man am I?"

He turned around again, pacing in front of the assembled crowd.

"I literally do not know. It's all untested. Am I… funny? Sarcastic? Sexy?" he turned to look at Rose, throwing her a wink and a click of his tongue before resuming his speech. "Am I all mood and misery? The life and soul of the party? Left-handed, right-handed? A gambler, a fighter, a coward, a traitor, a liar, a nervous wreck? I mean the fact that I'm laying all the evidence out like this, I've certainly got the gob, but beyond that…? I could be anything, really, but the question you should be asking… is what I think of this."

The Doctor gestured to the blood control matrix and its luminous red button.

"I mean, it's big, it's red, it's threatening. Everything about it screams 'do not press under any circumstances what so ever'. You could not make this look any more malevolent if you put a skull and crossbones on the face of it," he said as he waved at it. Judging by how his audience – save for that strange flame-haired alien who was watching him like a hawk – failed to react to his gestures, they'd forgotten that it wasn't just a prop for his rambling speech. Good. "Honestly, it's every Saturday morning doomsday device and a few real ones besides. Doctor Claw would be proud of this design."

The Doctor leaned back for a moment, as if admiring it, and then ducked down, opening up the side. A bit of blood was sitting in the receiver basin, just enough for the Sycorax to exert control. A clever and subtle – if also devious and underhanded – form of control, strong enough to take over even a Time Lord if provided the right sample.

He should know, seeing as it had happened to him once.
Shoving that particular dark train of thought to the back of his mind, the Doctor reached in, dipping the tip of his middle finger in the basin before bringing it back to his mouth. He could feel every human in the room recoil slightly as he licked it.

He mentally rolled his eyes. Well, how else was he supposed to identify it?

"Human, Type A… plus. Slight overabundance of iron, really needs to cut down on the red meat," he declared as he stood up again. "The Sycorax are one of the few races that actually use blood control, isn't that interesting? And they never really stop either. Well, why get rid of what works, right? Especially when it appeals to the natural superstition of the 'primitives' they like to enslave. A little bit of cheap, practical 'voodoo'. Perfectly scary… until someone happens to notice the man behind the curtain."

"One of our experts demystified the technique for us, Doctor," Harriet Jones said from across the room.

He grinned. "Oh, who was it? Someone I'd know? Maybe A–?" the name wouldn't escape his throat properly, sticking in an awkward and painful spot just behind his Adam's apple, so he swallowed it down again. "No, don't tell me," he said around a freshly fake smile. "I'll puzzle it out later. Always love a good mystery, me. Almost as much as I love a big red threatening button."

The Doctor looked down at the control apparatus.

"…which is probably why I'm going to push it," he confessed, looking up to meet the eyes of all those looking up at him before he did exactly that.

"No!"

I jumped back as the Doctor pressed the button, touching Harriet Jones lightly on the shoulder. "The blood control can't override basic instincts, one of which is the one that pulls people away from ledges," I murmured soothingly. "Nobody died on account of that button being pressed."

"Nobody died then?" Rose asked.

"Oh, plenty of people died, I imagine. Overtaxing bad hearts, suffering strokes, making a bad step and taking a long fall… depending on where they were, I imagine a few managed to die of exposure during the wait," I said, staring at the Sycorax leader. "But the threat was never as great as the Sycorax made it out to be. Like I said earlier, they play dirty."

Fadros curled his lips back from his teeth. "We allowed them to live–"

"No, no, no. That's the control matrix, I just cut the release. You didn't allow anything," the Doctor said, pointing at the button he'd just pressed. "Y'see, blood control… it's tricky and hard to force your way through, sure, but it has certain limitations. Kind of like hypnosis, but for a couple of things. Need a blood sample, for one, besides the technical specs which the Sycorax happen to have, but that's off the point."

He stepped away from the control matrix, descending down the stairs without any seeming care as to where his feet were going.

"The thing is… like hypnosis, your blood control cannot override the basic instincts," he continued. "Like… for say… the one that makes you step away from high ledges without even thinking about it. So your threat was nothing more than a bluff… and I called it." He glanced up to lock eyes with the Sycorax leader. "Now… are you going to take that chance to run yet?"
"Blood control is only one form of conquest," the Sycorax leader declared, turning around to look at his men. Appealing to theatrics and trying to save face all in one stroke. "If I summon the rest of the armada—!"

"Please. You've got no guarantee that the other tribes will want anything to do with you," the Doctor snapped back, "How would they react to you asking for their help conquering a tiny little dust ball that doesn't even have proper interplanetary flight? Forget your honor. Forget your respect in the 'community'. They'd be badmouthing you all over the newsletters, not being able to conquer a few billion 'primitive' apes. No offense, humans."

"None taken," Rose Tyler said.

"Some, actually," Mickey added quietly.

The Doctor shook his head as he refocused on Fadros. "Besides that little problem, I have another question; why? I mean, they've just gotten started as a species, they're no threat to you—"

That's why they came here in the first place. Because they didn't expect resistance, they expected easy pickings. Was he warning them off – reminding them that for all the Earth was 'helpless', it was defended by the last Time Lord – or simply glossing over the fact to make a speech? How much of this was post-regeneration uncertainty or the Tenth Doctor's own personal brand of 'pacifism'?

"These human beings… consider their potential," the Time Lord continued, sweeping his hands around to gesture at the small collection of humans in the room. "From the day they arrive on the planet and blinking, step into the sun—"

"If you were going for Patrick Stewart, Doctor," I interrupted. "You should know that you're actually quoting the Lion King."

"Ah, wait. That was the Circle of Life, wasn't it? Good film, but incredibly off the point," he said before refocusing, force returning to his voice. "The point is: leave them alone!"

"Or what?" Fadros asked.

"Or death."

All eyes turned to fix on me as I stepped forward. For all this Twili body was elfin and smaller than the human average by a noticeable margin, I'd established my physical threat quite clearly to the Sycorax, because all it took to make the crowd scramble back from me was a small show of teeth. "Even if you survive me or the Doctor – and believe me, you're far more likely to in the second case –, the humans are not as weak and powerless as you seem to think. Oh, they might strike you as 'primitive', but they are defined by their determination to survive under circumstances that would leave other species extinct."

I stepped forward, eyes flashing over every alien that dared meet my gaze.

"You could cut their legs out from under them and there would still be humans willing to keep crawling at you with nothing more than the thought of stopping you driving them forward. Kill a few to sow fear among the masses, half of them will step forward with nothing less than your complete and total annihilation on their mind."

I smiled. It wasn't the sort of smile that brought comfort to anyone witnessing it.

"And though I know for a fact that while humans can be very kind and forgiving, they can also be very cruel with a long memory towards the wrongs done to them… and they can be very creative
about the business of revenge, particularly when it comes to abhorrent individuals such as yourselves," I said, my smile widening to show off my teeth in all their pointiness. "Food for thought."

I focused on Fadros again, the Sycorax leader stiffening as I stared him down.

"So, as we were discussing before the Doctor interrupted," I said, flashing him a little smirk as the slaver clenched his wounded hand. "It'll be a duel for the fate of the Earth. Who will you face in combat, the Doctor—"

I gestured at the Time Lord, the scrawny, spiky-haired humanoid in rumpled pajamas and a dressing gown. It wasn't a very impressive image, if one didn't know the stories behind it. The way the Sycorax were acting, they still didn't fully comprehend what he was or what he represented. Oh, there was a reputation behind the name 'Doctor' but how much credence could it have, balanced against this image of harmlessness?

"— or me?"

Me, the demon that could become one with the shadows and had lightning pulsing through her veins, who'd already crippled one of his hands. The mystery that had come out of nowhere and kicked their teeth in with the same move. They didn't fully comprehend me either, but my physical threat had been established and was now unquestionable.

In the end, between those two options and the Sycorax's generally underhanded tactics, I wasn't terribly surprised that Fadros Pallujikaa picked the Doctor.
features a sample from every single human extant at that point in time. It came out last year and as soon as I have money, I might get it (but I'm more excited for the most recent Diary of River Song and all my love belongs to Six, so…).

Twili are from the Legend of Zelda, specifically the Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess. In action, they are not… terribly different from the Shadow Kin, though most of my reference is taken from the one Twili the player is accompanied by in the game who is one of the more powerful examples of her kind. For visual reference, I used both of Midna's two forms for reference and kind of split the difference in the general trait department before building an original design from there (though the Twili Mask's outfit is a bit more practical than Midna's true form's wardrobe…).

The powers of the Twili Mask form are somewhat nerfed from Midna's power set and include –

- Levitation/ weightlessness

- Telekinesis

- Limited hair prehensility

- The ability to enter and introduce foreign beings and objects into the Twilight Realm (only available in 'verses with a Twilight Realm or approximate equivalent)

- Make use of Twilight Portals (same as above)

- Subspace access – a power that Delaine already has, but the Twili form has an affinity for speed and ease of access.

- The ability to hide in the shadows of light dwellers and appear as a shadow in the Light World.

- The ability to break down own body and others into Twilight particles to transport them (related to Twilight Portals, but doesn't explicitly require them).

In exchange, the Twili form is weakened and even burned by sufficiently bright light (in the games, this is enough to kill a Twili, but there's a reason why the Twili Mask lacks this limitation), thus necessitating hiding in another's shadow during the day if in this form. It also (barring use of other powers) is not a physically strong form, instead being one built for infiltration and stealth.

It's Time For More Highlights of Rassilon.

Rassilon is mostly famous for killing off most of the universe's vampires, 'inventing' time travel, shoving his best friend / research buddy into a black hole, and abusing label maker technology by putting his name on literally everything ever. Also may have altered the universe so that the majority of sentient species were Time Lord-shaped. Definitely committed a couple dozen different flavors of genocide and was into deleting people from creation so thoroughly that nobody even remembered that they had ever existed in the first place.

There's a (lot of) reason(s) that one of his nicknames in the classic fandom is 'Assilon'.
The Doctor eyed the alien woman that was sitting cross-legged on a low stalagmite. He'd been hopping around the universe for over two millennia, no matter what made up and rounded down number he threw out when asked his age, and he'd never seen anything exactly like her.

Oh, there were the odd humanoids with pointed ears and multi-colored skin and nigh-luminous hair, but all those features at once… no. Not in his experience. Given, he could hardly go everywhere or know everything there ever was, but usually he had some guess as to what he was dealing with.

Maybe she was a permutation of some other more familiar species, a hybrid, or perhaps even a living piece of artwork. He'd seen that before… though they tended to be a bit more ostentatious and a tad more delicate than the average pane of stained glass, a hard contrast to this girl that only seemed to exist in three particular shades and was capable of going hand to hand with a warrior easily twice her size.

There was also the problem of why she was here. Why get involved with 21st century Earth? What was there to gain?

"Sword?" she asked, pulling a bright Earth-style blade from thin air. It seemed crafted from electrum and pure silver, with bright rubies inlaid in the ornately decorated hilt. There was a name of some sort inscribed into the blade, though the Doctor couldn't quite make it out from his current angle.

"Showpiece like that, I don't think I'd get very far," the Doctor replied. "Besides, I wouldn't want the Sycorax to accuse me of foul play, not when they've oh so generously given me the use of one of their own swords."

He jerked his head to where the heavy hand-and-a-half sword rested against the wall. Compared the silvery bright blade the alien woman was offering, the Sycorax blade was a crude piece; fashioned from bones, sinew, and a long bit of meteoric iron likely pulled from the very asteroid they were standing in, the finished product stood almost half as high as the Doctor did.

"Your funeral. Figuratively speaking of course," she said, and the blade dissolved into black pixels that shot straight into the air before vanishing completely. Another curiosity, but it did bring to mind some ideas of what she could be.

"So what are you?" the Doctor asked, "Shadow Kin? Elemental shade?"

"Good kennings, but if you were floating ideas for my species, entirely wrong."

The Doctor eyed her. If he was taking her at her word, then that ruled out anything that might have matched what he'd seen from her so far. "Then what are you?"

She smiled, not the threat display of earlier but a playful, almost puckish expression that fit her face all too well. "Creature of Twilight, thief of the night, trickster perched in evening eaves, trouble-dweller, and a pretty good dancer, if I might say so myself. Like everyone else in this universe, I am many things. If you must have a name, call me Angrir."

"I was asking about species."
"Ah. Well, let's just leave it at 'not something you're liable to run into again in this universe or the next'," she quipped, twisting around gymnastically to hang upside-down from the stalagmite, her black kilt doing an excellent job of defying gravity in its quest to maintain its owner's modesty.

Oh. There was something sad about that, discovering another last of a kind, even if he knew near nothing about the kind itself. "Imagine if I ever do run into another mane like that, I'll develop some sort of complex," the Doctor said with false flippancy.

She grinned. "Ah, still sore about not being ginger?"

"You caught that?"

"These big pointy ears aren't just for show, you know," the alien replied, wiggling said appendages before looking off to the side with a serious expression. The Doctor followed her gaze to where the Sycorax crowd had parted, their leader waiting in the middle of the 'arena'.

"His left hand is injured from our little 'spat' earlier," she said, dropping the playful tone for something low and serious. "I can't say how fast a Sycorax might recover from chemical burns, but it's something to keep in mind, if you find yourself a pragmatic man."

"Cheating?" the Doctor asked, picking up the heavy sword to balance the flat against his shoulder. He flashed her a bright smile bought secondhand from his Fifth incarnation. "Wouldn't be cricket."

"Good, because this isn't a game."

He took one last look at her, searching for some answer as to why she was doing this in her eyes. Why was she here for a planet that wasn't even hers...? The Doctor cut off the thought as he stepped into the arena and turned around to face his opponent.

Fadros' left hand was as badly injured as described, almost entirely covered over by thick red scabbing. Despite the small sign of recovery, that hand would remain a weak point for the warrior, one that would necessitate stiff swordsmanship and careful handling if the Sycorax planned to keep it in any functional use. No showy twists of the wrist or powerful reverses from that side, at least not today.

Twisting his borrowed blade around and planting its tip in the floor, the Doctor knelt, meeting his opponents gaze. "For the fate of the planet."

The Sycorax snarled softly before repeating the same line. "For the fate of the planet."

With that, the duel officially began, both participants quickly standing to swing their blades at each other, the rough edged blades scraping off of each other with each clumsy swing. For now, the match was barely even, though it was clear that the first fighter to find his tempo would have the advantage.

Unfortunately, a Time Lord fresh off a regeneration tends to be off beat for a day or so.

'Any help?' the Doctor asked the depths of his mind. 'Three? Four? I'll settle for Six!'

Nothing. It was still too early on for this model, his psyche too unsteady for his past selves to be of any use, even as sources of vague advice. And right when he could have used them the most.

Fantastic.

He pulled up his blade, deflecting a strike that might have ended the duel right there. Still, the force
of it drove him back, stumbling over the non-existent heels of his slippers.

"Next time I have to fight a duel, I'm wearing shoes with proper soles," the Doctor murmured before twisting out of the way of another strike.

The Doctor slashed at his opponent again, trying not to overextend on the action and receiving nothing but an elbow to the ribs for his trouble. That was the trouble with regeneration, he thought as he just barely ducked under what could have been a beheading. Getting used to the new limbs and their limits.

The Sycorax around all were roaring, pleased with their champion's apparent superiority over Earth's defender. It was too loud in here, too close. He needed air.

The Doctor ran back down a path, one that he instinctively knew led out onto the outside of the craft. "Bit of fresh air?" he asked as he opened a minor airlock, escaping out into the darkness of a barely illuminated night.

It was dark, save for the slash of a scimitar moon casting silver shadows over the outer contours of the asteroid ship and the sweeping path of searchlights below casting a phantom glow from beneath the bottom of the Sycorax ship. Most species would call this 'inoperable conditions', only a fraction better than absolute darkness to navigate. To any creature that could see in the dark – say, for example, a Time Lord – the only cost was a bit of color perception.

The Doctor grinned. He could work with this.

This new Doctor was an idiot.

That was the only conclusion Rose could come to. He was a talkative, excitable, distractible, brilliant idiot that occasionally lost track of his feet and his words. And they had given him a sword, pointed him at a duel, and said 'for the fate of the planet'.

Maybe that just made the rest of them bigger idiots.

"He knows what he's doing," the alien girl had assured them as the Doctor moved the fight into a nearly pitch black night that was only occasionally interrupted by sweeps of light, before adding an incredibly unhelpful. "...probably."

'Probably' was probably one of the last words Rose Tyler wanted anywhere near the sentences 'he knows what he's doing', 'we're going to save the world', and 'it's perfectly safe', because it was nearly as good as shoving an absolute negative somewhere into the mix.

Now, all they could do is watch for the glint of moonlight on iron and the sparks of clashing blades as the two champions dueled in the dark.

"What's happening?" Rose asked.

"The tide has shifted," the alien girl said, her red eyes glowing slightly in the dark as they shifted slightly, following the movements of the fight. Of course, she'd be able to see in the dark. Why wouldn't the creepy half-shadow alien wearing a crop top and kilt at Christmas be able to see in the dark? "The Doctor's coordination and control has improved, while Fadros' is swinging around blindly..."

The world turned white as a searchlight hit just the right angle to throw the duel into sharp silhouette, and the alien girl threw her arm up over her face with a sharp shriek of pain before she dropped to
the ground. Harriet Jones was immediately at her side.

That scream was followed by another one, one that Rose recognized as the Doctor's.

The Sycorax leader raised his sword, bellowing out some sort of victory roar.

The Doctor was still there, she saw, just barely visible from the glow of one of the searchlights down below and still alive from the way he was moving to get back up again, but something was wrong with his right arm. Like… like it was too short. Like his hand…

"You… you cut my hand off," the Doctor ground out as he cradled his arm to his chest. "You cut it off. Do you know what kind of man this makes me?"

"The Sycorax claim vic–"

"A very lucky one."

The Doctor stretched out his arm, the golden flames that Rose remembered from the TARDIS – the regeneration – dancing out of the stump, at first slowly but then picking up speed as they began to trace the shape of bones and muscles, the actual stuff following closely behind.

"Witchcraft," the Sycorax hissed.

"Bit rich, coming from you," the Doctor replied. "No, it's not witchcraft. I'm just lucky… because, quite by chance and in the event you haven't been paying attention, I'm a Time Lord within the first fifteen hours of his regeneration cycle," he said as he flexed his new hand, the last few golden sparks dancing off into the night like fireflies as he waggled his fingers. "All that extra regeneration energy bouncing around my body… sometimes it goes to good use. Too bad for you, this one feels like a fighting hand!"

Somehow, that was a cue and one that Rose jumped on immediately, pulling the sword out of a nearby Sycorax's hands and throwing it towards the Time Lord. "Doctor!"

He snatched it out of the air easily, twisting around to batter at his opponent. The Sycorax seemed suddenly swamped by the onslaught, barely raising his sword back up each time as the Doctor's blows hammered down. Soon, it was the Sycorax that was lying on the edge of the asteroid, sword thrown off of the edge as the Doctor held the point of his weapon at the alien's throat, his other foot braced on the Sycorax's chest.

"I win," he said.

"Then end it," the Sycorax spat. "Kill me."

"No. I'll let you live. I'll spare your life and you'll leave this place forever, full of warnings to anyone who crosses your path that the Earth – is – protected! That is this champion's command; leave, and never return. Not with your brothers, not with your sisters, not with all the mercenaries you could ever buy. The Earth is forbidden to you and your race from now until the end of time."

The Doctor tilted his head to the side, as if reading the Sycorax's mind through his eyes alone. "What do you say to that?"

"Fine."

He leaned down, pressing the sword tip closer. "Do you swear it on the blood of your species?"
"Yes!" the Sycorax yelled back. "I swear it!"

As if a switch flipped, the friendly Doctor was back, stepping away from the alien and tilting the sword over his shoulder like an unorthodox sort of cricket bat. "Ah, well then, thanks for that, big fella. Best bit of exercise I've had all day." With that, he twisted the blade around and planted it in the stone before walking back towards her with a smile.

"You won!" Rose yelled as she threw herself into his arms.

"Done giving up on me then?" he asked playfully.

"Never doubted you for a minute," she replied.

"Saved the day, got my best girl, and..." the Doctor paused, reaching down to rifle through the pocket of his borrowed dressing gown. "...a satsuma. Well, wouldn't be Christmas without them." He turned to look at the alien girl, who had just gotten up from the ground, supported by Harriet Jones. "What happened to your face?" he asked.

There was an odd look in his eyes. Like that alien girl had become the absolute center of his universe the moment he noticed her injury.

Rose wasn't entirely sure she liked that.

The alien grinned, a bit of grey skin peeling away to show burnt looking flesh beneath. The skin on the arm that she'd thrown up to shield her face didn't look much better, already blistering horribly. "Forgot my sunscreen," she said, wincing as a section peeled off in a way that recalled wallpaper rather than skin. "Wouldn't think that I'd have to worry about that sort of thing in the middle of the night, but I – ah! – stand corrected."

The Doctor started to reach out a hand to her. "Do you need–"

She held up a hand to stop him as the skin on her face quickly began regaining its natural black and grey color, the blisters slowly but visibly fading before their very eyes while the parts that were apparently too damaged to recover simply sloughed off. "Don't worry about it; I've always been a fast healer."

There was a yell from behind as the Sycorax leader picked up the Doctor's discarded sword and began to run towards them–

The Doctor took the satsuma and threw it at a button near the door they'd come out through and suddenly the battle cry turned into a scream that fell away from the ship. How far down was the drop? Rose wondered. Far enough to kill, probably.

"No second chances," the Doctor said, his voice cold and serious once again. "That's the sort of man I am."

I ignored the sensation of burning as we appeared on Earth again, only opening my eyes once I was sure I wasn't going to burn out my retina. Crazy fast healing factor aside, regrowing the eyes was never a fun experience.

We were outside the Tower of London, the TARDIS sitting nearby and almost invisible for all the ambient Britishness. Somewhere between the landing and now, UNIT soldiers had surrounded us, most of their weapons pointed at me. A bit overkill for something that barely broke five feet in height, if you asked me. While there were some lights outside, it wasn't anything strong enough to
cause anything more than mild discomfort and slow down the healing process.

I looked up, ignoring the sounds of Major Blake telling his men to stand down and the ensuing clatter of automatic rifles being shifted to an uneasy rest, and made out the outline of the Sycorax ship. It was just visible against the night sky's backdrop of stars, the bright dots of searchlights fixed on its belly shifting out of place as it slowly started to climb up and away from the Earth, the red glow of its internal engine gradually becoming little different than the other stars above.

How far would they get before the order to shoot them down was given? Past the moon or close enough for the ash to mingle with the atmosphere and become the base for fresh snow?

Either way was good riddance, I thought, even as Mickey and Rose started jumping around and celebrating their victory.

"Thank you for your help," Harriet Jones said, taking my hand gently.

I smiled, wincing a little as the expression tested raw muscles. "Wasn't much trouble. Never cared for bullies."

"Neither have I," the Doctor said as he walked up to us, smiling down at Harriet Jones. "Prime Minister Harriet Jones."

She released my hand as she turned to him. "Doctor. My Doctor."

"I'm sure you two require a moment," I murmured, extricating myself from the immediate vicinity. I wasn't going to go far though. There was still one more event for me to push off the rails this morning, one more mistake that needed to be corrected.

It wasn't one without risk either. What did it cost to get in a Time Lord's way? The Family of Blood certainly provided an idea of what the Doctor could do. What could he do to a being that was already immortal? And how much worse would that fate be if he ever found out exactly what I was behind the mask?

"Thank you."

Shaken out of that dark train of thought, I turned to look at Llewellyn. The balding scientist would have died if I hadn't been there, executed for the crime of asking for basic decency. Instead, because I told him to hold back, he'd lived. "What for?" I asked.

"For… not being like them. You're evidence that… the universe isn't a cruel or lonely place. It isn't as ideal as I had hoped, but it…” he swallowed, as if trying to find the exact words he wanted to say. "It isn't as dark a place as it might have been."

Oh, it rarely was. Little could exist in such extremes; the grittiest worlds having their bright points while the nicest 'verses had their darkness. Of course, there were exceptions, stories that I never ever wanted to visit, no matter how smart, tricky, or powerful I could become. I could shift a genre, but some texts were unforgiving.

"I should be the one thanking you, Mister Llewellyn," I said as I turned my eyes to the night sky, much more beautiful for the lack of alien ship hanging between it and the Earth. "For proving that Earth's dreams of distant stars are not dead."

The silence stretched for a moment before I coughed awkwardly.

"Well, I'm certain that you have better things to do on Christmas than trade sappy sentiments with a
pointy-eared bastard," I said, quickly turning away. "Go open presents, make merry… or whatever else you had planned for the day."

I'm so good at social interaction.

Llewellyn nodded. "Yes," he agreed. "It's been a rather… long night and I imagine my daughter would rather I be at home when she opens her presents. Five year olds are rather insistent on those sorts of things."

Giving Harriet Jones a Merry Christmas and a goodbye, he was escorted to a car which drove silently off into the night. The Doctor had joined Rose and Mickey, the two jumping and turning all around him while the Time Lord simply basked in the glow of victory.

I sighed, moving to tuck my hands into my pockets only to be reminded that the Twili Mask's transformation didn't come with them. A logical problem for a race with subspace storage capabilities. Barely an issue, I thought as I corrected the movement to hooking my thumbs into the waistband of the kilt that came with the borrowed body.

Movement drew my attention closer. "Prime Minister," I said, dipping my head in deference.

"What do you think of the Sycorax?" Harriet Jones asked, her assistant standing nearby with his fingers pressed up to his ear.

"In what context?" I asked. So we were here now, on the cusp of the moment that could bring the whole chain of dominos falling down. The weight of an entire timeline was on my shoulders.

"Retaliation," she said. "Do you think the Sycorax will come back with the armada they spoke of or do you think they will honor the terms of our… agreement?"

I closed my eyes as I took a deep breath. "In my honest opinion? I think they proved the worth of their word when their leader attempted to stab the man he surrendered to in the back about a minute after the fact. But in the end, the choice is yours to take the shot or not," I opened my eyes to look at her through my eyelashes. "And the responsibility –"

"–will lie on my shoulders alone," Harriet Jones finished. "Yes, I knew that the moment the offer came through from Torchwood. But I cannot rely on the word of slavers that they will not return. Not when that word has been proven hollow and worthless."

I bowed my head. "So let it be done." As she turned to her assistant, I spoke again. "I will intercede should things get out of hand, but beyond the initial encounter, I can only give this advice: if anyone asks if you look tired, it has been a very long night and that you hope for a quiet Christmas. Six words can topple an empire, but only if you give them the power to."

Harriet Jones turned around. "What?"

"Don't get paranoid, even for a moment. Take each step in stride and take your rest where you can get it," I finished, before sighing. "This conversation might make more sense later. If not… well, the world will be happier for it."

There was a faint frown of confusion, but it was soon swept away as Harriet Jones, Prime Minister of Britain and current representative of Earth, turned to her assistant and uttered the fateful words, "Then we take the shot."

Alex nodded, before relaying the order. "The Prime Minister has confirmed action," he said. "Fire at will."
Somehow, the sound had carried across the distance between the two groups, because the Doctor's head spun around, his eyes wide–

And green beams of energy shot up from different parts of London, coming up to converge into a ball almost as bright as the sun before shooting off into space. Soon after that, another explosion of light, this one distant and fiery as the Sycorax ship suddenly failed to exist just past the moon.

There was no sound from the destruction of the Sycorax ship. There was no sound in space because there was no air for it to travel through, but there was a sound in the imagination and across more than a few telepathic bandwidths; the sound of many minds jumping up in surprise before being abruptly silenced, either by the initial blast or the airlessness of the environment they'd just been thrown out into.

That silence was as good as a scream.

"You… you killed them," the Doctor murmured before anger took over, turning the whisper into a yell. "That was murder! Cold-blooded –"

"That was defense," Harriet Jones said quietly. "Adapted from salvaged alien technology, as I understand it, from a ship that fell to Earth about ten years ago."

There was no pride in her voice, no defiance of the charge leveled against her. Harriet Jones knew what she had done and on some level, she agreed with what the Doctor said. It was cold-blooded, but the facts were cold as well.

The Sycorax could not be trusted.

"I don't care where you got it," the Doctor snarled. "What I care about is that they were leaving and you shot them in the back!"

Harriet Jones looked up to lock eyes with the Time Lord. "Would you have me gamble the lives of every human on Earth on the word of the Sycorax, Doctor? On a people whose leader attempted to kill you the moment your back was turned, immediately after he'd made his surrender?"

The Doctor stepped back, rage pulling at the lines of his face, but never quite crawling past the naked disgust in his voice. "They vowed never to return," he said. "As vowed to me by the ancient rites of combat and on the blood of their species. And you shot them in the back anyway. Britain's Golden Age."

That was it. I was going to interfere in the worst sort of way: by stepping into the line of fire.

"'By the ancient rites of combat'; that duel was done the moment you gave Fadros his life," I said as I put myself between the two, staring down the Time Lord. Quite a trick considering I was on the wrong end of twelve inches of height difference. "And he proved the worth of his word, as sworn on the blood of his race, when he picked up that sword to attack you after you'd won the fight."

I looked around at the people who'd witnessed it. "Everyone was paying attention, yes? To how the Sycorax equated the human race with cattle, to how they refuse to dirty their tongues with the languages of 'lesser' races?"

I turned back to the Doctor. "Honor only counts among equals and those that would hold themselves to it. To slavers that treat every other race as cattle… it means nothing but the chance to buy time so they can stab someone in the back when they're ready. So you protected the Earth this once… what was to stop them from coming back?"
The Doctor opened his mouth. "I –"

I cut him off. "You're not always here, Doctor. This time, you were almost too late. What happens when you can't get here in time? Hmm? A hundred and fifty years from now, some squid things riding around in giant pepper pots show up while you aren't looking and take over the Earth? What are they supposed to do, twiddle their thumbs while they wait for you to show up?"

I shook my head.

"Don't pretend they don't have the right to protect themselves," I said. "Not when they have trouble knocking on their door and only one name to call on. I won't pretend that Torchwood doesn't disgust me with their methods and their mentality and that violence shouldn't be the first answer to something outside your understanding, but do not fucking deny what desperate and frightened people are capable of or decry it as bare-faced cruelty when they have very real reasons to fear for their lives."

The Doctor stared through me, as if all the shine of curiosity had worn off and been replaced by something familiarly horrible in the blink of an eye. "What's your investment in this?" he asked. "What do you get out of letting humans become the new Daleks?"

I pulled myself up to my full height, not even coming close to being level with the Doctor's chin. If the eyes ever made up for the height issue in intimidation department, I'd never noticed it. "They are nothing of the sort and you know it," I snarled. "They won't become the sort of race that exterminates everything that isn't exactly like them just because their first official contact with aliens happened to be with some of the worst the universe has to offer."

I stepped back a little, unclenching my fists. "Of course they will stumble and occasionally they will fall. Everybody does at some point. But they will get back up again and learn from their mistakes. They will step forward, not back, so don't use this situation as some excuse to hamstring their chances at the future. It wasn't black-and-white and you know it, Doctor."

He stared at me for a moment, analyzing.

"And I thought I was the one for grand speeches," the Doctor finally said, still not looking overly impressed or convinced.

"And I thought you knew better than to paint slavers as sheep. Very easy, I suppose, now that they are dead and incapable of hurting anyone else," I spat back. "Do not twist history to suit your arguments, Time Lord. One Rassilon was enough."

With that, I spun on my heel and started walking quickly along the riverfront. I needed an alley, somewhere I could get my bearings and then start the long, complicated dance that would end with me back in my own skin and somewhere close to cooling off.

Damn cities with all their damn security cameras, I thought as I finally found an alley and made the sharp turn to disappear into the dark –

Only to have a hand lock around my wrist.

"What is Torchwood?" the Doctor asked.

So he'd followed me. Damn. Unfortunately for him, if he was planning on holding onto me, he would have had more luck where there was light.

"Somewhere old and cold where no alien should ever go," I said as I turned to shadow and slipped out of his grip. "Regardless of what they may or may not have done to deserve such a fate."
He stared after me as I properly became one with the ambient darkness and no longer visible to the eye and probably for a while after I'd left the alley entirely.

The Doctor stared into the TARDIS wardrobe, thumbing through the different articles of clothing without any real mind to what he was looking at.

Usually, he enjoyed this step more. It was like a rite of passage for each regeneration; finding his new signature look out of the nearly literal galaxy of options at his fingertips. But somehow, it didn't have that Christmas morning feel to it like it usually did. A bit ironic, seeing as it was actually Christmas morning, but that wasn't important.

What was important was why his mind couldn't seem to escape that strange shadow girl. It had been an over two hours since she'd quite literally slipped out of his grasp and the Doctor was still turning over every single one of his interactions with her over in his head.

Her species was inconsequential compared to most of the other questions. Why was she there? Why was she helping the humans? And how did she know him so well, while he didn't know her at all?

The last, the Doctor might have been able to chalk up to the fact that he was a time traveler. Meeting people out of order was hardly out of the question, but usually when he met aliens, it was in alien places. Sometimes on Earth, true, but they were usually exiles or invaders, almost never on the side of the humans.

So why? What did the Earth mean to her? She wasn't born here –

'Neither were you, if you care to recall such a sundry detail,' his First sniffed.

Ah, finally.

'lt's about time you lot showed up,' the Doctor snapped at his past selves. 'I could have used you a few hours ago.'

'Oh, I thought you had it handled quite tidily,' his Fourth said, putting a pair of imaginary feet on a similarly imaginary desk. 'Hardly anyone in the immediate vicinity died, the Earth hasn't been prematurely destroyed…'

'Or perhaps you are referring to when you attempted to depose of a woman whose political career was a fixed point in history,' his Sixth added.

"The Sycorax were retreating!" the Doctor said aloud as he pushed another rack of clothes aside.

'The Sycorax don't retreat,' his Seventh said darkly. 'They regroup and wait until their enemy's guard is down and come swooping–'

"Fine, fine, swooping is bad," the Doctor muttered. "I may have overreacted –"

'That's an understatement."

And now he remembered why his other incarnations tended to keep the older ones tuned out unless absolutely necessary. "Alright. Enough about that. It was a mistake. I want your opinions on something else –"

'Red really isn't your color."

The Doctor looked down at the rust red military coat his hands had settled on and shoved it away.
'Not that! The girl!'

'Mmm, she's not bad,' his Fifth said. 'I question her common sense, especially when she caused that paradox despite the clear warnings not to do that, but I'm hardly in a position to–'

"Not Rose. The alien one."

'Ah. Well –'

'Likely an Earth resident, from the terminology and the fact the TARDIS wasn't translating anything from her,’ his Third noted.

He hadn't quite caught that himself, but that did explain why she was so invested in the situation. Anything that affected the Earth affected her in turn.

'She's an interesting puzzle and she was a help in the crisis, though that reference to Rassilon was somewhat… troubling, considering how little the general universe knows about the culture of Gallifrey,’ his Seventh cut in. 'Beyond that, she did give us some good information on 'Torchwood'.'

"Barely,” the Doctor said as he pushed aside a rack full of fur. Definitely not him this time around.

'Still better than nothing, considering that you hadn't heard anything about it bar the odd reference in the far future of Earth.'

The Doctor had to concede the point. Instead of being dimly aware of there being an organization called 'Torchwood', he actually knew something about them. Nothing good and nothing concrete, but it was something rather than the previous nothing.

His hand brushed past something that immediately seized his attention. Ah, that was it. That was what he was looking for, but it needed – the Doctor's small smile widened into a grin as he saw the coat. Perfect!

'That is a veritable overabundance of brown,’ his Sixth noted with a wave of mental cringe.

'Oh, shut up, Rainbow Brite,' the current model thought before he shut out his other selves and started changing into his new suit. So what if it was all brown? The tie wouldn't be brown and he'd pick out a nice pair of trainers. Maybe in red, maybe white… or perhaps beige.

Then, instead of worrying about an alien girl that he may never run into again, the Doctor was going to have a nice Christmas dinner with Rose, Jackie, and Mickey.

The Doctor checked himself in the mirror, running his tongue over his new teeth before flashing an experimental grin. Not bad, he decided as he made for the control room and the door behind that.

Not bad at all.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 3 rewrite, beta'd by littleditto.

Revised 9/2/2017 to patch up quality and plot holes created by future chapters.
Yes, that was the Sword of Gryffindor that Ten turned down. Even in an anti-magic universe, it would still be fairly durable... and possibly poisoned, so maybe it's better he said no.

Shadow Kin and Elemental Shadows are both from Doctor Who (well, Doctor Who and its expanded universe), though the last have but one appearance and reference in the show proper (Love and Monsters) and the Shadow Kin appear just about exclusively in the Class spin-off.

Kenning: noun – a compound expression in Old English and Old Norse poetry with metaphorical meaning, e.g., oar-steed = ship. From 'kenna' to know or perceive. Usually consists of two words, often hyphenated.

Classical examples would be 'wave-horse' for ship, 'bane of wood' for fire, or 'wolf's joint' for wrist, referencing Tyr losing his hand to Fenrir. You could think of a kenning as a sort of verbal puzzle or riddle name, not unlike Bilbo's 'Barrel-Rider', 'Ringwinner', and 'Luckwearer' in his exchange with Smaug.

'Kin of Shadows' and 'Elemental Shade' would be accurate kennings for a Twili, but not accurate in the sense of species title.

Angrir is a reference to something that hasn't been written yet. It is being meticulously planned though and is partially the source of the 'trouble-dweller' epithet.

Time Lord senses – like pretty much everything else Time Lord – are way more powerful than a humans, and at least one source credits Gallifreyans with tapeta lucida, a reflective layer of tissue on the back of the eye that reflects the light that enters the eye and provides superior night vision.

Too long, didn't read version; it's the thing that makes cats eyes glow in the dark. Humans, along with most other primates, don't have them. This will be important.

Yes, the reference to Daleks showing up 150 years from 2006 is a reference to the Dalek Invasion of Earth, the 1964 serial / Daleks – Invasion Earth: 2150 A.D., the 1966 film adaptation of the same serial, where in the Doctor wasn't all that big into the universe saving business yet and the Daleks did come out of nowhere to take everything over.

The similarities between the Doctor's and Delaine's communications with their former/alternate selves are deliberate.
Christmas in London was – unsurprisingly – cold. Frost painted the windows and exposed bits of pavement, while fine powdered snow swirled in each passing breeze. For a city so plagued by moisture every other season of the year, today's snow was dry, which only made it colder. Like freezer burn.

Not that it bothered me. It wasn't a proper sort of cold, not to someone who'd spent their first life in a state where winters regularly went below zero and snow regularly went over two feet deep, and certainly not to someone who'd survived the likes of Skyrim, Hoth, and a dozen other places like them.

But with my limiter on, all of the powers that would render such environmental ills immaterial were beyond me. So, playing the part of plain human, I dealt with the chill like everyone else; by pulling my coat closer and shivering whenever a chill breeze brushed by any exposed skin.

I'd wasted a few hours familiarizing myself with the city and wandering wherever my feet wanted to take me. London had been familiar to quite a few of my other selves, but I had never been there in person. Not for long at any rate, so I was taking the chance to get a feel for the geography and play tourist.

I'd seen double decker buses, a few landmarks that I hadn't gotten the chance to appreciate the night before, and a couple… interesting bits of graffiti, all in between dodging traffic and wondering when my 'patron' was going to dump some wicked plot to make my life 'interesting' on me.

So far, it hadn't, but that didn't mean that some surprise – awful or not – wasn't lurking around the corner somewhere.

Currently, I was ducked into a coffee shop for the dual purpose of getting out of the wind and buying a cup of cocoa to warm me up. Coffee would have been just as good for the task, true, but cocoa was my primary concession to the fact it was Christmas.

As I blew a little bit of steam off of the top, the thick leather strap of the limiter peeked out of the space between my glove and my sleeve, the heavy buckle and shallow studs shining dully under the shop lights. It was simultaneously attention grabbing and inconspicuous, something that I attributed to the fact that it was a gift from my 'patron'… or merely the fact that it was an accessory that automatically marked its wearer out as some kind of punk.

Not that most of the other 'me's couldn't get away with it – most of us were punks of some description –, but sometimes it just attracted the wrong sort of attention in certain times and places.

My life would be 'easier' without it, true, but sometimes I just wanted to get away from being... well, me sometimes. Just take the opportunity to be human; no powers, no supersensory abilities. Just me boiled down to basics. It was also one of the few ways I could get a moment of quiet in my own head. Oh, they were still aware of what was going on, but I didn't have the almost constant stream of commentary buzzing through the background noise of my mind. And sometimes being halfway normal was worth it even without that particular perk.

After all, I couldn't feel the ache of a psychic bond reaching out for nothing when I didn't have any psychic abilities at all.
I took a sip of my drink and forced myself not to jerk back. Typical. My first real ‘meal’ of the day and I'd spend the rest of it not being able to actually taste the hot chocolatey goodness because I'd managed to burn my tongue on my first sip. Well, hopefully this would be the worst thing to happen to me today…

I shook my head as the thought finished crossing my mind before taking another sip, this time a little more carefully. Yeah, like that hadn't just been an invitation for trouble.

Especially when I'd been dealing with the sensation of being watched all morning.

The Doctor was bored.

Rose was at an ABBA concert, one that he had declined to go to the moment he'd stumbled upon this incarnation's dislike for disco. She'd probably be there for… what, a couple of hours? That could almost count as an eternity.

So, Rose was going to be gone for two to four hours. Where did that leave the Doctor? Twiddling his thumbs, tinkering with the TARDIS, or… perhaps wandering off to do something else. It wasn't like he'd come back late or anything, going around in a time machine – never mind all the times he had ended up doing exactly that – and Rose would likely never be the wiser so long as he didn't pick up any strays along the way.

The Doctor wasn't planning on it. No, just a quick jump back to the twenty-first century to hack some CCTV cameras and try to answer a niggling question. Barely an adventure at all, he told himself as he started pressing the various buttons and turning the various nobs that would take the TARDIS back to Christmas 2006.

He just wanted to see if he could get a glimpse of that alien woman. Something, anything to give him an idea of what she was up to.

'You're fixating,' one of his other selves warned. 'Nothing good happens when we start fixating.'

"I am not –" the Doctor began to say before he stopped himself. 'I am not fixating,' he thought firmly. 'I just have a question that I need to have answered.'

'Need?'

He didn't reply, instead throwing the lever and feeling the TARDIS rattle as it dematerialized. Need was a strong word and one that he shouldn't have thrown out on instinct. But there it was, scratching at some place between his hearts. An irrational, unfounded need for something that clearly wasn't there right now.

Regeneration was a tricky business. Any factor, any detail encountered early enough in the process could stick, altering his new personality for the better part of forever. Usually, it was just the first few minutes that defined the process, seeing the first face, having the first interactions.

The alien woman was later, hours after the fact. She shouldn't have struck him at all; barely anything else from that Sycorax invasion had. But it had been two days, a trip to the far future, dropping Rose off at the concert, and everything in between… and the Doctor still couldn't shake her image and voice out of his head.

And the questions that accompanied them itched as well. Had he met her before? How much did she know about him? Had there been some dialogue that resonated with an earlier memory? Why was part of him so desperate to find her again?
Finally, the Doctor decided to scratch that itch.


The Doctor watched and quickly dismissed the clip of someone trying and failing to climb up a wall, though he had experienced a flash of phantom sympathy at the palpable thump of the person hitting the ground.

When the London Police had been issued tasers, he didn't know, but it certainly looked painful. Still, not what he was looking for.

"– home video, social media…"

'Such a backwards thing, but so useful for keeping track of people and events…' one of his other selves noted as the current incarnation started flicking through the information. Boring, boring, boring, mundane, boring, boring, weird shadow but not her, nothing, nothing, domestic – wait.

That wasn't right.

The Doctor watched the shaky home video again, pausing on the moment in question. No, that wasn't right. Humans eyes didn't reflect light like that – they didn't have the internal structure, the tapetum lucidum needed – and this couldn't be written off as redeye. The video wasn't edited either.

It wasn't what he was looking for, but that question could wait for now. This was… concerning in ways that vaguely needling 'who was she' wasn't.

To be fair, it could be an alien living peacefully on Earth, disguised as a human, but honestly how many times was that the answer? Another, subtler invasion right on the heels of the Sycorax might actually stand a chance of success as the human governments spun clean-up and damage control instead of looking for the next threat.

So, that left the Doctor to look into and resolve it.

He smiled. This was far more interesting than hanging around outside an ABBA concert.

UNIT FILES: OBSERVATION OF ASSOCIATES / COMPANIONS OF THE DOCTOR

FILE: 10-7318523

SUBJECT: 'Delaine' [surname unknown]


OTHER DETAILS: American or assuming modern American accent and speech patterns. Clothing style is unevenly anachronistic with different articles suited for different levels of formality, but is in keeping with an Earth Native, circa 1970 – current and possibly near future.

HISTORY: Unknown. No persons matching the subject have been located on Earth in areas of search [AMERICAN MAJOR CITIES, ENGLAND MAJOR CITIES] on camera or on paper. This may indicate either that the subject has not yet been born, is a minor at this time, or is of alien origin.
Search is hampered by lack of a surname or any personal information.

UPDATE: Subject has been located in London, first seen around 10:26 PM, Christmas Eve via CCTV camera. Hair is longer than recorded, but the other distinguishing features confirmed the identification. Disappeared for roughly six hours, reappearing around 5 AM, establishing an erratic but traceable pattern in the six hours since. Agents have been sent to intercept.

There were many tricks to avoiding spies and government agents. One of them was that you did not to react to your tails. First, because they might get the idea that stealth can now be discarded. Second, because they might switch over to one of the tails you haven’t noticed yet. And third… well, just because running at the wrong place through the wrong crowd can get you tackled as a would-be purse snatcher.

To any unconcerned observer, it might have looked like I wasn't doing much beyond walking. To someone paying closer attention, I might look like someone who realized that they're lost and late, so they've recalculated their path and are adjusting their speed to what works with the crowd.

In reality… well, I'm trying to puzzle out the situation and to pick a good confusing path that doesn't get me caught or pick me out as a supernaturally enhanced being. Without powers, the last goal is easier. It's the possibility of getting caught that I'm concerned with.

This is a reality where Torchwood is a very real and very horrible thing, where the Master took over a government with subtle mind-control and a goofball public face. I don't know who is following me or for what, because there's a fair chance I haven't done it yet. For all I know, I just look like someone else who did something that I haven't the first clue about. That's happened before and usually it's resolved in a way that doesn't involve a bullet to my head, but I'm not risking getting 'disappeared' on the off-chance this is one of the 'friendly' covert operations organizations.

So, think. What am I up against? What resources do they have to work with? Manpower, obviously. CCTV. Do they have connections higher, the sort that can close buildings or streets? That'll both narrow down the possibilities and fuck me over entirely.

So, if they have people and a means of following me, why haven't they done anything yet? They could have intercepted me physically by now, secreted me off to god-knows-where. Why haven't they?

One possibility; they know who I am and what I am capable of and don't want to piss me off. Second possibility; they want to see what I do, where I go. Third…

I grimaced as I stumbled on the most likely answer.

Third possibility; they don't know what I am, only that I mean something to someone they do not want to piss off by hurting me. Someone who would know about it before it even happened.

I hate time-travel. I hate being locked up more.

I considered the traffic. No, it was London. Traffic was shit and not the kind of shit I could use for anything but a very physical wall.

Would it be prudent to attempt parkour? It was within the human range of capability, something I could do on my own without releasing the limiter… but if something went wrong, it would go very wrong. A bad step leading to a worse fall, removing myself from the relative safety of the crowd…

My eyes darted around the street again. Tail, tail, tail. Maybe more. Impossible to tell how they were...
kitted out with winter clothes. Tasers seemed like the most likely option if I was working against a wholly mundane force, but even with that limitation they could have all manner of small arms depending on who they worked for.


As soon as the crowd opened up enough for me to access an alley, I ducked in, catching the movement of every tail I'd pinned and a few more besides bolting after me in the second before there was a wall between us. I'd like to see them follow me up a piece of barely-fused-to-the-wall piping. The only trouble with this was climbing with gloves –

Something hit me in the back and I had just enough time to swear internally before voltage shot through my body.

Update.

Being tased while fifteen feet off the ground not only hurts, but makes you automatically let go of whatever you're holding onto. Hitting the ground from fifteen feet up while your muscles are all locked up from being tased also hurts.

In conclusion:

Ow.

There was a trick to identifying patterns. Humans were pretty good at them, coming from an environment where so many things practiced camouflage, but they tended to overdo it sometimes. Assuming that the world was going to end based on arbitrary numbers their ancestors decided to start counting their rotations around the sun with, the Doctor thought with a roll of the eyes, honestly.

But patterns. The ability to search patterns was a valuable one, so long as there was actual evidence to work with. First piece of evidence; a shaky home video detailing a family Christmas.

There were a handful of points to go on from there. Not a lot to be gleaned from the environment; the time stamp already gave away the date and time, the window blinds were down which denied him any possible clues as to location, the camera girl didn't explore enough of the flat to give the Doctor a sense of its relative size beyond a vague 'maybe a little bigger than Jackie's', and none of the people present offered up any references to nearby landmarks.

The people were a little more helpful. Two children, two seniors, and two adults, all related. He'd run a search algorithm based on their faces and general sizes, just for the sake of getting their names, but the most important was the woman, Lisa Belfrey. Oh, from the outside she looked perfectly ordinary, but it was clear that something was wrong. Not just from the inhuman golden eye-shine that had given her away in the first place, but the affect. It was flat, something that had thrown off the entire family dynamic to the point that the children were commenting on it.

Children were pretty clever like that, the Doctor thought with a smile. Infinitely smarter than their parents sometimes.

But that just marked out how much of a problem it was. If this was a peaceful cohabitation, there wouldn't have been a change in behavior. So there'd been a replacement. Organic, robotic, something in between… Lisa Belfrey had been replaced with something not of this Earth, probably sometime in the last month or so.
By what... well, the Doctor would be finding that out soon enough. The algorithm had found what it was looking for in a CCTV camera. He checked the currently location of the TARDIS. And only a few streets away, as well.

VIDEO OF INTERVIEW WITH COMPANION DESIGNATED 'DELAINE'

FILE: 10-7318523-AUDVIS-5

Interviewer: UNIT Captain [Redacted]

Interviewee: 'Delaine', companion to the Doctor

Interview Setting: standard interrogation room, three meters by two meters, featuring one door and a one-way mirror. Contents: one table, two chairs. Two points of recording; audio recorder on table, video recorder in corner opposite door. An observer remains on the other side of the mirror. Transcript was created by combining information taken from both sources along with the interviewer's and observer's personal observations.

[The interviewee enters the room, picking out the recording equipment easily but sitting down without commenting. Body language is tight, possibly pained from earlier fall while attempting to escape pursuit, but nervous tick of fiddling with wristband is noted. Still photos and footage taken from security cameras also show the same physical awareness of the environment and wariness while moving through the rest of the building and previous to capture.]

[Recording features nothing of note happening for fifteen minutes. This is to help gauge the interviewee's patience and temper. Subject 'Delaine' remains suspicious and twitchy, stimulating themselves with unfastening and refastening their wristband].

[At this point, the interviewer enters, shutting the door behind himself. The door locks automatically. The interviewee notices this and the stimming gesture stops as their attention is dedicated to the interviewer.]

Interviewer: [sitting down] You, Miss Delaine, are a difficult person to track down.

'D': [smiles, expression doesn't reach eyes. Most of the subject's reactions are contained.] I try. [Wincers, reaches up to rub shoulder] Well, tried.

I: Do you know why you're here?

'D': [sarcastic] Because I didn't climb fast enough?

I: You are a known associate of the individual known as the Doctor.

'D': [not surprised, still possibly sarcastic] Really.

I: Have you met him yet?

'D': In passing, yes. But 'associate' implies something a little more than that... doesn't it?

I: But you clearly know of him.

'D': [small smile] What gave it away?

I: Most would have asked 'Doctor who'?
'D': [amused] Now isn't *that* the question? [serious] But I'm sure that you didn't go through all that effort of chasing me through London just to discuss an individual that I may or may not have dealings with in the future. What is this *really* about?

I: If you are familiar with the Doctor, you are aware that he is a very important resource to the people of Earth.

'D': [serious, watchful] I am aware.

I: Then you would understand the importance of vetting the individuals that he surrounds himself with.

'D': [grins, openly amused] *Really?* You're going to tell the Time Lord, literally *thousands* of years older than you, who he can and cannot play with? I mean… that's just ridiculous.

I: You think we're overstepping our bounds?

'D': [laugh] I think you're trying to herd Cheshire cats! He might pick up all sorts from Earth, but I bet you can't account for all of those, let alone anyone he meets on alien worlds.

I: You really think that?

'D': Of course!

I: Obviously you have someone in mind. Could you give us a name?

'D': [began to answer but then became silent, contemplative. Observer notes this as a 'look' that 'could turn dangerous very quickly'.]

I: Is something wrong?

'D': [upset, serious, hand simply resting on the fastener of wristband, stimming possibly on the verge of resuming] You dosed me with something. A truth drug or just something to loosen my tongue? Airborne, it would have to be, unless you got your first shot at me back at the coffee shop. Either way, it's not doing you any favors.

I: Actually, we use an alien artifact that encourages an honest atmosphere within this room, so there's no need to worry about allergic reactions or appropriate dosage sizes. It's important for these files –

'D': [Cold, furious] The truth is a very dangerous thing, Captain. Do you know what sort of truth a person like *me* could share?

I: I imagine quite a bit or not at all, depending on who that person was.

'D': [smile noted as being stiff and cold, 'a silent well done']

I: [folds hands] So what kind of person are you?


I: [interrupting] That was a bad question, there's no need to continue answering.

'D': Thank you. Summing up a person in a handful of words is just about impossible, even if they're only a few minutes old. I would think you would have the sense to know that. Think about your questions before you ask them.
I: I'll keep them basic then. Are you human?

'D': Last time I checked.

I: What is your name?

'D': Delaine.

I: No surname?

'D': Not at this time.

I: Any reason for that?

'D': A few.

I: Care to share any of them?

'D': Sure. I was disowned and I don't like my old man.

I: What year were you born?


I: [surprised] You're very… tall for a twelve year old girl.

'D': [laughs quietly] The joy of living outside the natural pattern of things. No, I'm a lot older than that.

I: How much older?

'D': Ten years, give or take. Depends on your calendar.

I: Have you travelled in that time?

'D': [amused] Quite a bit. Roughing it has its upsides and downsides.

I: Ever in the company of Time Lords?

'D': I've only met the one once.

I: What's your stance on murder?

'D': [silent. serious] Complicated, but under the right circumstances, I won't hesitate.

I: What's your stance on secrets?

'D': Depends.

I: On what?

'D': Who's getting hurt by them.

I: [silent]

'D': Was there anything else you wanted to ask?

I: Were you involved in the Sycorax incident this morning?
'D': [clearly doesn't want to answer the question] Yes.

I: Would it be too much to ask how intimately?

'D': [silent] I saved a few lives, that's all.

I: Thank you.

'D': For my time?

I: That and what you did.

'D': [silent] So that's it?

I: That's it.

'D': [rises from chair, still guarded] Surprisingly painless for all the cloak and dagger.

I: [rises from chair to get door, lock releases] It didn't seem wise to risk anything more in depth, but the protocols dictate that we avoid upsetting interviewees. The Doctor takes a dim view of those that cause distress to his companions.

'D': You might have considered thinking about that before sending me into a paranoid spiral and making me fall off the side of a building earlier. I imagine that counted as a form of distress.

I: We would ask that you keep this meeting secret from him.

'D': [glances at camera] I don't imagine I'll have much choice in the matter.

[Subject 'D' exits room, followed by Captain [REDACTED], who leads them back to civilian zones as the memory filter takes hold, removing the memory of the interview. Agents resume tailing the subject even as memory filter takes hold before dropping off once the pattern of movement is reestablished.]

[Upon further analysis, many of the answers given by the subject are evasive or generalist truth statements, even when compelled by the Truth Field. Anyone dealing with this subject in the field should be aware of the subject's command of 'technical truths' and wordplay. Subject also clearly knows more than one would initially assume and may be aware of certain security measures specific to the London Black Archive.]

[In conclusion, while subject 'D' is a somewhat unorthodox choice for the Doctor given past preference in companions, UNIT has no material objections about this individual at this time. Future interactions would be advised to be taken carefully and recorded for further analysis.]

I don't know what I was worried about. For all I'd been worried about being followed, nothing had come of it and I'd lost nearly all the daylight to that vague paranoia and the glimpse of similarly dressed people in the crowd. It was winter, everyone was dressed vaguely the same.

Still, there was that lingering suspicion that I'd forgotten something. A passing conversation, a grocery list. Something that didn't strike as major but still niggled like a hangnail in my subconscious.

And I had no idea why I was vaguely sore all over. Maybe it's that thing called 'fatigue' that normal humans get when they do nothing but move around constantly for however the fuck many hours it takes to lose a handful of tails.
…why did I even bother using the limiter to keep out the peanut gallery when I was always ready to roast myself?

I rubbed my head as I continued walking up some random staircase to the roof of some building I didn't even know the color of. So what was the next step of the plan? Embrace that my 'vacation' in this universe might be completely and utterly mundane and hunt down an apartment, rough it for the night, or take off the limiter and remove my need for sleep and shelter? Why not call up the House of Mystery while I was at it, enjoy the shades of my friends and companions for a fortnight?

Oh wait, magic. Yeah, the last option was right out.

But other than that, I didn't know. Getting away from the powers for a while was a refreshing possibility afforded by few universes, one that I still didn't regret taking in this one, if only because it made other things hurt less. Actually having to work for things, being able to feel the world around me… not that I couldn't before, but the reflex to deny my human weaknesses wasn't always a voluntary one.

With the limiter, letting go and cutting loose was a very intentional action. Without it, all it took was the slightest twitch of muscle memory or whatever counted as such for intangible powers and any assumption that I was a normal person would be shattered like sugar glass.

Sometimes, usually when I was alone, I didn't care, but out in the open among other people, I did. Possibly too much.

My feet had finally carried me up the last flight of stairs, the roof access door offering up a screech and the barest ounce of actual resistance as I pushed it open, knocking flakes of paint and rust to the floor. Not a popular lounging spot then, if the door was trying to fuse itself shut.

Good. I wasn't much in the mood for conversation.

I walked over to the edge, grasping the aging metal railing as I sat down to dangle my legs over the street, the tiny figures of people making their ways home the only point of interest at this angle.

How many of them were headed for some holiday celebration? How many had families and homes and the certainty that they weren't capable of ruining it all in a moment of forgetfulness? How many could look up at the snow softly falling down and not think of the Sycorax ship that had blown up barely twelve hours ago?

A sigh escaped almost of its own accord as I finally let my posture fall.

Sometimes I felt entirely too old.

Still, it wasn't unpleasant. If I cared to listen, I could catch the strains of laughter and songs being sung, not necessarily with skill but with enough heart to make up for the deficiency. People who might have died or been enslaved still lived and breathed as free men. A child still had her father because of me.

Yes, that would be enough. Just that scrap of happiness would be enough to keep me going for another day. It would have to.

"Ah, hello!" a familiar voice said from all-too-close.

I froze, any smile that might have been easing its way onto my face shattering into a thousand tiny pieces of terror and regret. No. Not that voice. Not him.
Anyway, welcome to the first 'original' chapter of the rewrite. There will be others with original stories, sometimes based on unproduced stories or drawing on threads from comic books, audio adventures, and the books.

Edited on 9/3/2017, minor updates and consistency issues remedied.

Bit different format on this one, but I hope that it's easy enough to follow for the readers.

Yes, the Truth Field is one of the same type as the kind on Trenzalore. If taken at face value, it is possible to evade an exact truth by making a true statement ex: 'Ten years, give or take'. Someone could assume that the 'give or take' refers to a year or two, but Delaine's using 'millennia' as her meter stick.

Has anyone started picking up on any threads I dropped? I'll keep teasing at them just in case you haven't noticed them yet.
"Wouldn't think I'd be running into anyone up here," the Doctor continued as he leaned his elbows against the railing above me, casting an amused – why amused, why? – glance down at me. Brown-spiky hair, coat all the way down to his ankles, just allowing enough room for cherry red trainers to poke out into the world. Naturally, his hands were in his pockets.

Anyone but him. The only one that I could stand less than Ten was Seven – was it simply my dislike for manipulation or was there something to be said for familiarity breeding hatred there? –, but Ten… Ten came with saddled with Rose fucking Tyler and a face that came with an unavoidable association with terrible things. Things that gave me nothing but nightmares whenever something dug them up.

Forget that, had he somehow figured me out or was it just bad luck on my part? Was I five minutes from being cast into a singularity to prevent my 'unnatural presence' from contaminating the universe? Or maybe, just like so many other universes, had my 'patron' altered the flow of things to make sure its point of entertainment was always where it wanted it to be?

"Rooftops. Love rooftops," the Doctor kept musing, apparently unaware of my freak out less than a foot away. "Excellent place for people watching, catching the breeze, and pondering the meaning of life, the universe, and everything."

"42."

The answer was automatic, pure reflex in the range of 'stupid, stupid references'. Still it was spoken aloud, so he blinked and looked down at me.

"What?"

"42," I repeated slowly, trying to get some moisture back in my mouth while stopping my hands from jittering in a way that couldn't be ascribed to the cold. "Is the answer to the ultimate question of Life, the Universe, and Everything according to a book called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy* authored by one Douglas Adams. One of the… you could call them subplots, I guess… is about these aliens who built this great big computer called 'Deep Thought' that they've set to solving the ultimate question. Seven and a half million years later, it gives them the answer of 42."

"Oh," the Doctor said. An awkward silence began to fall before he suddenly spoke again, "How would you rate the book?"

"Pretty good," I replied, any immediate panic in the face of imminent Time Lord 'justice' fading away as it became clearer that I wasn't about to suffer a horrible fate for existing. Now my problem was mostly the fact that the person standing next to me had *that* voice matched with *that* face. "The ridiculous reality of what living in a random universe would be like, marrying horror and humor in delightful prose, and just generally being a delight to consume. Oh, and lots of bathos. Bathos is good."

The awkward silence was back.

"So," the Doctor finally said. "An American in London during the hols. Whatever happened to 'I'll be home for Christmas'?"
No home, for one, I thought as I hooked my hands around the rail. Not without my companions, and they were a universe away. "Never liked that song," I muttered, pulling myself upright and twisting around face away from the edge. "Too much radio play around the holidays."

"No place to stay?" he asked. "No friend to offer up the use of a sofa?"

"Nah." Not unless I called up one of my 'resources'. And the House of Mystery, being a magic-based anomaly that rode between reality and something else, wasn't one of them.

"Sounds awfully lonely."

It was, but I was getting used to lonely. Lonely was best staved off by staying busy and distracted, not by pitying glances from one of the few other beings that could appreciate what it was like living in a world of beings so infinitely more temporary and fragile. "It isn't that big a deal," I lied before offering up a nugget of truth. "Never been what you'd consider a 'social butterfly'."

I stepped ahead slowly, my arms spread wide as I started placing my feet heel-to-toe as I mimed walking across a balance beam. Yes, that was the TARDIS parked behind the roof access. How had I missed that? Well, besides a) being wrapped up in myself, b) perception filters, and c) just being dim in general. No, that probably covered all the bases.

"Besides, some homes are better left behind, along with the baggage attached," I said brightly as I abruptly clicked my heels and spun around to face the Doctor again. "So, instead of asking 'what sort of girl spends Christmas alone on a rooftop', the question should be 'what sort of man sees that girl spending Christmas alone on a rooftop and thinks, "ah well, might as well intrude"'?"

My brief imitation of his accent brushed aside – how well it would have gone down if I had perfectly imitated his voice would have unanswered, but the act itself would probably leave a bad taste in my mouth for weeks after –, the Doctor stood up, hands still shoved deep into his pockets.

"Well, many could and would argue that intruding is a bit of a hobby for me. Maybe even a bit of a lifestyle. Intru da door, intru da window," his smile widened a bit more as he added, "occasionally intru da ceiling, but I can't say I really recommend that one, 'cause if you don't stick the landing just right you just end up with a twisted ankle and a bill for a new skylight."

I let the smile the joke was teasing at show, though it was just a twitch. The Tenth Doctor had the sort of bubbly charisma that could go from anywhere from a boiling geyser of righteous fury to the tickle of carbonation behind your nose. It was impossible not to like on some level and, unless you kept a sense of perspective well in hand it was easy to get dazzled and lost in the now rather than in the realizations of what he had done until his worst traits decided to rear back and kick someone's head in.

Still, it was no worse than most of any of the other people I'd been around over the years… or been myself. Though usually in different directions, with different 'actors' behind the role, and infinitely less capacity for destruction riding on their shoulders.

"Must do a lot of running if you're constantly bursting into places. Ever take a flying leap out of a second story window?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, and higher as well. Always important to know how to make your own zip-lines and parachutes, that's what I say. That's right up there behind regular cardio and escapology in my book," the Doctor said before tilting his head at me. "Care to take the extended course?" he asked.

What?
"Is that an invitation to… go with you?" I asked, fighting back the automatic 'no'.

"No, it's a correspondence course," the Doctor replied flatly before slipping back into his usual energetic state. "Of course it's an invitation! I wouldn't have asked if it wasn't. So, do you want to come with me?"

The chance to take a trip of a lifetime, to see the ghosts of the past, aliens from the future, and see what a TARDIS was truly like, instead of working off of Zeke's memory. Sure, I'd time traveled before, seen alien worlds, done all sorts of crazy dangerous things... but this was different. They were all different, I supposed. Every alien, every sentient ship, every universe... nothing was ever fully the same, no matter how many iterations of a concept, there was always something unique in the experience.

A thousand lifetimes or more ago, I might have said no, too scared to mess up, too intimidated by the prospect of fumbling a timeline I'd presumed set. Another me might have said no, just because of the person asking, too traumatized by a memory that would never go away.

"Why not?" I finally said with a shrug. "I might see something new."

I wasn't the first person anymore, but I was still mostly the second. There was enough difference and enough distrust of Ten's habits that I could make the decision to try to hold his worst impulses in check.

The Doctor smiled before walking over to the TARDIS. "So you think you've seen it all, then?" he asked as he reached the doors, looking over his shoulder at me. Gauging the distance between me and the TARDIS, as if waiting for the opportune moment to open that door and hear the words 'it's bigger on the inside'. "Everything that this little blue ball hurtling through time and space could ever offer?"

The smile turned into the sort that graced the lips of hungry sphynxes; the superior feeling of holding a puzzle in his hands that could only be solved by a clever twist of the wrist known only to himself, one that he would be unveiling in a moment.

"Think again."

The door was opened and my jaw dropped as my feet automatically carried me inside. Oh god, she was beautiful.

I might have had my problems with Ten, within and without the context of his universe, but his TARDIS was never part of that. For all the coral theme slash grunge phase was supposed to be unspeakably tacky to the point where even the leopard skin was better, I loved it. The colors were warm and alien, but alien in a way that felt like home. Given, I'd grown up in a 1970's time capsule owned by a small-time hoarder, but unlike that mess of a house where half the rooms were unfit for habitation, the TARDIS aesthetic wasn't just functional, it was wonderful.

And to stand there in person, breathing in the charged particles in her air…

Oh, what she might have looked like if I could get a look at her without my limiter, I thought as I looked up at the ceiling.

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The Doctor grinned as he watched the girl go through the stages of amazement. Oh, he loved the first look. Every single one was different – he still remembered Sargent Benton's reaction particularly clearly – but it was the ones that looked at his TARDIS like the wonder she was that were his favorite.
This one – oh, he hadn't asked her name yet, that was a bit rude – was spinning around with her eyes fixed on the ceiling like it was showing off the most spectacular lightshow available on Earth, just drinking in the sight of the TARDIS around her. There was no way to miss the way her eyes were dancing around the curves of the coral struts or the geometries of the roundels or the breathless smile that refused to be contained.

"So, what do you think?" he asked as he walked around her to the console. "Or have I struck you speechless?"

"Oh my GOD!"

There it was. The lead up to The Words. Not the gush of how beautiful the TARDIS was – no, that had been clear from the girl's face alone – but the immortal statement of the blatantly obvious as the mortal mind tried to wrap itself around the concept.

"Oh, it's bigger!"

"That's what they always say," the Doctor said around a satisfied and slightly smug smile as he leaned back against the console, crossing one leg over the other and folding his arms as he waited for the rest of the reaction. Just three little words left to say.

"On the inside," the girl said, pointing towards the console before turning around to gesture theatrically at the door, "than it is… on the outside?!"

The smile fell. That was a lot more than six. And the delivery was ever so slightly overplayed somehow. "Ah… what are you doing?"

"My entire understanding of physical space has been transformed!" she yelled as she flung herself dramatically over one of the coral struts.

Oh yes, definitely overplayed.

"No, seriously. What - are - you - doing?" the Doctor asked again, ignoring the TARDIS's almost laughing wheeze in the background of his mind.

Her hands were in proper flight again as soon as she released her grip on the TARDIS coral, fingers fluttering in the air as the girl's arms swept about like streamers caught in hurricane force winds. All very theatric… and the mark of a shameless and deliberate ham.

"Three-dimensional Euclidian geometry has been torn up, thrown into the air, and snogged to death!" she cried.

'I believe the expression you're looking for –;' one of his other selves commented as the Doctor stared. ‘– is "taking the piss".’

"My grasp of the universal constraints of physical reality has been changed…" she cut off the dramatic speech to fling herself at the railing suddenly, locking eyes with the Doctor. "Forever," she finished in a stage whisper.

"Are you done?" the Doctor asked.

The serious expression evaporated, leaving a half-embarrassed half-unrepentant grin behind. "Sorry, just wanted to see that done properly," she said, still not fully dropping the Scottish burr. It was a fair imitation of a Glasglow accent, but it was clear that the girl was imitating a specific person rather than the broad idea of the sound, and not one that she was all that close to in vocal pitch.
'Four stars for enthusiasm, three for delivery, absolutely none for subtlety,' his Fourth said.

"Was that mockery?" the Doctor asked aloud as he dragged a hand down his face. "Because it tasted a lot like mockery. Served up on American-made bannock bread with a slice of shameless ham. Was there a purpose to the accent? Because I'm going to ask you not to do that ever again."

The smile was still pulling at the edges of her mouth, unable to be fully contained. "But that's the best kind. And it would have been a slight to the actor not to."

He gave her a Look, any trace of a smile long swept under the rug of 'let's never speak of this again'. "Well, before you decide to start channeling Brian Blessed, would you like to hear about that adventure I promised you?"

"Fine, fine," she said, pulling herself up and through the gap in the railing. "So what's a guy like you pulling a girl like me into a lovely space-age beauty like this for?"

"Oh, a little help. Nothing much," the Doctor said as he turned back to the console, tapping away at the old typewriter before pulling the view screen around. "Just need a hand tracking down an alien running around London."

There was a pause.

"What kind of alien? Because if you mean like those… Sycorax from last night, I don't think –" she asked warily. Oh yes, that wasn't all that long ago for her. There was a fair chance that she'd been one of the people left standing on the edge.

"Oh no no no. They're nothing for you to worry about. No, this is something completely different," the Doctor said as he flicked the videos on the screen to the side as he relocated the video he wanted and leaned back in the command chair. "Here, take a look at this."

The video played again, the shuddering and frankly shoddy quality of the cheap digital camera quickly giving a panoramic view of some nearly anonymous flat decked out in tinsel and fairy lights. The cameragirl quickly discovered the zoom effect and focused on the various faces of her family.

"You were watching other people's Christmas videos?" she asked, raising an eyebrow as she looked away from the screen.

"I was looking for something, anyway, tell me what you see."

She gestured at the screen, pointing at each point she was focused on. "Well, Grandma's clearly on her fifth or sixth cup of eggnog and Granddad's eyebrows are attempting to eat the rest of his face, but I'm pretty sure you mean the hellish eyeshine on the mom."

The Doctor smiled. "Exactly. Humans don't do that, don't have the anatomy. Anything else?"

"Not a lot to work with here, unless you want me to start spinning whole cloth," she said, locking eyes with him again. The grin from earlier was gone, replace with razor sharp focus. "If whatever it is living like a human, paper and electronic trails should be easy enough to track down…"

"Already ahead of you. She's Lisa Belfrey nee Petty. Born 1972, married since 1993, mother of two. Nothing to suggest that she's been anything other than human for the whole of her life," he said before pointing the sonic screwdriver at the screen and switching the video to a CCTV capture. "Except the video you just watched and this."

The sole advantage of this video over the last was the fact that it wasn't being flung in a new
direction every three seconds. It was just as grainy in quality, far away from the action, and rendered in staid murky grey-scale, likely adjusted for the absence of light. Naturally, there was no sound to go with it.

That was the truth of security cameras sometimes, the Doctor had to admit. They were almost always the lowest common denominator for the technology level of the era, unless in the hands of people who he really didn't want to have pictures of him. Then they were high-definition and in full color with the clearest sound possible.

The scene was dim, the time stamp in the corner giving away that it was taken over a week ago at just before six in the evening. The street was mostly deserted, save for a few people heading to their homes laden with bags of groceries and Christmas gifts. Lisa Belfrey was one of these, walking along the near side-walk with four separate bags hooked over her arms.

Suddenly there was a disturbance in the camera feed, the only warning that the footage was about to go a small swipe of light rushing towards Lisa. The video came back a second later to show Lisa picking up a dropped sack and then glancing around, eyes glowing dimly in the gloom as she did so.

"So, my shiny new assistant, what did you see?" the Doctor asked.

"Can you replay it, but at half-speed?" she asked, eyes fixed on the screen. The video played again, as she requested, but she paused it as the spot of light was about to touch Lisa. "That. It's not a video error. That's how she got replaced. Teleported out and replaced with some sort of replicant," she said as she looked over to the Doctor. "Which means someone's on the outside pulling the strings."

"Yes," he replied. He'd guessed just about the same, but it was a good test of the new girl's abilities. "There's a changeling running about. You're pretty swift on the uptake, for someone I just picked up." The Doctor leaned in close to her, almost resting his chin on her shoulder. "Can I be absolutely certain that you aren't a UNIT scientist in disguise?" he asked in a low, mock-serious voice.

Ignoring the palpable shudder that ran through her body at the contact, her voice never wavered. "If I had any sort of job working for the UN," she said. "I would think they would have had the decency to at least invite me to the office Christmas party."

He smiled. "If they're anything like I remember, you didn't miss much," he said as he leaned back into the chair and out of her personal space. "But enough about that. Any thoughts about our mystery pod people?"

I looked at the Doctor, disbelief shoving away any immediate discomfort from the unsolicited and unwanted physical contact. Was he serious? Two videos and a bit of speculation and he expected me to come up with a good idea? It might have been different if I was a companion with some kind of established rapport, but asking someone he met less than ten minutes ago seemed a mite quick even by TV standards.

"At a guess, I'd say they picked her because she was convenient, not because of any specific strategic value. Relatively low foot traffic, nobody really paying attention to anything but themselves. A lot less risk than other options," I said as I tried to pull theories out of the available facts. There wasn't much to work with. "The fact that the shot came from the alley might mean that our aggressor is somehow unable to disguise its alien nature, either physically or just the equipment required to pull the swap in the first place. The angle is bad, so I can't really take a guess at the relative size of our shooter. There weren't any other cameras available?"

"Nah. Least none that I could access," the Doctor said, crossing his legs as he studied me.
"Then, barring casual use of time travel, I don't know what else I could tell you than what we've established," I replied as I broke eye contact. I didn't like that appraising look. It felt too close to the sort of scrutiny that preceded a guilty verdict… or a chess player evaluating the strategic value of a piece.

I could just feel him grinning from behind me.

"Oh, so instead of just being the most beautiful thing ever, she also does time travel. Brilliant," I said as I reached up to caress the time rotor. Sorry, my sweet lady, but I must play the part of fool. "Style and substance in one bigger-on-the-inside package."

The TARDIS hummed, the various lights noticeably brightening.

"Oi, you keep flirting with her like that, I might get jealous," the Doctor scolded as he stood up and walked around to the other side of the console, flicking a series of buttons and switches as he went before reaching for a Lever.

There was a difference, I'd learned long ago, between a lever and a Lever. A lever just does something, no fuss or show, just flick it and you're done. It might as well be a mildly stylish light switch.

A Lever is a bit more than that. A Lever with a capital L not only does the thing big, but it tends to be big itself, complete with a noise to match. A metal screech of resistance, a solid thump as it falls into place... it doesn't matter, but something will be there. A Lever with a capital L is designed to be dramatic and is almost always the size of the user's hand, if not bigger.

The Doctor's Lever fit all these qualities, I noted.

"You might want to hold onto something," he said right before he threw it, and before I could get a grip on the railing. I fell over immediately, scrambling uselessly for some kind of handhold before finally grabbing the railing and locking my arms and knees around it. Of course the Doctor himself wouldn't be bothered, barely rocking back on his heels because he'd grabbed the edge of the console in time.

The short shuddering trip through the Vortex was over quickly, though not so quickly for me not to express a couple thoughts about how to get my revenge. All of them would be petty and ridiculous.

"And here we are at the scene of the crime, approximately five minutes before it occurs," the Doctor said brightly as he walked around to the view screen again, casting a glance down at me. "Everything alright down there?"

"What do you think, you—"

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," he said around his grin as he opened up the scanner. "No sign of Lisa Belfrey… although we do have an excellent view of a few garbage bins and a stray cat," the smile faded a little as the Doctor checked the coordinates again, "Aaand we're on the wrong side of the street."

"It's not like there was an eighteen wheeler in the way," I groused as I climbed my way back to a standing position. The view through the scanner was a lot clearer than the security footage, offering up a clear view across the street to where our mystery agent was going to be.

There was nothing visible in the other alley yet, nothing beyond a pile of garbage bags and cardboard boxes. But that was just something else to hide behind. To actually fire whatever weapon or teleportation device that replaced our subject, they would need to have a clear shot.
"And there's our victim," the Doctor said, calling my attention away from the opposite alley.

Lisa Belfrey wasn't much to look at. She was the sort of woman who entered her thirties slightly wilted; a side-effect of having two children to deal with I supposed, but the fact that she was spending December 20th loaded down with grocery bags probably didn't help the image of perennial exhaustion.

Just over her shoulder, something moved. Something that didn't even approach the image of 'human'.

"What the hell is that?" I asked, staring at the alien.

It was small, maybe three feet tall at most, but what really grabbed my attention was the head. The chin stuck out of its otherwise flat face like a knife and three long tentacles dangled from the back of its head, but it was the shiny, half-burnt, half-scaled texture of its pink skin that really got my attention. It was half-familiar, and none of those familiar feelings were positive ones. No, they only recalled the sensation of burning and flesh melting as another self stared into the weaponized starlight of a nuclear –

"That's a Graske," the Doctor said, interrupting the flashback. "Surprising and somehow not all at once."

"How's that?" I asked, watching the Graske raise its hand, some sort of small black device clenched in its clawed fingers. It pressed some button and a flash of blue-white light shot out of it to strike Lisa Belfrey. She stumbled, catching herself before she could fully fall, and when she looked around, a flash of gold was readily visible in her eyes.

"Oh, they do this sort of thing. Sort of their species hat, changing out people with their copies. They're part of the reason why changeling myths are so pervasive," he said, not even watching his hands as they flew over a keyboard. "Standard Graske invasion pattern. Mind you, I'm not saying they're particularly good at it, between picking poor targets and just generally mucking up their own plans. I mean, they've got a couple of successes historically, but win-to-lose, they're worse than the Chudley Cannons."

The Graske, apparently done with its task, suddenly disappeared in a flash of blue-transmat light.

"And right there's a signal I can follow!" the Doctor crowed, pulling a pair of glasses out of his pocket, flicking them open before setting them on his face.

Ooh, the Brainy Specs. "You couldn't trace Lisa's?" I asked.

"No. Wherever they sent her, they don't want anyone to know about it. Bounced the signal around enough with double backs and split branches for flavor..." he grimaced as he looked at the screen and the horrendous tangle of lines and incomprehensible Gallifreyan scribble, his fingers still tapping away at the keyboard at breakneck speeds. "Naw, it'd be easier to unthread a twenty-foot scarf by hand than to pull her end destination out of that mess."

"Like daisy-chaining anonymizers or onion routers."

"Oh, computer savvy one. I like that," the Doctor said as he flicked the screen, switching to a much less complicated spinning graphic. "Well, this is a bit different. If I can get another sample, I can eliminate the extraneous data and isolate the commonalities. From there, I can figure out where the Graske are keeping their victims."

"But you can trace the Graske itself?" I asked.
"Oh yes," the Doctor said as he reached around the console to flick some switches. "Y'see, he did a bit of daisy-chaining, but not anything close to what they did for Lisa. Probably means he's not headed to their home base, but is still out on errands, so to speak, but if he snatches someone else –" He spun around, pushing buttons and twisting dials all around the console. "– I can get another sample. I'll need you do help with the flying a bit though."

"Walk me through it." I wasn't taking the limiter off just yet. Not for this.

The Doctor reached around the rotor, leaning over half of the console. "This," he said, pointing at a lever, not quite as impressive as the one he'd pulled before, "is the dimensional stabilizer. That," he said, his hand swiveling to point at a dial matched with a dial, "is the vector tracker."

"And the bicycle pump?" I asked.

"Either the vortex loop or the thermo-buffer," he said before looking over to his side of the console. "Nope, that's the thermo-buffer there. You've got the vortex loop. I really should label things."

I suddenly recalled an old joke about the Label Maker of Rassilon. "Anything else?"

"Nah, that's it," the Doctor said. "I'll handle the tracking, you just fiddle with the bits when I tell you, alright?"

Any immediate double-entendre I might have reflexively made with literally anyone else was shoved down and replaced with a simple, "Got it," as I placed my hands within easy reach of the controls.

"Good. And try not to fall over this time."

Jacka–

The thought cut off as the TARDIS dematerialized again, flying through the vortex at breakneck speeds. I barely stayed upright, holding onto the console with white knuckles until I got my bearings back.

"Depress the vortex loop!" the Doctor called from the other side of the console and I grabbed the bicycle pump, shoving it down into its canister.

"Brilliant, now the dimensional stabilizer. After that, take the vector tracker and twist it twenty degrees to the – left."

"My left or your left?"

"It's everybody's left!" the Doctor yelled back.

I pulled the lever and twisted the little lever to the exact degree requested. "Anything else you'd like me to play with?" I asked over the sound of the TARDIS engine. "I don't know, like a Bop-It or something? I don't do Simon Says, just throwing that out there."

The TARDIS abruptly thudded to a stop, but I didn't stumble this time. I'd been ready this time.

"Alright, we just went back about a hundred and twenty years," the Doctor said as he checked the scanner, "I couldn't get much closer than this, geographically speaking, but I do have the means to scan for alien DNA. Coordinate that with the discharge of the cross-chronal transmat he's using, it'll be easy to figure out where he is specifically."

I looked towards the door. "So where are we now?"
"We're in a geostationary low Earth orbit above Europe," the Doctor replied before looking away from the scanner and at me. "Do you want to have a look? We are ahead of schedule and I won't be able to pinpoint the Graske's exact point until he arrives."

I'd seen planets from orbit before, including the Earth, but it was always beautiful, seeing the jewels of the universe just hanging in cradle of black velvet we called space, surrounded by the halo of atmosphere. That tiny envelope of gases and water vapor, capable of supporting life in the great cold vacuum…

It was always a reminder of what I liked to protect.

"Of course I want to see," I said.

He smiles like he knows what I'm thinking. On some level, I imagine he does.

The Earth is such a sight from this distance.

It's not as small as it would have been from the Moon or even further, the Doctor knows, but it's still somehow more impactful to see a planet from that rare distance where the big and little pictures start to blend. There are no country lines from here, none of the silly prejudices some humans insisted on carrying around with them, but he can still pick out the lines of cities as dusk casts over the surface of the world like a velvet cloak set with lines of golden thread gleaming in the black.

Those lines were the lines of humanity, lighting fires against the cold of the night. Oh, in a few decades, those threads would spread further across the dark, part of them replaced by electric lights. A few more after that and the entire world would be a glittering jewel in the night, the threads tracing the lines and movements of humanity throughout their own sphere.

But for now, the Earth was darker, dimmer, but no less beautiful for the absence of highways and metropolises. The view was priceless and life as always, was precious.

"I used to have a NASA coffee-table book as a kid," his companion said, shaking the Doctor out of his musings. "Loved the colors of all the nebulas, but the Earth… the Earth as seen from the moon is the most beautiful."

"What do you think of the real thing?" the Doctor asked her. He could just catch the outline of her smile in the dark, lit by the subtle glow of the Earth's atmosphere. There was something soothing about it, like looking up into a perfectly clear night sky with an unmatched view of the universe and no threat of death or destruction on any horizon.

"It's better."

Chapter End Notes

Beta'd by littleditto

Updated on 9/3/2017 for quality and continuity reasons.

I confess; I muddied up the timeline a little. The show treats New Earth as happening maybe a week or so after the Sycorax invasion whereas I managed to cram it in the span of three days. Thankfully it was an offhand mention, so I've gone back and fixed it
without too much of a mess.

Douglas Adams not only wrote the incredibly misnamed Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Trilogy and the Dirk Gently series, but also was a credited writer on three Doctor Who stories (The Pirate Planet, City of Death, and Shada, unproduced because of reasons). While Doctor Who has referenced his work in different ways, with characters quoting his books and the Doctor once claiming to have met Arthur Dent, I'm treating it as outside-context knowledge for the sake of a joke and to avoid a celebrity paradox.

Of course, then the Doctor namechecks Brian Blessed (who was considered for the part of the Second Doctor and actually did play a character during the Sixth Doctor's/Colin Baker's tenure), so forget that last point.

Bathos – when one reaches for pathos and slips on a bar of soap. Basically, an anticlimax during what should be a dramatic, serious moment. Sometimes intentional, other times… not. Like someone having a wet fart too close to a microphone during what was supposed to be a dramatic inspirational speech.

Attack of The Graske is an interactive episode / game that is still available (the last time I checked) to play. Seeing as I'm an idiot, I just opted to watch other people play-thru's on Youtube.

A large part of the Doctor's dramatic 'come with me' speech is taken from the Series trailers. I believe that most of this one comes from the Series Two trailer. Delaine's reaction right after that comes from The Husbands of River Song. If you haven't seen it, Google it.

Offhand references to things that might not make sense at present time are usually seeds for 'future' – as in, will be written and posted later, not taking place at a later point in the timeline – stories in the Chains Adventurous series. You might see a reference to something like Animorphs, Hellblazer, or Harry Potter that won't get more than an offhand mention or momentary use, but there's already some loose planning in the works. Anything really specific will be explained in the Author's Notes.

Like I mentioned in earlier chapters, I like research even if I might not have the mind for the subject in question. I'm also reading reviews of different episodes, particularly the ones where they point out plot holes, logic problems, or bad science (in particular, the fact that the Impossible Planet is actually quite possible, at least from the 'planet orbiting a black hole' angle). Most of the fun is applying real stuff to apply holes in what was constructed by imagination.

Some people have pulled on one of those threads I keep mentioning by now, I think.

Anyway, feel free to ask any questions in the comments / review section. I will either answer them in-story or in the next Author's Notes. Reviews, criticisms, and commentary are, as always, welcome.
It was a relatively simple piece of advice; dress for winter in 1883. The Doctor had shown me to the wardrobe and turned me loose as soon as we reached the door. It's not like turning me, the twiggy young stick-bug wearing skinny jeans and a printed tee under a long coat and zebra-print converse, loose on the streets of Victorian London would go down well.

Of course, the Doctor's own look wasn't all that different and he hadn't made any moves towards blending in himself, but the Time Lord had a tendency to get away with those sorts of things. So what was I looking for?

Well, first; not a dress. I didn't like them most of the time and the ability to run without tripping over my own clothes was one that I hated to give up. The fact that they had a tendency towards showing off too much arm and too much neck also added to my general antipathy for the entire breed of clothing. If it didn't go all the way up the neck, all the way down to the wrist, and all the way down to the ankle in black or similarly subdued shade, a dress didn't stand much of a chance of grabbing my attention.

An old – one might even say 'ancient' – preference, but I had never liked having my scars stared at. And when my body tended to feel it was half-held together with scar tissue, that meant either embracing full body coverage or being so casual that something as simple as scar tissue was somehow just part of the picture. People would see them, yes, but they didn't stick out as badly against leather jackets and jeans as they did against satin and silk.

But no matter what the logic behind it, the dresses were out. Pants were too useful.

I brush my hand over the racks as I tried to find something that jumped out at me. Anything that could catch my attention – ah!

Ah.

I brushed my thumb over the deep green velvet of the frock coat. Plush and soft as forest moss, just the way I remembered it. Against all of my better impulses, I pulled it off of the rack and brought it up to my face. It even almost smelled the same; honey-scented and herbal, carrying the sensation of warm sunlight behind it, though Selby's scent had traces of pine and deep forest mystery that this lacked. Which made sense, considering this coat belonged to the Doctor, but the rational thought didn't help much with soothing over the homesickness.

I forced the thoughts away. I'd see my companions in a few years, Selby included. What was a decade in the face of eternity? Why did I have to get so nostalgic for them whenever I couldn't reach them?

Because, a treacherous voice reminded me, if I fucked up, I'd lose them all forever. It didn't matter that I'd known some of them for over a millennia, it didn't matter if they would otherwise be dead if not for coming with me beyond the bounds of their universe, it didn't matter if some of them were closer to me than my own soul.

If I failed to entertain, my 'patron' would take my friends – my family – away.
Sometimes I wondered if it wouldn't just be better to let them go. Let them forget that I'd dragged them into my mess and crawl off to die on my own time.

I released my death grip on the coat, quickly moving to smooth the imprint of my fingers out of the velvet. It wasn't really my style. It would fit in. But would it be a good idea? I wanted to, but I shouldn't. I –

"Just wear the damn coat if you're going to get this clingy over it, Delaine. Christ, you're on the clock," I muttered to myself as I draped it over my shoulder. The rest of the outfit followed quickly, each choice a subversion of the Eighth Doctor's own. Waistcoat, trousers, borrowed shoes... and, just because it was within my ability to do so, one of what could only be the Third Doctor's cloaks and a top hat. It was my main concession to 'winter'.

For all the time I wasted on the coat, I could get dressed quickly when pressed. The only point of difficulty was the bit of black satin I was trying to get into something resembling a proper tie, but only managing to turn it into a floppy bow.

Selby was always better at this sort of thing.

Fuck it, I decided as I threw my hands up in the air and stalked back towards the console room. It was a valid sartorial choice, I had over fifteen thousand years' worth of experience in my head when I bothered to use it, and I'd run out of fucks to give about this kind of shit somewhere around eight hundred. Not that it stopped me from occasionally giving a fuck anyway, but that was me; backwards and contradictory to the last.

If the Doctor recognized any part of the outfit, he didn't make any comment about that beyond raising his eyebrows halfway to his hairline.

"Glad to see I'm not the only one here making an effort at blending in," I said giving his outfit an unsubtle once-over. Absolutely exactly what I had expected; the sum effort of nada.

He ignored the snipe. "Just two questions," he said, before raising a finger. "Does it hurt being so sarcastic all the time and isn't that cape a bit too tall for you?"

"It's December, it's warm, it's era appropriate, and I'm a 5'6" cocktail of sarcasm, depression, and assorted candies. Just about everything's tall for me," I replied, pulling the cape a little higher onto my shoulders. I could have adjusted it to something closer to my size, if I'd taken my limiter off and disregarded any qualms about messing with other people's property. But I didn't, because I'm not an asshole.

"'sides," I added as I spun the top hat between my fingertips before shoving it on my head. "Isn't that hair a little tall for you?"

Most of the time anyway.

The Doctor almost reached up to smooth down his spikes. "Anyway," he said, dropping his hand down a few inches to point back at the door with his thumb. "We should be going. The Graske aren't going to stop themselves."

As we stepped out into Victorian London, I was struck by the odd but increasingly familiar feeling of belonging and not belonging all at once. Some of the others in my pattern had once called streets identical to these 'home' and I remembered all of that, but it wasn't as tight as my 'own' memories were. Like attempting to rely on muscle memory, only to be reminded that those weren't your muscles you were calling on.
But as it was, Victorian London was nostalgic, especially under snow. The moon, much fuller than the cat's grin sliver of Christmas 2006, cast the snow in shades of silver and blue while fires – be they of street lamps, furnaces, or even the odd metal barrel – cast their own warm, flickering light into the fray. The streets were cobblestoned and, almost against reason, people seemed almost as thick on the ground as they had a hundred and twenty-three years in the future, if not thicker.

Well, Christmas was a defiance of cold weather and logic, so why not? The carolers singing hymns and 'God Rest You Merry Gentlemen', the last mad dash for gifts and food, the cry for alms from urchins…

The fact that a lot of people were ignoring said urchins…

The Doctor gave me a look as I shoved my hand down into the freakishly deep pockets of his former coat. "What are you looking for?"

"Era appropriate Earth money," I growled. None of the scattered bits of clutter I could find fit the description. Why the Eighth might have needed a pair of glasses, I didn't know. Maybe they were tinted, maybe they picked up on some sort of radiation. Maybe it was another attack of the Brainy Specs. But they certainly wouldn't buy a bit of anything edible.

"I'm not in the habit of carrying the stuff, unless I've planned ahead or forgot that I had it in there for some reason," he said, looking off to the side to where the small clutter of children were huddled inside an apparently disused alcove. "It's not like you can do much, just giving them money."

I bit my tongue to avoid spitting an immediately acidic retort. No, a bit of money wouldn't turn their lives around. I knew that. But one meal, one night of not starving, would make a difference. Maybe not a big one in the grand scheme of the universe, but to the kids… certainly. If they lived on the streets, they knew very well what the line between life and death could come down to.

"Any sign of the Graske?" I asked, redirecting my attention to our surroundings. Nobody looked to be acting particularly strangely and there wasn't much in the way of out-of-context material present either.

"Nah. Our scaly little friend's got the common sense to hide until he picks out his victim. He's close though," the Doctor replied. "TARDIS scan is sure on that one, so keep an eye and an ear out, because I don't imagine people will be very quiet once he jumps out at them."

As we walked past a carriage, the horse snorted, ears swiveling around as it eyed a pile of baskets and packages in front of it. I followed its gaze. Horses were skittish at the best of times, but for one that accustomed to the busyness of London to react in such a way to a seemingly inanimate object…

"Doctor -"

Before the rest of the warning could pass my lips, the Graske burst out, sending the smaller baskets rolling and people screaming as it rushed into the street. I couldn't blame them; it was hardly an attractive creature. From this range, I could see the sickly yellow, almost reptilian look of the alien's eyes, along with the razor teeth and crocodilian details of the scale pattern.

It quickly produced its teleporter again, pointing it at one of the urchins that had dared go further out into the street. The blue-white light that signaled an imminent switch shot out and struck the boy squarely in the chest. The Doctor had whipped out the sonic screwdriver almost instantly, but it was too late. The boy had stopped twitching, looking up with luminous gold eyes, and the Graske had activated his teleporter, vanishing from the street.
"I've got the signal," the Doctor said, grabbing my arm and dragging me out of the crowd, "Back to the TARDIS!"

The Doctor loaded the sonic screwdriver into a slot on the console, a smile spreading over his face as the numbers came out into something decipherable. Between the urchin's abduction and the Graske itself, the coordinates were clear and the scanner screen was showing the picture of a very distinct violet-hued sphere covered with deep glittering gashes in its surface, chasms that ran down miles and riddled with subterranean tunnels and cities.

"And there we are," he said, twisting the last switch before throwing the dematerialization lever. "Griffith, the legendary planet of the Graske. Arriving in five minutes."

"Legendary for what?" his companion asked. She'd shed his Third self's old cape, draping it over the back of the command chair, revealing what he'd half-suspected from the glimpses of bottle green sleeves from beneath the cloak; she was wearing his Eighth's velvet frockcoat, though buttoned closed rather than left to hang open as that incarnation had usually worn it.

"Exotic sausages and cured cheese. Actually, I'm not sure," he admitted. "Bit daft, using their home world as their primary base of operations, but considering how many other worlds they have at their disposal…"

"How many do they have?" she asked.

"Besides Griffith? None. I did say they weren't terribly good at the whole 'conquest' thing, and most won't have anything to do with the Graske these days. Not without an exorbitant price tag attached."

"Exorbitant'? he thought at himself.

'Don't cast your disapproving mental gaze in my direction,' his Sixth sniffed. 'That particular word choice falls entirely on you.'

"So that leaves their dreams of conquest to be carried out from the back garage. Impressive," the girl said, rolling her eyes. "I have just one question."

"Shoot. Or rather, ask away," the Doctor corrected himself. "I don't like guns. Don't like using them, don't like having them pointed at me, don't like having them anywhere around me. Just an all-around general dislike."

Alright, alright, I get the picture," she said. Any trace of her light and playful mood from when they first met was gone, transformed into a snappish manner that screamed 'all business'. "I have just one question."

"Abit of Column A, bit of Column B," the Doctor replied with a shrug. "They're reasonably adept in the technological and scientific areas, but 'common sense' is a bit scarce on the ground on Griffith and the Groske got most of it."

"Dare I ask?"

"Sister species. Bit less prolific, a far sight richer in the basic logic and morality departments. Also, blue." He pulled a few more switches and dials, looking at the screen read out. One final defense on the Graske's base of operations, this one likely unintentional; the method of time travel they were using was so tangled and disjointed that if he brought the TARDIS any closer, it stood the risk of destroying the whole ball of yarn.
Just one more reason to stop them, the Doctor supposed. The entire thing was a hazard to the space-time continuum of the universe, a deathtrap of physics just waiting to collapse on somebody and take out a species or six.

The TARDIS finally materialized on the surface of Griffith, the final thud echoing dimly through the console room.

"Can't get any closer to their base than this," he said, grabbing the sonic screwdriver out of the console. He paused right before opening the TARDIS doors. "Any complaints about going in through the back door?"

"I was half-expecting to go intru da window," his companion muttered.

'I like this one.'

'Yes. Also – shh!' the Doctor said as he shoved the voices of his previous selves back into the back of his mind. "Nah, this place doesn't have any," he said as he pushed open the TARDIS doors, revealing purplish stone and the black-finished metal that made up the Graske's back access door. The metal was rusted, chipped and generally carrying an air of disuse, but the electronic lock was still functional… and short work for the sonic screwdriver.

The inside was no better, cobwebs hanging off of bundles of wires and cords that hung from the ceiling like jungle vines, dust-covered and half-rotted from age and disuse. Sections of the floor were similarly rotted out by rust and other damage. The lighting – what there was of it – was barely present, the twinkling of LEDs and power crystals the most reliable light source in the gloom.

"I'm going to need a tetanus shot just looking at this mess," the girl muttered as she followed the Doctor into the hallway, stepping gingerly over a gap in the flooring. Her steps were barely audible at all, something that the Doctor was quietly grateful for. "You sure this is the right place, Doctor?"

"We're headed straight for the biggest complex space-time event on the planet," he replied, swinging the sonic screwdriver around in the dark like a drowsing rod. No cameras present, nor any other identifiable security measures beyond the locked doors. He'd expected that from the condition of the passageway to begin with, but it was always nice to have such expectations confirmed. "If this isn't connected to our time-travelling bodysnatcher, I'll eat my hat."

"You don't have a hat."

"Exactly," the Doctor said as they came to another airlock. He started working on the coded lock, humming to himself as the sonic started feeding the information back. It was strange that the Graske's locks had been in such dramatically different patterns, but perhaps it spoke to the relative age of the doors. This one seemed slightly newer than the last, though not any less disused by any inhabitants of this place.

"Must have a thing about porches, seeing as they seem to have as many doors as Jim Morrison," he muttered as he got started working on the mechanism. This one was a touch more complex than the previous sets, requiring not only a handful of electronic codes be solved, but a physical key to release the final mechanism. Not that that particular detail stopped the sonic screwdriver, but it did take a minute of dialing through the different settings.

It was just before that final lock released that the Doctor remembered something. "This is going to sound horribly rude, but what's your name?"

"…Delaine."
"Oooh, is that French?" There was something pleasing about the structure. Maybe in that there was room to play with the stretch of the syllables. There was a pleasing undertone to the meaning of the name as well, even if it was as simple as 'from the alder grove'.


"Ah." That… was a legitimate alternate reading, which fit with the teeth she flashed every now and then.

The lock had finished its release, the hiss of the hermetic seal as soft as a whisper as the door prepared to slide open. The Doctor crouched, pressing her back behind him as the door slid out of the way and revealed a bustle of activity in the room – not decrepit or disused like the hallways they'd come from, but reasonably well-lit for all it was filled with the low fog of cold storage.

Graske wandered around everywhere, testing the various connecting bits of the storage freezers where they'd stowed their victims. Surprisingly, those victims were not all humans, with there being at least twelve different alien species visible in storage. There was even a Raxacoricofallapatorian in one of the tubes – possibly a Slitheen from the color, but it was impossible to say for certain through the frost –, half-calcified from the chill of suspended animation.

"The Graske need to keep them alive to sustain their changelings," the Doctor explained quietly, nodding over to a case not yet frosted over. Inside, the urchin from earlier was frozen, dead to all outward appearances as aliens like the one who'd abducted him checked over the settings of his cryostorage casing. "They'll all be trapped here forever if we don't stop them… at least until the Graske cause a paradox and collapse the entire space-time tangle they have going here. Either way, not a happy ending."

"And if they've got a record for having their grand plans collapse under them, they've probably have a –" her eyes widened and the Doctor barely got a glimpse of the Graske and its energy pistol before Delaine pulled him out of the line of fire, the tiny blast of plasma shooting past them into the tunnel. Maybe it would find its mark in a ruined wall or ricochet fruitlessly until it finally found a mark or died out on its own.

That was less of a concern than the problem of more of those violet-hued streaks of energy flying around them, duly ricocheting around the storage area like a storm of furious fireflies, striking and sparking off of what could only be important equipment. One of the stray shots fried the lock mechanism on the Slitheen's tube and the hulking alien burst out almost instantly, swiping at the closest Graske. The small alien just barely escaped with all of its limbs intact, screeching as it ran in the opposite direction at top Graske-speed.

The Doctor wasn't entirely certain that would be fast enough to outrun a sufficiently motivated Slitheen, but that was a secondary concern to the fact that his companion was very much not beside him anymore. So where was she – oh.

Oh!

That was brilliant.

Delaine was over at what could only be a control panel, flipping switches back and forth as different sections exploded into sparks as the internal machinery melted down. There was a barely traceable method to her madness, though how much of that was luck or knowhow was hard to divine without knowing her exact thought process.

She finally settled on a large luminous button, punching it as a Graske noticed what she was up to. It
started to move toward her, but it was too late; Delaine had activated the teleporter and every
cyrostorage tube lit up with blue-white transmat light.

They didn't wait to watch that light fully dissipate, though, instead racing through the ruined tunnels
back to the TARDIS as the unhappy howls of the Graske echoed behind them. As soon as the
TARDIS doors were closed, the Doctor punched in the coordinates for Earth and pulled the lever,
only relaxing as the wonderful sound of dematerialization filled his ears. Then he laughed.

His new companion – Delaine, Dee-laaaine, it had a good cadence for all the lack of a last name –
was splayed out in the command chair almost as an afterthought, one leg thrown over an armrest
while the other supported her head, her brown hair splayed out like a tangled, sweat-streaked halo as
she chuckled around gasps for air. Almost to spite that loosening of image, the rest of her borrowed
outfit was as pressed as it had begun, save for the odd bit of cobweb caught on velvet.

"Brava brava," the Doctor said, brushing his hand back through his hair as he frowned. "No idea
why I said that. Maybe I like opera… But a good show for your first night out."

"Maybe that mouth's built for Italian," the girl murmured as she picked up the top hat she'd
discarded, spinning it around in her hands.

"Molto bene..." he tried before grinning at the way the words rolled around his mouth. "Ah, always
fun discovering the new quirks. Now, wasn't that better than spending Christmas all on your
lonesome?"

"Mmm, probably," Delaine replied around a smile that slowly grew into a proper grin as the black
hat's spin slowed down to rock back and forth between her fingers. "Most fun I've had in years."

"Would you be interested in doing it again?" the Doctor asked.

There were words that could have described the way her eyes opened and shot over to look at him,
all of them required a bit of nuance that simply weren't there. 'Surprise' fit the best, though there was
an edge that he might have quantified as 'panic' or 'shock'.

Whatever it was, it was quickly gone. "You're asking me to come with you," Delaine said slowly. It
wasn't a question; every word was measured and devoid of inflection, as if they were being tested for
quality… or weakness.

"Well, yes," the Doctor replied, "unless you aren't interested…"

"Why wouldn't I be?" she said before looking away, spinning the hat again. The casualness suddenly
seemed somewhat counterfeit. "I'd just think, with your personality you'd have all sorts of people
hanging around…"

There'd been many hanging around over the years. Oh, maybe only one or two at a time – three at
the most crowded, though the Doctor rarely counted Kamelion – but there was no question that there
were dozens, if not hundreds of people in his past.

The Doctor didn't mind much. People came, people went. Time, as always, moved on. So long as he
wasn't alone, it was fine. Survivable.

"Oh, I've got Rose around lately," the Doctor said as he set in the coordinates to pick the blonde up.
"She's at an ABBA concert right now, so you'll be meeting her before too long…"

"Ah," Delaine said before sitting the top hat down over her face. "Joy," she finished, her voice
echoed and muffled from within its fancy prison.
"A bit more enthusiasm would be nice, if you don't mind."

"I'm so ecstatic it defies description," the brunette deadpanned quietly before appearing to drop off into a light doze, almost in spite of the awkward position she was laying in, her fingers playing across the green velvet of his Eighth's coat as if she was stroking a kitten.

The Doctor shook his head as he turned his attention back to piloting the TARDIS. It would be interesting to see how Delaine and Rose interacted. Rose's optimism and energy against the dry, sarcastic nature of Delaine. Not to say that either of their personalities could be summed up so simply; Rose could be childish and territorial and Delaine had showed off her silly side within seconds of entering the TARDIS.

'Of course, you're working with the assumption that they'll actually get along,' his Fifth said. 'But there have been cases – '

'Adric was a one-off, and most of the other conflicts of personality resolved themselves,' the Doctor thought back, but it was a thought to consider. Would that dry sarcasm in the face of danger rub Rose the wrong way? Would Rose's energy offend the laidback sensibility of his newest companion?

What was Delaine? Brave or reckless? Dramatic or pragmatic? Serious or silly? Why not all of those, shifting with the situation?

The Doctor would just have to figure it out, but the first question was this – in the face of that… inexplicable flash of fear, why had she said yes? Because she liked her first taste of adventure or because she'd been alone without anywhere to go? Maybe all the answers were right, mixed together in a slurry of other details that he wasn't privy to.

The Doctor then considered the second question.

Why had he asked her in the first place? Because she'd caught his eye or because he'd recognized something in that lonely figure sitting on a rooftop at Christmas, watching all the other people living their lives on the streets below, only to slap on a playful and carefree front as soon as they were called on out on that solitude?

It was a deep question, one that he didn't entirely think he had an answer to.

Any thoughts were scattered as Rose stepped back into the TARDIS, still bouncing on her heels from whatever ambient excitement had been the atmosphere at the concert and the faint sheen of sweat glistening under the lights of the TARDIS.

"How was the wait?" Rose asked as she hopped up to where the Doctor was standing, turning around on her heel only to stop as she saw the slumped figure currently occupying the command chair. "Who's that?"

"Somebody who hasn't had any sleep in the last twenty four hours and needs it badly," Delaine muttered, lifting up her top hat just high enough to cast an unimpressed glance in Rose's direction. "So if you don't mind…"

Rose turned to look at the Doctor, the question clearly scribbled all over her face.

He reached up to rub the back of his head. "Ah, got bored, decided to go on a little side trip, picked up a new friend… Her name's Delaine. Don't let the clothes fool you; she's your contemporary. I'm sure you'll get along fabulously."

"Wait," Rose said, doing a quick double-take, looking at Delaine, back to the Doctor, and then back
And so Rose Tyler arrives.

Another confession; Ten and Rose are my least favorite Doctor/Companion duo. Most of you probably guessed by the fact that I used 'Rose fucking Tyler' right at the beginning of the last chapter. Part of it is the fandom, where Rose Tyler gets shoehorned in everywhere while one of my faves gets shafted (Martha), but another part is that RTD treated Rose the same way. She's clearly a flawed character, but by the time she makes her last appearance in Series 4, those flaws are glossed over and she's just kind of… there, saving the day and getting everything that she wants. Never mind that the show established that Pete's 'Verse doesn't have Time Vortex meaning that TARDIS's can't survive there, but I DIGRESS.

Ten has the same problem. He's never called out for what he did to Harriet Jones and some of his actions are kind of troubling (the first that comes to mind is his self-destructive behavior, often to the detriment of others around him, but also his ridiculous approach to pacifism, which really isn't that pacifistic in action anyway). I honestly enjoy him the most when whoever is writing him decides that the piss must be taken out of him, which appeals to my loves of slapstick and consequences for actions.

But, since I decided to just roll with the punches (or the roll of the dice in this case), I am making an effort to treat them fairly as characters. I do have the advantage of being the author here, so that means that I can put my own spin on their personalities. Also I can make Ten out as the massive dork he deserves to be (praise be to Titan Comics and the 50th anniversary special for giving me such gifts).

Kind of forgot that I'd written Delaine with a playful – if occasionally mean and regularly sarcastic – sense of humor (how much of that is faking is up in the air) before I got these chapters back from my beta, so I'll be fixing that at the appropriate times in the future.

Added in the Selby stuff after it gained a lot of importance later, polished up a few scant bits of writing. Other than that… not much.

The name 'Delaine' has a few different meanings. The first one I was ever exposed to was 'descendant of the challenger / dark challenger' which is metal as hell. The second was the 'from the alder grove' which is kind of tame in comparison, but not bad. Then I came across the interpretation 'dark water' or 'dark river' based on the idea – the name is a translation/modernization of 'Dubhshlaine' – that the 'shlaine' part is in reference to the River Slaney, which when taken back to the original Irish, gives us 'slaine' which can translate to 'healthy person', 'farewell', 'security' …or 'challenge'/defiance', bringing us back to the first again.

Adric and Kamelion were companions of the Fifth Doctor. Adric was a teenage alien math genius from another universe and Kamelion was an easily mind-controlled shapeshifting robot. Both have the distinction of being on the list of companions killed.
by travelling with the Doctor, though Kamelion bears the dubious honor of being killed by the Doctor himself.

Very little of value was lost on either occasion (well, in Adric's case, the dinosaurs), though the serial where Kamelion is destroyed also features Peri Brown trying to squash a cockroach-sized Master with her shoe.

A few more Highlights of Rassilon.

The Roulette of Rassilon (Russian Roulette with a gun that was designed for two things; deleting its target from history and not firing at Time Lords). Played between Rassilon (Time Lord) and a squid alien (not a Time Lord). Conclusion: obvious.

Profane Virus of Rassilon – not actually made by Rassilon but was created in the same spirit of douchy-ness. Overrides and reprograms electronics to destroy themselves. Last seen making a time machine crash into itself.

The Death Zone (of Rassilon) – think the Hunger Games, but older, more Doctor Who, and less rules. Only known rule is no Daleks or Cybermen allowed, because they're apparently 'too good' at the Game. According to the 'official' history of Gallifrey, Rassilon is the one who put a stop to the Game, but considering that he helped develop the technology that made the Game possible and his character, he probably started it in the first place. On semi-related note, the Tomb of Rassilon is located there, despite him not being dead. At best it's a kind of suspended animation because he's still mentally active (using his psychic powers to fuck with everyone in the building, turn people into statues, etc.) and comes back for real later in the revived series, never mind all the shit he pulled in Big Finish. Yeah, the fandom nickname of Assilon isn't entirely unfounded.
This was punishment for something. Somewhere down the line of all the morally suspect shit ever done and petty vengeances ever exacted, karma had found one tiny little thing that it hadn't kicked my ass for and had thought to itself 'yeah, I have just the thing for that'.

And that thing was 'girl talk' with Rose fucking Tyler.

Alright, maybe that wasn't fair. It wasn't like I knew her. All I knew was a TV show version of her and the highly exaggerated fandom perception. I could take the time –

"So what do you think of the Doctor?" Rose asked as we made our way to the wardrobe. Dress for November 1979, the Doctor said, as punk as you come. I wasn't entirely sure I would change my outfit, knowing where we were really heading on this next trip.

Actually, fuck time and understanding. Just let this conversation be over as soon as possible. “He’s a regular chatterbox.”

"Nothing else jump out at you?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at me as she turned around the door to the wardrobe with a touch of theatricality that just managed to strike me as wrong. To be fair, Rose Tyler managed to do that on her lonesome, but this seemed wrong even from approached from that baseline distaste.

"Patently ridiculous hair," I added flatly. Was I presenting some kind of threat to her relationship with the Doctor by dint of having two X chromosomes or was this some sort of twisted bonding exercise? I had every reason to believe it was the former.

"Well, I like it."

Good for you. I personally had spent too many mornings hammering on a bathroom door, desperately needing to use the can while a teenage boy with the exact same hair style as Ten went through the innumerable steps of getting his spikes just right to find that sort of thing appealing. Never mind that I already had every reason in the world to hate the face under it.

"So what do you find attractive?" Rose asked as she started shifting through the clothes racks.

Oh, there were probably guidebooks to be written on what appealed to me in any given incarnation, none of them fully accurate beyond the sections covering 'food'. "The brain of Albert Einstein, the personality of David Lee Roth, and the body of Kelly LeBrock," I deadpanned, taking the opportunity to open up a closet in the ensuing awkward silence. Not looking like people who'd manipulated and tortured me in a previous ‘verse was good too.

I wasn't the type to hold a grudge based on those factors alone – I mean, people usually didn't get much of a say in picking their face – but it certainly wasn't helping me relax any. It was all I could do not to punch the Doctor in his face every time he got too close for comfort. "Do you know if there are any lint rollers around?"

"What, you're going to wear that to Ian Dury?" Rose asked, giving the ever-so-slightly-dusty but still blatantly Victorian outfit I was wearing an incredulous once-over. "That's not exactly mosh wear."
If we were actually going to arrive at said concert – I *somehow* doubted it –, there was going to be people wearing everything from leather and spikes to trash bags and rags and, based on previous experience with the punk scene, I wasn't ready to rule out tutus either. A little Wild Bill Hickok wasn't going to stand out by much. "I really don't feel like changing my clothes right now and it'll be warm enough for November."

"Who cares about being cold?"

"People who like having fingers."

Rose swiveled her head around to look at me. "Where do you come from that you're worried about that kind of cold?"

"Michigan." At her blank look, I added, "It's in the Midwest United States. There's snow by the end of October most of the time."

"Ah," she said before disappearing into the clothes rack, once more on the hunt for suitably punkish attire. "So how you run into the Doctor?"

"I supposed I just *managed* to catch his attention *somehow.*" Likely through the interference of a certain omnipotent being with a predilection to dick moves. I dismissed the thought as I finally managed to find a lint roller that had gotten shoved to the back of the closet and began the process of pulling the dust and cobwebs off of my borrowed coat. Meeting Queen Victoria was going to be rough enough without looking like I'd been dragged through the Parisian Catacombs by a mutant dust bunny.

With no immediate response from Rose, I started browsing through the racks. Mmm, unfamiliar, weird, an incredibly distasteful shade of rust-red, Matt Smith's purple wish, a stripy sweater I vaguely recognized as Steven Taylor's, and… oh.

I smirked as I pushed a certain technicolor coat to the forefront. Definitely not a piece made for a wallflower, but it did look even more weirdly comfortable in person. Maybe I'd –

"What do you think – oh my god."

I held back the sigh as Rose Tyler, naturally wearing the same denim dungarees, t-shirt, and tights from the episode, stepped right by me to 'admire' Six's coat.

"Look at this! Oh, it's got to be in here as a joke," she said as she turned it over, laughing again as she saw the back, with its two completely separate patterns of plaid placed up against bright green and a marginally softer shade of tangerine.

"With infinite access to all of space and time, it's probably the height of fashion in some galaxy or another," I said levelly.

"It's… so tacky."

"Well, I *like* it," I said, pulling it out of her hands as I tucked it back into its place. I suppose that was the nicest way I had of saying 'fuck you' at the moment. The fact that I was able to defend my favorite Doctor at the same time was just a bonus. "Anyway, don't we have a concert to get to?"

Rose reached over and flipped the lapels of my coat outwards. "Ian Dury, not Liberace."

I rolled my eyes but flipped my lapels back down, smoothing down the velvet as I went. This was my comfort object, not hers. "Punk is as punk does."
"And what does a punk do?" Rose asked.

"Skip school, run wild through the streets, and carry a half-brick in the event of fascists," I said as we made the short trip back to the console room.

The Doctor, as before, had made no alteration to his own look, instead dancing and drumming his fingers along to the tin-distorted lyrics of a punk song that sounded like it'd been recorded via a microphone hidden in the rafters above some dive bar stage. Considering the genre, the shaky quality could very well be deliberate.

The rest of his 'dance' – a generous interpretation of the word – was disjointed swaying and twisting at every possible joint, no move fully committed to anything as clearly defined as 'a step'. Probably because going any further than that would prevent him from drumming on the various parts of the console.

Just as one hand stopped drumming to start twisting through the air in unearthly but strangely familiar patterns, Rose knocked on the outside of the door we'd just come through. The Doctor started, quickly turning the hand movement into a careless brush backwards over his hair as the rest of the dance ceased altogether.

"Well," the blonde asked, doing a little bounce. "What do you think?"

"1979, you'd be better off in a bin-bag," the Doctor replied with a certain curt playfulness before giving me a blink. "And you... you've changed absolutely nothing."

"Dusted off the shoulders a bit, but yeah, that's about right," I said as I shrugged said shoulders. "You don't dress for 1883, I don't dress for 1979."

And considering that we weren't actually headed for 1979, my nonadherence to any perceived 'dress code' was a moot point anyway.

The Doctor shook his head slightly. "Well, if you're both finally ready, I'll just grab a few things and we'll be off. The TARDIS may be a time machine, but she does have a few limits."

The Doctor had a good feeling about today. He knew better than to depend on something as nebulous as a 'feeling' as a forecast for the future – at least not without cross-referencing his history books and his time sense --, but there was still sort of promise hanging over the immediate future. Or maybe that was the remaining buzz from the last adventure and the acquisition of a new and exciting human.

Either way, it was a pleasant thrum of positive energy that sent him skipping and bouncing around the console room.

"1979. I love 1979," he said brightly as he collected various bits and bobs from various areas. "All sorts of things happening in 1979!" He could probably turn this old phone and this focusing crystal into a decent camera, use this to break out of the handcuffs of the period if it came down to an arrest --

'It usually does,' one of his other selves muttered as the Tenth kept talking.

"China invades Vietnam, the Muppet Movie – love that film –, Margaret Thatcher," the Doctor stopped to make an exaggerated 'uggh'.
"Disco Demolition Night at Comiskey Park," Delaine added. There was an oddly serene smirk on her face as she said that, though it was impossible for the twenty-something girl to have actually attended the event herself.

He personally had. Took advantage of it even. Nobody had been looking for a mind-controlling alien record in a pile of other records slated for imminent destruction and nobody had been looking for it after either.

"Skylab falls to Earth – I had a hand in that," the Doctor continued as he finally stopped collecting scrap and began making his way to the TARDIS door, skipping his heels as he went. The door opened easily, and the Doctor walked out with his head still swiveled around to look at his companions. Rose looked excited while Delaine's expression hovered somewhere between alert and curious. That probably counted as a sort of excitement, didn't it? "Almost took off my thumb. I like my thumb. I need my thumb. I'm awfully attached to my –"

There were a number of clicks that his brain dully registered as belonging to guns being cocked. Behind the soldiers surrounding them stood a single black carriage, conspicuous by the fact that it was the only thing visibly distinct from the rest of the grey-green-and-brown shades of the moor.

"–thumb," he finished lamely as he took in the sight. So much for 1979, let alone that vague 'good feeling' he'd somehow expected to carry through the day. "1879. A hundred years off the mark, 'snot bad," the Doctor murmured to himself. "Should make a note to see where that randomizer got off to…"

"You will explain your presence, sirs, and the nakedness of this girl," the mounted soldier said in a thick Scottish burr. From the fact that man had a horse, revolver, and a shiny medal instead of a rifle, the Doctor would assume that this was the captain of this particular party. Or maybe some other rank that put him up above the common riflemen. He'd never been terribly good at interpreting the various patches unless they had what they meant spelled out in half-inch high letters.

"We're in Scotland?" Rose asked.

"Where did you think you were?"

"Sheffie–"

"Please excuse her," Delaine said, interrupting Rose smoothly before she could finish the sentence. There was a minute adjustment to her gravelly voice beyond a simple lowering of pitch, like her American-Midwest accent had jumped a few state lines and economic classes in the few steps between the TARDIS door and where they now stood. Whatever it was, it did fit with the visual image of a well-dressed – if somewhat geographically incongruous – American of the period. "Poor thing was afflicted by brain fever as a child, never quite recovered. Forgets where she is, her manners, and herself upon occasion. Had to chase her half around the moor before we caught up with her."

"Oh, aye," the Doctor said, shucking his Estuary accent like an old coat as he slipped into a Scottish one. Two can play at being something they're not. "Over hill and over dale, we've been trying to stop this child from embarrassing the good name of her family, to no avail. Isn't that right, ya timorous beastie?"

"Och, aye! I've been oot and aboot," Rose said, laying on the thickest stereotypic brogue available in the British Isles.

"Don't do that." Somehow, the Doctor was desperately wishing that it had been Delaine who'd
decided to play that particular accent impersonation game again, because at least she would probably limit herself to just the one specific Glaswegian actor rather than a broad, poorly-executed idea of how an entire country should sound.

"Hoots, mon."

Companions were overrated. Completely overrated. He should have just stuck with Jamie and Leela, over and over again. Infinitely easier to deal with than people with ideas about accents and clever jokes. "Really, don't."

"Identify yourselves, sirs," the soldier said, apparently satisfied with Rose's absence of wit.

"Doctor James McCrimmon, from the township of Balamory and graduated of Edenborough," the Doctor said as he pulled the psychic paper from his pocket. "My credentials here, as ye ken see. Trained under Doctor Bell himself. And this is my assistant, late of the United States--"

Delaine dipped her head, fingers rising to touch the brim of an imaginary hat. If the Doctor turned his head a bit and ignored the phantoms of other timelines around her – so many possibilities to have been other people –, he could understand how the soldier mistook her for a clean-shaven young man. "Eastwood. Clint Eastwood."

The Doctor took back every nice thing he had ever said – no, ever thought about Delaine. Forget human companions altogether. Humans were overrated. He'd just stick to robot dogs after this. Robot dogs with no concept of pop culture or ideas about where to stick it into real life situations.

Throwing that thought to the side, there was the question of whether or not they would escape this encounter with their lives. Clearly, the soldiers were transporting something important in that black carriage and the fact that there was no sign of civilization anywhere within eyeshot did the excuse of 'we just happened to cross paths' no favors.

"Let them approach."

The Doctor knew that voice. He was nearly certain on that point. Oh, it was older with all the fading and cracks that followed age, but he still knew that voice.

"I'm not sure that's wise, ma'am," the mounted soldier said.

"Let them approach," the woman in the carriage said again, the firmness of a command that would not be denied crystal clear.

The soldier realized this as well, turning his unease into something harder. "You will approach the carriage and show all due deference."

With that, any 'nearly' was wiped away with that statement. The Doctor nodded to his companions to follow as the soldiers parted just enough for them to slip through the sea of guns single file. One of soldiers stepped back to open the door of the carriage.

Victoria – not the companion, but the Queen – was older than she was than he last saw her. Was it the coronation or… no, his Fifth had been appointed her scientific advisor for a time. A passing title for a passing crisis.

There was no spark of recognition in her eye, only the silent elegance of royalty balanced with a shrewd eye. Not that he'd expected recognition. That adventure was that of another self, a man with another face and another voice. People so rarely were able to connect the dots between who he was with who he'd been and who he would be.
Next to the Queen sat another woman, likely – no, absolutely a lady-in-waiting. In contrast to the Queen's dignified bearing, she seemed only minutes away from some kind of nervous breakdown, her fingers twisting and locking in with each other in a complicated dance of anxiety.

Ah, Jane Loftus. Should have known that from the year alone.

"Rose, Clint," the Doctor said, only allowing the slightest bit of annoyance to color his tone. There would be a conversation about Delaine's choices in alias later. "Allow me to introduce her Majesty Queen Victoria, Empress of India and Defender of the Faith."

Delaine, for all it would have made sense for her to be fully at sea with what to do with royalty, gave a deep bow at the waist while Rose curtsied.

"Rose Tyler, ma'am," she said, a smile still pulling at the corners of her mouth. "My… apologies for being so naked."

The Queen arched an eyebrow, clearly unamused by the proceedings. "I've had five daughters; the shape of a woman's body is nothing to me," she said briskly before turning her scrutiny onto the Doctor. "But you, Doctor. Show me those credentials."

This was where it could get dodgy, the Doctor knew as he handed over the psychic paper. Oh, he could hold a little influence over the psychic paper's readout at this range, but it was the Queen who would decide – consciously or not – what it read in the end. Oh, it would probably say something positive, nothing that would lead to their immediate execution, but 'convenient' was another thing entirely.

She studied the paper closely before blinking in surprise. "Why didn't you say so immediately?"

Because, despite certain cheap tricks and appearances to the contrary, the Doctor wasn't a mind reader... at least not unless that mind happened to be very loud, on a similar wavelength to his own – to date, exactly none except himself –, or he happened to have some form of physical contact to make up the difference. Here, he was running blind.

"It says clearly here that you have been appointed by the Lord Provost as my personal protector," Victoria continued, glancing up to look into the Doctor's eyes. "A lofty position for a doctor."

Does it? Is it? "Yes it does and yes it is," the Doctor replied.

"The Doctor is a man of many talents, ma'am," Delaine said. "A polymath, some might say."

The Queen's gaze turned quickly to the American, sizing the girl up before somehow finding her wanting. "The Lord Provost would not choose any ordinary man to serve as my protector, young man. That much is fact."

The 'mind your place' was unspoken but clear enough for both the Doctor and Delaine to pick up. Part of him bristled – the old Time Lord pride rearing its head as it was wont to do –, but instead of being offended or shrinking away, something in Delaine seemed to turn a few degrees colder. She might not speak out of turn again, but somehow the Doctor knew there was something dangerous in that silence.

"Anyway," the Doctor said around a cough. "Then may I ask why your Majesty is travelling by road when there is a train all the way up to Aberdeen?"

"A tree on the line."
Oh. "An accident?" he asked, knowing very well it wasn't any such thing.

"Hardly. I am the Queen of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Doctor… McCrimmon, was it?" she said dryly. "Everything around me tends to be planned."

"You suspect an assassination attempt?"

"I have grown familiar with staring down the barrel of a gun," the Queen replied. "Precautions have been taken."

Casting an eye at the soldiers around them, the Doctor wondered how many other precautions had been taken. Not enough to stop more creative plotters, that much was certain.

The mounted soldier from before trotted up, his mount casting the usual suspicious glance at the Doctor before dismissing him. "Sir Robert MacLeish lives but ten miles hence. We've sent word ahead. He'll shelter us for tonight. Then we can reach Balmoral tomorrow."

"These gentlemen and their timorous beastie will be accompanying us," the Queen told him.

The man nodded. "Understood ma'am. We should resume moving; it's almost nightfall."

"Indeed," she replied, her eyes shifting away from the Doctor and towards the horizon. "And there are stories of wolves in these parts. Fanciful tales intended to scare the children. But good for the blood, I think. Drive on!"

With that, the footman closed the door and took up his position on the back of the carriage before it started moving again, the soldiers falling into loose formation around it as it made its way down the road.

Mentally marking the location of the TARDIS, the Doctor and his companions fell in step about ten feet behind the procession.

"Back to the Future? Really?" the Doctor hissed as soon as he was sure none of the soldiers were in the mood to strike up a conversation.

"You're a time traveler, Doc. The door's wide open," Delaine said around a fair imitation of Marty McFly and a grin that said she'd do it again if she thought it was funny. It wasn't that different from his Fourth’s. "By the way; love the accent."

He grinned back. "Aye?"

"Mm. Much better than that weird… squeaky weird thing you've usually got going on."

"What you got against Estuary?" Rose asked, before looking back towards the Queen's carriage. "Can you believe it though? Rose Tyler, council estate girl, talking to the Queen. Was like talking to a Tussaud dummy, but it should count for something."

"Ah, I've met boatloads of royal personages," the Doctor said with a wave of his hand. "Half the time, you could replace them with a dummy and no-one would know the difference. I should know; I've seen that scheme done enough with them."

"Really?" Delaine asked. "I'd assume robots before simple mannequins…"

"Yes. Androids are useful like that… if people bother to program them correctly," he said, tucking his hands into his pockets as they walked along. "I recall this one adventure where this bloke called
Styggron decided to recreate a small English town in exacting detail – practice for an invasion or something, couldn't make sense of the plot myself –, only to get some of the most elementary details wrong…"

In another universe, the Torchwood Estate may have belonged to the likes of James Bond villains, vampire aristocracy, or especially dedicated, cheat code-exploiting players of a Sims game. It was at least three stories high – the irregular heights of the windows made it difficult to gauge where a floor might end or begin –, made of stone and with a roofless observatory parked on top of that, raising the ultimate height by another twenty-five feet easily. From that observatory, the acid-rain stained bronze of a telescope was clearly visible as it pointed upwards at the sky.

The end result was that of a sprawling estate rendered in various shades of black and grey under a partially clouded sky, the cold dry breeze at your back promising to make those clouds a memory at some point in the near future.

A good setting for the coming events of the night, I thought as the royal entourage finally came to a stop.

At first, the place seemed deserted, bereft of anything resembling life. But then people appeared. The assassins, I presumed. No ordinary person in this day and age moved with such mechanical, passionless precision, but the fact that all were men of like ages and appearances – save for their vulturine leader, who was at least twenty years older than his underlings – was a giveaway itself.

The only one not to fit the description of 'bald and athletic' was Sir Robert MacLeish himself. A handsome man, one would suppose, if one with an obvious noose around his neck. His wife – Isobel, I remembered just before he confirmed it – and household staff held hostage, the threat of death hanging over their necks should he fail to play his part.

That didn't prevent him from dropping every possible hint that something was wrong in the house and that the Queen would be better off elsewhere, but all of those warnings seemed to go unnoticed.

The Doctor looked over at me, raising his eyebrows as the Queen shoved Sir Robert's various objections aside. Not entirely unnoticed then.

The limiter itched at my wrist and I fought back the desire to start messing with it. It wouldn't do for a guest to find their wrist more interesting than their host.

"I've had quite enough carriage exercise for one day," the Queen said as she cast a glance up the high stone walls of the manor. "Besides, I've never had the opportunity to visit this house my late husband spoke so highly of. The Torchwood Estate."

The Doctor's look froze for a second, before the Time Lord forced a thaw. Panic, as was appropriate. This was the origin story for the shadowy organization and one that would set the tone for them for the rest of their existence.

"Now," Victoria said, breaking the spell her words had inadvertently cast. "Let us go inside. And please, excuse the naked girl."

"Sorry," Rose said.

"She's a feral child," the Doctor said with a small shake of his head. "Bought her for six pence in London Town. It was her or the Elephant Man."
"That's not funny," the blonde muttered.

Victoria gave an unamused glance at the pair, not even gracing me with that arch form of disapproval before looking back to Sir Robert. "Shall we proceed?"

The man nodded, stepping back as he guided the Queen and her civilian entourage into the building. Behind them, the soldiers busied themselves with some 'property'. A small locked box, meaning whatever was inside was likely important. Papers or some jewel of import. In another era, I might have even posited a USB drive or something of the like, but computers were simply mathematically minded individuals at this point in history.

So, papers or jewels… ah, right, it had been a jewel, one of the Royal set. Good to know that my deductive skills were a few miles ahead of my memory of a show I liked.

As we went into the house and joined the rest of the 'tour', part of my brain was fixed on the math. Hostages, werewolf, a short list of absolutely unacceptable losses… and what I had to work with. The house was built in the style for the era – high ceilings, narrow hallways, and tight corners. Not good for high speed chases, particularly if one was a large creature. If the werewolf was built to the traditional specifications, it would be a small advantage to my side of the field that I could exploit without taking off my limiter.

Not that a baseline human would be able to stand up to such a beast in straight combat… well, not for long at any rate and not without some merciless cheating on my side of the fight. So would it be worth it to remove my limiter and dispense with any illusion of humanity?

I gave a small glance at the rest of the group.

Sir Robert and the Queen were in polite conversation at the head, the Doctor, Rose, and I coming in behind them. At our back and sides were the would-be assassins. They were the only ones I had absolutely no designs on saving.

Yes, for the ones who'd come here seeking anything other than death, I could reveal myself. But I didn't really want to and likely wouldn't have to. I rarely fought fair in the first place and I was far from baseline in any case, limiter or no.

Besides, only so many Doctor Who stories were resolved by punching and this wasn't City of Death.

The tour, after a seemingly endless staircase, finally came to the observatory.

It was a large room for its purpose, with only half of a glass ceiling and a large tarp above that to protect it from the elements. Dust lay thick on the floor and equipment, only the occasional trail of footprints giving away the fact that anyone had even entered the room within the last year or more. Dominating the space was some sort of telescope; the same one that I'd spied from the courtyard. It was a lovely piece, one that I would have been proud to construct myself.

Even the Queen looked impressed by it. "So this must be the great Endeavor," she said.

"Yes," Sir Robert said, taking in the sight of it. "My father's own design. His last years were totally dedicated to its construction, to the point where he neglected the rest of the manor house. He helped build it by hand, mostly the inner workings."

By size alone, it should have been one of the most powerful privately available telescopes of its era, but it had been built for a different purpose than surveying the stars.

Naturally, the Doctor was already in love with it.
"Sounds like a fascinating man; pity I never got the chance to meet him. May I?" he asked, gesturing at the telescope.

"Help yourself."

The Doctor was already there and touching it, gazing through the eye piece. "Oh, she's a beaut. Absolutely rubbish as a telescope," he added as he continued poking around, "but an absolute wonder in design."

"What do you mean by that?" Robert asked, a question sparking in his eyes.

"Oh, there's too many prisms and the magnification too powerful for stargazing," the Doctor said, pointing at certain spots along the line of the 'telescope'. "Closer to a burning glass than a telescope in practice, but between the positioning and the focus being off just enough, you haven't had the risk of fire." He looked up at Sir Robert. "What did he model it on?"

There was a touch of embarrassment in the man before he answered. "It's an original design. My father was, shall we say, 'eccentric'? Sadly, I never thought to ask him anything about it." The embarrassment faded as some memory seemed to ghost across Sir Robert's mind. "I regret to say that we didn't have the… closest father-son relationship. I wish I would have spent more time with him, listened to his stories."

"Ah. My condolences," the Doctor murmured as he stood up. "Still, a masterwork of a design, even if I couldn't not begin to tell you what it was built for."

"For surveying the infinite works of God. What higher function could man build his devices for?" the Queen said. "Sir Robert's father was an example to us all. A polymath steeped in the sciences, but also versed in folklore and old tales, willing to turn his imagination to higher callings." Her piercing grey-blue eyes turned to the Doctor. "Not unlike yourself, Doctor?"

She knew. She absolutely had to know something about the Doctor. Maybe a passing encounter? Leave it to the time traveler to get around. I would ask Zeke if I had the ability to take the limiter off right now. He'd be the one to know, unless it was an adventure that took place further down the Doctor's time line than he had been.

Or maybe I was reading too far into it and she was merely bringing up my own reference to the Doctor's multiple uses to serve some point.

"Oh, I do my best," the Doctor said, taking the apparent slight in stride. This incarnation was one of the easier going ones, at least until it came down to murder and abuse of authority. From others and himself, going either direction on the scale of 'okay' to 'not'. "Stars and magic. A man after my own hearts."

"Must have had lots of stories to tell," Rose said.

"Oh, yes. My late husband loved his stories dearly. Prince Albert acquainted himself with many of the local legends, but no-one had quite the talent for telling them as Sir George." Victoria recalled, her eyes falling away to some far-away place. "Particularly the tales of the local wolf."

The lead assassin's eyes sharpened at that. Oh, so he'd planned on all parties but his own being unaware of anything to do with his plot? Ha. No one's life was ever that easy.

"What's this about a wolf, then?" the Doctor asked.

"Just a local folk tale," Sir Robert said quietly. "Nothing of grave import."
Oh, but it was. It was the backstory and keystone to coming events. It was of extreme importance if we wanted to live to see daylight. Our assassins might have wanted us to dismiss it as nothing more than a fairytale, but there was far more meat in it than that.

"No reason not to tell it then," I said, casting a glance at the darkening sky. "It will be a night for one, it seems."

"Well, it is said that –"

"Excuse me, sir," the lead assassin interrupted as he stepped forward. The man had glassy, almost empty eyes, like one of the scavenger birds I'd mentally compared him to earlier. While appearances weren't everything, I was one of those people who equated eyes to being the windows of the soul – call it a side effect of being able to actually use them as such when standing in a universe that didn't hate half my essential nature – and nothing about the man seemed to counter that belief. "Perhaps Her Majesty's party could retire to their rooms. The hour grows late and it is almost dark."

"And then supper?" the Queen asked before casting a glance at Rose. "And some clothes for Miss Tyler. I grow tired of her nakedness."

With that dismissal, we moved on from the observatory, Rose being guided to the rooms of Sir Robert's wife to acquire a suitable dress. No-one except the assassins and I knew what was coming.

Come dark and moonrise, they would make their move with their wolf at their backs. When they did that, I would be ready to meet them.

Chapter End Notes

Updated 9/17/2017

The 'Brain of Albert Einstein, Personality of David Lee Roth, and Body of Kelly LeBrock' line was in reference to the character Lisa from the 1985 movie 'Weird Science'.

Tutu and the Pirates was probably Chicago's first punk band, coming together in 1977 out of an assemblage of weird friends. Just so you know, Tutu played the drums.

Steven Taylor was one of the First Doctor's companions. A spaceship pilot from Earth's future who got himself marooned and held prisoner on a planet called Mechanus for two years with only a stuffed panda toy named HiFi for company. Very nice hair.

Matt Smith's Purple Wish – the purple outfit that Eleven wore once Clara became a companion. I forget if he said that during a behind the scenes bit or an interview, but 'I got my purple wish' was an exact quote.

'What a Morpork citizen liked to have on his side in a fight was odds of about twenty to one, but failing that a sockful of half-brick and a dark alley to lurk in was generally considered a better bet than any two magic swords you cared to name.' – Terry Prachett, Sourcery

Disco Demolition Night at Comiskey Park was a baseball promotion gone terribly, terribly wrong. Or right, depending on your point of view. For the people who owned
the part, the teams, and the people who came to watch a doubleheader, it went very
wrong, seeing as how the field was pretty much destroyed and the second game couldn't
be played at all. For the people who came there to blow shit up, throw disco records
around like Frisbees, and start a minor riot… well, they got what they came for.

Brain fever is a very dated (to the point of not being used in modern medicine) term
for… pretty much anything that might addle the wits in the 1800's. It could be used to
describe shock, PTSD, sunstroke… and probably a whole bunch of different stuff. It's
basically a writer's excuse and Delaine used it as a handwave for Rose Tyler's
everything.

Jamie McCrimmon was one of the Second Doctor's companions, and his longest lasting
one (and the longest running male companion to date, and longest running companion
by episode count), showing up in the second story of Two's run (The Highlanders) and
only departing in his last story (The War Games). Sadly, many of the episodes of this
era are missing, reduced only to audio and telesnaps. Blame the BBC.

Anyway, Jamie McCrimmon – Scottish Highlander, clan piper of the McClarens,
named Best Legs In the UK.

Leela - she of the leather bikini (well, more of a leotard) and the knife. Killed the shit out
of everything and screamed exactly once – and only after a giant rat started gnawing on
her leg. Would have stabbed a Dalek if given the opportunity.

The Doctor has seen Queen Victoria two times in show canon (going to her coronation
at some point during or before his Third Incarnation and the events of Tooth and Claw)
but I'm also going to throw in the Fifth Doctor novel Empire of Death for reasons.
Mostly because I want to and because I'm taking a bit of material from the various
novels to flesh out this fic (for content, background, and ideas for future chapters).

The inclusion of Jane Loftus, even in passing, was to correct an error noted by some
reviews of the episodes that said it made no sense for the Queen to be travelling without
a Lady in Waiting. So I put on my research hat and found out who was Victoria's Lady
in Waiting during the period the episode takes place. You're welcome.

I'm pretty sure that I'm writing Ten's Estuary accent as not being his natural one and that
he shares his real one with David Tennant, but if it is going to end up being a minor plot
point, it's probably not going to show up until sometime after Rose leaves. This might
not have been a question except for the fact that in The Time of the Doctor, Eleven
called out his younger self's accent by calling him 'Dick Van Dyke', which is apparently
– I found this out via the TARDIS wiki, so grain of salt – a reference to that actor's
awful attempt at Cockney in Disney's Mary Poppins and a possible dig at the Tenth
Doctor possibly faking his Estuary accent, which would probably work fine for Delaine,
since another Estuary-accented character played by David Tennant who just happens to
have a very similar speech pattern to Ten is associated with some major past trauma.

The Android Invasion is kind of famous in the Doctor Who fandom for… not really
making sense. On the other hand, everyone playing an android is very good at being
spooky and the one we see without its skin on is also very creepy.

City Of Death is a weird serial, but most of the serials are weird. This one is mostly
weird because it's written by Douglas Adams of Hitchhiker's fame.
There were plenty of things to dislike about this dinner.

First, the fact that said dinner was being served by assassins. Their plan probably didn't involve poisoning us straight off, but that didn't improve my mood by much because they hadn't bothered to season any of the food they prepared at all.

To be fair, I could probably chalk that one up to 'being British'.

The second was the company. The Victorian age had its high points - not many, but a few -, but easy conversation and friendliness between human beings... were not points I would mention, forget the actual content of said conversations.

"Your companion begs an apology, Doctor," the lead assassin said as he entered the room with a tray full of crystal goblets. "Her clothing has somewhat... delayed her. And the Lady Jane regrets to tell her Majesty that she does not feel well enough to join her for supper."

"Ah, Rose'll hardly complain if you save her a wee bit of ham," the Doctor said as he popped another bit into his mouth.

"Feral as her ways are, she'd probably eat it raw," the Queen replied around as much as a smile as she ever seemed to show.

Captain Reynolds laughed, an awkward stilted sound that clearly gave away how often the laugh was used. "Very wise. Very witty, ma'am."

"Perhaps a little too witty," she said, giving the man an unimpressed look. "I know you rarely get the chance to dine with me, Captain, but don't get too excited. I shall endeavor to contain my wit, lest I do you further injury."

Ouch.

I didn't say anything, instead turning my attention to the ham. Boring, boiled, and barely seasoned with anything more than salt, the most I could say for it is that it was edible. There were a dozen ways I could have cooked it better using nothing but the usual contents of a non-British kitchen.

Maybe I'd ask the Doctor if I could make use of the TARDIS kitchen. I couldn't stand deliberately bad food and it would take something particularly flavorful to get this grey taste out of my mouth. A thousand years or so of travelling, he had to have some spices floating around...

"Sir Robert," the Doctor said, interrupting the awkward silence. "I believe you promised us a story! A tale of wolves to stir the nightmares and tease us with a glimpse of what lurks in the darkness."

The Queen's eyes lit up. "Indeed," she said eagerly. "Since my husband's death, I've found myself with a taste for supernatural fiction."

"You miss him," the Doctor said, a note of understanding in his voice.

The light in her eyes dimmed slightly. "Very much," she said quietly before the intensity returned to
her bearing. "But that's the beauty of a ghost story, isn't it? Not the scares or the chills, but the idea of… contact with the beyond, to know that the people who have left us still remember us. To have some message from that place..."

Something stilled in my heart. Yes. I could understand loneliness. The pain of dwelling on what I couldn't pray to touch anymore, of being alone even in the middle of a crowd. But it didn't pay to dwell on that, so I refocused on the now.

The Doctor seemed to feel it as well, from the way any mirth seemed to drop from his face in that moment. Without that manic energy lighting up them up, those big brown eyes just looked broken. Another detail to separate him from an old trauma with a similar face. Maybe that was why Rose was so important: she encouraged him to act and think in the moment rather than dwell on old emotions and loss.

Or maybe they were just bad influences on each other. It was hard to call.

Queen Victoria quickly gathered herself again. "But this is reality. The dead do not speak and we must wait. As is God's will," she declared, breaking the spell she'd cast over the room. "Come now, Sir Robert. Night has fallen, there is a chill in the air, the wind is howling through the eaves. The stage is set for the tale of your wolf… now, tell us of monsters."

Rose Tyler had never liked monster stories, particularly werewolf movies. They were either cheesy or terrifying, and her luck always had her watching the terrifying ones where the transformations were loud, messy, and unpleasant to even listen to. The nightmares she'd had after accidentally watching The Howling as a child had stuck with her for years.

And of course, her life would end up planting her in the middle of one.

The boy in the cage had been clearly alien, or at least had something alien done to him. No human had silver-gold eyes with black around them when it should have been inside of them, and there was something subtly wrong about the set of his body. Like one of those Transformers toys after a few weeks of being turned around by small children before getting stuck between car and human-shape, shoulders lopsided and smaller bits trapped halfway through their escape from their folding storage.

"Don't make a sound," the lady had said. Rose assumed that she was Sir Robert's wife, Isobel. Edinburgh. Hah. If anything, it was an interesting name for 'cellar'. "He warned us; if we scream or shout, he will slaughter us. We've seen what he can do. What he can become."

Rose had asked how he was going to do that when it was him that was in a cage.

That was when the boy had opened his unnatural eyes. "You're new."

The accent was Scottish and the voice was the sort of whispery whistle that Rose had expected from a teenaged boy, but there was some sort of trill behind it that didn't fit. A flightiness of sound that made Rose think of birdsong.

Still, for all it sounded like the harmless tittering of sparrows, she didn't relax.

Those eyes were too intense, too bright while somehow being too empty to think of as belonging to anything harmless.

"What are you?" she asked. "Where are you from? You're not from this Earth."

Those empty eyes seemed to shift, the eerie silver glow moving in ways that reminded Rose of
Daleks. Maybe human eyes could be like that, if they glowed from the inside, but it was only unsettling here watching those star-bright spots focusing in on her through the gloom.

"Oh, intelligence," the boy breathed, leaning forward. "Uncommon rare on this meagre sphere."

"Where were you born?" Rose tried again, trying to calm down the wild beating her heart.

"My self or this body?" he asked, tilting his head to the side as if considering the question. "The body, ten miles from here. A frail, weak, heartsick boy, stolen away in the dead of night by the brethren. For my… cultivation. Myself? Oh, across further distances than you could ever imagine, young wolf."

Wolf? What wolf? "What… what about the boy?" she asked before shaking her head and steeling herself. The Doctor wasn't here now, so she needed to ask the questions he would. "I want to talk to your host."

There was a cruel twist to that pale mouth before the alien opened its host's mouth to reply.

"You ask to speak to my… host," it said, leaning forward to curl long-fingered hands around the bars of the cage as its eyes glittered in the dark. "As soon as I came into this body, I carved out his soul and devoured his heart."

Rose swallowed. Oh, this situation just seemed to be getting worse and worse. "I know someone who could take you back to your home world. All we would need –"

"But why would I want to leave this world and all its industry, workforce, and warfare? Why return to where I have nothing when here, I can have everything?" it said, closing its eyes and breathing in deeply before adding in a nearly rapturous voice. "I could turn it to such purpose."

Oh no. "And how would you do that?" she asked. She had to get answers. Anything that could tell her and the Doctor how this thing worked, how it thought, and how they might stop it.

"This flesh grows weak. It is time for me to migrate again. This time, though, not to common children stolen in the dark," it murmured before flicking its eyes to fix on Rose's again. "Were my plans not hitched on taking over the Holy Monarch, I might have taken you, young wolf."

"You mean the Queen?" Rose asked before leaning back. "And why do you keep calling me that?"

"With one bite, I'll pass into her veins and her soul." It sniffed, pulling its lips back from its teeth. "And you… you have something of the wolf about you." The alien threw its stolen body forward, forehead slamming against the bars of its cage as it bared yellow teeth at the humans, who pulled back in fear. "You stink of sunlight, time, and stars, young wolf. All of them burning bright, even in memory. I have no need of the sun. Only the moon."

As if that was some cue to some unseen stagehand, the cellar doors were thrown open, allowing the silver light of the moon to pool across the floor. The alien threw back his thick cloak, giving Rose a clear view of the twisted body as it stretched out its stolen arms.

Then, one of the arms threw itself out of joint. The boy screamed, the high noise abruptly turning into something lower as his body was thrown forward again, shoulder blades flexing in unnatural ways as muscles started swelling like something out of a nightmare.

Ignoring the urge to vomit, Rose grabbed the thick chain she was cuffed to and pulled. It was heavy and the anchor in the wall barely gave. Still, it gave. There was a chance.
"Come on!" she yelled at the other hostages, who were all staring at the alien-werewolf in various states of shock. "Stop looking at it! Listen to me. Grab the chain and pull! All together, we can pull it free of the wall!"

Half of the servants finally started moving, grabbing different sections of the chain before throwing their weight behind it, but the lady of the house still sat there, staring dumbly ahead at the monster before her.

"'Everybody' includes you, your ladyship," Rose snapped.

The werewolf howled again.

The Doctor was already running by the time the second howl ripped through the house, Sir Robert on his heels.

Oh, he should have known. Sir Robert had been dropping hints like flies since they had arrived, despite the threat to his wife's safety. The stories of the werewolf and the monastery that sought to stop any investigations into the subject. The entire staff consisting of men made as identical as the technology of the era would allow should have been a dead giveaway that something was afoot even before they started chanting.

Lupus deus est.

The wolf is the god.

Another howl rang through the building, followed by very human screaming. One was definitely Rose's. The Doctor corrected his course and accelerated as he finally saw the most likely door for the noises to be coming from.

Without slowing down, he kicked through it.

"Rose!" "Isobel!"

"It's about time you showed up!" the blonde snapped as she started herding people out of the room. Twenty hostages. Enough to constitute the entirety of a household staff. One woman, dressed more finely than the rest, fell into Sir Robert's arms. However, the man's attention was fixed on another point.

"Oh my god," Sir Robert breathed.

On the other side of the cellar, a cage sat. Inside was… "Oh, that's just lovely," the Doctor murmured as the werewolf stretched out its long arms and showed off a set of very long, very sharp claws. The creature looked up, focusing silver-gold eyes on the Time Lord before ripping its cage in half.

"Move!" Rose said, pulling him out of the way as half of the cage crashed into the doorframe.

The door shut behind them – and did that piece of wood feel incredibly insufficient in the face of imminent werewolf --, the Doctor set to work removing the shackles from the staff.

"What's going on?" he asked Rose as he set to work on getting her loose.

"It's some kind of alien parasite," Rose said. "Passes itself on through a bite. Feeds on moonlight. Wants to take over the Queen and make itself an empire."

Ah. How uninspired. "Werewolf. Oh, so many forms of lycanthropy, so little..." the Doctor looked
"What did its eyes look like before it transformed?"

"Black around the outside, gold rings around silver," the blonde recalled before pointing at her iris. "And that part was silver too. Glowing."

Energy-based then, since there weren't any ready light sources in the cellar to set off any natural eyeshine. Likely fed off moonlight itself, using the power of those specific wavelengths to fuel the transformation and damage inflicted by it. "Anything else that stood out?"

"Body was kind of messed up, lots of scars." Rose was gesturing at her own body as she relived the memory, tracing the lines of what she was describing. "Stretch marks, right shoulder was... broken or something, but it awful."

The Doctor calculated the information. Alright, so not a clean transformation. Probably rough on the host body, and why it transferred its very consciousness to a new host every twenty years or so. A sort of sentient virus, fueled by light on a frequency available via the Earth's moon and cursed with a blatantly visible tell of its nature.

Why it thought it was going to get away with its scheme when it was so obvious when it was inside someone was beyond him though. Maybe it just never had access to a mirror.

"Arms, and you five! The rest of you and Lady Isabel, out through the kitchens!" one of the men called out. The Doctor spared them a glance before ignoring the hubbub as soon as it was clear that the steward was handing out guns. They wouldn't work. Nothing that converted energy into bodily repair would be taken down by something as simple as a blob of lead flying at supersonic speeds.

No, this required more thought and supplies that the Doctor simply didn't have. Not unless...

Yes. Sir Robert's father. The one that knew all the stories, had held issue with the party responsible for the werewolf, and had done strange and inexplicable things that baffled those around him. Somehow, he had known this was coming and must have had some kind of plan in place.

It was just the matter of assembling the pieces left behind.

Queen Victoria was a stone-cold killer.

I mean, I'd already kind of guessed and the fact that she'd shot the lead assassin in the episode wasn't anything new to me, but knowing it and actually seeing it in action were two very different things. It wasn't completely at odds with my previous image of the woman, but it certainly was a new dimension.

'Indeed,' one of my other selves murmured, not only one of Victoria's contemporaries, but one of her subjects. 'An understandable reaction for a lady with so many threats leveled against her, but not entirely out of character.'

There was a further buzz of voices my other selves started chattering, tossing theories back and forth, but I tuned it out. I had more important things to worry about. Namely, kicking the shit out of everyone on Team Werewolf.

I'd removed the limiter. There were too many enemies to hold myself back like that and no reason to while the Doctor was absent. I didn't plan on doing anything wildly irresponsible like transforming into some kind of big cat but it didn't hurt to have a little extra when dealing with a larger, better armed force, for what little 'larger' and 'better armed' counted for in this time and place.
And there were some of them now, just around the corner. I held up my hand, motioning for Captain Reynolds and the Queen to stop. Why the monks had traded their brown robes for geographically incongruous saffron crowned by mistletoe wreaths, I didn't know, but I did know what they were holding in their hands.

Martin-Henry rifles. Breech loading, lever-actuated, single shot. Not great at close range, but with the narrowness of the hallway, a lucky miss was unlikely.

There was also very little benefit in me really cutting loose.

So I needed range, in a way that didn't require a reload if I missed and wouldn't be immediately classified as 'strange and unnatural' if witnessed by anyone with an ounce of sense in their heads.

I grabbed a tall candlestick, the sort that would eventually evolve into floor lamps. I blew out the candle and hefted it. The balance was poor for the use I was about to turn it to, but a little Transfiguration would change that soon enough.

Add to that a touch of the Jedi Mind Trick… well, I'd be sitting pretty then.

I counted out a few second before stepping out into the hallway, slamming my improvised weapon into the head of the closest monk. As he fell to the ground – unconscious or more likely dead –, I shifted my stance again and pulsed my magic –

Wait. There's no magic.

I twitched to the side, avoiding a bullet as I tried the spell that would turn the candlestick into a properly weighted bludgeon.

The candlestick remained a candlestick, unbalanced and wholly unsuited for the violence I was applying it to.

There's no magic.

Why the fuck is there no magic?

I forced myself past the thought and into forward momentum again, slamming the base of the candlestick into the stomach of my next victim before I let go. Before he had a chance to get his breath back, I'd slammed both of my hands over his ears. Temporarily deafened and disoriented, if I didn't manage to burst one or both of his eardrums.

I didn't stay still long enough to find out, instead maintaining momentum as I twisted around his faltering punch. I grabbed him by the forearm, bringing it over my shoulder before dislocating his.

As the monk choked down a scream, I threw him – by the affected limb, no less – through a window.

I didn't know how far down it was or what lay at the bottom of his fall. I didn't really care.

The last two didn't even react to the abrupt defenestration of their companion, moving towards me with their only concession to my skill being to attack me together. Good tactics, but ten thousand years too early.

I twisted around a strike, kicking out one's knee before throwing him into his fellow. Right after the furthest monk had slammed into the wall, I had his head in my hands to smash it into the wall again. He and his friend wouldn't be getting back up any time soon.
Four men down in six seconds. Good time for someone not using powers or magic. I'd have to figure out what was going on with that later.

I looked back at the Queen and Captain Reynolds. The man at least looked impressed, while Victoria simply watched. Analyzing.

Oh, in a different era – forget a different era, she was a maker and breaker of nations as it was.

"You must be one of those western ruffians that are so popular with the dime novelists, Mister Eastwood," she finally said. There was no shock or disapproval in her voice as I might have half-expected. No, the violence in front of her was no more worthy of emotion or comment than the weather.

"That's not an… inaccurate statement," I replied as I stood back up, smoothing out the lines of my borrowed coat as I balanced the wreaths of mistletoe on my arm. "I assume our would-be captors see some use in these," I said passing them over to the Queen's remaining bodyguard.

"I'd call it naught but superstition, but somehow I feel that word would be ill-used tonight," Captain Reynolds said as he took the wreaths from me. "Would you take protection for yourself, sir?"

Of all the people in the house, I probably needed the protection least. I shook my head. "Let it be used where it will do the most good. Where to?"

"To my property," the Queen declared. "I would not see it fall into the hands of these traitorous monks."

For a mere jewel. Hah. No, this game was being played for more than that, and she knew it. But I wouldn't argue. Not with the Koh-i-Noor playing such a vital role in the climax of tonight's events.

It was only a short distance to the safe room and none of the monks had saw fit to guard it. So they had no idea what steps had been taken to kill their werewolf. Good. That meant that the beast would be off guard, unprepared for what was going to happen to it.

Of course, that still left the rest of us to spring said trap.

We rushed down a staircase, just as the Doctor, Rose, Sir Robert, and a whole storm of other people burst into the foyer down below. They slammed the door behind them, barring it before looking up at the other immediate source of noise; us.

"Your Majesty!"

"Sir Robert!" the Queen said, staring down at the man. "My… personal Sir Walter Rayleigh. Do you have an explanation for the dreadful noises that I've been hearing about the building?"

Between the howling and far more human screams, that was a wild understatement.

Sir Robert took a deep breath. "The wolf, ma'am. It has taken one man already tonight. Tore him to pieces." He looked up, scanning the stairs. "Where is Father Angelo?"

"Disposed of," Victoria said coolly. "Along with a number of his cohorts."

Sir Robert's eyes went to Captain Reynolds and then over to me. The Queen herself was never a suspect in his mind. An erroneous assumption, thinking that an old woman couldn't be just as deadly as anyone else, given the right motivation.
"The door's boarded. We need to get out of here –"

"Can't," I said, casting a glance out of the window. "Our saffron suited friends are outside and I doubt they're there to wave us goodbye. It's a base under siege."

"Do they not know –"

"Who you are, your Majesty?" Rose finished. "Yes. That's why they've want you. The wolf's lined you up for a biting."

"There can't… there can't be an actual werewolf," Victoria murmured. That was the line that she wasn't willing to cross? Even in the face of murderous monks and whatever other weird shit this 'verse had to offer? "It's nonsense. It has to be some rabid beast, cultivated to appeal to those who believe such superstitious drivel–"

A howl rang through the house. It wasn't quite the sound of a proper wolf, but louder. More primal and agonized than any natural beast should have been capable of.

"Sound's fairly real to me," the Doctor said. He'd dropped the Scottish accent, a detail that would have been impossible to miss had the situation been any less rushed.

"Yes, but a… a werewolf?" Captain Reynolds repeated.

The door the Doctor had barred splintered as a heavy form slammed into it. Long claws dug through the wood as the wolf slammed into it again. Part of the wood gave way, allowing a glimpse of gnashing teeth through the quickly disintegrating door.

"I'd say it's a there wolf right now," the Doctor said in a surprisingly blasé tone before yelling, "Run!"

The Doctor had no idea how many staircases this house had, but it was starting to feel like far too many for a non-dimensionally transcendental structure. Still, he rated this one as his favorite, because it had given them access to the one room in the mansion that might be able to save their lives.

The library.

Delaine suddenly dropped back, something bright flashing in her hand as she turned around and threw it at the wolf on their heels. A knife, long and shining silver in the moonlight planted itself squarely in the wolf's forehead, and the beast stumbled back, clutching at its head as black blood seeped out of its new wound. Had she palmed it back in the dining room when the howls first began?

Whatever had possessed her to pick the knife up in the first place, she wasn't wasting any time on it because as soon as she knew it had hit, she'd started running again with the rest of the group.

Still, there had been that second of hesitation, like she'd been about to follow up that knife with another attack.

"That gets us a few seconds," Delaine yelled. "How far is the library?"

"Not far," Sir Robert panted. "We'll make it."

The wolf slammed into a wall behind them, apparently recovered from whatever injury that his companion had managed to inflict on it. This time, Captain Reynolds was the one to turn and attack
"Go! Keep her Majesty safe!" he called as he reloaded his gun.

"Bullets won't stop it!" the Doctor snapped.

"They'll buy you time, now run!"

They ran. The Doctor wasn't proud of it, but he ran, dragging Delaine by her arm as she moved to join the captain, and as soon as they were all in the Library – all except for Captain Reynolds –, he slammed the door shut.

The door was barricaded now, locking out the one person who'd stayed behind to buy them time. Captain Reynolds had given his life to see them to this tiny patch of safety, and the Doctor was intent on making the most of the opportunity, even as the screams of the man echoed through the building.

He made a point to ignore the look that had come over Delaine's face as he went to the bookshelves and started pulling out volumes. All covered in dust without a single sign of being opened within recent memory. He flipped through them before tossing them aside. Natural history and general geology. Nothing even remotely related to this situation.

"Doctor, what are you doing?" Rose asked.

The Doctor grabbed another book, zipping through the first few pages before throwing it away. Useless. He grabbed book after book, ignoring the dust stirring up all around him as he tried to find something relevant to werewolves and aliens and Torchwood.

"Doctor," Sir Robert said, grabbing his arm. "I fail to see –"

"Your father knew this was coming. I don't know how, but he did," he interrupted. "He surely had some plan in place to deal with it!"

Sir Robert worked his jaw wordlessly for a moment. "He-he said nothing to me on the subject –"

No. "There has to be something," the Doctor muttered as he pulled out more books. "You all," he called out. "Get looking for anything that might have something to do with our werewolf. Local history, mythology, anything even remotely connected."

"I know you, don't I?"

He stopped, though he didn't turn to look at the Queen. "You've never seen me before, your Majesty."

"Thirteen years ago, there was a fair young man with celery in his lapel who was appointed my scientific advisor during a plague of false ghosts. He had the same sort of energy as you, the same way of speaking, the same alias, and that same look in his eyes. You might have changed your face, Doctor, but you cannot change your soul," she said, still watching, still staring. Oh, Victoria was a clever one. Should have been a companion, if history would have allowed such a thing. "You are not of this world, Doctor."

"No." He grabbed another two books. Native Flora of the British Isles and Cultivating Cultivar. Neither were relevant, beyond the fact that the werewolf was practicing a sort of photosynthesis. Alas, they probably didn't cover carnivorous space plants. "But I consider it a home."

"Why?"
Oh, there were so many answers to that. Because his own home was gone. Because the Earth had saved him so many times. Because something about the little blue marble, so otherwise insignificant, called to him. "Because I do."

The Doctor grabbed another book – 'Secrets of the Kells' – and opened it. Once again, nothing. Was it too much to ask for a journal, a book safe, a key, anything that gave him the chance of solving how to stop the wolf.

"Doctor…"

"What?" he snapped.

Delaine was up against the door, her fingers pressed against the dark wood. "This door can't be more than an inch and a half thick," she said. "Why hasn't the wolf broken through it yet? It didn't have any trouble with the others…"

He stopped. There was no reason why it shouldn't have torn through them as easily as the others. Not unless he missed something very important.

He rushed over, pressing his face up against the door. The varnish had an odd smell. He licked it.

"Viscum album oil worked into the varnish," the Doctor murmured as another piece of the puzzle assembled itself. "It's repelled by mistletoe."

"The monks were wearing mistletoe wreaths," Delaine said.

And Victoria was wearing one now. "Before you stole them?" he asked.

The girl grimaced, as if the Doctor putting two and two together was painful to her. "Aye."

"Good work," he said as he jumped off of the makeshift barricade and went back to the books. "Alright, has anyone found anything?"

Sir Robert cleared his throat. "Ah… a bit of local history. 1540, something fell to Earth. A star, burning in the pit for eight days." He looked up. "That would be the Glen of Saint Catherine just by the monastery."

More like a spaceship. "Three hundred years to plan and adapt to humanity, plenty of time," the Doctor muttered as more pieces fell together. "Considering when it landed, that also explains why it thought that taking over the Queen would give it absolute power over the Empire."

"I would sooner die than grant this creature victory," Victoria spat.

"Your Majesty…"

"No, Sir Robert. I would not see this wolf despoil the empire I have been given charge of," the Queen declared, fresh steel in her eyes. "The life of an old woman is no matter. I only ask that you find some place to hide something far older and more precious than myself."

Any protests over the value of a life over some material good died away as the Doctor saw what the Queen held in her hand. Maybe the size and shape of a squashed plum, it was a diamond, but not just any diamond. No, it was one of the Royal Jewels and one of the most unique of the set. Such a strange bit of rock, eating up all the light that hit it from head on, it still glittered around the edges.

"That's the Koh-i-Noor," Rose breathed.
"The Mountain of Light," Delaine said quietly before flicking her eyes up to meet the Queen's. "Why do you travel with it?"

"My annual pilgrimage," Victoria said, handing the diamond over to the Doctor for inspection. "I was taking it to Helier and Carew, the Royal Jewellers at Hazelhead. The stone needs recutting."

"But it's perfect," Rose said.

Victoria shook her head. "My late husband never thought so. He always said the shine wasn't quite right. But he died with it still unfinished."

"Unfinished. Yes," the Doctor said, looking down from the diamond to the last book he'd pulled from the shelf. He didn't bother opening it before putting it back. No answers would be forthcoming from Galileo's Sidereus Nuncius. "There's a lot of unfinished business in this house. His father's research, and your husband, ma'am, he came here and he sought the perfect diamond."

Something in his mind clicked together and the Doctor snapped his fingers. "Hold on, hold on. All these separate things, they're not separate at all, they're connected. Oh, my head, my head. What if this house, it's a trap for you. Is that right, ma'am?"

"Obviously."

The Doctor ignored a bit of plaster dust that fell from the ceiling. What was a bit of dust on his shoulder when he was only a minute from solving the riddle? "What if Sir Robert's father and your husband decided to make it into a trap for the wolf? Not just telling each other stories, but finding out what would slow the beast… and ultimately kill it?"

Some more dust fell, this cloud thicker than the last.

"Doctor."

"What?"

Delaine was looking up at the skylight. "We need to get out of here," she murmured, stepping backwards towards the door.

The Doctor looked up and saw the dark figure hunched over the skylight, its massive body silhouetted by the full moon.

"Ah."

Chapter End Notes

Another unbeta'd chapter. Please tell me if there are any major errors in the text that I may have missed in my gloss over. Anyway, updating a little quicker than I usually would because... well, the reviews section has been a little quiet on all my fics and I'd appreciate some kind of feedback. Little petty, I realize, but it's one way to break an uninspired streak.

I changed a few details of the werewolf, not only to make it more personally interesting to write but for a few other reasons.
The Koh-i-Noor has been written to be more accurate to the real thing rather than the generic diamond shaped plastic/glass thing used in the episode. More interesting that way.

It is 'canon' that magic does not exist in the Doctor Who 'verse because Rassilon used time travel to 'retcon' it from their universe (part of exiling 'irrationality' from the universe). Xenophobic and generally unpleasant, he killed off most of Gallifrey's population in an attempt to render the rest immortal via the ability to regenerate. Then, in what is generally accepted as a dick move, he deliberately induced a limit on the number of regenerations.

Rassilon is also famous for killing off most of the universe's vampires, 'inventing' time travel, shoving his best friend / research buddy into a black hole, and abusing label maker technology by putting his name on literally everything ever. Also may have altered the universe so that the majority of sentient species were Time Lord-shaped. Definitely committed a couple dozen different flavors of genocide and was into deleting people from creation so thoroughly that nobody even remembered that they had ever existed in the first place. There's a (lot of) reason(s) that one of his nicknames in the classic fandom is 'Assilon'.

Anyway... I think I've left a lot of hints as to other 'verses' that our main may have visited in the text so far, so if you have any guesses, feel free to voice them. I'll tell you if you've won a cookie.

As always, comments and criticisms are welcome and I hope you enjoy the story.
The wolf pounded a fist against the glass of the skylight, sending a spider web of cracks splintering through it. It was a testament to its workmanship that the damage was as minimal as it was, but would only take one or two more good strikes like that before the whole thing came raining down on our heads.

Plenty of time for us to start running for our lives.

The Doctor and I were already to the door, throwing the various pieces of our makeshift barricade aside. As the wolf finally broke through the glass, we were already through the door, slamming them shut on its face.

"To the astronomy room!" the Doctor yelled. "Quickly!"

Ignoring the massive smear of blood on the carpet – was that a hand lying there, divorced of the arm it was originally attached to? –, we ran back towards the staircase.

I should have stayed out there. It didn't matter that I couldn't use my magic, I still had my subspace link to my warehouse and the arsenal within. A bevy of silver bayonets like the one I'd introduced into the werewolf's brain – did it even have a centralized brain or was silver a learned weakness like the mistletoe? – would have done more to slow it down than a simple revolver.

'You keep doing this,' one of my other selves murmured. Which one, I didn't care to pick out. For all I knew, it was my own guilty conscience.

Shut up.

'Just blame yourself for every one that dies. Yeah, *that's* healthy behavior.'

I grit my teeth as we turned a corner. The wolf was right on our heels, despite every bit of momentum it lost on the corners. I'd be amused by its inability to turn corners and make quick stops when those failures actually backfired on it.

Rose abruptly failed to make a corner herself, slamming into the wood paneling with enough force to send a nearby mirror rattling. She turned around, staring up at the wolf as it started to loom down over her –

Only for me to pull her out of the way as something hot and faintly noxious splashed over the creature, sending it scrambling back down the hall with a whimpering scream.

Lady Isobel and a few of her maids glared after the wolf, a heavy iron cauldron in their hands. The same smell – boiled-down mistletoe – lay heavy around it, even as faintly green soup dripped down onto the fine carpet.

"Isobel!" Sir Robert gasped before taking his wife into a tight embrace and kissing her. "Please," he murmured into her cheek. "Take the maids, get to safety."

"What about you?"
"Don't worry about me," he replied, letting his hand slide down the side of her face. "Keep yourself safe."

I looked up as the sound of scrabbling claws returned from down the hall. "It's coming back!"

Lady Isobel threw one more look at her husband – did she sense that he could be the next to die? – before running off with the rest of the maids. The rest of us ran in the opposite direction and up the stairs towards the astronomy room.

The sound of scrabbling claws just a story below us was plenty of motivation to keep running at top speed.

As we burst into the astronomy room, Sir Robert hesitated, only to stumble over his own feet as I pulled him into the room by his lapel. Almost as an afterthought, I pulled a pair of decorative swords off of the wall immediately outside the doors. Near useless as weapons, but they would bar the door for a moment.

And once those were gone, I'd be waiting.

The wolf rounded the last corner, snarling through a still-scalded snout as I kicked the door shut. The sound of a whimper and a series of thuds and bangs as it apparently fell all the way back down to the bottom of the stairwell brought an unfriendly smile to my face as I set the cheap swords through the door handles.

Get fucked, fuzzball.

"Rose, Delaine, Robert!" the Doctor called over from the 'telescope'. He was climbing all over the thing, twisting different focuses as a small spot of weakly reflected moonlight fluttered on the floor, brightening and dimming as the Time Lord tried to get the focus on it right. "Help me get this into position!"

"A fine time for stargazing!" Rose snapped before I latched myself onto the main gear that would raise the angle of the telescope. It resisted, which was no surprise given how long it had been left to gather dust, but with the correct application of force in the right places…

"It's not a telescope, it's a light chamber!" the Doctor said as he fell into place beside me and Robert. "Capturing and focusing light to a laser point! If we can get it concentrated enough –"

There was a heavy thud as a large body slammed against the door. The Queen scuttled back a bit at that, clutching at her necklace; a jet cross.

I preferred to rely on things I knew where there. Right now, that category was limited to myself, the door, and the makeshift door bar I'd set on it. The swords were holding for now, but for how long would they last?

The Doctor picked up on the urgency as well, twisting harder at the various controls before pulling the Koh-i-Noor from his pocket. "Everything else is in place except for this," he said, holding the diamond in his hand. His eyes fixed on Rose's, Robert's, and then mine. "If this doesn't work…"

"…can you just put it in already? We don't exactly have time for dramatic speeches."

The Doctor swallowed, breaking his gaze away from us as the wolf thudded against the door again. The Koh-i-Noor disappeared into a slot on the telescope and the flickering little spot of focused moonlight suddenly intensified, becoming an inch-thick circle of burning silver light centered right on the double doors.
With the third thud, the swords finally broke apart, shattering into fragments of gilded iron as the doors shattered open behind them. The wolf lunged into the room only to get a face full of focused moonlight directly to the head for its trouble.

It stumbled back with a bewildered expression as the pink burns on its face knitted themselves up, the raw flesh quickly being replaced with fur.

"Doctor, I don't think—" Rose started only for the Doctor to shush her.

"Let it take it," he said as he twisted on one of the prism controls, intensifying the stream of moonlight from a broad beam to a pinprick laser point. The wolf was still trying to move, but there was something sluggish about its movement and the increasingly silver sheen of its fur that didn't entirely jive with the current angle of the moon.

I knew where this was going and the werewolf apparently had realized it too. It lunged to the side, towards Victoria and out of the line of fire. One last attempt at realizing its goal and not enough time for us to realign the laser.

Too bad it would fail. Even as Sir Robert threw himself bodily between the Queen and the wolf, I pulled another silver blade through subspace and into my hand. I threw it at the wall where the point of light was now focused.

I didn't miss.

The bayonet caught the moonlight laser perfectly, reflecting it back at the wolf and striking it squarely in the back. It froze as the silvery sheen that had taken over its fur intensified, brightening enough to rival the sun and it let loose one more frightful howl before it exploded.

Instead of blood, bone, and meaty chunks like I'd expected, bits of silvery ectoplasm splattered all over the room with chunks of proper flesh and fur caught in them. These soon started evaporating at an accelerated rate, leaving wet stains and then nothing at all behind but a faint silver shimmer like spilled glitter.

A soft contrast to the horrible creature that had produced it.

Where the werewolf's main body had been, however, was something less whimsical. A withered, milk-white corpse lay on the floor, naked and twisted. One arm was stretched out towards the Queen, only six inches away from the hem of her dress.

The Queen finally seemed to relax, only to step back as the 'corpse' raised its head. Dark eyes, barely visible in the sunken sockets of its face, looked up at her with an emotion I could only describe as relief before it collapsed, its tenuous grip on life finally released.

"What a pitiable creature," Victoria murmured as she released her death grip on her jet cross.

"Are you alright, You Majesty?" Sir Robert asked.

"Fine, fine..." she murmured, finally tearing her eyes away from the corpse. "I am uninjured."

Somehow, that didn't feel like that was the intent of the question.

The Doctor waited, watching the moon – oh what a lovely, terrible thing the moon was, particularly after tonight – slowly make its way across the sky. He could have slept. It only would have wasted an hour or two but somehow he just couldn't find it in himself to relax.
They could have died.

How many times had he had that thought before? There was always that one adventure after a regeneration where fate took it upon itself to remind the Doctor's latest personality that reality still applied to him and those he surrounded himself with.

Usually it didn't come with the additional risk of the destruction of history, but there was one that came to mind. Sutekh. Oh, the werewolf had been nowhere near the Osiran's level, but it could have destroyed the future just as easily just by dint of knocking a vital point in the web of time out of line. Without Victoria… well. It didn't do to dwell on timelines averted. Fussing over those led down dark roads, the sort that resulted in Celestial Intervention Agencies and people who got ideas about 'optimizing' the universe.

The Doctor sighed, stepping away from the window to pace around the room. At least the situation had very nearly resolved itself. If Sir Robert's father had told his son of the plan or kept a detailed journal, it would have.

In the absence of that, a man had lost their life to buy them a bit of time to puzzle out what should have been obvious.

Time. For a Time Lord. There was some unfriendly humor in that.

If not for Victoria just happening to have the Koh-i-Noor on her person, how many others would have died to buy him more time? Sir Robert had almost done it, if not for Delaine making the choice for him. In another timeline – no, more than a few, every single one where he hadn't grabbed onto her arm –, the Doctor could see her attempting to fight it off herself. Heh, she'd be like another Leela, slashing around with that silver knife against what should count as impossible odds.

The Doctor couldn't quite bring himself to bet against her, though he knew quite well that no ordinary human could have stood up to that werewolf in a straight fight.

'Somehow, I suspect she's anything but ordinary,' his Fourth murmured.

The Doctor smirked. 'If you existed anywhere but in my personal Matrix, Four, I'd almost be worried about you poaching my companion.'

'With my charm, you know it wouldn't be hard.'

He rolled his eyes, brushing the thought aside as he sat down on the bed. Delaine was his companion, just as much as Rose was. Maybe even more so, since Delaine didn't have another model in her memory to measure this one up against.

'Why so concerned?' another of his selves asked. Seven? It was hard to pick out sometimes when he wasn't paying direct attention to them.

'Because –,' the Doctor couldn't finish the thought. There was no tangible reason for him to be worried about her leaving. She'd made no sign of wanting to go and they… didn't…

There was an uncomfortable feeling in the space between his hearts.

No, he couldn't accuse them of being best friends. Friends, maybe, but not 'best' friends. Not with only two adventures in a span of twenty-four hours. But something about her felt important. Like he couldn't afford to lose her.

Why? Did she remind him of someone? Of something?
The Doctor rubbed the bridge of his nose. Maybe some sleep was what he needed after all, even if it was just to take a break from the questions buzzing around his head. Let his subconscious pick apart his problems and let him deal with whatever came after in the light of day.

I didn't sleep.

Without my limiter dragging me down to human limits, I technically didn't need to sleep, eat, or drink. If I wanted to, I could even go without breathing. Even walls would be mere suggestions at that point. I made a point to keep doing those things. Muscle memory was part of it, but losing the stimulation… no, there were advantages to those things.

Advantages like sanity and perspective.

Still, just because I still indulged in things like sleep didn't mean I had to. And right now, I had questions that needed answering more than I needed extraneous Z's.

The question was this; why the fuck was there no magic? I'd tried to transmute a candlestick into a proper bludgeon and got exactly what I had started out with; an unbalanced candlestick.

And it wasn't a fluke. I hadn't incorrectly cast a spell in a thousand years or more, and not something as simple as turning one kind of stick into another kind of stick. It couldn't have been some induced error either, because my 'patron' would have rubbed it in long before now.

So that left me with some error in the metaphysics.

This required a little scientific exploration.

I summoned one of my notebooks and a teddy bear, flipping the book open to a blank page. When I wanted them to be full of the information I'd put down years, if not centuries ago, it would be there, but for now it was a blank page quickly filling up with my thoughts.

Easier than using a pen and it kept my hands free to test the boundaries.

I set the bear down on a chair across the room.

Goal; knock the bear over without actually touching it.

I burned through my options quickly. I didn't need anything big or fancy; I was trying to achieve the same small effect of levitating a teddy bear with every single power I had. Those that weren't that flexible or would have just made a huge mess in achieving the same goal, I just tried to shift into the visible spectrum.

Psychic powers such as the Force or Esper based abilities were fine, but I'd already expected that. It was well-established in the canon and I'd used them all in the three days I'd been in this universe. All the different flavors of straight kinesis, even the more spiritually based elemental bending, worked as well.

Magic, on the other hand, flat-out didn't work. I wasn't terribly surprised by the most heavily ritualized spells; they were finicky at the best of times due to calling on powers that didn't always exist in a certain universe, but not even the most basic swish-and-flick wanted to work.

"So Block-Transfer Computations are fine, but Wingardium Leviosa is going out of line?" I asked the teddy bear softly. It was like someone had gone back to the beginning of the Doctor's universe and beat the concept of magic like it was their unwanted step-child until it died.
I ran through the last set of 'spells'; the ones that weren't quite hard magic, but not quite anything else. Aura, Ki-energy, Chakra, Kido. They – against anything I might have called common sense – worked, though the more ritualized ones felt slightly more muffled than before. The words meant nothing, but the intent and focus did. Hm. Maybe it was because they weren't pulling the bulk of their energy from an outside source or from the concept of 'magic' itself. But at least they were still there. And the common factor between them was that they were all based in different energies than straight 'magic'. No, they drew their power from the constants of 'life' and 'soul'.

So, no magic in the Doctor's 'verse, but souls were good. Huh. At least the 'life' energy made sense; it would probably be somewhere on the same level as a Time Lord's regenerative energy, except less explosive.

I drummed my fingers along the line of my jaw. So why had the Termina Masks worked while other magic didn't?

A phantom hand scribbled in my notebook 'Not As Magic As Initially Assumed, Tie To 'Soul' Power?' The question was abruptly followed up by more question marks, all bunched up and in different sizes as to best represent abject confusion.

…still, even if I didn't understand shit about what was going on, I could work with what I had. It limited me a bit, but it what did a 'bit' count for when I already had an array of powers that made Silver-Age Superman look bland? Besides, it wasn't like I was one of the magic-minded incarnations.

'I like how not having access to 50% of our non-lethal applications counts as 'a bit'.

'It'll make things a bit trickier, but I'd hardly call it impossible.'

'So long as she avoids doing anything like her last rounds in control.'

The voices began to blur together as arguments and jokes started flying at speeds I couldn't really be bothered to follow.

'Shush,' I hissed at them. The peanut gallery was getting out of control. Besides, it hadn't been roadkill. 'New universe, no magic. Any thoughts?'

There was the sensation of someone raising a finger and taking a breath that would soon turn into a stupid question.

'Besides cracks about me and reckless behavior,' I amended quickly.

The imaginary finger dropped and a soft cough seemed to echo in the expanse of my mind.

"Thought so," I muttered as I closed the notebook and sent it and the bear back to my warehouse. Casting a glance at the window and the first traces of dawn beginning to crawl across the sky, I leaned back where I sat and slipped into a light doze.

The next morning saw us kneeling before a Queen. Victoria stood in front of us, a purse clutched in one hand while the other held a sword. There was a joke in there somewhere. An extradimensional transhuman abomination, a renegade Time Lord, and a chav rescue the Queen of England –

"By the power invested in me by the Church and the State," Queen Victoria intoned, lifting the sword above our heads before descending on the Doctor's shoulders. "I dub thee; Sir Doctor."
The sword turned towards the blonde. "Dame Rose."

"And Sir Delaine."

Oh. The Doctor had yelled my name in the tower. The fact that the other half of the secret identity equation had gone unsolved was kind of funny, but at least Clint Eastwood wasn't getting a knighthood fifty years before he was born, so far be it from me to correct the nomenclature.

"You may stand."

We rose together, Rose barely able to contain her grin while the Doctor just settled for looking slightly smug. Well, knighthoods didn't come around all that often, even if one had the advantages of immortality and time travel.

"Many thanks, your Majesty," the Doctor murmured.

"Nobody back at the estates is ever going to believe this," Rose said, almost bouncing in place.

"Your Majesty," the Doctor said. "You said last night about receiving no message from the great beyond. I think your husband cut that diamond to save your life. He's protecting you even now, Ma'am, from beyond the grave."

She almost blinked. Almost. "Indeed. Then you may think on this also. That I am not amused."

Oh. Here we go.

The Doctor looked like he'd been slapped with a fish. Not a particularly large one, but maybe a smelt. "Eh, sorry?"

"You consort with the subjects of stars and magic as if they are trivial things, Doctor. You change your face as easily as men would change a suit," Victoria continued. "I don't know what you are or where you are from, but it is clear that you are not of this world. So I bar you from it. Your world is steeped in terror, blasphemy, death, and darkness, and I can only hope that by banishing you from mine that it will not be touched by the forces you dabble with."

She cast her eyes towards the door. "You have your reward. Now leave my world, Doctor, and never return."

Fucking – The wolf was here long before the Doctor showed up. There was no cause, no logic to this decision. This was purely reactionary, the product of fear mingled with ancient superstition. Forget 'fair for its day', this was pure ingratitude.

And this was the seed from which would spring Torchwood.

Hah.

The Doctor swallowed, giving a small bow before turning towards the door. Rose and I moved to follow him.

"Sir Delaine, if you would remain –"

I stopped, pivoting around on my heel. "I would, your Majesty," I said coolly, stretching out the spaces between each word. "But, alas, I am banished."

With that, I followed the Doctor out of the Torchwood Estate.
'Oh, that was good. Should take that moment and frame it on the wall.'

'I'd call it stupid if we didn't have access to a time machine.'

'Please, like Victoria could ever touch us. After all, we have the--'

"Are you alright?" the Doctor asked as we stepped out of the main gate.

I unclenched my hand and let go of the breath I was holding. "I'm always alright," I replied. The words came out stiffer than I would have liked.

He didn't look entirely convinced, but Rose cut off any other question. "I can't believe she banished us for helping," she muttered.

"Different era, different approach to the strange and unusual," the Doctor said with a shrug as we started walking along the road. It wasn't a bad distance to the TARDIS from here – maybe three hours walking at a slow pace–, but just enough to be annoying. "A couple thousand years back, they might have considered us messengers of the gods sent to rescue them from supernatural malefactors. A couple thousand in the future, we're just experts in our given field."

"Stopping monsters?" Rose asked right as I threw out, "Causing trouble?"

The Doctor grinned. "Oh, bit of Column A, bit of Column B."

The road wasn't particularly rough, but we were still grateful when a passing farmer let us ride along in the back of his cart for the rest of the trip. The conversation naturally had to turn to less era-specific gripes and Rose's relative nakedness had been brought up and summarily dismissed, but it did shorten our travel time significantly.

As the familiar blue box came into view and then drew level with the cart, we hopped off, giving the farmer our thanks – his reply was a succinct 'you fuck right on off' – and started walking again.

The Doctor was the first to reach the TARDIS, quickly unlocking the doors.

He turned around to look at us, walking backwards into the TARDIS as he went. "So. Where would you like to go next? Just to be safe, I wouldn't make an attempt at Ian Dury just yet. The TARDIS gets finicky about places she doesn't want to go just yet. Learned my lesson on that one a long time ago."

Really? Was it the Eye of Orion, Metebelis Three, or Heathrow Airport where you realized that it was a bad idea?

Regardless of my thoughts about the pilot, it was nice to be inside the TARDIS again. Unlike the tight and claustrophobic hallways of the Torchwood Estate – would it turn into a headquarters for the agency? Would Sir Robert be executed for his 'treason'? There were too many uncomfortable questions there –, the TARDIS was the definition of breathing room. Maybe it was just her transcendental nature, but the mundane fact that I didn't have a chance of knocking into a wall unless I deliberately threw myself at one was a sort of reassurance.

Rose turned to look at me.

I blinked. "What?"

"It's your first… well, third trip in the TARDIS. Figured you should get to pick where we go next," she explained. "He does take suggestions, sometimes."
Really. I turned towards the Doctor, my raised eyebrow all the question he needed.

"You don't think I'd do that?" he asked back.

I know for a fact you don't do that. Oh, you might take a suggestion, but the odds of actually getting there…

"Surprise me," I said, throwing my hand up in the air. No room for disappointment if I didn't have expectations in the first place.

The Doctor smiled as he started fiddling with the console.

"But somewhere outside of the 1800's, please," I added.

"Oh," he said. "That was a given."

Chapter End Notes

Sutekh was the main villain of Pyramids of Mars. Effectively a god in the ancient (and modern) understanding of such, his whole thing was being totally evil bastard and being powerful enough that him getting out of his ancient prison means the destruction of Earth, period.

A werewolf is a bit of a step down from that, isn't it?

It is also canon that, while magic doesn't work in the Doctor's Universe, psionics do. I merely broadened the definition a bit to include things like 'ki' and 'aura' since there are fair counterparts to that in canon already (regeneration energy, anyone?).

The power nerfing is just… to kind of play with the established rules of 'canon', so much as Doctor Who actually has canon. I've already mentioned that the Doctor Who universe does not have magic, though some stories say that in the wake of the Time War, magic started to come back.

I'm not following that idea, though it does bring a few ideas to mind…

Block-Transfer Computations. Think magic math that can rewrite reality. Generally a bad idea to use because only bad things happen if you get distracted while being a godlike nerd. Occasionally good for cheap tricks.

Fixed an oversight I'd made in the original version of the story with Delaine's lack of banishment. This time, the Queen didn't banish Delaine herself, but our main took the banishment upon herself as a sort of combination defiance/gesture of solidarity with Team TARDIS.

Or maybe it was just a gesture of 'good job being not awful, please don't leave me with these people'.

Also corrected a problem with the knightig ceremony itself as was pointed out by the Discontinuity Guide, which I am referencing for both the novels and episodes (until they stopped reviewing towards the end of Series 3).
Metebelis Three was a planet that the Third Doctor really wanted to visit thanks to its reputed beauty, eventually getting his wish after literally hardwiring the coordinates into the TARDIS. Unfortunately, it really should have had a reputation for giant body-jacking spiders.

The Eye of Orion… is generally not a terrible place but considering that the one time the Fifth Doctor managed to get there ended up with him and his companions getting whisked away to a place called The Death Zone (which I believe I mentioned during the Highlights of Rassilon) and he kept trying (and usually failing) to go there after that. Too good not to mention.

The Doctor's inability to get to Heathrow Airport is (almost) the entire reason Tegan Jovanka, a companion to the Fourth Doctor (for approximately two hours before he fell off a building and died) and the Fifth Doctor, was a companion in the first place. The first time he (sort of) succeeds, they end up being three hundred years early for her flight.

Also the Master stole an airplane. For slave labor in the Jurassic Period, because he needed to dig up some alien that would give him supreme power or some shit. Why he couldn't have just hypnotized a dinosaur or something…

Other Universes/Jumps I've explicitly referenced Delaine having visited already so far include: The Marvel Cinematic Universe, Hellblazer, Legend Of Zelda, Harry Potter, The Elder Scrolls, Star Wars, DC Comics, and Fallout. There are quite a lot more I've got written down or powers and experiences displayed that may have come from other sources, but I'll only name them more specifically when they show up.

Anyway, this will probably be the last of the rapid updates to make up for lost time, because after this I still have a lot of writing to complete.
Delaine wanted a surprise. Hah. 'Surprise' would have been the Doctor's middle name if Gallifrey had ever stumbled upon the concept. Of middle names, anyway; vague allusions to highly probable futures were certainly one of their hats.

The Doctor quickly turned his mind away from thoughts of his home planet and towards the TARDIS controls, hands drifting over the dials as he tuned the various settings to some still yet unnamed brainwave.

So how to go about the business of finding an appropriate surprise for his latest companion? With the stipulation of someplace outside of the nineteenth century, but after their last adventure, that was a reasonable – and rather simple to grant – request. A concert was too close to tempting fate after their failed attempt at Ian Dury and something in him demanded that his next move be impressive.

'More impressive than watching the rotation of the Earth from the exosphere?' his Sixth asked.

Shush. Something impressive that wasn't frightening or overly intense for his companions without being mind-numbingly tedious for himself.

'Why all the fuss? It's not like you're planning a date.'

The Doctor tuned them out. For all it was occasionally convenient to have multiple points of view to analyze a problem from, dealing with the opinions of his former selves could prove a near constant headache. Particularly when they decided to throw their opinion in on matters that really didn't require their input. It was fine when dealing with alien computer systems, but infinitely less fun when shopping.

Shopping.

Well, it was an idea, if nothing else. A chance to sample alien cultures in a nonthreatening environment. An opportunity to relax without necessarily standing still. And besides, he had been meaning to pick up a few things for the TARDIS… so why not?

It wasn't like anything could go wrong.

The Doctor paused as he thought about that. Well, nothing could have gone wrong before that thought had crossed his mind. Now the door to something going wrong at some point inside the next forty minutes was wide –

The door to the inner corridors of the TARDIS opened, revealing his companions. Rose was looking as golden as always, wearing a denim jacket and skirt combination he remembered from one of their earlier adventures, though the soft pink jumper with the powder blue butterflies and the similarly shaded leggings were new.

Delaine, on the other hand, looked like she'd been pulled out of some river after a three day dive. Her hair was wet and clung to the edges of her face, though the sheer volume of it kept it from embracing a properly plastered down look and the green suede of yet another of his Eighth self's coats – the one he'd worn just before his 'death' – didn't add any favorable colors to her palette.
He wouldn't make a comment on the leopard print waistcoat.

"So where are we off to next?" Rose asked. "'Cause I'd like to drop in on my mum sometime soon."

"Ah, I don't see why we can't after this next trip," the Doctor said as he turned the dials to hone in on the coordinates of their next destination. He looked up at Delaine. "I did promise someone a 'surprise', after all."

He threw the materialization lever and watched the two girls stumble as the TARDIS threw herself out of the Vortex and into a landing. Before they could fully get their balance back, he was at the door, and as soon as he was certain that all of their attention was fixed on him, the Doctor pushed it open.

"Allow me to present… the Uberlan Bazaar of the Bizarre," he said as the view of a city under a spread of stars and the ghostly glow of a white dwarf sun appeared before them. Technically, 'of the Bizarre' was an affectation of his own creation, but somehow 'the Uberlan Bazaar' felt incomplete without it.

As it became clear that neither Rose or Delaine had any comments immediately forthcoming, the Doctor continued speaking. "Founded by the Second Great and Bountiful Human Empire, you are seeing one of humanity's first intergalactic trading posts. You can find anything here from warp generators to produce from Altari Seven and on down to collapsible snooker tables and other oddities collected from every populated world within a hundred billion lightyears."

He turned his attention to Delaine, flashing her a grin. "Pretty impressive, yeah?"

She shrugged.

The Doctor's grin dropped a little at the lackluster reaction. "Anyway, didn't really get the chance to lay out the usual rules, but here are the basics; don't wander off, let me do all the talking, do exactly what I say, never pick violence as your first option… and don't eat anything you aren't sure is totally safe, unless I give you the all clear. Alright?"

"Fair enough," Delaine said, sticking her head out of the TARDIS to look around. "How far counts as 'wandering off'?"

'Such a reassuring query,’ one of his past selves muttered dryly.

"Let's put it down at anything more than five meters for now, though you might want to stick around a little closer around here. Wouldn't want to lose you in the crowds," the Doctor decided. He pulled a couple of brightly colored plastic chips out of his pockets and handed them over to his companions. "Spending money. Would be a bit rude, taking you to an intergalactic flea market and not letting you get anything."

Rose took hers with a smile, the hot pink plastic a near match for her fingernail polish. "Was planning on getting a little something for my mum to make up for Christmas," she said. "What about you?"

"Oh, I imagine something will jump out at me," Delaine murmured, turning the little blue chip around in her fingers a couple times before tucking it into one of the pockets on her waistcoat. Probably had discovered how deep a Time Lord's pockets go already, the Doctor rationalized. It was curious how she seemed to favor his Eighth's old clothes, but maybe she just liked the color green.

'Or perhaps I forgot something I wasn't supposed to again,' his Eighth mused. 'Not like it hasn't happened with a companion before, but usually it comes back to me.'
Somehow that soured the Doctor's good mood more than Delaine's casual disinterest in what was supposed to be her surprise. As they entered one of the shopping areas, he deliberately dropped a few steps behind his companions to watch them.

While Rose was looking about at everything around her, the brunette seemed content to follow, her quiet focus only diverting for a few seconds at a time before refocusing on Rose. Rather than a natural sort of trust between friends, it was the kind of attention people gave to tour guides; polite and attentive, but mostly because they didn't want to get lost in a strange place. The Doctor didn't doubt for a moment that if Rose's judgement was found to be unsatisfactory, Delaine would take the lead just to make sure the pair wouldn't become totally lost.

That belief was confirmed as Rose began to argue with a short orange alien wearing a floral sundress and an impressively voluminous mohawk, only for Delaine to smoothly pull the blonde back as the alien belched a small fireball in response to something Rose had said. Another short exchange of words – this time without any gouts of flame – and his companions left, Rose's prize shoved deep into one of her pockets.

"Can't believe she charged me extra," the blonde groused.

"Traditionally, I think it's called 'the asshole customer tax'," Delaine replied. As Rose turned around to glare at her, she continued. "You shouldn't have made the comment about pink not being her color."

"It isn't."

"Perhaps, but sometimes keeping your opinion to yourself works out best for everyone," Delaine said with an unspoken 'and that's the end of this conversation' hanging very clearly in her voice as she walked into a small bookstore designed in a quaint retro-Earth style, leaving the blonde behind.

As Rose started mouthing something the Doctor assumed was less than complimentary, he interrupted her sulk.

"So how's it going with Delaine?" he asked, already having a fair idea of the answer he was about to receive.

"She's…" Rose threw her hands up in the air. "She acts like she's better than me! 'Don't start anything', 'don't argue', 'stop talking'. Ugh, I'm just… I thought you said she was my 'contemporary' so I thought she might actually be interesting, but it's like I'm going on an adventure with the school librarian. I mean, you saw her. Ignored everything but the bookstore."

"What's wrong with books?"

"Nothing… when you're not in a marketplace in the future," the blonde huffed. "Anti-gravity and alien jewelry, and she skips past all of them to look at plain old ink on paper."

"I seem to recall you going straight to the chip vendor the first time I took you to a future market," the Doctor pointed out.

"That's different," Rose said.

The Doctor hmm'd. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Tegan and Adric never got along either…"

"And who were they?"

Hadhn't he mentioned – no, probably not. Retrospectives were something he went out of his way to
avoid unless they suddenly became relevant to a current situation.

"Companions I had in an earlier regeneration. An air hostess and an alien maths prodigy, had absolutely nothing in common and argued all the time. I might have lost my mind from all the bickering if not for Nyssa," he explained. At her surprised look, the Doctor asked, "What? You didn't think I spent all my lives in a cave before I met you, did you?"

Rose didn't reply, though her sudden refusal to look him in the face answered the question just as well.

The Doctor sighed and scratched the back of his head. Well, this was awkward. "Which section do you think she'll be in?" he asked.

Poetry. Roughly five aisles back from the new releases, tabloids, and magazines and to the right of romance, which when translated to a store that could have been a filing cabinet in a previous life meant squeezing past haphazard piles of books stacked by customers who couldn't be bothered to put them back and double checking every corner just in case some shelf had wandered far enough out of place to hide a body.

Or two bodies, the Doctor realized as he finally picked out the sight of his companion talking to an individual lurking just out of sight. The fact that she was obviously enjoying the conversation...

Shoving the spike of irrational irritation aside, the Time Lord stepped around a pile of harlequinesque paperback romances with moving picture covers just shy of being obscene, mindful not to step on any loose pages. Slipping on slapdash fiction would be rather counterproductive to both sneaking and maintaining his dignity.

'Ve still have some of that?' his Fourth asked.

The Doctor ignored his past self as he snuck closer. Damn noise cancellers, making it impossible to eavesdrop properly.

Delaine's laugh broke through, loud enough for the canceller to register it as being outside of the usual volume for 'casual conversation' and the irritation returned.

That was his companion.

Clearing the last few feet, the Doctor stretched out a hand to Delaine's shoulder and slid into place alongside her, ignoring the way she'd stiffened up at the contact. Opening his mouth to say something, the words died in his throat as he recognized who Delaine had been talking to. Even if the face had appeared more than once in his lifetimes, there was no mistaking that coat or the enamel cat on his lapel.

"Oh," his Sixth said, his own smile falling into a grimace as he recognized his future self. "You."

"Me," the Doctor replied, pulling Delaine in closer to his body and ignoring every sign from her that screamed discomfort with his sudden physical intimacy. "I see you've met my latest companion."

"Yes, we were discussing the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, among other things," his Sixth sniffed, holding up a book he apparently had been reading before his future self's intrusion. "Very well read. At least I maintain some taste in my old age."

The wave of annoyance suddenly felt justified. "High words from a man wearing that coat. I forgot, did we steal that from some sort of clown college or was there some sort of paint factory mishap
"Neither, a fact that you should be well aware of," the past Doctor sneered as he cast an unimpressed eye up and down his future self. "There may be something to be said for monochromatic outfits, but I can't recall ever finding solid brown overly inspiring."

"Hey, this is pinstriped!" the Doctor snapped, stretching out a leg to point out that exact detail.

"As are these!"

Delaine pulled herself free of the Doctor's grip. "Boys. You both look nice. Now shut up."

The last seemed more directed at him than his past self, but both versions of the Doctor closed their mouths with a click.

Delaine sighed, raking a hand back through her hair. "Can't even have five minutes of peace," she muttered under her breath before refocusing. "What did you want, Doctor?" she asked.

Oh, _that_ tone was hardly the marker of anything good. "Just wondering where you'd got to," he hedged as casually as possible, avoiding eye contact all the while. "Didn't want to lose you on your third adventure."

His Sixth raised an eyebrow. 'You've only just met her and she's _this_ vexed with you?' he asked over their mental connection.

'Oh, like _you_ have room to talk about that sort of thing,' the Doctor shot back.

"I don't even want to know what's going on between you two right now," Delaine muttered from where she stood between them. Her arms were folded and there was none of the smiles and laughter his Sixth had managed to draw out of her on her face now. "Is this about not sticking with Rose? Because she wasn't interested in coming in here."

And now his Sixth was giving him the eyebrow again.

'Shit it,' the Doctor preempted his past self before turning back to his companion. "She… mentioned that."

Delaine hmmed. "And I suppose that it was in less than glowing terms? Probably something about being a stick in the mud, right?"

"…that's not entirely off the mark," he admitted before reaching over to pull at her hand. "Well, come on, we've got other things to do –"

And of course that's when his Sixth decided to step in. "Well, if there is a conflict of personality preventing your travels from being as pleasant as they deserve to be," he purred, placing his hand on Delaine's shoulder. This contact, the Doctor noted, wasn't treated with the same discomfort all of his incarnation's attempts at touch had garnered. "I would be more than happy to welcome you aboard my _ship_."

Technically the same one at a different point in his timeline, but it wasn't like Delaine knew that. Worst of all, Delaine almost looked charmed by the offer, despite the appearance of the person making it.

'Maybe she likes cats,' one of his past selves said. Eight, he guessed from the faintly spacey feeling of the thought.
'Shush.' The Doctor frowned. "Impossible. Temporal mechanics –"

"– allow for a certain amount of flexibility, so long as any loops are closed appropriately," his Sixth finished, eyeing his future self with an unspoken challenge. "I'm sure I can handle that quite neatly."

Challenge accepted then.

"In between the various phases of disassembly you put your TARDIS through every time you get the idea to 'fix' her?" he asked. "If you can't even manage to hit the Eye of Orion, I don't imagine you'd be able to handle anything as delicate as a temporal loop."

'Your turn, Sixie… if you can beat that,' the Doctor added telepathically, not even bothering to hide the fact that he was absolutely certain of his victory.

His past self seemed ready to make the attempt anyway, puffing himself up to his maximum height only to deflate as Delaine twisted around and took the hand that had been on her shoulder into her own, bringing his Sixth's knuckles up to her lips in time to catch a gentle kiss.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "He's an idiot –"

Ow. The Doctor wasn't even sure if he deserved that yet.

"– but I'll survive. The universe knows I'm indestructible," Delaine finished before smiling at him. "Maybe we'll run into each other again."

The irony of that statement wasn't lost on either version of the Doctor.

"Well," his Sixth said after a moment of being caught in the emotional dissonance between 'angry' and 'charmed'. "I'll leave you to your shopping then." He handed Delaine the book he had been holding and, after throwing one more half-accusing stare at his future self, disappeared towards the back of the store.

As soon as his past self disappeared, so did Delaine's smile. The Doctor jerked back as she slapped his arm with her book.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"Being an ass."

"Excuse me–? I swoop in to rescue you from a bore –"

'A bore?!

"Yeah, well, I'm sure this has been said plenty of times before, but swooping is bad. I was having a nice time before you decided to play the part of Captain Cockblock –"

Wait, wait, what?

One of his previous selves made a noise that was barely identifiable as guffaw.

"– just as I was getting to the actual flirting. It's a wonder I was able to give a proper goodbye, the way you were acting," Delaine finished before pinning the Doctor with a glare. "Very rude, you know."

'Well, that's in the description of this model,' his Fourth said around a giggle. 'Rude and not ginger.'

Resisting the impulse to ask what constituted a 'proper goodbye' and requesting an essay on why the
'Well…' Some part of him wanted to say 'yes' though there really was no account for it. "Not really," the Doctor decided before looking back in the direction that his past self had disappeared in. "But him? I can't see the appeal."

Delaine snorted. "Yeah, you go for small, busty, blonde, and obnoxious. Not exactly in a position to throw stones on the subject of 'taste', are you?"

And his Sixth self didn't count as half of that? "She isn't that bad," the Doctor protested as he followed Delaine up to the automated cashier. "A little rough around the edges —"

Another sarcastic snort as Delaine swiped the credit chip across the appropriate scanner.

"— but she's a good person," he insisted.

"Who gets in arguments with strangers because of things like the color of their clothes and starts pissing matches with unfamiliar women the moment they get within twenty feet of her established territory. Yeah, real nice."

The Doctor suddenly had a sneaking suspicion that Delaine had been on the other side of one of these pissing matches at some point in the last twenty four hours.

"I'm sorry."

She shot him a look, though this time it was more wry than annoyed. "And here I thought Rose Tyler was a person with free will and her own decision making process. Here's a piece of advice, Doctor; don't apologize for things you don't have control over. Be they forces of nature or teenage girls."

"Rather hard to tell the difference sometimes," the Doctor quipped as they exited the bookshop. Rose had been waiting, an annoyed look on her face.

"You were in there long enough," she said. "What took you?"

The smile that ghosted across Delaine's face was rueful, with traces of annoyance and humor lingering around the edges. "Oh, merely got caught up with the works of Lilian Jackson Braun," she said in the softly smug tone of someone hiding a mystery in their mouth. "Twenty-nine novels in a single series. Pity the thirtieth got turned down."

"Never mind then," Rose said as she turned to walk back to the TARDIS. The Doctor and Delaine followed behind, the Doctor keeping his pace balanced between 'able to keep track of Rose Tyler' and 'able to talk to Delaine in relative peace'.

"Now, that was a bare-faced lie," he said. "Who's Lilian Jackson Braun?"

"Lilian Jackson Braun was the author of a series of mystery novels called 'The Cat Who'," Delaine
explained.

It almost recalled another series the Doctor remembered, only less 'mystery' and more 'a failure at dodging a contract that then led into children's educational books that had managed to mess up its own title'. "The Cat Who what?"

The smirk returned as a proper grin, one that crowed 'oh, the cleverness of me'. "Depends on the book. The Cat Who Could Read Backwards, The Cat Who Saw Stars, The Cat Who Came To Breakfast..."

"And this relates to your big bouncy blonde friend... how?"

"Oh, like you could look at that man and not see a cat," Delaine said, still smiling. "And I'm not just talking about his lapel pin. And as to the 'mystery' part of it..."

She reached up to flick the collar points of her shirt. "Question marks."

"Ah." Clever, in a punny sort of way. Now that it had been explained, the internal cross-reference was half-brilliant pun, half-mad mnemonic. "And what was the point in lying to her?"

The smile fell. "I don't owe Rose Tyler a play-by-play of my day," she said, spitting the name like a near expletive, which was a near trick considering how many places in that sentence felt like they needed swears themselves. "Especially considering that I can't see her actually giving a damn about the subject."

It was an accurate assessment of their dynamic from everything the Doctor had seen so far. Neither girl seemed to have much tolerance for the other, though that disdain thankfully wasn't at the extent where the other would happily leave the other to die.

At least, the Doctor thought as he followed his companions into the TARDIS, he hoped so.

The Doctor had almost forgotten something.

That wasn't an uncommon thing for him. When the fate of a planet, a galaxy, or a universe was on the line, it was fairly easy to lose track of smaller things like keys, lunch, and companions. He usually was pretty good at finding them again, but sometimes things stayed lost and other times, things like To-Do Lists got forgotten in the interim.

The thing that he'd almost forgotten this time is that humans need beds to sleep in, a fact he'd been reminded of rather sharply when he'd disappeared to handle the various parts of the TARDIS and his own needs for a few hours and returned to the console room to find Delaine curled up in the command chair with her new poetry book.

Dark eyes flicked up over the edge of the book to study him before going back to the text. "Evening. Or morning, I suppose."

"You aren't going to wish me a good one?" the Doctor asked half-jokingly.

"Oh, what an opening for a Hobbit quote," Delaine muttered as she turned another page. "Alas, the moment is lost forever."

"Why are you still here?"

"Because it's the void outside right now."
"I mean, why are you still out here? You have a room," the Doctor corrected.

Her dark eyes flicked up to focus on him again and the Doctor had a moment to appreciate how close that shade of brown was to being properly black. "First I've heard of it."

Ah. Right. He hadn't actually got her one yet. "Well, let's fix that. I can't have you sleeping out here. Probably end up getting drool in something important."

Trying not to look like he was hanging on her every reaction, the Doctor motioned for her to follow him into the labyrinthine interior of the TARDIS. "Stay close to me," he warned as they started down a hallway. "Easy to get lost in here if you don't know what you're doing… or if she doesn't like you."

To Delaine's credit, there was no question of who he meant by 'she', and the TARDIS had already made it clear through her various means that the brunette was already one of her favored guests.

Still, the Doctor did not want to take any chances with this companion, though – honestly, what was there to be concerned about at this point? It's not like his Sixth was going to walk through the door and sweep her off her feet if he didn't suitably impress her.

'Don't tempt me.'

"So, what?" Delaine asked after they passed a handful of doors. "You going to have me shack up with Rose?"

The Doctor ignored the explosion of laughter from some of his past selves at the patently ridiculous idea. "Oh no, one of you would probably end up committing murder by morning tomorrow," he said. "Rather not tempt fate on that one, if you don't mind."

'The real question there is, who do you think would win?' his Fourth threw out there. 'I'd place higher odds on the young lady versed in knife play, myself.'

'Against the Bad Wolf girl?'

'Hardly counts now.'

'Oh, definitely our young bibliophage.'

'You're biased towards her, Sixie. Don't deny it.'

'What can I say? I've always possessed impeccable taste,' the Sixth said, pulling at an imaginary set of coat lapels.

'In companions and cuisine, if nothing else,' another added dryly.

The Doctor tuned out the burgeoning battle of insults and cheap shots to focus on Delaine. "So what do you ordinarily look for in a bedroom?" he asked before pulling a verbal backspace. "I mean, in style. Décor. Furniture."

Delaine cracked a small smile at his flailing, though it disappeared just as quickly as it had come. "Something comfortable. Decent shelving for books. Nothing in solid white, beige, orange, yellow, or pink."

'It feels like I should be offended by that,' his Fifth noted.

'She didn't mean you.'
"Does that mean cool and dark colors are okay or just avoid anything in monochrome?" the Doctor asked.

"Bit of Column A, bit of Column B," she replied, looking around the hallway. There were very little in the way of distinguishing marks in the TARDIS beyond the contents of any given room and even that was subject to change. "Are we going to be there anytime soon? Hate to have to go on an Odyssey every time we leave the TARDIS."

"Ah, she'll move your room where it needs to be," he said before a touch of mental presence ghosted at his mind. The TARDIS had found a room for Delaine. Either that or she'd cooked up something from some psychic impression plucked from his companion's mind.

In the end, it was a question of the chicken and the egg when all that mattered was the omelet.

The Doctor reached out to the door the TARDIS had chosen, tapping the center of it with his first two fingers. "This one."

Delaine suddenly hesitated, eyes flicking from the door to him and back again.

'Odd.'

"Oh c'mon," he said. "It's late, you humans need your sleep, it's not like I put a bottomless pit on the other side." Resisting the urge to look up at the ceiling, he asked the TARDIS, 'You didn't either, did you?'

There was a hum as she responded with a feeling of humor-laced annoyance – or perhaps it was the other way around – that roughly translated to, 'You've only known me for most of your lives. Do you really think I would?'

Delaine finally stepped forward, pushing the door open carefully. On the other side of it, the Doctor could see… well, not much of anything.

It was a small room, about half the size that companion's rooms usually ran on the TARDIS, without windows and barely decorated. That usually didn't mean that much, since the unoccupied spaces didn't always come with those markers of being lived in yet.

That wasn't the problem. The problem was that the room bore more than a passing resemblance to a prison cell.

A gunmetal grey steel bunkbed was pressed into the corner and bereft of even a mattress, leaving only a mesh of metal to serve as a sleeping surface, the writing desk shoved into other corner was made out of heavily scarred dark wood that showed a paler heart through every scrape and slash, and in between them was a casually garish oval rug that the Doctor half-suspected to be hand woven out of hemp string and old plastic shopping bags.

There was a decently sized bookshelf in between the bed and a boudoir, the first and the last both matched in approximate color and style to the desk, but somehow the Doctor felt that wasn't enough to make up for the raw inhospitality of the room.

"Nice," Delaine said. To the Doctor's ear, she almost sounded honestly enthused. "You got a room with blankets?"

"I'm sorry, she doesn't ordinarily do this –" he began to say.

"No, no. I meant it when I said I liked the room. I just need to steal some blankets. Pillows.
Comforters. The soft stuff." She threw herself down on the lower part of the bunk bed, the mesh support squeaking as it bounced and dipped under her weight. From this angle, it almost acted like an ordinary cot. "Did this at camp once. Most comfortable bed I'd ever slept on."

Americans held weird standards for comfort and safety, the Doctor decided as he swallowed the immediate desire to argue. "Alright then," he said. "Just check the rooms around here, the TARDIS probably has some extra blankets you could borrow."

He closed the door, ignoring the small croaking falsetto of 'steeaaaal' as he turned to go back down the hallway to the console room, an glowing ember of satisfaction nestled somewhere between his hearts.

Despite the obvious unsuitability of the room, Delaine had liked it. Moreover, she'd actually let slip her silly side again. Sure, it was only a slip, a tease at an aspect of her personality that he hadn't gotten a chance to fully appreciate yet, but it was good to know that a couple of crises hadn't managed to kill it.

'Yet it was me who got to see the romantic,' his Sixth said, his psychic signature giving away the sensation of preening as he did so. 'Poetry, flirtation?'

Yes, that had been unexpected and, actually, a little bit annoying from two entirely different angles. From his Sixth in that he'd never gotten to appreciate this attention properly thanks to the time differential and from the current incarnation in that none of that attention had carried over.

Not that he had a romantic interest in the girl – the Doctor was fairly certain of that – but being dismissed as anything more than just an acquaintance irked him.

'I have no idea what she saw in you,' the Doctor thought at his Sixth.

'A cat, probably,' his Eighth noted dreamily.

'I'm fairly sure the young lady was interested in far more than just a little petting…'

"Shhh!" the Doctor hissed before reaching up to massage his temples. "Maybe this is why there's a twelve regeneration limit; because having more than thirteen people sharing the same head space would drive anybody mad."

'And to think you're only at eleve–'

"Ten," he corrected forcibly. "That one doesn't exist."

Now if only saying it made it so.

His thoughts were interrupted – one might even say 'thankfully' – by the sound of a call coming through the console. Before it could ring a second time, the Doctor had the receiver up to his ear.

"Hello, you've reached the Doctor. If you've got to ask 'Doctor Who', then you just might have the wrong number," he said in a carefully regulated cheer. "If this is an old enemy of some description, feel free to take up the issue with someone else. If this is an emergency –"

"Doctor!" a familiar voice shouted from the other end of the line.

"Mickey Smith!" the Doctor said around a grin.

"Glad to see you've finally got my name right," Mickey Smith muttered. "Anyway, do you know
how annoying it is trying to get hold of you? I swear, the last time I tried the number you gave me, this complete nutter answered. Kept me on the line for hours, going on about jelly babies and trying to convince me that I could solve the issue by playing with a yoyo and deleting system32 from my computer – stop laughing! This is serious!

The Doctor smothered his giggles. "Alright then," he said. "Give me your date and location, and once I've got that punched in, you can tell me all about your 'emergency'…"

Chapter End Notes

Okay, the story behind this chapter is a mess. I went through about three different versions of it before I just went 'fuck it' and made it into a one-shot of the most harmless and consistent pieces of all of them (the future alien market bit, the Sixth Doctor being there and hitting it off with Delaine – it's a cat thing –, the Doctor suffering mild indignity because of that) and then shoehorned in the stock 'here's your room on the TARDIS' bit.

The first version was long and dramatic, but around the part where it would have ended up being about four chapters, it kind of stalled out before I could figure out the climax/ending (literally about 4000-6000 words missing compared to the 13000+ I had done). The second was sillier and more fun to brainstorm, but didn't strike the fancy as much, so it stalled out at 'intro' and basic plot idea. By the time I got to the third one I was like 80% done with the process SO I JUST SMOOSHED THEM TOGETHER TO MAKE SOMETHING THAT WORKED. And then I was like 'god this is cheesy and ridiculously self-indulgent, even for fanfiction', got writer's block and then, after about a month, was able to produce the straight one-shot.

And then I had to rewrite it again. Like I said. A Mess.

The Uberlan Bazaar and Altari Seven are of my own creation. Just kind of generic names, mostly for background color. Originally I had Uberlan in more detail, but that turned out to be unimportant to the plot, so...

The forgotten companion the Doctor was thinking about was Charlotte Pollard from the Big Finish Audios. First a companion of the Eighth Doctor, temporal hijinks saw her travelling with the Sixth Doctor (and then removing his memory of her at the end to prevent paradoxes). You could also chalk it up to the Eighth Doctor referencing his proclivity towards losing his memory for some reason or another.

Nysa was yet another of the Fifth Doctor's companions (I think the only one of the TV set that I haven't mentioned is Turlough…). She was another alien genius, though unlike Adric, her talents were fairly consistent and actually useful in the average story, to the point where she was able to fly the TARDIS.

The Sixth Doctor is an acquired taste, especially if you're coming in from the echo chamber side of the fandom where people just regurgitate the negative things they've heard without actually watching the thing (cough a lot of Moffat haters).

I'm not going to make you acquire said taste, but I'm going to strongly encourage it because if you skip the Twin Dilemma which, besides being a post-regeneration story, was feature to shaky writing, child actors in a major role, and start of the 'Peri getting
singled out by the baddie for creepy reasons' trend. The rest is actually fairly good, maybe middling quality if you ignore the various budgetary issues and take the pointless Peri persecution with like thirty grains of salt. People might not agree on how attractive Colin Baker in the 80's, personal tastes being what they are, but as an actor he's fantastic in both ability and attitude, considering the shit he went through during his tenure.

If it's possible for you, try to listen to some of the audio stories before moving onto the televised episodes (or just skip the Twin Dilemma). If you are limited to the TV show, try to go in with an open mind, though getting offended at the writers' treatment of Peri is wholly acceptable.

The Cat Who series is a real thing. I haven't had the chance to read them – seeing as I found out about them while looking for a suitable reference for this chapter – but I'll see if my local library has any of them.

In the Fifth Doctor audio story 'The Kingmaker', it's revealed that the Doctor was slated to write a number of educational books but skipped out on Earth before getting the last book finished. All of these were released as 'Doctor Who Discovers' and then the subject of the book, such as 'Mysterious Creatures', 'Early Man', 'Pre-Historic Animals', 'Space Travel', and 'The Conquerors'.

Weirdly enough, those books are all real (though probably not written by the Doctor himself).

Uuuh, I don't know how deep all of you are into Doctor Who, but I think the whole 'If the Doctor meets another version of himself, the younger one forgets all about it (or at least most of it) until they complete the meeting from the other end' thing is fairly well known. The technical term is the Blinovitch Limitation Effect, but fuck if you can spell that off the top of your head.

So now you know. Write me some reviews.
Schools were one of those things that I could never quite make up my mind about. There were good things about them, of course, like books and learning and teachers who both loved and were good at what they did, but those were so outweighed by the bad that they might as well not have tipped the scales at all.

Sometimes, if the staff, curriculum, or the building itself was interesting enough – oh, what fond memories I had of Hogwarts and the Unseen University --, I could push by that queasily uncertain feeling and enjoy the experience.

Unfortunately for me, Deffery Vale was nothing special in any particular category except perhaps poorly hidden malevolence and a fried food lunch menu that might have passed for half-decent if not for the fact that it was prepared using alien brain-altering oils.

Oh and the UFO sightings that had brought us here in the first place, of course.

As soon as Mickey had contacted the Doctor about it, the Time Lord had landed the TARDIS in London and set about the business of investigation, a business that very quickly came to involve infiltration. Within two days, Deffery Vale had a new lunch lady, librarian, and physics teacher.

Rose, naturally, was the least happy with her new role, if the murderous glances both the Doctor and I were catching from behind the serving counter were any indication. She need not have bothered; the lunch both of us had been given was death threat enough.

For the third time since we'd sat down at our table, I poked the puddle of vomit yellow something with my fork. It almost made me nostalgic for the canned chocolate pudding they'd served at my elementary school in my first life, except this had the additional disadvantage of being both steaming and actively horrible to every available sense.

Personally, as a person who has eaten everything from rat and dirt on down to two-hundred year old radioactive snack foods and the occasional concept, I probably didn't have that much room to complain, but there were still some areas where I wasn't quite willing to go.

"You're really going to have to show me where the TARDIS's kitchen is," I told the Doctor. "I can't survive on this nonsense."

"Come on, it's not that bad," he said as he chewed on a chip, avoiding the suspect smear on his own plate. He swallowed and gave the bit of deep-fried potato in his hand a considering look. "Though I'll admit, the flavor is a bit off."

I took a bite of one of my own. The potato itself was fine, but the frying oil was definitely not an Earth variety, with a slight sourness that stood out if you were looking for such subtle differences. "Different kind of oil, you think?"

"Mmm. If it's an Earth variety, it's not one I recognize," the Doctor said as he munched away at the rest of the chip.

Maybe Time Lord biology was innately incompatible with the Krillitane oil, because I couldn't see any other reason why he would be able to miss the sensation of one's mental gears being greased up
and set spinning at maximum speed. Sure, without my limiter on I could probably think and process just as fast and more reliably but while using a standard human set up, the kick in speed and clarity was impressive. Combine that with the neuroplasticity, metabolism, and body weight to caloric intake ratio of the average teenager... well, I could see the payoff – and the corresponding total moral and ethical bankruptcy – of turning a school into a think tank.

"Well, I think they're just gorgeous," Rose declared, stealing a chip off of the Doctor's plate as she plopped down next to us. I could have quoted Mean Girls. I really, really could have, but I imagined that last indignity in the chain of other admittedly worse shit that had happened to the blonde in the last three days would have spelled some kind of disaster – namely, critical annoyance – for me.

She was dressed in those formless pastel-shaded scrubs that belonged to the lowest denominator of the service industry, specifically of the kind people tended to gloss over even as they looked at them. At least fast food work afforded the dignity of a nametag, because the only thing that separated her from the rest of the lunch ladies was the configuration of her face which belonged only – at least as far as I knew – to one Rose Tyler.

She stole another of the Doctor's chips. "Anyway, have either of you found anything? Because it's been three days and if I'd wanted to be bored in a dead end job…"

"Blame your boyfriend. He was the one who put us onto it," the Time Lord reminded her before leaning forward in a half-conspiratorial manner. The fact that his new position kept Rose from stealing more of his food seemed like one of those accidental bonuses. "And he was right. Had a boy in class this morning, Milo, rattling off numbers that he shouldn't have in the first place. And I don't mean upper level stuff. I mean like how to facilitate FTL travel, which you lot won't have a handle on for another couple centuries."

Mmm. Impossible knowledge was one of those things that always put people on edge, usually for a good reason. "So, someone's been feeding him and the others those sorts of numbers," I said. "To what end?"

The Doctor waited patiently for me to say more before realizing my question wasn't rhetorical. "Oh, could be anything. I've seen more wetware computation devices than I care to remember, but brainwashing to get an 'in' on the next generation of science, calculating numbers for some kind of intergalactic lottery drawing... I can't really get a pin down without more information. Can't make bricks without clay."

"And it falls to us to supply said clay."

He beamed at us. "Exactly."

The head lunch lady, a wizened spindle of a woman with a mouth permanently puckered into a sour expression, had finally noticed the absence of her youngest hireling hard at work and having picked Rose out from the crowd, was now heading our way.

"Looks like you can't sit with us," I whispered, finally giving in to the need to quote.

"Back to scrubbing," Rose sighed as she stood up and grabbed our abandoned food trays. "I don't see why you get the cushy librarian job."

"Probably because I am a librarian?" I asked.

Both Rose and the Doctor stared at me.

"What? I've had jobs and I like books. It's not hard to find a place where those two areas intersect," I
said half-defensively. What, were my youthful looks that at odds with the idea of me sorting books for a living? "'sides, it's easy to use the Dewey Decimal System when you've been navigating it since age six."

Not *exactly* how I had picked it up, if I was to tell the truth, but telling people that one of my other selves had been a half-loony wizard-slash-librarian-slash-Time Lord-lite from a flat world travelling through the void on a Jenga tower of animals in a past life so rarely went over well, even if I left out the bit about the little blue man who lived in my hat.

A pity; Wee Jamie was almost always the best part of any story he featured in.

Wherever the conversation would or could have gone after that was shoved aside as Rose's supervisor, who I was sorely tempted to dub 'Ms. Bitters', arrived with a scowl that looked like it had been added around the same time anything resembling 'kindness' had been cut out of her soul. Considering that she was probably a member of a people-eating conqueror race, she might have been born that way.

"You are not permitted to leave your station during a sitting," the Ms. Bitters knockoff hissed at Rose.

"Was just talking to these two," Rose mumbled.

The Doctor waved at the evil one, a bright smile fixed on his face. I settled for a level stare.

"He doesn't like the chips," she added, as if this was some great and terrible secret.

Considering the evil one's reaction, it might have been.

"The menu has been specifically designed by the headmaster to improve concentration and performance," the woman snarled before turning her hateful gaze back to Rose. "Now, get back to work."

With that and one final glare, 'Ms. Bitters' vanished back into the depths of the cantina.

Rose rolled her eyes, doing a final turn to face us. "This is me; Rose Tyler, Dinner Lady."

"Save me a bit of the crumble," the Doctor said.

"I'm so going to kill you."

The Time Lord grinned. "Dessert first, if you don't mind," he called after her before she vanished back into the kitchen. He turned around to look at me and found my unimpressed stare now directed at him. "What?"

"Trying to figure out the dynamics here." Particularly how the hell they even *have* a dynamic, between the 'morally superior in all ways because I'm from a higher species totally not known for being incredible cosmic assholes despite my tendency towards myopic views on just about everything and emotionally based kneejerk reactions' and the 'overly possessive of her people and way too willing to consume an energy field way larger than the Evil Overlord List advises and possibly destroy two universes for the sake of a guy I've known for maybe a year or so tops'.

…actually, I could see how it worked, because Rose Tyler was a teenager with the ordinary expectation that the rest of her life was going to be defined by anything that lasted longer than two months and the Doctor was… well, he was the Tenth Doctor, relatively fresh from the Time War and caught between his old role of 'wanderer through time' and all the responsibilities of being 'the last of
the Time Lords'. I just didn't *like* it because it was incredibly dangerous to anyone else in the vicinity, which combined with the fact that they lived in a space-time machine capable of reaching just about any point in the universe at any possible time meant that literally no place in the universe was safe.

The Doctor just shrugged. "I like her and she likes me. What's there to figure out?"

Everything. Like how to keep that combination of 'likes' from putting other people in needless danger.

"Anyway," he redirected. "I didn't know you were a librarian."

"Surprised I had a life before you?" I asked. What would that reaction would have been if I'd used 'lives'?

The Doctor almost looked abashed for a moment. "Well, one would think that a person with steady employment wouldn't be wandering around London alone on Christmas," he said.

"You would think that," I agreed, taking a sip of my drink. Boxed milk, harmless and without the slightest trace of the telltale sourness of Krillitane oil. "But what we think is often very different from the truth."

Moving universes every decade or so and getting into a metric fuckload of crazy shit in between those shifts had a way of discouraging anything resembling long-term work. Of course, what I considered long term usually was measured out in… decades? Centuries? Sometimes I wasn't even sure myself, but I was sure of the fact it wasn't applicable to anything resembling a human scale.

"Little too quiet in here for my taste," the Doctor said, breaking the awkward silence that had wormed its way into the lull in our conversation. "Would think I would have seen some sort of delinquent behavior by now. Hoodies, ringtones, gossip."

I looked around the room. He was right. There was too little noise for teens and pre-teens shoved into an enclosed space, with the most I could hear being muffled small talk and the sound of cutlery clashing on plastic. Not much in the way of movement either, save for the odd teacher making their rounds, all too often in the style of a predatory beast looking for an injured or sickly animal to separate from the herd and devour.

And above it all, loomed the Headmaster.

I would not compare him to Giles, even if they technically shared the same face. I remembered Giles. All the little quirks, habits, and subtleties of body language picked up over a lifetime, and I particularly remembered his way of conveying 'why the hell am I the only reasonable person in this town' through his eyes alone.

This lookalike had none of them and the visual didn't line up either. The suit was too severe and the hair too slicked back for me to even entertain the notion of them being variants on the same person, but there was also the fact that Giles would *never* look over a room like he was casually picking out his next victim.

Much unlike the man whose gaze we were now avoiding.

"Definitely something about the chips," I said.

The Doctor nodded, taking another glance at the Headmaster through the corner of his eye. "Oh, definitely."
Being a librarian, it followed that I naturally liked libraries. Deffery Vale's might have been a touch undersized and more than a little underused for my taste, but I could appreciate the slight distortion of L-space it provided as I went about the business of putting away books without my limiter. Despite this universe's ban on magic, the fact of knowledge equals power equals (force times distance squared) divided by time remained. Perhaps it tied in to Quantum Mnemonics or Block Transfer Theory somehow, since those were other reality warping concepts native to this 'verse.

The knowledge accumulated here, unfortunately, wasn't enough to grant proper L-space access, but I did seem to recall some library planet somewhere in the future that was absolutely loaded with reading material.

'Oh, yes. The Library,' a soft, very Scottish voice murmured from the back of my mind, his brogue buzzing and rolling the 'R's like bumblebees in a rock tumbler. 'Always important, things that people call the 'The'.''

I smirked at that. 'Fine words from a man who called himself 'The Doctor', Zeke,' I thought back at him.

'Ah, well, that's a few millennia in our rearview, isn't it?" my personal edition of the Time Lord said around an obvious smile, not even making any movement towards dismissing my toothless accusation that he thought himself important. 'In my old age, I've come to find "Professor Ezekiel Sterling" more than sufficient for my needs.'

Yes. Besides, it was easier than throwing numbers at every model and version of the Doctor I ever encountered, particularly when the temporal specifics decided to get squirrely. Christ, how the fuck was I going to survive the Metacrisis? What would happen if the Doctor ended up regenerating into an unfamiliar face?

'Anyway,' I began after schooling my thoughts. 'What do you think of the situation?'

'Seeing as we have a fair idea of how easily the Krillitanes were dealt with without our input, I'm assuming you're referring to my… successor.'

I shrugged as I shoved a selection of encyclopedias back into their places and started to make my way back to the front desk. 'You would know him best.'

'Hardly. You should remember as well as everyone else that I was separated from that experience about four models before this one,' Zeke said before sighing. 'I can't say you've observed anything I would disagree with. If Miss Tyler wasn't part of the picture, perhaps he might have adopted a less –'


'Please, Delaine, those are all standard features,' the Time Lord said dismissively before becoming serious again. 'Let's just say… the exact combination of those traits combined with a certain lack of others that might otherwise counteract them have led to a… unbalanced personality? One might even accuse me of being an example of such, though too much brains, too little heart rather than being caught between ancient and immature.'

'At least until you got stuck with this mess,' I said.

'Yes. It's *rather* difficult to pull off such complicated plans inside of a decade without a TARDIS and exhaustive knowledge of the universe I'm operating in,' Zeke admitted. 'Never mind the twisting of one's history by the whim of a petty cosmic power or the swarm of commentators that do nothing but scream and try to usurp control when one starts moving in directions a little too morally suspect for
'Please,' I thought back with a roll of my eyes. 'You know you like us.'

'Like gnome jokes and haggis, it's an acquired taste.'

With that, his mental presence receded into the back of my mind to mill around with the rest of the little pinprick points that made up my other selves.

I sighed as I settled into a comfortable perch on the stool behind the front desk, pulling a yo-yo out of my warehouse before strapping my limiter back on and starting the process of idling. Zeke hadn't given me any answer I could work with, but I couldn't quite blame him. After all, he knew about as much about the current model of the Doctor as I did and, like the Doctor had said earlier, you couldn't make bricks without clay.

The yo-yo jumped up to and down from my hand before making a quick detour around the world before I snapped it back to rest into my palm.

"Testing the local gravity?" an amused female voice asked.

I fell off my stool, dragging a number of papers off the desk with me as I went. The yo-yo that smacked me in the face a few seconds after that was merely icing on the humiliation cake.

"Are you alright?" the woman asked, her brown hair swaying as she leaned over the counter to look down at me. Sarah Jane Smith. Eee! "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Just in my dignity," I groaned. "Also possibly my coccyx."

"Unfortunate," the alien wearing the Giles-skin said, not sounding particularly invested either way. "Anyway," he continued as I pulled myself off the floor. "This is Miss Sarah Jane Smith, a reporter. Miss Smith will be writing a profile on me for the Sunday Times and I expect you to render her as much assistance as you are… capable."

With that, the Headmaster turned on his heel and left the library.

"All business, isn't he?" Sarah Jane asked.

"He knows what he's after and has a pretty good idea of how to get it," I said, not looking away from the door. Universal domination through the exploitation of children, I didn't add. "Anyway, was there anything you needed from me, Sarah Jane?"

She blinked and then her face settled into a considering look.

"You know," she said carefully. "Most people begin with Miss Smith. Or just 'Sarah'."

Fuck. "I've known some Sally Anns, a few Mary Janes, and a couple Sarah Lees. A Sarah Jane isn't so off the mark," I said as casually as I could manage. "Of course, if you would prefer 'Just Sarah', I suppose I could –"

Her amused look was back. "No, Sarah Jane is fine." She looked around. "Where is the cellphone signal best in here?"

I pointed towards the back of the library, which was mostly window. "It's not the greatest, but it's steady if nothing else."

As soon as Sarah Jane was out of earshot, I started kicking myself. Idiot. Iiiidiiiot. Sixteen thousand
years old, still making an ass of myself in public.
Could I use the excuse that I hadn't been a dominant personality since the absolute beginning? No, nobody got to use the 'senility' excuse. I came by my social stupidity honestly.

Just like my general jumpiness.

"How's the snooping going?" the Doctor asked from just behind my shoulder, just barely ducking out of the way of the wild swing I took in his direction.

"Don't sneak up on me like that!" I hissed, running my hands down my arms and desperately wishing I had some kind of jacket on. I didn't like being exposed, especially when presented with someone whose face and voice brought back nightmares.

"Are you alright?"

Do alright people look this scared? Bad enough that the not-Giles was putting me on edge, I didn't need flashbacks of Kilgrave every time a certain someone decided to get up in my personal space.

I straightened my waistcoat and shoved my stress back into a little box to be dealt with later.
"Anyway, what was it you wanted, Doctor?"

The Time Lord gave me a searching look very much like the one Sarah Jane had given me earlier, but he didn't push it.

Maybe I should have worried about that more.

"Just wanted to know if you'd found anything," he said.

I dragged a hand back through my hair. "The absence of evidence is evidence in itself," I said as I turned to the computer and flicked on the appropriate screens. "You say that these kids are able to whip out impossible numbers? Well, they aren't getting them from here. Barely any activity outside of class projects. I'd say Sarah Jane's getting more out the room right now than most of the students."

"Sarah Jane?"

Don't play dumb, Doctor. "Smith. The award-winning investigative journalist? I somehow doubt that she's been sent here to write a mundane puff piece. Besides, even if she was sent to do a report on the upswing in school scores, it would be an article about the school in general, not a profile on the headmaster." I turned off the computer and turned to look at the Time Lord. "She's playing off his ego to get what she wants."

"And what is it you think she wants?"

Playing dumb again or feeling out my thought process? "Answers, clearly. It's the question that's unclear," I finished.

No it wasn't. She'd probably heard about the alien activity as well and was here for the exact same reasons as us. But I wasn't supposed to know that.

The Doctor hummed as he busied himself around the desk, pausing only as he found a book I'd been reading. "The Demon Headmaster?" he asked, holding up the hardcover.

"Thought it was thematically appropriate."

"Mmm," the Doctor replied, flipping through the pages. "Bit of an obvious villain, isn't he?"
I raised an eyebrow. "And you're calling the guy who's a Nehru jacket and a goatee away from being a Bond villain 'subtle'? I mean, what kind of guy stands on a balcony to loom over everyone at lunchtime, if not to watch all within his domain eat his strange chips, which have quite possibly been spiked with alien brainwashing oil?"

The Doctor lifted up a finger as if to argue the point and then lowered it again. "Okay, point. Finch is too tied into this not to be a major player."

Thank you for confirming what I already knew and told you.

"Anyway, when did you want to go out on that double date with Rose and Mickey?" I asked as the bell rang and Sarah Jane walked out, casting another searching glance our way. "Tonight?"

The Doctor checked his watch. "Four hours, you think?"

"Five works better."

"It's a date then," he said with a wink, disappearing before I could ask him never to do that again.

Sneaking into buildings after dark, schools or otherwise, is old hat for me. Still, there's always that edge of caution, because you can't always know what's waiting for you. So it pays to be quiet, cautious, and well-prepared.

This group is barely any of those things.

"You know, it's weird being in a school at night," Rose said as we slunk through the darkened hallways of Deffery Vale. It could have easily been an entirely different building, as what the sun had painted in uninspiring shades of tan and brown, the night sunk into bruised black and blues. "When I was a kid, I used to think the teachers actually slept in the school."

"Someone wrote a book about that, actually," I noted in a half-whisper, more to myself as to her. I'd taken my limiter off before we arrived and could afford to have multiple focuses, though admittedly one of them was keeping any of my powers from being obvious.

More trouble than it looked like sometimes. So much for night vision.

"Really?"

I winced at the volume. Stealth mission, stealth mission.


The interest that had colored Rose's tone withered away instantly. "Oh, nice."

And there was any positive feeling I might have generated with the blonde gone. Vanished. Poof. And there was me, not quite capable of bringing myself to care. Outside and closer to the building than I would like, there were sounds of movement, of leathery wings a lot bigger than the average bat disturbing the air.

Krillitane. At least they had good sense to keep a lookout while the rest slept.

"Alright, team," the Doctor said a little too loudly for comfort before losing his train of thought. "Team… don't quite like the sound of that. Gang? Comrades?"
“Fellowship of reckless idiots?” I offered.

The look the Doctor gave me didn't have near as much heat as Rose's did.

"Anyway," he continued. "Rose, you go to the kitchen, get a sample of that oil. Mickey, all the new teachers are Maths Department, so check out that wing. Delaine –"

"I'll go with Mickey, he doesn't know the layout." And I really didn't want to be a third wheel during the grand Doctor and Sarah Jane reunion. Talk about a mood killer.

"Right. I'll check out the Headmaster's office," the Doctor said as he started to run up the stairs. "Anyway, be back here in ten minutes, try not to have a crisis without me."

With that, the Time Lord disappeared into the dark and Rose broke off towards the kitchens, leaving me and Mickey to head off into the tangle of hallways that led to the shared Maths and Science wing.

"So, uh, we haven't been introduced yet," Mickey said as we stopped at a break in the hallway. "I'm Mickey. Mickey Smith."

"Delaine." I scanned the hallway again. Empty, though I couldn't say how long it would stay that way if the Krillitane decided to make their move. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Better that I was in a position to put down any that got the idea.

"So how'd you meet the Doctor?" Mickey asked as we slunk down the hall, testing doors to see what was unlocked. Unfortunately for our snooping session, most of them were and the broom closet that wasn't was of questionable value to the investigation.

"Naked mole rat aliens tried to steal Christmas. Rose was at an ABBA concert."

With no response immediately forthcoming to that, I pushed on another door. Locked. If I really wanted to, I could force it open or use some fine point telekinesis to open it, but would it be worth it? …well, if absolutely necessary, yes. Still, it would be a bitch to explain.

"You some sort of alien then?"

I spared Mickey a half second glance as I tested another door. "What makes you think that?"

"Ah… just something about you."

Smart boy. Much smarter than anyone gives him credit for. That or I forgot to keep my night vision turned off. It was hard to miss silvered eyes, even in the dark. "I was human last time I checked."

The next door I tested opened easily, though the chemistry lab on the other side was definitely not what we had come here for. Still, it was the first door that had led to a room that was at least a little useful, so Mickey started looking around anyway.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that we were looking for computers, so I started looking around as well.

Typical desk contents, typical lab gear, typical dissection tools –

A door creaked open and Mickey screamed as a wall of vacuum packed rats fell down on him.

I resisted the urge to facepalm. Typical fuck up right at the typical worst time. If stealth had ever been
a part of this mission, it sure as hell wasn't now.

I should really give credit to the Doctor Who companion cardio program; it only took the Doctor, Sarah Jane, and Rose a little under a minute to get to us and none of them acted the slightest bit winded by the effort.

"Find anything interesting?" the Doctor asked as he ducked in the door.

"Mickey can hit a high C," I deadpanned before I pointed down at the floor. "Also; that."

"Oh god," Rose cried as she saw the mess all over the floor. "Rats! Dozens of rats! Vacuum packed rats!"

"Screaming like a girl over a couple of rats? I expected better from you, Rose Tyler," the Doctor said, deftly stepping over the small pile and the fact that he was not surprised by Mickey screaming about the same thing. "Besides, I've seen bigger. Big enough to gnaw a man's leg off."

"Yeah, yeah, rats so big you had to take an elephant gun after them, I get the idea," Mickey spat. "They took me by surprise!"

"And your response was to scream like a little girl."

"It was dark and I was covered with rats!"

"I'm thinking nine, ten years old. Frilly skirt, pigtails..." the Time Lord continued. Mickey clutched at the back of his head, as if by merely speaking the word had somehow added pigtails to his hair.

"But why are there rats in a school?" Rose asked. "It doesn't make sense."

"For dissection, of course," Sarah Jane replied, a touch snippily. Ah, so Rose Tyler had employed her noted diplomatic tactics; namely, the complete absence of such. "It's a basic biology class... or perhaps you haven't gotten to that bit yet. How old are you?"

Aaah. Excellent.

Rose didn't even flinch. "Excuse me, but they don't do dissection in school anymore. They haven't done it for years. What, are you from the Dark Ages?"

The Doctor and Mickey looked back over to Sarah Jane, apparently ready for the return salvo. I, on the other hand, was ready to do something else.

"Excuse me -"

"They did dissection at my school," I interrupted, toeing a piebald rat as I did so. Probably would have been cuter if it wasn't dead. "Never heard anything about rats, but we did cow's eyes, pig's lungs, and cats."

There are a few ways to redirect people's attention. The best way is to drop some kind of bomb. Explosives would work, sure, but saying something too goddamn weird to ignore worked even better. Things too goddamn weird to ignore that just happened to be complete and total truth were simply the best material for said bombs.

"What?" Sarah Jane asked faintly incredulously.

"Second grade... oh, different system than you, so about age seven, we cut open cow's eyes in health class. They were all blue and shiny on the inside. I think they were... yeah, tapetum lucidum,
that's what it was called. Real pretty stuff, all iridescent for the purpose of night vision," I continued in an artfully blasé tone after taking a moment to swirl my finger around the general shape of my own eye. "About two or three years after that were the pig's lungs, which we did in the cafeteria. Found a bit of food in ours, that wasn't particularly appetizing."

I started counting off on my fingers, more nonsense than any meaningful action. "Didn't do any in middle school, but I heard about some of the others people did. Earthworms, chicken legs, frogs. High school was supposed to be cats, but I skipped that class. Can't abide hurting a cat, even if it's already dead." I looked up, letting my eyes boggle a little before I dropped my voice into as close to the Fourth Doctor's I could get without someone realizing that the noise coming out of my mouth wasn't one it should have been capable of making. "I heard someone found kittens."

Mickey looked ready to have kittens himself, though everyone else settled for different combinations of disgusted and disturbed.

"What kind of school did you go to?" Sarah Jane asked, that incredulity returning with a side of revulsion.

The way I'd phrased it sort of did make it sound like some kind of serial killer training ground, didn't it?

"Rural America, where the sports get all the money, the arts get shafted, and the grade points, the attendance numbers, and the test scores are the only things that matter because that's what judges how much they get paid," I said before flashing a Cheshire grin that might have glowed in the dark. "Nothing particularly special."

"Anyway!" The Doctor interrupted. "While this conversation is very interesting, I would like to remind everyone that we did come here on a mission, which was…"

"Not die."

"No. Yes. More of a guideline, actually," the Time Lord said, shifting on his feet a bit. "Anyway, since Mickey's catlike tread couldn't have gone without notice, we really should leave… after I take a look around Finch's office."

Ducking out into the hallway, Rose and Sarah Jane quickly pulled head of the group as they resumed their passive-aggressive combat.

"I don't mean to be rude or anything, but who exactly are you?" Rose asked.

"Sarah Jane Smith. I used to travel with the Doctor."

I nudged Mickey. "Ten quid says the office is full of nasties."

"No bet," he said before casting a considering look at the bickering women. "Ten quid Rose tries to kill the bird before we leave school grounds."

Somewhere ahead of us, the blonde cut in with, "Oh. Well, he's never mentioned you."

I looked at Sarah Jane, who'd stopped giving Rose the dignity of eye contact. I was more on her side than anything, though how much of that I could grant to her being Sarah Jane or the other option being Rose fucking Tyler was up in the air.

"Oh, I must've done. Sarah Jane. Mention her all the time," the Doctor said weakly, his spiky hair seeming to wilt a little at the sudden spotlight on his silence.
"Hold on. Sorry. Never," Rose said around a vicious grin before she turned a corner.

"Does that count as a murder?"

"Feels like it should."

"What, not even once? He didn't mention me even once?" Sarah Jane asked as she turned around, her eyes darting to the Doctor and the hurt obvious on her face before she followed the blonde around the corner to the Headmaster's office.

"Not unless your name used to be Teagan or Adric."

Mickey sped up a bit, clapping a hand on the Doctor's shoulder. "Now, this may be the point where I would make a comment about 'the Missus and the Ex'," Mickey said, ignoring the annoyed glance the Doctor shot at him. "But I'd like to think I'm above that sort of pettiness. So I'll just settle for welcoming you to every man's worst nightmare."

With that, he giggled.

"And thank you ever so much for that," the Time Lord said as he pried the boy's fingers off his shoulder. "Now go bother with monkey business somewhere else."

Mickey shrugged before going to join Rose, Sarah Jane, and I at the door, where I'd taken over picking the lock.

"You're rather good at that," Sarah Jane noted.

"Practice," I said as the final tumbler shifted into place and the lock clicked open. That and the gentle application of telekinesis on the appropriate mechanisms to speed up the whole process. "And there we go."

We opened the door slowly, peering into the darkened interior of the room.

"Mmm, remember what you said, Rose?" the Doctor asked coolly as he looked up at the ceiling. "About teachers sleeping in the school?"

One of the Krillitane stretched its wings in its sleep, disturbing the calm slumber of its fellow next to it. Though it was hard to call from this angle, each one had to be about six feet tall with a wingspan of… what? Fifteen or eighteen feet? Either way, they were certainly nothing a normal human could take in straight combat.

"I'd say you're about right," he finished as he ushered us out of the room and towards the exit.

I doubted anyone besides me noticed the sound of leather wings following us to Sarah Jane's car.

Chapter End Notes

The updates have been coming a little quick on this one, haven't they? Well, part of that is that I have a bit of backlog on the material (though anything after School Reunion is far from done) and a burning need for people's approval. Call it the result of not getting enough praise for my creative endeavors as a child. Or teenager. Or just in general.
I'm not the biggest Rose fan but I am trying to not... overplay her worst traits, because that just strikes me as lazy writing. Unfortunately, I'd say that neither School Reunion or Age Of Steel/Rise Of The Cybermen were highlights for her character (or Season 2 in general, but again, I have a really low opinion of Rose Tyler at the best of times) but I did cut out her most obnoxious bits from Tooth And Claw, so maybe I'll end up being able to pull that off in other places where the material allows.

There's also the fact that she and the primary POV character really don't like each other – the mental image I get when I think about them interacting is just two Sims doing the red negative signs at every turn —, so that's another aspect that colors the narrative. If Rose was the primary view point character, Delaine would not come across as likable as she is, since most of her humor and thought process is kept internal or shared with characters other than Rose.

Plus they don't have that much common ground between them, considering that Rose is about 19 years old, reactive and impulsive without regard to the consequences of such behavior where Delaine is 16,000+ years old and very aware of the damage her actions can do, physically or otherwise. They might come from similarish backgrounds originally (before Rose started travelling with the Doctor and before Delaine started on the whole jumping thing), but they really display how different their approaches to life are in the way they act, which will get highlighted more as the story continues. Even comparing the Delaines from this story and Shadow Savers (which is roughly 16,000 years back in Dimensions In Time Delaine's backstory and right at the beginning of her Jumpchain) should show a lot of character development between here and there, though I don't doubt that even early Delaine would dislike Rose on a deeply personal level.

I think the primary reason I'm able to cut Rose any slack at all is that she's a teenager and I remember quite strongly how good my decision making process and brain-to-mouth filter were at eighteen and nineteen (spoiler: not very), not to mention I've seen the dumb shit that teenagers will do in the name of 'love' in person.

But just because I understand it doesn't mean I have to like it.

On Wednesdays, we wear pink.

L-space (or Library-space) is a concept from the Discworld books, and is, to quote the l-space website, 'the ultimate portrayal of Pratchett's concept that the written word has powerful magical properties on the Discworld'. Basically, the idea is taking 'Knowledge equals Power' to a logical conclusion covered earlier in this chapter. In short, if you get enough books in one concentrated space, space and time begin to warp.

The Nac Mac Feegle (little blue men) may have also belonged to Terry Pratchett, but anyone asking them about who they belong to will be informed – possibly alongside receiving a good swift kick – that the Nac Mac Feegle have nae king, nae quin, nae laird, nae master, and correspondingly, nae owner and that they will not be deceived on this subject again on pain of many vicious headbutttings.

Regardless of ownership, the Wee Free Men do feature in a number of Mr. Pratchett's books and since the Discworld books are amazing (both in humor and content), I recommend them highly. GNU Terry Pratchett.

Think I mentioned this before, but in a reposted chapter so there's a fair chance that a number of you missed how Delaine's got a version of the Seventh Doctor among her 'alters'. Long story short (the long one will be covered when I get to the Buffy fic in this
series), Halloween happened.

Coccyx – tailbone.

One last question; did anyone actually notice that one comment in the Doctor's final conversation with his selves? The 'I'm sure the young lady was interested in more than just a little petting' bit. I mean, I thought at least one person would have commented on that. Maybe the term 'petting' was too old-school, but the joke wrote itself.

Anyway, feed me [the reviews], Seymour.

Tarantara.
One ruined K-9 Mk. III, a short drive, and an all-night diner later, I wrist deep in a mechanical dog's guts and everyone else knee deep in personal drama. Speaking as the one not mired in that stuff for once in my lives, I had the better deal, even if I was splitting my attention between the task at hand and the Krillitane swooping around outside. There were two now, and I couldn't completely shake the suspicion that the one wearing Giles' face was one of them.

After all, I thought as I took a sidelong glance out of the restaurant front window at the dark shape standing on top of the building across the street, the bastard had a very distinct loom.

"I can't believe you let it get this bad," the Doctor scolded his former companion.

"It's not like getting parts for a Mini Metro," Sarah Jane shot back. "Besides, who was I supposed to show him to? UNIT?"

"Please, they haven't had a decent roboticist since I stopped working there…"

Tuning their conversation out, I turned my attention back to K-9. It was a very nice system, one that exploited a certain amount of internal dimensional transcendence, though I'd seen many more of greater complexity and processing power. Still, the trade-off between that and actual durability was usually worth it.

Actually, there were a lot of similarities between this and Canti's system. Made sense, considering they were both originally medical diagnostic robots upgraded to more general use after the fact. That K-9 had a laser nose where Canti most definitely did not was just splitting hairs.

'Ah, move that connector over to the sixth slot there, though I would recommend wiggling some of that dirt out of there first,' Zeke advised, directing my focus to the areas in question. 'Admittedly, this K-9 was made a little less finicky than the previous models, but every dog has his down days, I suppose.'

'Yeah,' I thought as I pulled out a processor that could have doubled as a dust bunny convention center. 'And I'd say that this puppy's been down for the last decade.'

I blew a considerable amount of dust out the processor I'd pried loose and, almost as an afterthought, put a little extra something inside with that breath. A metaphysical bonus package that I usually reserved for my own robotic projects to give them the seed of a soul. Given, it was a sliver of my own, but it was hardly an inconvenience to a being as metaphysically massive as myself.

Besides, it'd grow back.

"Going well?" the Doctor asked, leaning around the front of K-9 to look at me.

I took one of the toothpicks I'd been working with and started working out the most stubborn bits dust and anonymous gunk. "Well, I'm getting results. How well 'clean' translates into 'actual working robot' is a bit of a crapshoot at the moment, but I've never met a computer that worked best when choking on grunge."

"I take it you're the Doctor's actual assistant then," Sarah Jane said.
Still a touch of anti-Rose sentiment going on there? Well, it wasn't like I could actively disagree with the feeling; the girl had a talent for aggravation. "Mmm, I suppose you could call me that. Bet there's a few things that I know he doesn't."

"Oh, like what?" he asked, a grin teasing at his mouth.

Oh, so many things. Magic. Fields of study and science you couldn't even dream of. What it's like to fly on winds cold enough to freeze a weaker soul. "I'd hate to ruin the surprise," I said as I finished reinstalling the processor and pulled out another piece in need of TLC. "But I can do things with pasta that would make you question the nature of your universe."

"Were you there during that invasion?" Sarah Jane asked. "Last Christmas over London."

Yes. "Nah, though I think Rose was," I said, sweeping out the inside of the part before holding it up to the light. Mmm, some sort of crystal focuser. Part of his laser array? Thankfully there were no obvious cracks or flaws in the matrix, because that would be a bitch to replace at such short notice without access to my warehouse or powers. "He picked me up later."

"Three weeks later for me, about ten or so hours after for her," the Doctor clarified, his grin finally coming out in full force. "The fun of living in a time machine, eh?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "Make sure he drops you off close to where you live when you leave, alright?"

Oh, that's not even close to being possible.

"Hmm? Didn't I?" the Doctor asked, missing my eye roll completely.

"I live in Croydon, Doctor."

"I know that."

"You dropped me off in Aberdeen," Sarah Jane said.

The Doctor's face blanked. "That's close to Croydon, right?"

I rolled my eyes as I twisted the focuser back into position and tested the connection of a couple nearby wires. "Of the two answers that readily come to mind, you either have a difference of about five hundred to five thousand miles."

"Oh." There was a beat before the Doctor turned to Sarah Jane. "I didn't accidentally drop you off across the pond, Sarah?"

"No, it was the Scotland Aberdeen," Sarah Jane said before giggling. "I don't think I could have forgiven you if it had been America."

"Washington isn't that bad," I said, though the protestation didn't have that much heat to it. There were a couple dozen Aberdeens in America alone, but of course I'd think of that one. Fucking Nirvana.

Something sparked between my fingers and I jerked back as K-9's internal mechanisms started whirring and lights suddenly hummed to life. The mechanical dog's head raised slowly, his red 'eye' strip glowing a dull fire red.

"You didn't turn him off before we started working?" I snapped.
The Doctor offered up a sheepish smile. "Best way of knowing we were headed in the right direction."

Of all the fucking careless, stupid – alright, so it wouldn't hurt me as I was right now, but it's not like he knew that. Hell, I'd done the same thing when working on some of my own robotic companions. Still, when dealing with a theoretically fragile work partner, it was usually best to make sure they kept all their fingers and synapses intact.

"M-Maaaassss-ss-ass-as-stter," K-9 whined, voice pitching up and down as his vocalizer tried to get a grip on turning input into output again. I reached in with some telekinesis to twist it a few degrees to the left and the voice took a swerve into a sharp squeak. A minute adjustment to the right and the robot dog was back again, this time without the distortions and stutters.

"Unit K-9 Mrk III back online. Identify users, Sarah Jane and Doctor –" K-9's crisply robotic voice abruptly disintegrated into garbled static but, before I could make any other surreptitious adjustments to his internals, snapped back to normal. "Hello, Master. Miiisssttress number threeee."

Well, almost normal.

Sarah Jane's right eyebrow rose by a couple centimeters. "Number three?"

"Hm. Probably shouldn't have included Mrk I and II memories during the programming stage," the Doctor muttered, tapping the sonic screwdriver against the casing of K-9's head. "Feeling up to a little analysis work, K-9?"

"Yyyyyeennnnnnn – systems damaged, but funct-fuc-functional."

"Your dog said a dirty word," I said as if I hadn't heard – not to mention used – language strong enough to peel paint and, upon certain occasions, actively injure and sometimes outright kill people.

"Forget that; I still can't get over that voice," Mickey wheezed.

"Careful," Sarah Jane said as the Doctor shot the boy a sharp look. "That's my dog you're talking about there."

"Anyway," the Time Lord said, pointing at Rose. "The oil."

The blonde fished a small jar out of her pocket, viscous yellow oil sloppily sliding around inside as it tried to decide if it wanted to obey the law of gravity or not. "Careful with that," the blonde warned. "One of the dinner ladies got all scorcherd from that stuff."

"Rose, I'm not a dinner lady, I'm a Time Lord. And don't assume that's a common sentence for me," the Doctor said as he unscrewed the jar, stuck his thumb into the oil and swiped it across the little suction cup embedded in K-9's face. "Here we go, K-9. Now what's our mystery substance?"

"Oi-oil ex-extract. Annalyyyyyyzing…" the robotic dog clicked and whirred for a few seconds, his internal diodes lighting up and dimming as they processed the information provided. "Substance appears to be… Krill-i-tane oil."

The Doctor stared for a moment before reaching up to drag a hand down his face. "Ah. Krillitanes. Great."

"Sorry to be the one askin' stupid questions, but what's a Krillitane?" Mickey asked. "And where does it fit on a scale of 'bad' to 'awful'?"
"Oh, somewhere in between 'absolutely no good at all' and 'suitcase dirty bomb full of badness just waiting to explode and render the city uninhabitable'," the Doctor answered before finally pulling his hand away from his face. "They're… a composite race. Sort of like how humans adopt certain cultural aspects from each other, except Krillitanes do it with their genetics and not in the 'melting pot' way that you lot do it."

"No," he continued, an icy dislike that might have been mistaken for a glacier creeping into his tone. "They like to cherry pick the traits they like best – be they genetic, cultural, or technological – and then, once they've got everything they want and have distributed it throughout their species, they destroy everything that's left so completely it was like no one was ever there to begin with." He shook his head as if to dispel some image that had traced itself into the Etch-A-Sketch of his mind's eye. "Probably been ten generations or more since I ran into any of their lot. Enough time for them to stop being long-necked humanoids and start being bat people."

"So what are they doing here?" Rose asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked, taking care not to look up at the winged figures looking down at us from the building across the street. "They want something. And they're using the children to get it."

"So what's with the tin dog?" Mickey asked as he helped pack the thing back into the boot of Sarah Jane's car. It was odd thinking of this lady, who was halfway between school librarian and being legitimately cool, as being like Rose but something about her must have struck the Doctor and if Mickey turned his head and squinted a bit, he could just about catch a glimpse of it himself.

"Oh," Sarah Jane replied with a soft smile. "The Doctor likes to travel with an entourage. Sometimes they're human, sometimes they're alien…" she gave K-9 a pat before shutting the boot. "And sometimes they're tin dogs. So!" She turned around, flashing him a smile. "Where do you fit in, Mickey Smith?"

"Me?" he scoffed. "I'm their man in Havana! I'm their technical support! I'm… oh my god, I'm the tin dog."

Sarah Jane gave a small giggle before giving him a gentle pat on the shoulder. "So tell me about your friends. Rose and Delaine."

"Uh…" This was entering potentially dangerous territory. Mickey shot a glance over to Delaine, who was watching the sky from across the street. "Er, I only met Delaine a bit earlier than you, so I can't tell you much beyond 'American' and 'weird' which you probably figured out yourself by now, but Rose… well, we used to go together. On and off, whenever she needed some stability after another bloke didn't work out –"

"Ah."

"She's a nice girl," Mickey threw out there quickly. "But she just tends to do what she wants without really thinking about consequences. Impulse shopping, weekend parties, that sort of thing. Went off with the Doctor the first time and didn't come back for a year. No calls, no letters. Her mum thought I'd murdered her, til Rose came knocking on the door, Doctor in tow."

Not one of Rose's better moments, but talking her down when she couldn't defend herself hardly set right with Mickey.

Where the conversation might have gone after that was cut off by the sudden appearance of the Doctor and Rose, apparently arguing. Well, at least Rose was arguing. The Time Lord seemed to be
ignoring every question the blonde was throwing at her.

"How many were there before me?" was the merely the latest.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes it does, if I'm just the latest in a long line," Rose snapped. "Is that why you picked her up? Is she my replacement? Is that the Time Lord way of doing things? Get yourself a new model every few years and forget about the old one? Is that why you don't ever talk about Sarah Jane?"

Oh god, Mickey thought as his ex-girlfriend's voice kept rising, this was worse than EastEnders. He was almost surprised that he didn't hear some soulful and lonely piano solo at work in the background, because this was a scene straight out of a daytime drama.

"Rose –"

Wherever their conversation could have gone after that was interrupted by an inhuman screech and the falling figure of a very, very large bat. There was a deep swoosh as the Krillitane flew over them, claws grasping just inches above their heads as it screamed at them. Then, just as quickly as it had come, it was gone again, leaving nothing behind but a fading scream and a speck of a silhouette against the moon.

"Was that a Krillitane? It didn't even come close to her –"

It had been close enough to him, Mickey thought as he tried to get his heart skipping at a natural beat again.

"They were watching us the whole time," Delaine said, staring so hard at the moon that Mickey would have sworn her eyes were shining silver. "And I'll bet that little stunt was them giving us notice of that fact."

"Well, that just moves up the plan, doesn't it?" the Doctor replied, hands shoved deep into his pockets before turning back to Sarah Jane's car. "Come on."

Walking into Deffery Vale with my limiter on was probably one of my dumber decisions this week, because if everything went to shit, it would take time to remove the damn thing. A few seconds at the most, but to someone who could travel faster than most eyes could follow and had twitch reflexes that could break the sound barrier without significant effort, those seconds counted as small eternities in which anything could happen.

Maybe I should have left the thing off. Or maybe I should have questioned why, in the process of dividing everyone into teams, the Doctor chose me to follow him to his confrontation with the monster wearing the Giles mask. Maybe he thought I was good to bounce ideas off of, maybe I was good at floating theories. Maybe he wanted to keep an eye on me.

But that was a thought that came up in retrospect, not in the cold-heat of the moment.

"So what do you think his end game is?" the Doctor asked me as we walked through the school, casting glances at any suspicious figure.

"Well, using the data we have… despite their adaptability, the Krillitane have need of the children. The children spend most of their time in school on computers and have knowledge that shouldn't be
possible on Earth in this era. Something big that needs to be kept under cover, because they'd otherwise be better served to use their regular strategy," I said, watching the children rush pass us like waters around rocks, ignorant of the shit that was about to go down within the next half hour. "So they need an answer to a problem that, somehow, only these children can solve. A big one that benefits them in some way, that's bigger than faster than light travel or teleportation, and not just because it represents something, but because it gives them power of some description. You're the brilliant Time Lord; what sort of question needs this sort of set-up and brainpower to answer?"

He looked away. "Oh, there's a short list, believe me."

"This... Finch, or whatever his name is, is looking for intelligence," I warned him. "You've made no secret of yours. What are you willing to bet he'll offer to get you on his side?"

"No price that I'll take, and, believe me," the Doctor said. "In nine hundred years, I've heard quite a few and refused them all."

But it only would take one 'yes' to ruin that track record and you, Doctor Number Ten, have a certain weak-spot that gets announced every other time you make a dramatic speech. Or was 'Last Of The Time Lords' suddenly a mark of pride?

We stepped into the swimming pool room, the lazy splash of barely disturbed water and the scent of chlorine our only company beside the Krillitane across the room, standing in the corner like a lurking nightmare. The effect was diminished by the daylight pouring through the windows and the sharp contrast of peeling robin's egg blue paint against the severe black of his suit, but a threat was a threat, especially if it was wearing a familiar face.

"So who are you?" the Doctor asked, tucking his hands into his pockets as he surveyed the other alien. There was a cold steel in his posture now, something that even put me on edge, though it wasn't directed at me. Any affability that was part of his demeanor before was long gone, replaced with cold ice that threatened an unpleasant and unavoidable death if underestimated. "Because I'm assuming that 'Finch' isn't a traditional Krillitane name."

"Ah, very astute of you," the Krillitane purred. "Yes, I am Brother Lassa. And you?"

This was clearly directed at the Doctor. The human at his heels was hardly with this level of attention.

"The Doctor. Since when do Krillitanes have wings?"

Lassa tilted his head to the side. Analyzing. "It's been part of our form for ten generations. Our ancestors invaded Bessan. The locals had some rather lovely wings." A small dreamy smile played around his mouth for a moment before he continued, "They made a million widows that day. Just imagine."

The Doctor's frown deepened. Good, the anecdote wasn't nearly as amusing as Lassa seemed to think it was. "And now you're shaped human."

"A personal favorite, nothing more." His body language was minutely contrite and retiring, but it was just as fake as the rest of his image; a learned and deliberate affectation at best.

Some flash of absolute hatred must have flashed across my face, because suddenly I was the focus of the Krillitane's appraising gaze.

He smiled unpleasantly. "Oh, you're familiar with this face? I rather like it; I happened to see it when I first arrived here on this planet, you see, and I just had to have it."
My fists tightened, something cracked, and – after remembering that I'd left my limiter on and the
sensation I was processing was pain – I realized it had been the sound of one of my fingers breaking.
Nothing immediately problematic, but still a pain that could become worse if left as was. I'd slip off
the limiter later to fix that.

And possibly kill the son of a bitch in the same instant if my self-control just happened to slip.

"Such fascinating creatures, humans," Lassa said, still watching me. "Passionate, imaginative
creatures. I suppose you're imagining all the ways you could kill me right now."

Right on point, batty.

"Stop that," the Doctor commanded. "What about the others? Did they –"

"No. They weren't so willing to give up their wings. What you see there is mere morphic illusion.
Scratch the surface and the true Krillitane is revealed." Lassa took a few steps alongside the edge of
the pool. "And what of the Time Lords? I've always thought of you as such a pompous race.
Ancient, dusty senators, willing to sit on laurels millennia old, so frightened of change and… chaos.
And, now, extinct. All gone. Except for you. The last. Surrounding yourself with such meagre
creatures to forget."

The Doctor's flinch was almost imperceptible.

There it was. The weak spot. The spot that Lass was now absolutely certain he could use, because of
that 'almost'.

"This plan of yours. What is it?" he asked.

Lassa's head tilted again. "You don't know," the Krillitane realized.

"That's why I'm asking."

"Work it out," the alien said, beginning his prowling walk again, closing the space between us with
every sliding step. "Show me how clever you are, Doctor."

"If I don't like it, it will stop," the Doctor promised, looking down his nose at the Krillitane.

"Fascinating," Lassa breathed, as if looking at some puzzle rather than a person. To a manipulator
without empathy or emotion for other creatures, they were usually the same thing. "Your people
were peaceful to the point of indolence, but you seem to be something different." His head tilted to
the side. "Would you declare war on us, Doctor?"

Lassa was changing the narrative of the Time War, painting the Time Lords as sheep when they
were anything but. It was an image that would appeal to the Doctor, particularly this incarnation. The
man who 'does something', who loves to play the part of high and mighty pacifist until he decides he
very much isn't. And in the other direction was the word 'war', the one thing the Doctor wanted to be
as far removed from as possible.

The Doctor stopped in the doorframe, turning to glare at the Krillitane, who merely smiled as he
walked up to us.

"I used to be so full of mercy," the Doctor said quietly. "But I'm old now. And that was your one
warning."

"But we're not even enemies, Doctor," Lassa purred. "Soon you will embrace us."
The Doctor turned on his heel, coat flaring out behind him as he walked towards the door. I followed, ignoring the pain in my hand. It was transient sensation.

"The next time we meet, you will join us. I promise you this," the Krillitane called after us.

*That* one was a transient sensation as well.

The Doctor didn't particularly like mysteries like Brother Lassa. Oh, there was a bit of fun in a good puzzle, but cryptic conversations with cannibalistic aliens from a culture built around conquest and killing hardly counted as that.

Still the possibilities teased at his curiosity.

"You know he's trying to manipulate you, right?" Delaine asked with raw emotion laced throughout an otherwise controlled tone.

The Doctor supposed he could understand that, since Lassa had confessed to – no, not a confession, a confession implied regret – *bragged* about taking his Earthly appearance from someone she'd known. A relative? A friend? Something else? Whatever the man might have been, he was dead now. Killed off and replaced by an alien of less than benevolent motives.

Now, if he could only figure out what those motives *were*.

"Why do you say that?"

"Show me how *clever* you are. Fascinating. You seem to be something *new,*" she spat, in a near perfect mimicry of Lassa's voice, though laced with more acidity than the Krillitane had ever seasoned his words with. That was a remarkable talent, though some of her imitations were infinitely murkier in their point of origin. She dropped the imitation but not the disgust as she fiddled with her leather wrist strap. "The general implication that you are a superior creature compared to the others of your race. Now *that's* a compliment in good taste."

"Well, who's to say I'm not?" How many Time Lords stole a TARDIS? How many times had he saved the universe from destruction?

Delaine's eyes went hard at that. "That wasn't my point," she ground out. "He's appealing to your pride and playing on your history. He knows you're angled to stop him, but he didn't take the chance to kill us. No, instead, he tries to get you on his side. So he thinks that whatever he's offering is bait good enough for a Time Lord to swallow whole."

"Suspicious one, aren't you?" the Doctor said with false levity as they made their way to the computer lab where Rose and Sarah Jane were supposed to be, though he couldn't exactly argue her points. Lassa's bait was easy to see, but it did tease at the imagination and that was tempting in its own way.

"I'm accustomed to manipulators and people who think that life is a long game."

Oh. There was a *story* there. One for later, if he could draw it out of her, but the Doctor had a feeling it was an interesting one.

The key word here being "If", his Seventh noted as the current model shook off the sensation of an umbrella handle pressed against the bottom of his mouth in thought.

"So what would you suggest I do about it?" he asked.
The annoyed look directed at him again. "How about 'don't'?" Delaine offered. "Ignore the bait. And don't get distracted by whatever bombs, truth or otherwise, he throws down. He's a murderer and manipulator; lies aren't that far beneath him. He wants your mind, we just need to figure out why."

The Doctor considered it. "The Krillitane are an adaptable species, one with a mind for conquest, but they aren't here for that. There isn't much they can get out of the human race, actually, but they're here, using the children to calculate... something. But what is it?" he asked, more to himself than his companion. And then an idea dawned. "You said something about 42 once?"

"The Answer to Life, The Universe, and Everything. Honestly though, this situation seems a bit less 42 and a bit more Anti-Life Equation."

He stopped dead in his tracks. "What?"


As he continued staring at her, she sighed.

"You've never even seen the Justice League cartoon, have you?"

"No, because I've got much better things to do on my Saturdays. Like saving the world and such," the Doctor said as he pushed open the door to the computer lab he'd sent his other companions to... only for Sarah Jane and Rose to start laughing at the sight of him.

'This is fun,' one of his past selves said, right as the Doctor decided that introducing his hand to his face was the most reasonable reaction to this course of events. Oh for the days when companions had respect for him...

Of course, this would be the time that the klaxon went off before the PA system announced that all students needed to be in their classes and all members of the staff were required in the teacher's lounge.

"And here's the part where nothing is fun anymore and people start dying," Delaine muttered.

The Doctor couldn't bring himself to disagree.

The code flashing across the computer screens was alien. Oh, there were a handful of familiar characters but those were being added by human hands in patterns inconsistent with both language and any coding process yet invented on Earth.

It was also sloppy, a keys mash of barely directed stream of consciousness with no clear end goal in mind. Whatever the Skasis Paradigm really was, Lassa and his brethren were taking the 'give infinite monkeys typewriters and someday get Shakespeare' approach to it.

Still there was enough there to make the Doctor draw a quiet breath. "No. No, that can't be."

"What is it?"

"Skasis Paradigm," the Time Lord explained, eyes never leaving the ever-changing pattern of alien and human symbols across the computer screens. "It's a... reality breaker. Universal theory. Forbidden in forty-seven systems, not that it stops people from trying. After all, what's 'law' when you can control the building blocks of the universe?"
He shook his head. "That's why they're here. The Krillitane don't have the psychic potential to create the collective unconsciousness required on their own, so they're hijacking humanity's. Earth's backwater enough to fall outside of surveillance for this kind of activity, nobody local is advanced enough to stop them, the children have that spark of creativity that'll make it work… little bit of push from the oil and, presto, they've got a chain of wetware computers working to give them –"

"42," I supplied.

"That's about the sum of it," the Doctor agreed, still staring at the screen. "Computed through mind, body, and soul."

"So you solved the riddle," Lassa purred as he slid into the room. "Now let the real lesson begin." Everyone stepped back, but the alien merely continued speaking, his entire attention on the Doctor as he narrowed the gap between them. "Think of it, Doctor. With the Paradigm solved, reality becomes clay in our hands. We can shape the universe and improve it."

"Oh yeah. All of creation given the face of Mister Finch, sounds like a real fun place," the Doctor muttered. "Call me old-fashioned, but I prefer the universe the way it is."

Lassa twisted his head to the side again. "You act like such a radical, but all you do is preserve the old order. Think of all the changes this power could do for good."

"What, by someone like you?" the Doctor asked.


And there was the bait. Subtle as a sparkly pink brick to the face and as shallow and meaningless as cheap gilt coming from that lying mouth. Still, the Time Lord's posture shifted from 'on guard' to 'interested'.

Appeal to grief, appeal to pride, appeal to power, appeal to nostalgia. The Doctor seemed to be falling for every single cheap play Lassa was placing on the table and, honestly, I couldn't blame him. There were a lot of things I might have changed in my own history if I'd had the chance.

But selling out reality and free will for a shallow 'fix-it' wasn't acceptable.

"Doctor, don't listen to him!"

Lassa turned his gaze on Sarah Jane. "And you. You could be with him through all eternity, Miss Smith. Fresh, young, never fading, untouched by death and disease."

The Krillitane flashed the Doctor a shallow smile. "Human beings are so fleeting and fragile. So little time. So many goodbyes. How lonely you must be, Doctor," he said softly. "Join us, Doctor."

"I could save everyone," the Doctor murmured, the noise barely audible yet unmistakable in the silence.

Dammit.

"Yes."

"I could stop the war," he continued, eyes sharpening with dark resolve.
"In the name of peace and sanity."

It was a poor imitation of John Hurt's voice, but the weariness was easy to imitate. After all, who would know it better than someone who had their own taste of hopeless battles? In the end, it was the sound of a tired man, still trudging forward with many miles to go before he could sleep. Harmless enough, so long as you didn't know the baggage.

The Doctor did and it was obvious from the way his posture stiffened that those seven little words chilled him to the bone.

Good. That made him stop. Now I just had to make him turn around and walk away from that ledge.

"Death is a part of life, the final change to bring forth new life. A world without death doesn't truly live, because nothing changes. Without age and sorrow, there is no joy or learning. Without loss, what is love? The world turns, the sun burns, planets come and go, stars fade, and everything has its time and everything ends."

The Doctor turned and I caught a glimpse of his face before he grabbed a chair and slammed it into computers next to Lassa. That little speech would have consequences, but it had been the only move I could make.

Hopefully I would survive the experience.

We ran through the school, skipping over the sea of broken glass and twisted metal where Mickey had plowed Sarah Jane's car through the school doors as the sound of animalistic shrieks tore through the building and the Krillitane began to swarm. We just barely had time to pull K-9 free of the wreckage before we had to run again.

Reaching a far science lab, we barricaded the door as heavy bodies slammed into it.

"That's not going to hold them for long," the Doctor said, informing us of the obvious as a long nail punched through the glass window. "Need a plan... need a plan..."

"What's going on?" a kid that had somehow followed us asked.

"Big nasty bats."

"Oil!" the Doctor shouted, making everyone jump. "Rose, you said that one of them started melting when it got exposed to the oil, right? They must have altered their physiology enough that their own oil is toxic to them. We can use that."

"Kitchens aren't far off," Rose noted. "They got barrels of the stuff in there."

"Oh, then the plan works then," the Doctor said, almost sounding surprised. "Now, for the problem of getting from here to there without messy unpleasant death..."

The kid punched the fire alarm and the sound of Krillitane screaming in pain quickly followed it. The Doctor blinked. "...suppose that works," he muttered before everyone started running again.

Like Rose said, the kitchens weren't far. Unfortunately for the Doctor's plan, the Krillitane weren't complete idiots.

"They've got deadlock seals on these barrels," the Time Lord hissed as the sonic screwdriver failed to release the lids. "You know, I'm really starting to dislike this Lassa."
K-9 trundled into the room, nose gun out and apparently armed. "The vats would not withstand a direct hit from my laser," the machine informed us. "But my batteries are failing."

They wouldn't be if I'd had more time and resources at my disposal during the repair process.

"Right. Alright, everybody out! And you," the Doctor added, staring directly at me. "Don't wander off."

Ah.

I followed Sarah Jane and Rose out the back doors, making sure they wouldn't linger too close to the building. How big the ensuing explosion would be was somewhat up in the air, but regardless of if K-9's batteries were failing or not, they wouldn't make it a small one.

The Doctor appeared not too long after, pausing only to lock the door behind him.

"Where's K-9?" Sarah Jane asked.

"We have to run."

"What have you done to my –"

Sarah Jane was cut off by the explosion. Doors and windows shattered outwards from the force and flames were visible from within what once was the kitchen. Probably a grease fire, with all the fried food they'd liked to push at this school.

Children were screaming, though how much was glee at the destruction of an institution or how much was fear at the realization that 'we could have died and there might be people dead in there right now' was up in the air. Whatever the case, our work here was effectively done.

Skasis averted.

Now for my next problem; the Doctor.

Chapter End Notes

And now things are going to slow down for a bit because I've got to catch up on plotting and planning (on this fic and Shadow Savers). Hopefully. I'm kind of a slut for feedback and I've really been enjoying all the reviews lately.

A lot won't be changing in the immediate future (there's only the rest of School Reunion, The Girl In The Fireplace, and Age Of Steel / Rise Of The Cybermen) but hopefully I've set up some good threads to work into other stuff as the story gets to going off the established rails, something that I'm still working on in my fanfiction writing.

I think it's important to explain a lot of the references because; 1) a lot of Doctor Who information counts as arcane knowledge because getting access to past episodes, novels, comics, and audios depends on connections (either to dubiously legal torrents or friends willing to share), money (if you like legality), and free time (to actually enjoy the things regardless of the means they were acquired by) and 2) I've had too many experiences with mentioning something that seems obvious to me and then having the person I'm
talking to immediately go 'what? What's that?' or make a mental connection to some very different unrelated thing. So footnotes like this make everyone's life a lot easier and from there you can usually find a wiki to explain things that I cut out for space.

Canti is a robot from FLCL. If you haven't seen or heard of FLCL, it's a six episode anime by Studio Gainax that's like Neon Genesis Evangelion except lots less sad and lots more crack. By which I mean it's just lunatic action matched with a story, great animation, a kicking soundtrack, and a whole lot of nonsense. The Dub is awesome and there's supposed to be a Season 2 getting released sometime this or next year.

Mistresses Number 1 and 2 would be Leela (already explained in a previous author's notes) and Romana, a Time Lady who travelled with the Fourth Doctor for two of her incarnations after Leela left with K-9 Mrk 1. Mrk 2 ended up in another universe or something with Romana, though she left him behind when she decided to return to Gallifrey.

Fun fact! This fic was named after a Doctor Who/EastEnders' crossover that almost happened in '93 and definitely doesn't actually exist called Dimensions In Time. Seriously, don't look for it. It's bad. Or it would be if it was real. But it isn't so everything is fine.

To those interested, planning for the Buffy story is in the early stages (as in there are a number of broad stroke planning for certain chapters and character arcs, but nothing actually written yet), but I have access to all the televised episodes and the wiki so hopefully everything there goes well… though I have a very strong feeling I'll be taking a very different approach to some characters and stories than canon, because Whedon's leaked Wonder Woman script recently made my soul break out in hives.

But what the hell, that's the point of fanfiction, isn't it.

The Anti-Life Equation, to those of you not into superhero comics, is basically a hard override on the free will of any sentient being exposed to it. There are a couple interpretations as to what it actually is, but the sum of it is that it presents the person in control of it of being the only thing that matters in the universe and thus reduces the victim to only existing for that person. Naturally, a despot overlord like Darkseid is very interested in that sort of power, so locating it is his big thing.

The idea of a 'collective unconsciousness' was hijacked from other parts of Doctor Who (cough – Ten's Tinkerbell moment) and the Persona series, which hijacked it from Carl Jung.

Forgot to mention this last chapter, but the exchange between Mickey and the Doctor on the subject of rats referenced the Fourth Doctor story, the Talons of Weng-Chiang, which besides giant rats being shot with elephant guns also features the Victorian Era, the inimitable Jago and Litefoot, and racism (not only as a subject of the story, but also within questionable dialogue choices and the fact that someone decided that putting a white actor in yellowface was easier than hiring an Asian actor). Apart from that last bit and the questionable believability of the giant rat, it's a decent story.

Also, every single thing mentioned in Delaine's dissection speech really happened to me (including not taking high school biology class because of the cat dissection and one of my asshole friends informing me about the kittens. I was very unhappy). I can't abide hurting a cat and I still cry over my first indoor car (she died and my asshole dad threw her in the manure spreader without telling me until about three months later). I don't
know what the kids who dissected earthworms actually got out of the experience.

Anyway, thanks for reading and feel free to leave a comment or review on your way out.
Sitting in the console room of the TARDIS, I was half-tempted to rip off my limiter and run.

There were a few holes in this plan of course. First was that we were currently in the Vortex and while I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out I could survive it – when your metaphysical makeup contained everything from 'negative energy ghost monster' and 'ammonia-based kaiju' on to 'abstract personification of the concept of harmony' and 'draconic spawn of a time god' there were maybe three environments in any given universe that posed a hard 'no' to your existence –, I didn't much feel like making the gamble.

The second was that tempting a Time Lord into giving chase was probably tantamount to suicide, particularly this model of the Doctor.

The First and Second would have probably left me alone, being too young and relatively new to the wider universe to risk antagonizing a bigger fish content to leave them alone. The Third wouldn't have had a choice in the matter, not with his broken TARDIS.

The Fourth would have made a face, but not much else if I'd failed to make good on my obvious threat. Five… well, he'd end up debating himself for so long that I could leave without him immediately noticing, if someone else didn't capture him first.

Six wasn't territory I was willing to touch. Neither was War, though for entirely different reasons.

Seven… now Seven could have presented a similar screaming threat like Ten, possessing the same focus and drive when sufficiently pushed, except there would have been a lot less question about where I stood. I was an unknown who wouldn't be controlled and knew too much about him, so obviously I'd been an enemy and – if he ever learned about Zeke – an 'evil' counterpart of some description.

Eight, while fairly sharp like all the other Doctors, would have probably forgotten all about me by the next crisis that crossed his doorstep, though if that would be on account of amnesia or having more pressing concerns was entirely up in the air. Nine would give me a warning, possibly two, and then probably done the same thing as Ten but – another piece of supposition – with a significantly more open mind. Possibly handcuffs as well.

Eleven… well, that was territory I wasn't willing to touch. He was softer and harder in different ways, somewhere between the territories of Two, Seven, and Eight while managing his own thing. Fun, but not someone who you trusted unconditionally unless you had a fairly good idea that he liked you.

But those were all hypotheticals. What I had was the Tenth Doctor, Last of the Time Lords, the Oncoming Storm, and – with the right pressure in the wrong places – self-proclaimed Time Lord Victorious. A man who could and would drop me into a black hole with all the effort it took a normal person to drive to the supermarket and had no issue dividing his universe into shades of black and white applied to people and entire species with a thick brush, repainting them as he saw fit.

…maybe that was a bit unfair, but I wasn't overly inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. I was older than him, sure, but that didn't mean I was perfect.
I'd seen too many who'd held a fraction of my power fall into that trap of thinking they couldn't be scratched and could do no wrong… or that no one else could be better with the power they'd been given. I learned from their mistakes, but that still didn't keep me from making my own, even when I walked into them with my eyes wide open.

My mistake this time was probably not running when I had the chance, back on that London rooftop. Would the Doctor have followed? Would the same conflict have arisen at another time and place? It wasn't worth thinking about, since that timeline was long since closed to me, but something told me it wouldn't have worked.

I opened my eyes. I was still in the console room, still the epicenter of the latest awkward silence, and still caught in the Doctor's proverbial crosshairs. It was unpleasantly similar to the gauging look I'd gotten from one of his less friendly lookalikes.

…with my mind automatically going to that comparison every time I interacted with him, it was no real mystery as to why I couldn't relax around the Time Lord for long.

"Well," the Doctor said, breaking the silence with a quick drum of his fingers against the rim of the console. "While this wonderful period of absolute nothing has been fun, I've got a robot dog to reassemble and three assistants to speed up the process. C'mon."

Mickey perked up immediately. "K-9?"

Such a kid. It was easy to forget how young people were sometimes.

"What, you know another one?" the Doctor called over his shoulder as he motioned for all of us to follow. "Anyway, robot dog requites robot room which requires you walk this way."

"Can't, your legs are too long."

"Ha," the Doctor said humorlessly as we started walking.

The TARDIS had shifted her hallway pattern again, along with the location of my room. There was a faintly apologetic tinkle at the back of my mind, halfway between the tinkling of fairy-speech and the feeling of dust motes hanging in a beam of morning sunlight.

So the Doctor had deeper plans than an ordinary 'talk'. Hah. Nothing I hadn't expected.

Would he wait until after I helped him with K-9 or stuff me somewhere before? If he wanted anyone who knew what they were doing with the robot – ah. There was the trap.

I'd already established a certain level of skill and though the Doctor hadn't really had a chance to really watch me at work, he still probably had an idea of what I was capable of. So, if I deliberately underperformed, he would notice and call me out on it. If I did everything as I did before, he'd be able to see that my skill was way beyond what any human of my presumed origin was capable of and call me out on that.

Morton's Fork in action, people.

So I might as well make the best goddamn robot dog I can under the circumstances.

As the Doctor finally brought our little parade to a stop in front of a rather non-descript door, I mentally prepared myself for the inevitable mess on the other side.

Despite that, I still was not ready for it.
The Doctor's robot room reminded me of the third bedroom I'd ever remembered having in my first life.

The first had been a single snapshot of a normal – if slightly impoverished – kid's room in one of those trailer park-ish homes assembled in halves brought in by semi-truck delivery. White walls and a little white bed with a toy box at the end and a little TV for watching holiday novelty tapes, everything all neat and orderly.

The second had started out pretty much the same, except perched on the second story of a house that was only two-thirds livable and one-third active health hazard. There was no TV and no toy box there, only a closet with a weird smell and a door with no handle. The various biological stains on the walls and carpet would come later.

The third bedroom, only eight feet down the hall from the second in the same barely-fit-for-human-inhabitation house, had been – in short and in accurate reflection of my mental state at the time – a fucking mess.

Scale the ten years I'd taken to fuck up that eight-by-twelve cube of misery by about a hundred and then convert the contents from drawings, old homework, third generation hand-me downs, and clearance rack teenage bric-a-brac into seas of crap of the electronic, mechanical, and roughly robotical persuasions – added in with the odd broken down appliance, of course – and removed of any markers of a specific era, you'd roughly have what we walked into. Fuck, I'd swear I saw a washer/dryer set under one of the smaller piles, wires bursting out of one of the doors like spilled intestines.

"It's a bit messier than I remember it being," the Doctor said mildly as he stepped over long braid of wire that snaked around at least two major piles of trash. "But there shouldn't be anything dangerous."

"We're supposed to find one robot dog kit in this?" Mickey asked, voicing my own thought with two less expletives and a lot less yelling than I would have used.

At least I kept my fucking warehouse most of the way organized, though automated systems certainly served to make the task that much less of a bitch. This was… this was the trash of the titans.

"Well, no," the Doctor replied. "There should be three or four. Easier to buy in bulk and then make extra boxes with whatever upgrades I come up with later."

That was almost reasonable, but any points I could have awarded for that thought process were a drop in the ocean of 'what the fuck is wrong with you' this disaster of a storage room had dumped on me like some twisted cousin of the ice bucket challenge.

Calm down, I told myself as we moved into the clutter from hell, stepping carefully over debris as I did so. Relax. Treat it like a treasure hunt. A weird game of Dig Dug through a junk yard… that's inside of someone's fucking house, oh my god.

"Doctor," Rose said with a strain I was feeling at a cellular level. "When was the last time you were in this room?"

The Doctor opened his mouth, closed it, and then opened it again after an uncomfortably long moment. "Uh… a couple centuries?" he supplied uncertainly before adding, "Maybe… more?"

Okay, fuck faking normal, I was taking off my limiter just so I could grab Zeke by his imaginary lapels and scream at him for being complicit in – or at the very least complacent to – this bullshit.
Before I could do that, I tripped over something that definitely wasn't metal or plastic and took a dive through a pile of tubing and onto yet another thing that wasn't metal or plastic, but a fairly close approximation to a flesh-and-bone body.

"Delaine! You alright?"

The 'body' wasn't moving or possessed of a pulse, but it was clearly not a corpse. Too stiff and unyielding at the joints while still relatively supple in the flesh. Also, no smell. Not even the little biologic smells humans took for granted. Taking that into equation with the presence of knit scarf and tweed...

Hello, evidence of the Android Invasion.

"Tripped on his scarf," I said as I pulled myself and the android duplicate free of the plastic. Its arm was held out stiffly to the side, almost as if it was resting on the shoulder of an invisible friend. "Handsome fellow, isn't he?"

The Fourth Doctor's android grinned.

The actual Doctor made a bitch face.

Rose on the other hand, just looked curious. "Is that a…"

"Robot," the Doctor said. "Well, android."

"What's the difference?"

Hairsplitting, aesthetic design, and the occasional definition that says that golems and Frankenstein's monster technically qualify as the latter while definitely not being the former.

"Androids are made to look organic, at least from the outside," the Time Lord said, coming forward to peer up at the form of his former self. "This one was made to look like me."

Mickey and Rose both did a minor double take. "Uh…"

"Sarah Jane's model. Well, the second one. First one she had was a bit more…" His hand twisted around in the air as he searched for the appropriate word to sum up his Third self. "Dandyish."

"Alright, I get that," Mickey replied. "What I don't get is why you have an android of yourself."

"Weelll… long story short, someone decided to build an android of me for some nefarious purpose or another and after that plot fell through, I decided to keep him. Sarah would probably recognize him. I used to dress him up and pose him artfully to take weird photos and annoy people, but eventually I got bored with it and threw him in here. It's been… five or six centuries? Maybe more?"

Wax Tom Baker lives… or, rather, doesn't. I started poking at the android's face, moving the expression around into different ridiculous positions. "I can see the appeal. Does this thing do tongue?"

"What?"

"I mean can you pose the tongue?"

"…Why?"

Ignoring the Doctor's question, I opened the android's mouth – no different than manipulating a
human's jaw, really, though the resistance of the material gave away its age and disuse – and pulled out the tongue. "Feels like a dehydrated slug," I noted as I closed the jaw into a smile around it. Have to fix that, and replace the skin with something a little less – stop it, it's not my android to tinker with. At least it was in good condition considering however many centuries it had been back here. I pushed around a few other features before finally deciding that the image in front of me was perfect.

"There we go."

The Fourth Doctor's distinctive face was now locked into a goofy – if mildly threatening by its design alone – grin, tongue stuck out between his teeth and eyes boggling out of their sockets. All he needed now were some jelly babies and a jauntily positioned Indiana Jones hat.

Mickey immediately lost his shit and I allowed myself a small giggle. It was funny and the way the actual Doctor looked fit to swallow his own tongue was funny too.

It almost made one forget the threat of being trapped in the event horizon of a black hole for all of eternity.

"Hey," Rose called from not too far away. "I found something."

There were a lot of 'somethings' in this room. There were a lot of those 'somethings' that would be better classified as 'nothings'. There were also some that could be classified as 'wow'.

"It's a robot cat," she said, holding the limp-legged mechanoid out for everyone to see.

What Rose Tyler had found was one of the 'wows'.

While the Doctor's android duplicate had the superficial appearance of a living being and K-9's main concession to the theme established by his name was his head, end, and collar, this robot had found a middle ground of being unmistakably catlike in design while being most definitely not an organic being.

Underneath the dust and scruff marks, it was a pearly white, each plate of its body smoothly worked into the rest like clockwork. Its head, while shaped very much like a cat, did not have a cat's usual eyes. Instead, the space that would have been taken up by the eyes, forehead, and brain on a flesh-and-blood cat was a clear dome covering a motley selection of dead diodes and silent sensors.

While it clearly hadn't been discarded as long ago as the Fourth Doctor's android double, it was also clear that the electric cat wasn't in here due to catastrophic structural damage.

You know what? I'm going to steal that cat. I don't even care if it's the Doctor's, this level of neglect will not stand. This –

"Ah, I see you've found Splinx. Used to travel with her… well, it didn't last long, seeing as she didn't have much of a personality."

– this Splinx will be repaired, improved, and polished to a high shine and equipped with a mini-taser to remind certain assholes that basic maintenance is not optional.

"You can put it down, Delaine."

I stopped petting the robot cat for only a second. "No?"

"Yes," the Doctor ordered.
I very slowly and very carefully placed Splinx on the android Four's lap, arranging its – her? – legs underneath her in classic catloaf-style. Once I'd rearranged the android's hands over the cat, I turned back around and gave the Doctor a look that muttered, 'Are you happy now?'

The Doctor didn't respond, instead going back to searching for K-9.

Alright then, I thought as I quietly slipped off my limiter. Business-business time.

Even with my powers providing a guide to pinpoint where the boxes were, it still took a half-hour to get one out of the sea of trash and then ten minutes to move it back to the console room. Despite his seeming disregard for order, the Doctor had conceded that the chances of losing an important part in the mess he called a robot room were too high to really think about dealing with at this time.

'Zeke, would it be going out of line for me to strangle your future self?' I asked as I helped Mickey drag the box to the console room.

'Well, considering that I'm not personally connected to that experience and more than a little of what he's been up to is highly aggravating to my sensibilities, I wouldn't be personally offended,' my personal copy of the Doctor mused. 'But the fact that I – that is to say, the Doctor's continued existence is needed for most of this universe not to spontaneously catch flame at any given second, I'd advise against it, no matter how appealing the idea may strike you.'

'…you had a separate robot room didn't you.'

'Oh yes. A bit smaller, more of a workshop, and much more organized. The TARDIS will probably let you find it… if one of my successors didn't space it in an emergency. Or out of spite. Or, possibly, entirely on accident.'

I had the sudden feeling that if the Doctor ever tried to kill me, he might manage the feat through dumb luck alone. Fuck if that wasn't the main reason he was still alive.

The TARDIS interrupted my internal conversation with a golden buzz of annoyance.

Fine. Luck and the love of the most beautiful and wonderful time machine to ever fly through the Vortex.

'That's better,' the TARDIS seemed to say before her honey-gold presence returned to the walls around us.

'It's nice being around her again,' Zeke noted as we finally reached the console room with this stupid ugly box. 'I almost forgot what it was like…'

'To be a proper Time Lord?'

I could feel Zeke's smile at the back of my mind. Not his fully pleased one, but a bittersweet twist of the mouth. 'Oh, I've never been an ordinary Time Lord, much less a 'proper' one. But she does make me feel like myself again. Even though I'm not.'

'Don't talk like that. You're you. Maybe a bit more than what you once were, but never anything less.'

Any more of pep talk that I might have thrown out was disturbed by the feeling of getting yanked back to reality. Suddenly, everything was too bright, too loud, and too close all while every sense felt like it was being transmitted through a ringing haze.
"-aine? Delaine? Delaine!"

Actually, this mild sensory overload bit was very annoying now that it was being applied to a voice I hated on reflex. "What?"

Kilgrave – no, the Doctor stopped shaking me. Kilgrave had never had worn a look of worry on his face like that, not for another living creature. Another small but important difference was the spiky brown hair, both in styling and shade. "Thought I'd lost you for a minute."

Lost me? It wasn't like I'd done anything more than zone out from any outsider's perspective. Hell, I hadn't even fallen over or anything. "Just had myself a little moment. Also; stop touching me."

His fingers stopped digging into my shoulders immediately, though the barely concealed look of confusion that followed the action was... odd. Had that been an involuntary reflex? Or had my 'patron' put some kind of subconscious programming into yet another person they wanted me to stick around?

Either way, the moment passed. "Anyway," the Doctor said. "I was asking you if you were ready to start work on K-9 Mrk. IV."

He turned, showing the scattering of parts and blueprints on the floor. The blueprints, I wouldn't need more than a second's glance. The rest...

'Oh yes,' Zeke murmured, flexing a pair of imaginary hands as we prepared to sync up. 'I think we have this well in hand.'

The Doctor could have handled K-9 on his own, true. But this... this was a way to test the depths of his companions, particularly the one who'd already established that there was more to her than initially assumed.

"Alright," Mickey said as he pulled out the instruction manual. "Aw, this can't be more complicated than assembling Legos!"

"Clearly you've never encountered the Lego Millennium Falcon kit," Delaine replied as she loosened her wrist strap and set to sorting the various parts of K-9 into piles. "Over five thousand pieces of pure torture, all waiting to be stepped on."

There was a minute shift in her voice, a faintly familiar buzz around the R's and a distinctly un-American emphasis on the L's and the P's. If he had to pin an exact location on it, he would say that it was Scottish, possibly Highlands, though it wasn't a complete enough shift to make that an absolute identification.

The motions she was going through were familiar as well, though thankfully they were not those of the incarnation he preferred to forget. In fact, he could probably say that if not for the presence of Mickey looking over the directions and naming the odd part, Delaine would be preforming a script perfect recreation of his Seventh's assembly process.

'It's not like that's particularly odd, sorting things by what goes where before one gets started,' his Seventh said, folding a pair of imaginary arms. Now there was a proper example of a Highland Scottish accent, without any trace of American English running through it like a half-broken horse. 'I don't understand why you'd remark on that, of all things. Unlike some others I could think of.'

'I have a system!' his Sixth protested in absence of any direct accusation while his Eighth stifled a cough, which was an odd trick for someone who didn't currently possess a corporeal body.
The Doctor did appreciate the chance to see her at work though. He'd missed it earlier, having had most of his attention fixed on Sarah Jane at the time, but now that attention was fixed on Delaine and, oh, there was a lot to see. She was clever with her hands, much better with robotics than Rose… or most of his companions really. Mickey wasn't so bad himself, but there was a big difference between fiddling with the wheely-bits and connecting a robot's sensory inputs correctly.

No human from this time period should have been capable of the last without instruction and Delaine was barely looking at the sheet provided.

So that meant that either Delaine was far enough ahead of the curve – not impossible, though incredibly improbable – for such work to be relatively simple, she wasn't from this time period, or she was never human to begin with.

'The last can be tested, you know,' his First pointed out. 'The TARDIS has medical scanners and it's just as simple to separate twenty-first century humans from fifty-first century humans as it is aliens. From there, we can eliminate the theories that don't work.'

There were three of those as well.

The first was that Delaine was some sort of spy, sent by the Time Agency or some other party that knew who and what he was. The second was that she was some old enemy under a new face. The Master was his best guess at the moment, though why his old friend-slash-enemy would flirt with his Sixth self was an entirely different can of worms.

'Probably would do it just to get a rise out of us,' his Fifth muttered. 'Rassilon knows what else the Master would be willing to sink to get a reaction.'

'Ah –'

'You know what I meant, Four.'

The third and, in the Doctor's mind, least probably theory was that the girl had the bad luck to be a local era time sensitive, in which case everything he was thinking of doing to get answers would serve no purpose than to shatter whatever trust the Doctor had managed to build with her.

'So what are you willing to consider an acceptable cost for the confirmation of your suspicions, Doctor?' the warrior asked, the question setting the current incarnation's teeth on edge.

He shouldn't have let him out of the box.

Delaine sat back from the now-mostly assembled robot dog. "The memory backup, Doctor?"

"I'll handle that bit, after I check over your work," the Doctor replied sitting down with the sonic screwdriver to do just that. While making sure she didn't add any 'extra features' to K-9's hardware, he added in an internal aside. An unlikely event, considering how closely he'd been watching her, but for once he would err on the side of caution.

'Is that a first for us? It's difficult to recall.'

Delaine seemed to hear his thought all the same, giving a small nod as she leaned back against the railing, fastened her leather bracelet again, and began idling with the fastener.

'A nervous tic or something else?' his Seventh wondered. 'Check the scanners while you're doing the medical scan. If that thing's giving off any interference, the TARDIS will know.'
Yet another check on the list of things to do within the next twenty four hours or so. Thankfully, it was a very short list, made all the shorter by the quick assembly of K-9. On the other hand, the most important point on the list – getting some answers from Delaine – could be tricky. Especially now that they were back to the tense atmosphere that they had started this exercise with.

'Very nice work on the energy transferal array,' his Fourth noted. 'Improves power efficiency by almost… twice over.'

Definitely not current era then, unless that joke about her being a UNIT scientist in disguise had held more truth than he realized. 'Have we found any problems in the programming?'

'Well, there's a bit of odd activity in the memory core, but that's all from the back-up and it all reads as benign,' his Third said, his mental presence rubbing the back of his neck. 'Could be a natural techno-organic A.I. evolution or the remnants of some deleted files.'

'What's missing?' the Doctor asked before squinting at the read-out. '…tennis?' What? Well, at least it wasn't anything worth worrying about.

He closed up K-9's casing. "You two did well," the Doctor told Mickey and Delaine. A little too well, actually, seeing as everything was just as he would have done it and maybe – if he cared to admit it – a little better than what he would have done in some places.

And all without him lifting a finger to assist.

The Doctor would probably leave out that bit when he presented the robot dog to Sarah Jane, but otherwise everything was letter-perfect. All they needed now was a little collar to slip on and, what do you know, he had one right here in his pocket!

On the other hand, Delaine hadn't sabotaged the dog or her efforts in repairing it in an attempt to stay under the radar. Would that be a point for or against her?

He'd worry about that later, he decided as he started punching coordinates into the TARDIS console. For now, he had a dog to return to his mistress.

It was a nice park that Sarah had picked for their meeting place. Very green and very well-maintained, but it still had that distinctive London air; mildly polluted and heavy with the promise of rain – or at least a thick, choking fog – at some point in the unforeseeable future.

For now, however, it was clear and sunny so the Doctor was simply enjoying the wait, kicking the heels of his trainers against the stonework beneath the rail he was sitting on. The latest version of K-9 was hidden behind the TARDIS, all ready to wake up and follow Sarah Jane home the moment the Doctor took off again.

'I do enjoy being around her again, you know,' his Fourth whispered conspiratorially. 'One forgets for a time what a face means, but when you see them again…'

Yes, the Doctor remembered that sweeping, fluttering feeling that had come over him when Sarah Jane Smith of all people walk into that teacher's lounge. Like his hearts had suddenly become feather-light and his tongue had suddenly been cut loose from his control. That his voice had squeaked up to pitches he hadn't known this model's could reach until then was just the most obvious side effect.

'Never had that problem myself,' his Sixth noted.
'Because instead of getting higher, your voice simply settles for getting louder,' his Fifth snipped quietly.

'Why you –'

His past selves all shut up as the Doctor turned to catch Sarah Jane's arrival. Under the leaf-diffused sunlight, she was even more beautiful than she'd been in the school. It was too bad that behind that beauty, he could also see time wearing her down. Slowly and inexorably.

"Hello, Doctor," Sarah Jane said around a smile. "Thought better of leaving K-9 on my front step with a voice message again?"

"Well, I thought you deserved a proper goodbye from me this time," he replied, bouncing up onto his feet and nodding towards the TARDIS, the bluest thing in the park that wasn't the sky. "Cup of tea?"

The Doctor opened the door for her, waiting until she was inside to follow. There was the look, oh so subtle compared to the confusion that was usually written all over the faces of first-time observers, but the wonder was still there even though none of this was strictly new to her.

Good.

"You've redecorated," Sarah Jane noted after a good look around.

The Doctor smiled. "Do you like it?"

A pause. "Ah, it's lovely," his old companion said carefully. "But… I think I prefer it as it was. Yes."

'I think that means I win, Doctor,' his Fourth said.

'Ah, it wasn't even a contest,' he replied silently.

Rose stepped out from behind the console, flashing a wide smile even as Mickey played the part of less certain shadow. "Well I love it."

Delaine, the Doctor noted, was still sitting on the floor with her back against the railing. A small smile was sent Sarah Jane's way, but there was no interjection.

"Anyway," he said, drawing everyone's attention back to him. "We're about to be off and I was just wondering… if you could come with us?"

It was a vain hope that he knew would be refused and yet, as Sarah Jane gathered herself and smiled, the Doctor felt the 'no' break his hearts a little. "I just can't do this anymore," she explained. "Besides, I've got a much bigger adventure ahead of me. Time I stopped waiting for you and found a life of my own."

"Can I come?"

Everyone except Delaine turned to look at Mickey.

"Not with you, Miss Smith, no offense," the boy corrected before looking over at the Doctor. "But with you. Cause I'm not the tin dog. I want to see the stars and all that."

The Doctor made a point of ignoring the absolutely disgusted look on Rose's face and the way she unsubtly mouthed 'no' at him.

Sarah Jane seemed to take a very different view of her fellow Smith. "Oh come on, Doctor. Sarah
Jane Smith, Mickey Smith. You need a Smith on board, keep you honest."

Maybe it was the nostalgia talking, but he supposed that was as a good a logic as anything.
"Alright," he told Mickey. "I'll give you a try. Could always do with a laugh."

"Rose, is that okay with you?" Mickey asked the blonde.

"No, great," Rose replied with all the enthusiasm present at the average funeral. "Why not?"

Sarah Jane shook her head at the antics of his companions. "Well, it seems I should be going then," she said before taking the younger girl into a hug. As they pulled apart from each other, the last exchange of their conversation reached the Doctor's ears. "Find me, if you need to one day. Find me."

His old companion then turned around and walked towards the door, leaving the Doctor to open it for her.

"You know," she said as they stepped back out onto the gravel outside. "It's daft, but I never ever thanked you for that time. And, like I said, I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

"Something to tell the grandkids at least," the Doctor said.

"Someone else's grandkids, I suppose."

Right. Right. "I didn't think to ask if there had ever been anyone else," he murmured.

Sarah Jane smiled. "Ah, there was one guy that I travelled with for a while. He was a real tough act to follow." She stepped up on her toes to whisper in his ear. "Goodbye, Doctor."

"Oh, it's not goodbye –"

"Do say it," she said. "Please, this time say it."

"Goodbye," the Doctor said softly before clasping his arms around her in a tight embrace and spinning them around, his coat flaring out around him. "My Sarah Jane!"

He set her down gently and began to walk back towards the TARDIS.

"Oh, one last thing," Sarah Jane said, making him pause. "Is that girl… Delaine. Is she going to be alright?"

"Ah…" There was no good way to frame the lie. "I hope so," the Doctor finally said, turning around to look at his old companion. "Why do you ask?"

Sarah Jane smiled. "Oh, when I first met her... she just reminded me of you when you were my Doctor. I thought, 'If there's anyone who could be the Doctor in this building, it's probably that strange girl in the library with the yo-yo and the rambling explanation for how she knew how my name was Sarah Jane before I had to correct her.' Turns out my investigative intuition wasn't as sharp as I thought it was."

"Oh?"

"Just something about her. I'd ask if she was another Time Lord, but you already said…"

Now there's a theory, but the factoid itself was an interesting little kernel of unexpected truth. Maybe he'd do something with that later. "No, I don't think so," he replied.
"Well, that doesn't change the fact that she's a good girl," Sarah Jane said. "Just as important to have around as a Smith, don't you think?"

The Doctor didn't answer her as he ducked back into the TARDIS and refocused his attention on the humans sitting in there. Mickey and Rose had picked up on the renewed tension between him and Delaine and were accordingly tense themselves as they waited for something to happen.

And judging by the way that Delaine had just settled into silence, sitting on the floor with her back to the railing as she studied the finer details of his shoe tops and the metal grating in front of them, the responsibility of making that 'something' happen was going to fall on the Doctor.

He set the dematerialization circuits running and hoped that Sarah Jane's assessment of Delaine's character was an accurate one.

Chapter End Notes

Another wholly original chapter… at least until we get to Sarah Jane, and even then it's not really all that much like the end of School Reunion beyond certain dialogue bits and the implication of a brand new K-9. I originally wrote the entire thing from the Doctor's POV, but a reviewer pointed out that this was a prime time for some insight into Delaine's thought process and I was like '…yeah, that would work'. So this is the second version of the whole thing, brought in under the umbrella of School Reunion because it just kind of made sense to do that and with some other parts scooted over to the next chapter because they didn't quite fit in this one (thematically, not physically).

I mentioned the Android Invasion? Yes, I did, though that was back in Chapter 7. One of the Android duplicates was of the Fourth Doctor and at the end of the story, the Doctor managed to reprogram it to help him out. After it 'died', Sarah Jane had a minor freak out over the apparently dead Doctor, and the real Doctor had a chance to confirm that 'no it was just the robot I'm still very much alive', it wasn't ever mentioned again, but I figured the Doctor probably would have just shoved it in a closet somewhere at UNIT or on the TARDIS.

And the whole 'pose artfully to freak people out' is kind of a reference to the fact that they couldn't get Tom Baker for the multi-Doctor story The Five Doctors so they just posed every Doctor they could get (along with one replacement for the one who died) with a wax sculpture of the Fourth and then they just kind of chose to get weird from there.

 Seriously, Google images is a gift, just search 'wax Tom Baker', the one I'm thinking of should be in the top results.

Splinx was a robot cat belonging to the Sixth Doctor in the Doctor Who And The Mines Of Terror computer game (1986, BBC Micro, Commodore 64), pretty much serving the same purposes as K-9 but with proper legs, no weapons, shorter battery life, stealth features, and being something of a semi-autonomous carrying case (thanks to bigger on the inside technology).

In the Fourth Doctor story The Stones Of Blood, Romana asks K-9 what 'tennis' is after a conversation with the Doctor. K-9 asks if she means lawn or table tennis, and when Romana told him to 'forget it', he deleted all the files on tennis.
Okay, so it's very unclear how Sarah Jane came into possession of her first K-9 because, while there was a short story written where the Fourth Doctor personally delivered it along with a proper goodbye (the accordingly named 'Farewells' from the Doctor Who Yearbook 1993), School Reunion says that the Doctor never gave her a proper goodbye. So I decided to interpret that as the Doctor leaving K-9 on Sarah Jane's porch with a voice message but never really talking to her in person until School Reunion (though she did encounter the Fifth Doctor during the Five Doctors, they didn't really interact beyond Sarah having a 'uh, who is this' moment at the end).
The handcuffs were nothing particularly special, just an ordinary Earth set the Doctor had nicked off a policeperson or kept as a souvenir of yet another daring escape from the back of a moving vehicle. Oh, there was probably a more comfortable set lurking somewhere around the TARDIS, one that didn't lock the prisoner's arms into one awkward position, but that would have required more digging than he had patience for right now.

The Doctor paced outside the Zero Room, rubbing a hand down his face.

Not that he really had much patience at all, at the moment.

Who are you? Who sent you? Where do you come from? What do you know about the Time War? He'd asked every question that had been burning a hole in his mouth since Delaine had said the words 'in the name of peace and sanity'.

Delaine refused to answer any of them. And not through the catty evasive responses he'd half expected from the girl. No, this was all silence, the kind that could strangle a person alive.

After that, the plan was to get the data from the TARDIS scanners, see if revealing who or what she was would loosen her tongue. That plan fell through when the scans said 'ordinary, twenty-first century human who has spent a sum total of one week in a TARDIS,' which also, coincidentally, left more than a couple of his theories as to her identity dead in the water.

Oh, he still had a few left beside 'wrong person in the wrong place with the wrong abilities', but the most likely one left a sour taste in his mouth.

A Time Lord hiding under Chameleon Arch. There were known to be flaws in the technology; leaks in the memory, slips of reflex, psychic potential that should have been impossible for the assumed species spilling out under the right provocation…

'And considering the level of familiarity with our habits, that makes for a very short list of possibilities,' his Second said. 'Romana, the Master, one of the other renegades… Berenyi or Joyce perhaps… oh, even ourselves if Sarah Jane's intuition was on point.'

'Crossing our own timeline like this, even under Chameleon Arch, would be patently irresponsible,' his Third snapped in response. 'Never mind that Delaine was openly flirting with Six.'

'Well, at least it would serve as evidence that our powers of good taste will return in the future,' Six sniffed.

'There is another possibility.'

'I'm not sure I entirely like your tone, Seven.'

Unfortunately for Six, Seven had never much cared about being liked. 'I'm merely pointing out that there's another individual of a… dubiously Time Lord persuasion that would more than passingly familiar with our habits.'

The Doctor suddenly realized where his Seventh was going. 'The Valeyard.'
Six's previously smug presence suddenly started shifting uncomfortably. Considering his history with the alleged dark side of the Doctor made manifest, the Doctor would have been more surprised if he hadn't.

'Gives new meaning to the phrase 'only wants you for your body', doesn't it?' his Eighth asked mildly.

'Thank you oh so much for that image,' Six ground out. 'I'm certain I will treasure it forever, seeing that it's just been seared into the retina of my mind's eye.'

The Doctor tuned out the conversation as he tried to think of a good response. Was it fair to keep Delaine locked up if she wasn't fully cognizant of what she'd done? Probably not, but there was also the chance that she was deliberately using the information she had against him.

Did that fit with his understanding of her character? No. Did it fit with the theory of her being spy, which would require by definition that she practice such deception?

'Yes,' Seven said.

'Would a spy have given away their cover repairing K-9?' he asked.

'She'd already established her ability. Concealing it after we already knew what she was capable of would have been just as suspicious as showing off her skill.'

That, in the end, seemed to be the problem with Delaine. She didn't reveal things at the lightest prompting. The situation had to fit for her to display her skills and even though there was no hesitation to perform at those times, as soon as the drama was done, those revelations were quietly tucked back into the closet until they were next required.

What the Doctor needed was an unobscured look into that closet.

'Do you think we've let her wait long enough?'

Probably not, but pacing got old fast, even for an alien whose lifespan was measured in millennia.

The Doctor opened the door to the Zero Room.

From the look of things, Delaine had been pacing as well, though the Doctor would describe her stride as 'caged tiger' rather than 'conflicted Time Lord'. If he cared to stretch his imagination a bit, he could even see a long tail hanging behind her, twitching with annoyance at her captivity in time with every swing of her head. Even without his Eight's jacket covering up the tightly wound discomfort in her posture and with her arms trapped in a stacked position by the rigid cuffs that would – hopefully – keep her from using any tools, there was still a sense of danger around her. Like electricity humming through a transformer, just daring some idiot to stick their fingers in and complete the circuit.

Unfortunately, the Doctor was the person who had to do just that.

"Ready to talk to me now?" he asked.

Delaine refused to make eye contact.

The Doctor sighed. "I want to help you –"

"Some help, locking me up in here," the girl muttered as her eyes darted around the room again.
Looking for an escape? It should have been obvious there was none other than the door he'd come in through, and she would have to go through him to reach it.

For some reason and despite her obvious desire to be out of the Zero Room, she hadn't. Was that out of a desire not to hurt him or because she knew that she couldn't overpower him?

"If I stay away from the questions I asked earlier, will you talk?" the Doctor asked.

"Depends on the question."

Alright. That was something he could work with.

"Are you claustrophobic?"

She finally reacted, a flash of surprise interrupting her intense expression before she focused on him again. "I don't like being stuck in little white rooms, especially when they don't have windows," she ground out.

That was a very specific dislike. "Can I ask why?"

"Too bright. Too close. It deadens your eyes and messes with your sense of time."

Right. Humans didn't have the same unerring sense of time that Time Lords did. The smallest things could set it off-kilter and, apparently, the Zero Room personified number of them.

"How long do you think you've been in here?" the Doctor asked, hands shoved deep into his pockets. There was some interesting clutter building up. At least one fob watch, a pair of 3D glasses, some spare change that probably came in three different denominations. Oh, and the sonic screwdriver of course. That was always fairly close at hand.

Delaine looked up at the ceiling again. "Five, six hours? Maybe more?"

The last time the Doctor checked, it had only been two since he'd corralled her in here and handcuffed her. No wonder she had been pacing. "Would you like a watch?"

"What? Not concerned that I'll use it as a weapon or try to escape?"

Well, now that she had mentioned it... "I don't think you would," the Doctor decided. "I've seen a little of what you can do. Granted, you don't exactly have a knife on you right now and even if you did, I don't think you're in a position to really make use of one, but I imagine that if you're smart enough to turn a fob watch into a weapon, you would have done something with those handcuffs by now."

Something in Delaine's expression shifted. Was it a measure of respect being returned for the respect he'd afforded to her? Something to make note of. "Don't suppose those will be coming off anytime soon, huh?"

"No," he agreed. "You know something about me that nobody should and I can't let you go until I find out how you found out about it."

The combative posture eased and the sense of walking on the edge of a razorblade finally passed over the Doctor. "I can understand that," the girl said.

"Will you tell me, then?"

"...No."
Well, it wasn't an answer he hadn't expected, but it was still better than silence. And the hesitation seemed to imply that she wanted to tell him the truth. The Doctor pulled the fob watch out of his pocket and tossed it over to her. She fumbled for a second as she forgot about the cuffs locking her arms into place, but caught it before it could fall.

"I'll check in with you later. Maybe bring you something to eat."

"Don't let either of the English kids cook," Delaine called after him as he left, sounding rather tired for the joke she was making. "Forget food poisoning, I'd die of boredom."

The Doctor shut the door behind him and shook his head.

There was that irreverent sense of humor again, claiming that the person making the jokes was untouchable. It might have been believable if the girl making the jokes hadn't been holding on to that fob watch like a lifeline.

I sat down heavily as soon as he left. It probably be a bitch to stand up again with my arms locked up like this, but I just didn't have the energy to stand anymore.

Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic. Put me in a box I can't escape from – even inside my own head – and I fall to pieces. I hate empty white rooms, I hate being trapped, I hate feeling powerless, and I hate silence.

Which made the constant tik-tik-tik of the watch the Doctor had given me a massive relief. Another relief was that he probably wasn't going just dump me in a black hole and be done with it.

Still, that didn't mean I could just tell him how I knew about the Time War and the incarnation he hated so much he refused to claim him as a version of the Doctor.

'Yeah, I'm originally from another universe where your adventures are considered family entertainment. Yes, including the Time War and every single horrible thing that ever happened to you since you picked up Barbara and Ian in 1963. Also, while I'm at this 'unvarnished truth thing', I'm actually an ancient abomination with multiple personalities and the power to destroy a planet with my bare hands, even while acting within the bounds of a universe that hates roughly half of my essential nature.'

'PS, there's a highly probable chance that the omnipotent being responsible for shuttling me around the multiverse and turning me into something out of one of your nightmares has tampered with your mind for shits and giggles.'

'PPS, please don't throw me into a black hole for stuff that's not my fault.'

Yeah, like that would go down well. And the thing was, I could sympathize. My entire existence was dictated by an omnipotent being whose only interest was their own entertainment. I even had 'fictionalized' versions of my own adventures. I mean, sure, the DVDs spent more time gathering dust than being watched, but the fact that I had those DVDs in the first place… no. Nobody liked being told they were a fictional character, especially when they played the part of universal chew-toy.

I ran my thumb over the lid of the watch. Probably a recentish acquisition from the lack of dings and scratches in the surface. Bit boring in the texture department, but who was I to complain? It wasn't like the Doctor was going to hand me his Chameleon Arch watch just because I liked the way the
designs felt in my hand.

Still, it was something and in a room that prided itself on being nothing, it was a godsend.

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Rose sat in the command chair, legs folded over one of the armrests as she went about the business of ignoring Mickey's attempts to draw her into conversation. Why the Doctor hadn't just told the boy 'no' when he asked to come along with them was beyond her. Oh, Sarah Jane might have thought it was a good idea, but she didn't know anything about Mickey beyond the fact that his last name was Smith.

Besides, Sarah Jane wasn't here to deal with this drama. Not just the thing between her and Mickey, but whatever was going on between Delaine and the Doctor.

'In the name of peace and sanity.'

What was that supposed to mean? Was it some kind of Time Lord password? A hidden phrase that only the Doctor would be familiar with? And if so, why had the Doctor been so upset by Delaine using it?

The Doctor strode into the console room, coat flaring out behind him as he – after giving a cursory glance to the readout screen that turned into a flash of real surprise – immediately started resetting dials and knobs on the TARDIS console.

"How'd it go?" Rose asked. "Get her to talk this time?"

"Better," the Doctor replied without looking up from what he was doing. "And yes. Not much, but it's an improvement on nothing. Did either of you notice that we were receiving a distress signal?"

"Can't see why you locked her up in the first place," Mickey said, throwing his arms up in the universal posture of 'I don't know what's going on'. It was a fairly common pose for him in Rose's memory. "I mean, I'm not a mind reader but it seemed like everything was fine when you two went off to talk to that alien – the Krillitane. What happened?"

The Doctor felt silent for a second. "Let's leave it at she knows something about me nobody should."

'Not even me?' Rose asked silently. "So why don't you just… get rid of her?"

He looked up, his expression totally blank. "What?"

"I mean, dump her. Like you did Adam when he tried to steal that future information."

"Sorry to be the one lagging behind in this conversation, but who's Adam?" Mickey asked.

"Oh, just a boy with the personality and general appearance of an untoasted piece of white bread that Rose insisted on bringing along. Before she got this model, of course. Couldn't keep his hands off some future technology and decided to lie to my face about it like the TARDIS hadn't picked it up the moment he walked in with that port planted in his brain," the Doctor explained. Oh, so he was still annoyed about that. "And I can't do that with Delaine."

"Why not?" Rose asked, ignoring the minor crisis Mickey was having over the casual reference to brain surgery. "It's not like she's any different."

Something about the Doctor's face seemed to say otherwise. "Well… the thing is, I can't. People
know about Delaine. Adam was only with us for… what? Two, three days? And that was one trip to the future. Delaine's been seen with me in her era of origin, where organizations like Torchwood can find out who she is just by checking security cameras and checking with witnesses."

That almost made them sound like common criminals, instead of… well, regular time travelers that just happened to save the day every other week. "You think they'd track her down just for that?"

"Rose, Delaine knows things about me nobody alive does. I don't know how much or how she got that information, but she knows enough that it's dangerous for both her and me if I just let her go. Even barring Torchwood's involvement, I've got other enemies who would reduce her brain to a fine paste to get any scrap of information they imagined would give them the means to destroy me," the Doctor said as he pulled a lever that sent the TARDIS wheeling out of the Vortex and shuddering to a stop. "I have absolutely no doubt that someone would."

"Anyway," he continued as he walked down the ramp towards the door. "Delaine's safe and snug in the Zero Room, nobody's out to kill us at the moment –"

"Always nice, that," Mickey muttered.

"– and, despite the feeling that I've mentioned this already, we've picked up a distress signal that I've decided to look into because it's in the middle of the Diagmar Cluster, which to those of you who aren't familiar with space geography… kind of an oxymoron right there… is way off the usual interstellar lanes of travel."

"Meaning that we're their personal RMS Carpathia," Rose answered.

She'd been picking up on her education through self-study which, oddly enough, was going better than it ever had when she'd been in school, but stacked up against Delaine's casual 'yeah, I'm a fully trained librarian, I know robots and knives and god knows what else, probably some kind of aikido', it felt like bringing a reading primer to a book club that had just finished War and Peace.

Still, the Doctor's grin wiped all those feelings of inadequacy away for a moment. "Oh, you've been reading! Well, I'd rather avoid the Titanic analogies for a few reasons, but that fits the situation fairly well." He looked at Mickey and gestured at the door. "First look out for the newest member of the party?"

Mickey's hesitation had only lasted long enough to be recognized for what it was, but he stepped forward smoothly, taking the handle that would open the TARDIS up to whatever it was outside…

"Looks like a proper spaceship to me, 'part from the fact that it's dead empty."

The Doctor rushed by him, Rose quickly following behind.

The interior was cathedral-like, with a ceiling high enough to almost count as a pocket sky and windows that offered slices of star fields blazing brighter than she'd ever seen while standing on Earth. It was also, as Mickey had pointed out, completely abandoned and had probably been for some time, if the dust on the various pieces of equipment lying around was any proof.

"Looks like we've had some cowboys in here," the Doctor said, kicking at some singed metal parts on the ground.

"So how far in the future are we?" Rose asked.

"Oh, about three thousand years. Humanity's having its great Breakthrough into the wider universe while the Earth deals with another Ice Age and World War VI… well, what would have been World
War VI. Interesting time period." He turned over a bundle of wire and tubes. "Speaking of Earth…
this ship looks like it came from there. Equipment might make it a scientific surveyor."

"So where's the crew? Deep space, I don't imagine they nipped out for a quick fag."

"Nah, I just checked the smoking pods. Nobody in there," the Doctor said as he looked over what
looked like a computer readout. "Actually, nobody's been here in… months. To be exact, it's been
about a year since any of the sensors reported any life signs on board, which is when the last log was
recorded. 'Ion storm. Result; catastrophic failure of systems PrimaDri1-1493, Delta-47, and 362-B-
ZetaPhi. Primary crew and repair units attempting to repair'. Explains all the parts at least." He
looked up at the windowed ceiling and the steady glow of the light strips in the walls beneath it. "But
not how fifty people up and disappear in the middle of an empty sector… or the fact that the engines
are going at full tilt without moving the ship. Strange."

"So instead of a Space Titanic, this is an interplanetary Mary Celeste," Mickey said.

"I was involved in that," the Doctor said almost automatically before backpedaling. "The original
one, I mean. It's a long story."

"Imagine a lot of yours are."

"About the engines, Doctor," Rose said. "Is their going at 'full tilt without going anywhere' bad?"

"Oh, yes. Warp Engines. Might not be quite as impressive as the TARDIS's primary power source,
but there's enough energy being generated here to punch a hole in the universe. Not a big one, mind,
but that's still an end that would be better to avoid." He punched in a series of commands into the
console, looking triumphant for a moment before he leaned down and squinted at the little red box
that started blinking in the middle. "…and something's got an override on anyone turning the engines
off."

That wasn't ominous at all.

Mickey looked to the side. "You smell that?"

Now that someone had mentioned it, she could. Under that unsettling funeral home must was the
smell of meat cooking. "Is that… a Sunday roast?"

The Doctor looked around before pressing a couple buttons on the control console. A door opened
up, revealing a smaller room off to the side of the main 'hall' they had landed in. Inside, a series of
tool bins and what might have been welding gear lined the walls… apart from the furthest one,
which instead featured exquisitely carved wood paneling and a very old fashioned fireplace, with
gold candlesticks mounted on each side of it and an ornate mantelpiece clock on top.

"Well, there's something you don't see in your average fifty-first century spaceship. Eighteenth
century. French. Nice mantel," the Doctor said, quickly walking over to it and pulling out the sonic
screwdriver to begin scanning. "Not a hologram. Not a reproduction either; this is an actual Eighteen
century double-sided French fireplace, if you care to take a look through there."

Rose pressed her face to a porthole to the left of the fireplace, taking in the view of uninterrupted
space going on for what might as well been forever. "Can't be, this is the outer hull of the ship."

The Doctor wasn't paying attention. "Hello," he said through the fireplace.

"Hello?" a small voice called back.
Rose crouched down. On the other side of the fireplace, instead of being star-studded blackness like the view from the porthole had shown, was a little girl with long blonde hair. The room behind her was a better match for the fireplace than the one they were sitting in, Rose thought, taking in the details of the extravagant bed and full sized harp shoved into a far corner.

"What's your name?" the Doctor asked.

"Reinette," the little girl said.

"Reinette. Ah, that's a lovely name," he said. "Can you tell me where you are at the moment?"

Reinette's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "My room?"

"I meant city, country, planet, that sort of thing. Come to think of it, if you could tell me the year as well, that could also be a great help."

"I live in Paris, sir. And it's seventeen hundred and twenty-seven, August." The little girl tilted her head to the side. "Shouldn't you know that? And what are you doing in my fireplace?"

"Oh, good year, but August… August is rubbish, so you might as well just stay inside," the Doctor said around one of his winning smiles. "And don't worry about me, it's just a routine fire check. Thank you for your help and enjoy the rest of the fire."

"Goodnight, sir."

The Doctor stood back up. "That was period accurate French," he told them.

"I heard English," Mickey said. "And you said this was the fifty-first century."

"Ah. Well, the TARDIS translates for you through me and, speaking as the Time Lord who's learned just about every language in this universe and a dozen or more variations on each, I know eighteenth century French when I hear it," the Time Lord explained. "And on the second point; I said this ship was generating enough energy to punch a hole in the universe. This fireplace is it."

My leg was beginning to jump on its own as I resisted the urge to start pacing again. According to the watch, the Doctor had only been gone for twenty-minutes. Still, if I had the timeline still right in my mind – and how long could I rely on that for? – they were aboard the SS Madame de Pompadour, the ship that was being repaired through gratuitous abuse of multiple corpses.

Would they be safe without me? Maybe. Still, I didn't like gambling with 'well, it went this way once' anyplace where lives and knives crossed paths.

So that was why I was calculating everything I could do about the handcuffs and the fact no matter what I did, I wouldn't be able to use my powers.

I could probably still do an elbow drop if I needed to, but most of my offensive output would be coming from my legs and how well I'd be able to redirect the robots and the attached knives into my immediate surroundings. If I was willing to suffer a little pain in exchange for more range, I could probably dislocate my thumb and get at least one of my hands free like that, increasing my options while also rendering one of my hands almost entirely useless.

If that hand was my right one, that last bit wouldn't be an issue. I could just rip off my limiter and
everything would sort itself back into place. Unfortunately, the way the Doctor had put the handcuffs on me had ended up locking the unassuming leather strap that brought me down to normal around my wrist in a way that would be impossible to wiggle my way out of, dislocated fingers or no.

"Well, if the situation gets bad enough, I can always just let one of those robots cut if off just above the cuff," I muttered as I tried and failed to rotate the wrist in question around in its prison. "After all, it'll grow back."

Mickey Smith looked around the corner before taking a spinning roll across to the opposite wall. He wouldn't deny that the big fancy looking gun made him feel pretty cool, even if it was technically an oversized fire extinguisher. It worked on the clockwork robot thing, after all, so he'd count it as a weapon, even if it was a bit cooler – heheh, pun – than he would have normally expected for himself.

Of course, he thought as he adjusted his grip on the gun for the fifth time since Rose had handed it to him, for all that big fanciness, there was also a corresponding weight. It was like trying to lug Jackie Tyler under his arm, except with less kicking and verbal abuse… not that he'd be mentioning that comparison with Rose nearby.

"Don't see any of those creepy robots this way," he called back to Rose.

The blonde wasn't even paying attention, instead poking around at something a few meters down the hall.

"Rose!"

She looked up. "Eh? You said something?"

Mickey resisted the urge to sigh. "When do you think the Doctor'll be back?" he asked. If him wandering off during dangerous situations was a regular thing, Mickey might just turn down the chance to make these adventures a regular thing. "Not that I mind exploring, but between the robots of death and just the… general creepiness of this place, I wouldn't be terribly upset to have someone who knows what's going on around."

"He'll be back," Rose said before looking back at the wall. "Anyway, I was looking at this thing."

'This thing' was a camera looking thing set in the wall, which would have ordinarily been nothing worth commenting on except that, to Mickey's view, it looked a lot like a human eye.

"Is that what –"

Rose poked it with her finger and the eye blinked before sucking itself back into the wall. "Yeah. Pretty sure that was a real eye."

"Can't believe you touched it," he muttered before noticing something else. A sound that seemed like it should have been familiar.

Mickey kneeled down and pressed his ear up to a round hatch. There it was, louder and more distinct; the wet thump-thump that automatically registered as 'heart'. Against his better judgement, he leaned back and unscrewed the hatch.

"Aw, that's just wrong," he said as he saw the heart pumping away with half dozen metal and plastic tubes feeding in and out of it and disappearing further into the guts of the ship. "You think it might
"The eye was real, why not the heart?" Rose replied, her expression surprisingly flat for the situation. Maybe the panic reflex eventually got scared out of you if you travelled with the Doctor enough. "Shut that thing, won't you?"

Mickey screwed the hatch back and quickly stood up, holding the fire extinguisher gun a little tighter to his chest. "This is normal for you then?"

"Well, maybe not the organs laced into machinery bit," she said as she walked down the hall, looking all around her before turning around to flash on of her patented tongue-kissed grins at him. "But yeah. Werewolves, ghosts, aliens of every description… even got to see the end of the world once. Life with the Doctor means no more average days, Mickey."

And then, just as he passed by a window that showed off a breathtaking view of the cosmos as shown in NASA coffee table books, it clicked. That's why Mickey Smith would never measure up to the Doctor. The Doctor was special and being around him made Rose special as well. No more Henrik's shop girl. No more council estates. No more boring old Mickey Smith. Rose Tyler could go anywhere and do anything.

He could get that, he supposed, even if it was clear that Rose thought of him as part of her boring old life on Earth. Out here, there weren't any worries about money or bills or being stuck in a dead end job. Just the infinite mystery of the universe and the light of all the stars in it… so long as you ignored the great swaths of black nothingness in between all the light and the fact that all of it – stars and all – could kill you in an instant if you weren't careful.

"Lovely view, innit?" the Doctor asked from right over Mickey's shoulder. "Two and a half galaxies away from Earth, three thousand years into your future. What do you think of that, Mickey Smith?"

"It's…" Big. Terrifying. "Realistic," Mickey said around a swallow before turning to look at the Doctor. The clutter of emotions that had been vying for some kind of dominance in his head suddenly disappeared. "…why are you on a horse?"

The Doctor looked down at his shiny white horse and then back at Mickey. "You're on an abandoned spaceship three thousand years in the future, which is full of killer clockwork robots and doors into eighteenth century France, of all places, and you're questioning the horse? Get a little perspective."

"I'm not questioning the presence of the horse, I'm asking why you looked at it and went 'oh, a horse in a small enclosed space full of scary robots with knives up their sleeves that they use to cut people up, I think I'm going to ride it,'" Mickey countered, his tone maybe a touch more snippy than he would have liked.

"Well, when you say it like that it just sounds daft," the Time Lord muttered before focusing again. "Hang on. You said 'cut people up'. Could you clarify that little statement for me?"

"We found some… stuff," Rose explained. "An eye in a camera, a human heart hooked up to tubes as a pump…" she gestured in the vague direction of Mickey's newest nightmare fuel.

The Doctor dismounted the horse, pulling out the sonic screwdriver as soon as his feet were on the ground. "Might be an explanation for the smell of that roast, considering that there wasn't any food in Reinette's room either time I visited…"

Any lingering hunger that Mickey might have felt suddenly disintegrated into an ill-defined desire to
vomit, but that wasn't a concern for the Doctor as he unscrewed a bit of paneling to have a look inside.

"Well," the Doctor said with a grimace as he put the panel back. "Looks like we've found our missing crew."

Chapter End Notes

Part of writing a very old or experienced character (or a character of any age, really) is that there's a lot you will never see of them. Backstory, internal motivations, character development that took place 'off-screen'. Part of the trick with Delaine's character is that I'm kind of showing a large part of her development (and her other selves, though she's the focus right now) over a large number of stories and, for a lot of them that are planned, she's not really in focus.

And since I'm writing her 'earliest' adventures at the same time as this story (though this one is going along with my muse a lot easier), I have the advantage of knowing where her character development needs to go and the job of getting it there.

If I had to sum Delaine up in as short a space as possible, it would be 'kitten/tiger'. The kitten loves loving on people, playing around, and being a (largely harmless) nuisance in the name of fun. The tiger, on the other hand is a force of nature; powerful, deadly, and very protective over what is hers (cubs or otherwise). You could also throw a regular house cat in there for 'petty', 'picks favorites for seemingly arbitrary reasons', and 'has no hesitation in fucking up anyone who disrespects her boundaries', but I think that 'kitten/tiger' covers the base of it.

The fact that she has a pretty heavy feline motif is just happy coincidence (or is it?)

Berenyi is a Time Lady from one of the untitled Brief Encounter stories published in Doctor Who Magazine (specifically issue 171, 1991). She was responsible for the Kennedy assassination.

Professor 'Daniel Joyce' (from Eighth Doctor Adventure novel Unnatural History) never out and out called himself a Time Lord, but he does have a tattoo corresponding to imprisonment on the Time Lord prison world Shada and at one point calls Gallifrey 'home'.

There's actually a dearth of canon(ish) renegades because their deaths are usually the pretty permanent kind (getting their skin ripped off to get tattoos of ultra-special maps, being experimented on by bad guys until all that remains is a little flesh potato that can only say 'fiddlesticks', shredded from history by time storms…).
Spare Parts

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: blood, injury (starting midway through Delaine's section). It's mostly scrapes, cuts, and deliberately inflicted dislocations, but I just thought I'd give you all a heads up just in case.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's events like these that make me question how humans can come up with so many stories about robots killing people because of a mistake in the programming and still manage to leave such gaping holes in their programming."

Rose Tyler wouldn't admit out loud that the space ship was creepy, but it was definitely that. Forget the clockwork robots in the period drama costume and the creepy clown-like masks, there was also the little detail about the fact that there were bits of people in the machinery and the tiny little snag that the aforementioned creepy robots had access to short-range teleportation that could take them to any part of the ship.

"It's not hard to put in a failure condition or hardwire some sort of protection," the Doctor continued as if the two other people present were actually following his monologue. "If complete repair cannot be finished with current resources, do ABC to get the bare minimum functionality required to land at the nearest space port or habitable world. If ABC cannot be done with current safety, do XYZ to get crew to safety. At no point can you kill the crew and use their finger bones to make screws. Simple."

And then, like a little plastic figurine on top that cake of awfulness, there was the horse. A fully saddled, casually noisy horse that was following the Doctor around like a little lost duckling even after the Time Lord had stopped riding it, hooves deafening in the relative silence of the ghost ship.

"Instead, we end up with voice identifications thrown off by helium gas and parts of someone's nervous system replacing fried circuitry."

And the Doctor simply did not seem to care, instead complaining about humanity and sloppy computer programming of all things as they walked around the ship, looking for god knows what.

"Please Doctor, just… put the horse back where you got it," Mickey said, sounding extraordinarily tired. Another thing the horse was responsible for.

The Doctor stopped complaining about careless robot programmers to stare at the boy. "What? Just leave Arthur out in the hall all by himself, where those nasty robots can get to him and chop him to little bits?"

"You named it?"

"Don't be silly. I asked him what his name was. Took an evening course on speaking Horse. I wanted to take Mammoth, but Romana talked me out of it," the Doctor said before switching to a haughty female voice with all the effort most people put into a falsetto. "Which is more likely to prove useful, Doctor; a large smelly animal that only exists in a time period you rarely visit, or something that's almost always around those humans you like so much?" Oh, she lorded that over me
for weeks after, though I had my own turn after our little trip to the Ice Age."

Romana. Another name that meant absolutely nothing to Rose. Was she a former companion or something more? Clearly, no matter what she had been to the Doctor, she wasn't human. Was she another Time Lord or, in this case, Time Lady?

"So do you have any idea why this ship has all these holes going back to eighteenth century France?" Mickey asked.

"Ah, broadly speaking, yes. The little intricacies such as the why of the initial why are a bit out of focus at the moment, but I think I can make an assumption or two based on what happened to the crew and what I've seen in on the other side of that fireplace," the Doctor said before pointing to a window they were just coming up to. "It's because they're stalking her."

The 'her' in question was a woman could have walked out of a period drama, which made sense considering that she from that time period. All silk and perfectly styled hair and an understated smoothness of motion as she walked across the room they were watching from across time. Rose supposed that she was something of a natural beauty as well.

"So who is she?"

"Allow me to present Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, known to her friends as Reinette. One of the most accomplished women who ever lived. You might know her better as Madame de Pompadour."

Rose and Mickey exchanged looks. Rose didn't know the name and it was fairly clear that it didn't mean a thing to Mickey either.

The Doctor made a disgusted noise. "You both slept through history class, I just know it," the Time Lord muttered before raising his voice to normal tones again. "I'd say this is the night that she meets Louis the Fifteenth."

"Got her eye on becoming his queen, does she?" Rose asked, watching the woman smooth out some imaginary wrinkles in her dress. This 'Madame de Pompadour' did seem tailor made for such a role.

"Nah, he's got a queen already. Reinette's got her eye on becoming his mistress."

Ah. Camilla. Now there was something Rose was familiar with. "Bet the queen just loved her."

"Actually, yes. They got on very well," the Doctor replied, drawing surprised looks from both Rose and Mickey. He shrugged. "France; it's practically another planet."

He suddenly cut off, eyes focusing on something in the room past where the woman stood. Apparently, whatever it was made some noise, because she turned around as well.

Rose watched a figure step slowly out of the far corner, revealing itself to be yet another of the clockwork robots, though this one wore a dress instead of the embroidered suit that last had. The Doctor didn't even hesitate before hitting the switch that rotated the window and pulling Mickey's fire extinguisher gun out of his hands. "Hello, Reinette. Hasn't time flown?" he said before dousing the robot with freezing liquid. "Slush hydrogen. Fun stuff… when the ice isn't gumming up your internal workings."

The robot twitched its head to the side before its arm snaked out at a speed Rose could barely follow. If not for the fact its hidden blade hadn't deployed, the Doctor might have been dead.
"…not entirely gummed up then," he corrected as he took a step back. "I'd admire the workmanship if not for the faulty programming and your literalist interpretation of 'human resources'."

The robot didn't respond to that beyond tilting its head with a series of tiks and whirrs, analyzing Rose, Mickey, the Doctor, and Reinette in turn.

"Oh, what I wouldn't give to know what you're thinking in that shiny metal mind of yours," the Doctor said, walking slightly to the side as he watched the robot slowly divest itself of the ice. "I mean, it's probably half nonsense, but it'll have a certain logic to it that will make the puzzle of 'why' slide all together. Why open up the time portals, why go through all this trouble, and why her?"

"One more part is required," the robot replied in a voice that barely registered in Rose's mind as feminine. Its head suddenly twisted to the side in a display of speed that it hadn't shown since the Doctor had doused it in ice, its empty eyes boring into Reinette's.

Rose noted the way the Doctor subtly positioned himself between the machine and the noblewoman. "Then why haven't you taken it?" he whispered.

"She is incomplete."

The Time Lord's head jerked back in apparent surprise. "What, so you're just going to keep punching holes in history, scanning her brain, and checking her mileage until it hits your ideal number? But that doesn't answer my last question; of every single brain in history, why do you specifically need hers?"

"Because we are the same," the robot replied.

"What?" Reinette asked, stepping back a bit. "No."

"We are the same."

"Get out! Get out this instant!"

The robot complied, teleporting away right as the Doctor told yelled for it to stop. He turned around quickly, pulling the mirror/window they'd come in through open.

"It's back on the ship," he said. "Rose, take Mickey and Arthur. Get after it. Follow it. Don't approach it, just watch what it does. I don't want any of you hurt."

"You're not keeping the horse!" Rose yelled.

"I let you keep Mickey," the Doctor countered as he shoved her through the door. "Now go! Go! Go!"

The window rotated shut, leaving Rose and Mickey alone on the creepy space ship again.

The horse – Arthur – whinnied softly, as if to confirm his presence.

Alright, Rose corrected mentally, so not completely alone.

I suddenly had the feeling I wasn't alone.

The door hadn't opened and the Zero Room was as empty as ever, but there was a sense of presence
all the same. Muted perhaps, but still very clearly there like someone watching you from behind. Somehow, despite that and the creeping anxiety that something was happening somewhere I should have been, the presence itself didn't quite scare me.

Probably because it felt like a muted version of something I'd already felt during my stay in the TARDIS. Did the Zero Room mute even her 'voice' or was the limiter messing with my ability to pick up on her?

I looked up at the ceiling. "Something's gone wrong?" I asked her before trying in my head. 'Lady TARDIS? ...Idris?'

There was a passing sensation of amusement at the names and then her presence in my head turned insistent again. I was needed somewhere and now, which was going to be quite a trick considering I was locked in and shackled.

The sound of a lock clicking open suddenly rang through the silence.

"Suppose that handles one problem," I muttered, casting a quiet 'thank you' towards the ceiling again before I started running for the console room and the door beyond that.

Empty space ship. High ceiling. Dim lighting. No soul like the TARDIS and no sense of home or purpose like most mundane vessels. The place smelled like an abandoned mortuary but with more grease and polish worked in around the edges of smothering smell of dust and embalming fluids.

I didn't give much more mind to the details, because there was yelling down the hall. It had to be Mickey and Rose. It wasn't like there was much else in the way of options.

I sped up, skidding around a few corners as I tried to maintain a balance already thrown off by the position my arms were locked into. That didn't stop me from twisting around to kick one of the droids away from Mickey.

"How'd you get here?" Rose asked angrily.

"Time machine," I said quickly as I twisted around an incoming blade and shoulder checked the robot on the other end of it. It fell over, twitching slightly before something teleported it away. "Also, running towards the sound of screaming."

"The Doctor had you locked up!"

"And now I'm not." I slid past her and kicked the droid that had been sneaking up behind her away, keeping a series of needles full of something blue and clear out of her back. "Also, you're welcome."

A blast of absolute cold went right past me, freezing some of my hair where it came too close, and I heard the previously silent machine that had been in my blind spot stutter to a stop as ice ground in the space between its gears.

"You could consider that something of a 'thank you' then," Mickey said, adjusting his grip on the fire extinguisher gun in his hands.

I smiled.

And got a slice of burning pain along the line of my ribs as the robot reactivated.

I rolled forward, hissing as the cut moved with the rest of me. First blood. Great. That only meant more blood from here on out.
And all because I let my situational awareness slip for a second.

I managed to get my legs under me and stood up again, eying the robot that had done the damage. Ice crystals still hung on it heavily, but they were melting rather quickly. "Mickey, give it another blast," I said, ignoring the feeling of warm blood trickling down my side.

He did, the white stream of freezing condensation covering the droid again, and as soon as it stopped pouring out, I kicked the robot as hard as I could. It hit the wall without grace, the internal parts breaking off at the joints to hang loosely by the clothes it was disguised with.

That was one down at least. I didn't know how many more there was left to go. "We need to relocate. Somewhere there's more space to work with," I said, reaching around to put some pressure on the wound. Clean cut, so it would heal halfway decent, but didn't do jack for the bleeding now.

"How bad is that?"

It was relatively shallow and it wasn't near any problem bleeding areas I could remember. Nothing to be immediately concerned about, even for a normal human, provided it didn't become infected and the timeframe we were working with probably wouldn't allow for that. My shoulder would probably end up hurting more from shoulder checking a robot. "I'll live. Let's keep moving."

We slunk through the halls, but no robots reappeared. Was that because they were otherwise occupied or were we walking into an ambush? I doubted the machines had the brains for that, but I'd been unpleasantly surprised before.

The room we ended up in was probably the worst we could have found. Smaller than the massive space the TARDIS was parked in, this one was a tangle of wires and equipment, all surrounding a pair of futuristic exam tables… that came with straps attached to the places where arms and legs would go.

"Uh, I'm just going to go out on a limb here and say this is very not good," Mickey said.

"Understatement of the year right there," Rose muttered before turning her attention on me. "So was this your plan? Keep us safe by walking right into the place we don't want to be?"

"I'll admit it; I was in too much of a rush to save your lives to remember the directions back to the TARDIS," I replied, most of my attention on the machines in front of me and all the luminous screens dancing with data. There was a pattern here, something I could do… but what? With the limiter on, I didn't have the computing power or the innate understanding of what I was looking at, so I was stuck trying to pry the answer off the tip of my tongue.

But there was one thing that was clear; step one to using these control panels was getting these cuffs off. I twisted my arms, trying to see where or if I had any give. There was a bit around my left hand, but the limiter was still trapped in the vice grip of the right cuff.

So how to get them off? No power tools were visible here, I didn't have a key…

Ugh, bad solution.

"Any ideas on how to get out of these?" I asked Mickey and Rose, not expecting much from either but willing to take a gamble on the off-chance they did.

"Why would I let you out?" Rose asked, crossing her arms as she glared at me. "The Doctor must have put those on you for a reason."
On the other side of the enthusiasm coin, Mickey's eyes lit up. "That robot broke after I froze it and you kicked it. Why not do that to the handcuffs?"

I grimaced. "Because while that would make the metal brittle enough to break fairly easily, exposure to those kinds of temperatures will literally turn my hands to solid ice which would not only be incredibly painful, but also would defeat the whole purpose of the 'get the cuffs of me so I can use my hands' thing. Thanks for trying though."

It'd be a way of getting the limiter off, sure, but I wasn't quite desperate enough to go that far yet. I'd already been locked up and questioned for knowing too much. How well regrowing a lost limb would go over was not territory I wanted to try exploring just yet.

A better solution would to be find some kind of pick or shim to get around the lock. That, however, would take time, effort, and an unreasonable amount of my attention as I tried to talk Mickey through the process, and there was no guarantee that Rose would allow him to go through it. After all, 'the Doctor must have put them on me for a good reason'.

So I'd settle for the stupid and painful – but not as stupid or painful as actively losing a hand – way of getting free.

Ignoring the immediate explosion of pain from pulling my thumb out of socket and the gasp of horrified surprise from my audience, I folded my thumb up into the palm of my hand and began to pull it out of the cuff.

It was a tight fit, though not impossible to escape at the cost of a little blood and tears. I finally pulled my hand free with a pop, feeling my wrist go out of joint as my control of my fingers suddenly started lagging.

Well, that was inconvenient, but at least I could make decent use of the other hand. I could work around the pain, but the blood loss… well, unless the robots got in a luckier shot than all their previous attempts, it'd be messy but it wouldn't be lethal.

Probably.

"Why the hell did you do that?" Rose asked, looking horrified.

"Need to access computer. Couldn't type with the cuffs on. Didn't have the key and didn't have time to teach either of you how to get past handcuff mechanisms," I explained through gritted teeth as I waited for the adrenaline to kick in properly. There was a reason this type of injury sent people to the emergency room and then on into surgery not too long after that. "So that left the coyote solution."

Would it be worth it to try fixing the hand? Probably not. The pain would still be there and if I did it wrong, it would only get worse.

"I would have helped if that was your Plan B!"

"Really?" I asked, lacing my tone was as much sarcasm as I could get around the pain. "That wasn't the reading I was getting from you at all."

I shuffled over to the computers and flexed my fingers, wincing a little at the pain and slow response in my left hand. Yeah, I could do this. Probably not as well as I could have with the limiter off and with my left hand not fucked to hell, but beggars can't be choosers.

"Now, let's crack this walnut."
The Doctor stumbled back through the window he'd gone out through, careful not to spill any of the contents of his cup. Part of the drunkenness was an act, because that was his excuse to leave the debauchery earlier than the French nobility would have accepted, but despite the total absence of ginger beer, he had a feeling he'd be paying for what partying he had done in the morning.

Oh, it probably wouldn't last long – one of the many perks of Time Lord physiology – but even if it only took five minutes for him to recover, every second promised to be unpleasant.

Right now, however, his problem was of a strictly mechanical nature.

The Doctor very carefully stepped over a piece of discarded machinery, noting the embroidered sleeve it was wearing. Ah, so Rose and Mickey were doing some percussive maintenance.

The thought distracted him long enough to stumble into another elegantly dressed droid, knocking it to the ground where it broke to pieces.

"And I'm not paying for that," the Doctor told the empty hallway before spinning around and breaking into song. "I could've danced all night, I could have danced all night…"

The not-so-distant sound of metallic crash informed him that he was dancing in the right direction. Suddenly, one of the droids hit the hallway wall opposite the door, falling to the floor where it lay with its legs impotently pedaling through the air in a jerky walk cycle.

"…and still have begged for more. I could've spread my wings and done a thousand things or mo–" he sang as he danced around the wreckage, only to cut off as he saw Rose standing on the other side of the doorway in question with one of the fire extinguishers in hand. He grinned at her annoyed expression. "Have you met the French? My god, do those people know how to party."

"Oh, look what the cat dragged in," she said flatly. "It's the Oncoming Storm. The day is saved."

"I take it things haven't been going well," the Doctor said mildly, swirling his cup as he looked around the room. It looked like a likely candidate for the droid's 'chop shop', what with the tables with straps and all the tubes of suspect stuff.

Mickey was watching the other entrance, fire extinguisher gun in hand, while Delaine over by what looked very much like a computer, studying it intently. The Doctor started a bit as he reprocessed that bit of information. Delaine standing over the computer. Hadn't he left her in the Zero Room? In handcuffs?

"Yes,' his Fourth replied. 'Most definitely. That makes her not being in the Zero Room right now…'

'Questionable?'

'Among other things. How did she get those handcuffs off though?'

"So just what happened while I was out?" the Doctor asked, ignoring the litany of unpleasant possibilities building in the back of his head.

Rose looked slightly uncomfortable for a moment. "Well… after we left you, we got attacked by the robots straight off."

'Is Arthur okay?' his Eighth asked before he was shushed.
"And Delaine just runs in from out of nowhere and starts kicking them around!" his companion said with a distinct note of frustration. "No clue as to how she got out but she just took over after that, telling us we needed to move to some place we had some space to move. Then we ended up in here and Delaine's just like 'oh, I'm going to take a crack at this computer, don't let the robots in'."

At this outburst, the subject of their conversation looked up from what she was doing and – after seeing the Doctor – went back to it. For the first time since he'd met her, her sleeves were rolled up to her elbow, showing off a number of angry red slices on her forearms, some seemingly fresher than others. More eye catching, however, was some chain of bruises forming along the line of her jaw and a small slice along riding along her cheekbone above that. If there was any more damage to be seen, he'd have to be closer to appreciate it.

"Do you think Mickey let her out?" he asked.

Rose scoffed at that. "He doesn't even know where the toilet is, how would he know where to find the Zero Room?"

"You both know that I'm standing right here, right?" Mickey noted from the other side of the small room.

"Anyway," the Doctor said loudly. "I've found out what they've been following Reinette for."

He pointed at the computer Delaine was working at. "Right there, that big old mess is the primary computer for this ship. You could say it's the brain of this whole ship. Navigational computer, star coordinates, power regulation… and command center for the repair droids."

The Doctor turned around to look back at Rose. "Long story short, the tin men need a brain and apparently the question they've been trying to answer every time they scanned Reinette's brain was 'how old are you?' and the magic number is…"

"Thirty-seven," Delaine answered.

Well there went his dramatic reveal. "How'd you know?"

"The ship is thirty-seven years old and its name is the S.S. Madame de Pompadour. It's not a big leap," she said flatly, giving him an unimpressed look. "And, according to the mission statement, the S.S. Madame de Pompadour is a scientific research ship, home to some experimental time viewing technology that was being tested in neutral territory to avoid any intergalactic incidents should anything go wrong."

Which it did, the silence she let follow the statement seemed to say.

"Oh. So the repair robots aren't just picky, they're smart enough to use what tools they have and just thick enough to decide that breaking history is the best way to solve their problem," the Doctor said as he walked over to her. He leaned over her shoulder to look at the blood streaked touch screen before looking down. "What did you do to your hand?"

"She took the 'coyote solution' to the cuffs," Rose said.

'Gnawed off her leg to get out of the trap,' one of his other selves muttered as the Doctor surveyed the injury with a barely concealed grimace.

From the way her hand was hanging off of her wrist and starting to swell, it was clearly a dislocation. The areas skinned raw and bloody were probably from pulling her hand out of a cuff still a hair too small despite her best efforts, but…
"What about your side?" he asked, eying the blood that colored the side of her button down shirt a very bright, very human red beneath the dark fabric of her waistcoat.

"Got distracted and got the sharp side of a knife," she replied tersely, clearly in pain and making an effort not to show it. "It's a clean cut, not deep. Barely even bleeding now. Nothing to worry about."

One of the droids then. "Same with the face?" the Doctor said, reaching up to touch the scratch.

Delaine pulled away before he could come close to touching it. "Just a scratch."

Ugh. It looked like all that work he'd put into bridging the gap with her just fell through to the bottom of 'Don't Touch Me Ravine'. Ah, it was a process. "Still, I'm going to have to pull you into the infirmary to look at that hand. I have a duty of care to my companions, after all."

He looked down at the bloodied screen and – trying to ignore the fact that it was his companion's blood sticking to his fingertips – pulled up the index file, looking for anything he could find on the repair droids. If he could find some scrap of identification or an override code, this entire mess could be over – ah, and there it was.

"Certified repair expert AI in mechanical, electrical, and biological technologies, repair drones immune to every possible environmental hazard from anti-oil to ion storms'. Well, that covers just about every base you could possibly need in space," the Doctor said before scanning further down the contract, which seemed like it was half written by an advertisement executive. "And it did have failsafes against the whole 'killing people thing'. Unfortunately, that was part of the system baked by the ion storm. Take out the restraining bolt out of the AI, you end up with robots preforming to their tasks to the letter… which spells trouble when the book they're going by is Alice in Wonderland."

"The braaaaain is compaatable," one of the ruined droids on the floor sang in a voice like a broken music box.

"Oh, shut up." And here was the master control to the androids. The Doctor turned it off and was satisfied to see the robots stop twitching. "And now onto the time-windows. All I need are some Zeus plugs…" he said as he patted his breast pocket down and then worked his way through the other possible locations. "I know I had some on me; I was using them as castanets not that long ago…"

"But if they needed her brain when she was thirty-seven, why'd they do all that hopping around?" Rose asked, interrupting his search. "Why not just open a window to when she was 'complete'?"

"Rose, their circuits are so cooked I'm amazed they even got the right century. Probably got as close as they did through trial and error. And that should –," the Doctor stopped and tried to flip the switch again. "It's not closing."

"What's not closing?" Mickey asked.

"The time-windows. I don't understand why they aren't –" A little bell rang, and then a series of clicks and scratches came through a clockwork machine. "Ah," the Time Lord realized. "Report from the field. One of them is still out there with Reinette. That's why I can't close the windows, there's an override!"

The droids on the floor suddenly started clicking and whirring. "She is complete," they sang in their broken, inflectionless voices. "She is complete, she is complete –"

"Shut up!" the Doctor yelled. "So she's 'complete'! None of you are in any condition to do anything
about it! Message from one of your little friends, what are you going to do?"

"There are enough resources. She is complete. It begins."

Of course they had reserves. Big ship, lots of repair drones. Nothing could be simple, could it?

"Come on, we've got to find the right time window! Rose, you go through this one here," the Doctor said as they passed one place where the future bled into the past and left a definite year its wake. "Warn Reinette that in five years from that point, the droids will be back for her head. Tell her that when that happens, she needs to stall them for as long as they can."

Rose nodded, ducking into the window while the rest of them ran on.

"Why can't we just use the TARDIS instead of these windows?" Mickey asked. "I'm sure you could land it where you needed to faster than this."

"Can't," the Doctor replied as he searched for the next time window. "The way these time windows leak and with so many crammed into such a relatively small area, there's no definite temporal location to the area. Worse, causality is tangled. Probably at least one or two stable time loops set up thanks to this mess, which means getting another time machine involved, even if it's the TARDIS, risks turning the whole ball of yarn into... well, let's leave that outcome at somewhere between 'less than good' and 'big ol' hole in the universe'. Oh, we'll be able to leave once all the windows are turned off, but anything other than that is just asking for disaster."

"Stable time loop?"

The Doctor brushed off the question. "I'll explain the finer points of temporal mechanics later! We've got to find that time window!"

"Right here."

Delaine was looking up at a wall mounted window, on the other side of which was a ballroom full of the highest members of French society, all screaming for their lives as the droids herded them into the corners.

"I think it's been fucked," she added, rapping on the glass with the handcuffs still attached to her right wrist. Whatever the window was made of, the metal didn't even scratch it.

The Doctor pulled his sonic screwdriver out and took a reading that made him want to swear himself. "Hyperplex this side, plate glass on the other. I'd need a truck to smash through it."

"Would a horse work?" Mickey asked.

The Doctor turned to see Arthur standing just down the hall a bit, looking a bit underwhelmed for the situation.

"Suppose it would," he replied.

We waited.

There wasn't much other option. While I might have been able to pilot the TARDIS with Zeke's help, the fact that the limiter was still locked around my wrist put a quick stop to that back-up plan and somehow, Rose didn't know where the fast return switch was. There was more than a small
chance that she was lying, buying time for the Doctor to return on his own, but honestly I couldn't disagree with the decision. Even if I didn't have the advantage of foreknowledge, the chances of us unintentionally marooning him on this dead ship were too high.

Still, I was getting antsy. What if my presence somehow changed things enough that the fireplace time window wouldn't –

Before I could get to the 'work' part of the brainwave, the Doctor walked in.

"Miss me?"

Rose looked like she was torn between hugging and hitting him. "You were gone for five and a half hours!"

"I left the horse back in France," he said.

And for some reason there was the tipping point towards hug. "Thank god."

"Suppose someone's going to have to figure out how to get him out of the ballroom at Versailles, but I'm sure they'll figure it out eventually," the Doctor said before turning his attention to me. "You, infirmary, now. Bad enough you messed up your hand, leaving it like that for over five hours isn't helping."

"What, you wanted me to screw it back into place on my own?" I asked. "With one good hand, no anesthetic, and no equipment?"

"No. I'll be in to handle it," he replied with a slight roll of his eyes. "After I go get Reinette."

Ah. Well. This could only end in tears. History said that Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson had died from tuberculosis at age forty-two. There was no getting around that fact because if it hadn't happened, this ship might have never existed.

I walked through the hallways of the TARDIS, relying on her vague definition of 'directions' pressing on my brain to guide me to the infirmary.

Considering I ended up there fairly quickly, I didn't really have anything negative to say about it save feeling ridiculous for doing the whole Inigo Montoya 'guide my sword' bit without the impressiveness of a fine sword or a dead relative attached.

The Doctor arrived not too long after, his mood and hair much lower than it had been before he'd rushed off through that fireplace for the last time. He didn't say anything and I didn't press it; I knew what it was like to fail at saving someone, to have time slipping through your fingers despite your best efforts.

"See you found the infirmary without any difficulty," he noted.

I looked up at the ceiling. "Had some help."

The Doctor hmmed, but didn't comment on it as he brought over a screen on a swivel arm. "Readings say you've got some light blood loss, a number of minor lacerations, bruising, and the… well, obvious problem with your hand."

That matched with what I had been keeping track of. "So what do you want to fix first?"

He gave me a look. "What do you think?"
"Going by your face, probably the attitude."

"I may be good, but I'm not that kind of miracle worker; I'll settle for the hand," he said, pulling over a machine that had more than a passing resemblance to a dentist's overhead light.

"What's that?"

"Psychic anesthetic. Good for working around allergies and dosage issues."

Clever and not too different from the medical bay in my cosmic warehouse. I didn't entirely appreciate the haze slipping over my mind, but considering that I'd spent six and a half hours running on nothing but adrenaline and pure determination, the level of exhaustion crawling over me made sense. That the 'anesthetic' took that exhaustion to a point that teetered on the edge of passing out was only logical, at least to my tired mind.

That the Doctor was still talking to me was less sense. "What were you thinking, dislocating your wrist like that? I could have –"

"Pain is a transient sensation," I murmured. Stop talking to me and let me sleep.

"Hah. Tell that to the permanent damage you would have ended up with if not for the wonders of Gallifreyan medicine," he replied as the bones just pushed themselves back into the right place without any surgery or pain. Huh. Usually healing hurt more than that. "Just... in the future, don't be so reckless. With your hands or your life."

"So if I'm reckless in the eighteenth century, everything's alright."

The Doctor made a face. "Not what I meant."

"I figured," I said right before I finally fell asleep.

The Doctor shook his head as he put the skeletal realignment machine back into its place along the wall and grabbed a small jar of blue healing paste. Humans were ridiculous, this one was more so than usual.

He smeared some of the paste over the cut on her cheek, moving onto the other cuts as the nanites within it started knitting the wound shut. The cut along her side, he would save for last since there was no telling how much of the paste it would take to heal it and it wasn't actively life threatening.

He was fairly certain that she wasn't a spy. A spy might have attempted the handcuff trick, but the casual disregard for her own safety in the defense of others didn't fit with the profession.

So that left his 'Time Sensitive Human' and 'Hidden Time Lord' theories standing, and without some evidence – either some irrefutable proof of a human history or the appearance of a Chameleon Arch watch somewhere in Delaine's possession – that's what he was stuck with. Two theories that were mutually exclusive yet relied on the same evidence.

Whatever the truth was, the Doctor decided, the girl at the middle of the mystery was something that he was going to protect.

Chapter End Notes
The trick with a character not knowing some vital information about someone or something is that they'll make theories and assumptions based on what they know and, usually, those theories and assumptions will bite them in the ass somehow. If not, well, it'll still be fun for the reader who knows what's really going on.

Ex: The Doctor knows Delaine is unnaturally well informed about his history + she's also capable of working with robotics originating from 3000 years after her assumed era of origin + the TARDIS's medical scans say she's a normal human female from the early 21st century.

This eliminates a lot of theories like 'Zygon' (TARDIS's medical scan would have picked up on venom sacks in the tongue – which is the method the Tenth Doctor tries to use in The Day Of The Doctor), 'Time Agent' (TARDIS would have def. picked up on 3,000 years of evolutionary difference between a 21st century and a 51st century human), and probably more I couldn't be bothered to list here. From there, the Doctor goes with what he knows to be true about his universe and the person he is studying, resolving those into theories which he can pare those down from there as he gathers more evidence and understanding of Delaine's character (though he won't necessarily be correct). Deductive reasoning is fun!

Well, there's a few things going on with Delaine's dislike of the Zero Room, one of which will be covered in a future chapter. The other is a thing called 'white torture', which has a Wikipedia page that describes its effects quite well. The short version is it's a kind of sensory deprivation that, instead of using a dark room, uses a solid white room with no windows and a bright light that never turns off.

While I hadn't really had her first experience with her 'patron' in mind when describing it, it wouldn't be out of place to say that past experience doesn't make it better.

Slush hydrogen is a mix of liquid and solid hydrogen, which is close to negative 260 degrees Fahrenheit. It's mostly been proposed as a replacement for straight liquid hydrogen rocket fuel because you can get more of it into less space (good for rocket design which has to take weight into consideration), but I was using it here as the contents of the fire extinguisher guns because the spray of liquid hydrogen mixing with oxygen creates water vapor, which the aforementioned cold-as-hellness turns into ice (which fits in well with what the extinguisher guns do in the episode, though it isn't a substance used in real life fire extinguishers, probably because careless use would be really, really bad).

The fact that the repair droids are built to survive the coldness of space, which goes down to about negative 270 degrees Celsius (translation; negative 455 degrees Fahrenheit), means it just slows them down for a minute before they adjust to that (the Doctor does point out in the episode itself that the robot is melting the ice, which means there's some sort of heater built in, but Delaine's able to damage them somewhat despite being at human-normal because frozen metal tends to be more brittle) and proceed on with their murder-business.

The Doctor doesn't really explain why he can't just use the TARDIS in the actual episode, so I used a bit of explanation from the Eleventh Doctor episodes The Lodger and The Angels Take Manhattan; time distortions make it difficult for the TARDIS to lock onto a position / signal and brute forcing it isn't an option.
The main thing that I'm not really satisfied with concerning this and the last chapter is that I wasn't really able to work in more of Reinette / Madame De Pompadour's actual history? Like the fact that when she was nine, a fortune teller told her and her mom that she'd someday reign over the heart of a king and so everyone was like 'okay, gotta start grooming this kid to become Louis XV's future mistress'. Like the Doctor said – France, it's another planet.

Anyway, for more information on Madame De Pompadour, check out the Wikipedia page, because this Author's Notes is getting kind of long.
John Lumic did not consider himself a soft man. The soft did not survive in this world. Life had long since rid him of any delusions about that fact. In reality, the universe was a forge; taking the raw material of man and refining it through its crucible, removing the dross from the quality, and, yes, sometimes that pieces of that quality metal was lost to chance or deliberate action. That was the risk in living in a universe defined by the rolling dice of an unseen God.

Sometimes Lumic wondered about that. What if certain pieces had been lost instead of others, if some lived where they had died, died instead of lived. Would his brother have transformed the world as John had if the odds had fallen in his favor when the ice on that lake cracked all those years ago? Somehow, he couldn't see Jacob achieving a quarter of what John Lumic had done. Was that because he was too ordinary or too gentle?

John Lumic cut off that train of thought before it evoked a nameable emotion. Nostalgia would serve him no purpose here. There was only the future, the dawning of his age. Jacob Lumic had no part in that, apart from providing the initial inspiration, and John would be damned if he allowed his brother to end it by inspiring some kind of guilt about what he had done.

What he had done was necessary to designing a future without pain or suffering. Surely his ghost would understand that. Lumic had given too much to give up now, too many years in research and study, too much of his soul in the pursuit of eternity to just let it slip out of his grasp now. Soon, he would give his life for it, this aching and failing body in exchange for a form of perfect steel.

He cast his eyes over the illuminated table full of blueprints and bits of metal and circuitry. Forty years' worth of designs, refined from the initial mad impulse into something tangible. Forty years. That's how long John Lumic had been dedicated to this project and he had no hesitation in calling it his magnum opus. The categorical defeat of death itself could be described as nothing less. Oh, there had been hiccups along the way, factors he had failed to take into consideration, but that was the nature of advancing technology and the purpose of prototypes.

Hobbling over to the table on his crutches, he picked up a piece of metal; a faceplate with a basic – some might even say over-simplistic – approximation of a human's face, with two circular eyeholes and a small rectangle for a mouth. A more fanciful mind might have pointed out that the shape of those eyes almost looked like they were crying, but Lumic didn't give much precedence to such whimsy.

Did some part of him feel guilt for the ones that had gone wrong? Perhaps. In their own way, the Cybermen were his children, produced from his brain as Athena was produced by Zeus, and it was the way of parents to feel guilt over the suffering of their children.

But they were alive. His process saw to that and, in light of their pain, he had refined it. There would be no more pain for the future generations of his children now, just as there was no more death in their future. His only regret was that there was no 'fixing' what had gone wrong with the ones that had come before, which was a pity. Most of them had been interesting people, people that John might have even genuinely liked.

Interns and underlings. A few intellects that had turned his original concept into more and more of a reality. One of his nurses that had been… John wasn't sure what she had been. Kind, he supposed.
Certainly not condescending or pitying like others had been. Kind and gentle… but unyielding, even when there was no option left to her but to break. And then he had taken that broken body and made it anew. Imperfectly, sadly, but the brain had been too damaged to be fully salvageable.

At least it had proven that converting deceased material was impractical and ultimately a waste of resources.

After that… well, there were others. Some volunteers, others… less enthusiastic about their involvement. One of the most recent had been that nurse’s teenage daughter; one last favor to the woman and a sort of apology for her current state.

It might have been a better one if the process hadn't gone horribly wrong again. Lumic had decided it was an object lesson; this time on dealing with immature mentally-ill brains. The emotional inhibitors and his method of picking out converts had since been refined and perfected. There would be no such slips again, in himself or his creations.

The fodder of his army, the ones that were perfect, would be nobodies. No names, no faces, no histories that any human part of John Lumic might sympathize with. No, he was doing them a favor, cutting out the weaknesses, the flaws in their flesh, and replacing it with something that wasn't defined by the circumstances of their birth or the color of their skin. They would never be cold, hungry, or ostracized ever again.

That he had been able to take so many of the homeless with scarcely a glimmer of concern from the rest of mankind was only proof that he was right.

'Is it?' some doubting voice seemed to ask.

It sounded all too similar to the voice of his brother, but before that doubt could crawl into John Lumic's mind properly, his Earpod rang. He picked up the call. "Lumic speaking."

"Mr. Lumic!" the bright voice of Peter Tyler chirped over the connection. "I was just calling to thank you for the lovely gift you sent Jackie."

"The jeweled Earpods. Yes, I thought she would appreciate access to the latest model. It will be several months before they will be available to the general public," Lumic replied. That was a lie. There would be no future models of Earpods. Oh, the factories were still producing the parts, certainly, but none of them were assembling those parts into the ear-mounted, brainwave-reading communication devices any longer. "Tell her to take care."

"Of course sir… does that mean you won't be attending her party? It would be a great honor, for both of us. Even the President is attending."

Lumic looked down at himself and the scaffold of braces that kept him upright, then lifted a hand free of his crutch, experimentally clenching the digits. While there was still the ever-present pain of a failing body, today had been good by even that low standard. Appropriate for the day of his ultimate triumph. "If my health permits it, I may. But I doubt I will be able to stay long, even if I do go. There is always work to be done, Peter. The bleeding edge is ever advancing and I –"

"– must rise to match it. Truly, Mr. Lumic, your work ethic is the stuff of legend," Peter Tyler finished. Wherever the man was standing, Lumic imagined that Tyler was making that odd bobbing half-bow of his, even though his employer was in no position to appreciate the subservient gesture. "Whatever your decision is, know that I will stand behind it, one-hundred percent."

"I would expect nothing less from my premier spokesperson. Lumic out." As soon as that call had
ended, Lumic started another. "Mr. Crane. I believe I will be attending Jacqueline Tyler's birthday party tonight. Arrange for a platoon of Cybermen to be delivered onto the property covertly."

Crane did not resist. It was not in his nature, which was one of the reasons why John Lumic had chosen the man as his second in the Cyberman project. That and his ability to stay bought once bought no matter what depravity the job might sink to. This did not prevent the man from resenting others in Lumic's employ, however. "Pete Tyler is a small player, barely important to your master plan. Why do you bother with him?"

John Lumic might have rolled his eyes if he was given to such juvenile expressions. "Because unlike yourself, Mr. Crane, there's something innately likable about Peter Tyler. Perhaps it's the stain of his background that makes him less intimidating. The elite have nothing to fear from him, the rabble see one of their own. Whatever the reason, they trust him without knowing a thing about him. I believe the exact term is 'charisma'."

And if not for that charisma, Lumic would have probably dismissed the man the moment Tyler had sent him that pathetic pitch for his 'Vitex' drink. It was pure stupidity, a snake-oil product made by a man without a spark of talent in anything but networking, but it was something the inventor could turn into a viable product; after all, who would know how to make a health drink better than a man who knew almost everything there was to know about keeping a body alive?

It was a small enough trade in exchange for a resource more useful than mere capital.

"And what is that going to count for after tonight, sir?" Crane asked.

Lumic felt his lip attempt to curl into what could have been a smile or a grimace. "Absolutely nothing."

"Let's try that again."

Mickey leaned back from the pile of cards that was lying on the grating that made up the 'floor' of the console room. "Look, I'm clearly not cut out for… what's this game again?"

Both of us were sitting on the floor, and this had been my second attempt at walking Mickey through a certain card game. Rose and the Doctor were occupied with each other, giggling over something or other while sharing the command chair. I didn't much care, partially because none of them were really high in my personal regard – the Doctor had been climbing in the standings as of late, which was more than I could say for Rose – but also because I had a ready distraction in front of me. And no limiter to keep me from multi-tasking or making smartass comments to my other selves.

"Blackjack," I said as I reshuffled the deck and let Zeke sync up to perform a bit of cardistry with the laminate cards as I focused on my explanation. Sleight of hand was his hat, not mine. Besides, this allowed him to enjoy the TARDIS's presence. "Object of the game is to get as close to a sum total of twenty-one points without going over or, in other words, 'going bust'. Number cards are worth exactly what they say, face cards are worth ten points each, and an Ace can be worth one or eleven points, depending on the rest of your cards. You start out with two cards and you need to look at those numbers and decide if the risk of going over twenty-one is worth taking."

"Sounds like you'd need a bit of luck to come ahead."

"Mmm. That's not an entirely unfair description, because – provided your dealer's an honest man – chance does define the cards you get. Of course, if you've got a sharp eye, a good memory, and a head for numbers, you could always take up card counting. So long as you're calculating it yourself
without any outside help, it's a legal strategy." Zeke and I broke out of a chain of Charlier cuts to deal the cards again. Our hand only came up to fourteen, through a Ten and a Four of Spades, which would mean drawing again. "On the other hand, there's always the chance of getting Eighty-Sixed if you pull the trick too often."

Ten of Swords, the prospect of destruction and the stress of being pinned down by a multitude of situations. Betrayal, slander, the promise of an intangible thing coming to an end. Four of Swords, a warning to take a break from anxiety else mental anguish will follow. The prescription of space to provide perspective.

"Do I want to ask what that means?"

"Eighty miles out of town, six feet underground." Only a quarter of my focus was on the game itself. Half of it was on what I was teaching Mickey. Another twenty-five percent was casually translating the cards into Minor Arcana. "Modern usage just means 'refused service' or to get rid of something or someone, but the original etymology is unclear and considered lost, though my favorite is the Las Vegas mob casino explanation. But this is a lesson in gambling, not English."

"Card counting's not the real trick to playing Blackjack; the trick is leveling your greed with your fear," I said, resuming the lesson. "Figuring out what you stand to lose, what you stand to gain, and if the risk is worth it. A man that has nothing has nothing to lose."

Well, theoretically speaking. The sassier alters and my own argumentative streak could probably think of a couple dozen other things a man without money could lose. His autonomy, his reputation, his life, various organs…

Mickey looked at his hole card and then back at his visible card – the Two of Clubs. Two of Wands, power and success in one's career, possibly because of a mentor figure stepping in to teach the recipient. Alternatively, the card predicted the ending of partnerships, usually because of friction, miscommunication, and a failure to appreciate the other party's goals and motivations. "Hit me."

I hit him with an Ace – Hearts became Cups as my brain translated the card. New possibility and intuition or one-sided, emotionally draining relationships leading to a need to withdraw. It felt like a soft hand from this angle, though I was taking care not to accidentally 'peek' at my opponent's hole card with any kind of enhanced sight or psychic ability. I drew a card myself – another Two, in Hearts again.

Harmonious relationships of all possible types, foretelling the creation of new bonds and the strengthening of old. Reversed… disharmony abounds, though all is curable through a little time and understanding.

'How apropos,' Zeke said almost in an aside. 'For Time Lords and tarot both.'

'You read into things too much,' I thought back at him before turning my attention back to Mickey. "And a man that has everything has everything to lose… in the card game at least. A literalist interpretation –"

"What about a man who has just a bit? Hit me."

"Well," I said as I flipped another card at him. Eight of Hearts. The abandonment of an emotional relationship, where the promise of happiness had long since lost its shine and the best option available would be to leave. Mmm, weren't we feeling a touch of prophecy today? "He's got to decide whether or not what he has is worth gambling. If he's lucky, he could win something of greater value. If he's not…"
Nostalgia, the act of taking joy from a past long gone. The promise of old connections resurfacing in the future, history casting light on the present, finding who you are through who you were. On the other hand, you couldn't move forward by always looking back. The memory cheats and a habit of self-hatred has long roots. Reaffirm your presence in the now by subtracting who you were and seeing what's left.

Also, it meant that I'd gone bust.

"Show me what's in the hole, Mickey," I said, revealing most of my collection of losing cards.

The boy grinned as he revealed a Ten of Spades, bringing his total to twenty-one.

Betrayal. The destruction of trust, usually through careless words and gossip. The end of something important; beliefs, relationships, careers, or a life. From rock bottom, there is no way left to go but up. A need to address and reverse negative thinking and certain deeply-held beliefs if one desires to grow. A self-fulfilling prophecy and the chance to buck the trend.

Wait… I checked my hole card again. How did a second Ten of Spades get into this deck?

"You're supposed to say something when you win, Mickey," I said, taking the cards back and going through the motions of shuffling again without giving away any of my growing concern. Something was wrong. The twinned card was just the most obvious sign at the moment, and I doubted whatever followed it up would be so unobtrusive. "Interested in another game?"

"Sure, why--"

The TARDIS lurched, cutting off anything else Mickey could say as we suddenly found ourselves in a human tumbler. The lights were flashing, the TARDIS was screaming, and gravity had gone from an absolute law to a mild suggestion like laws against jaywalking; technically enforceable but not really something worth bothering about most of the time, until something hit you. Like the ceiling. Or the console. And then the floor again before making a sharp detour into the wall.

"What's happening?" Rose yelled from where she had been pinned to the command chair. Ah, so she hadn't gotten the joy of playing the part of human pinball. Either that or she had a better grip than initially assumed.

"The Time Vortex is gone!" the Doctor said as he tried to climb his way down the TARDIS's rotor and to the console. "Somehow – we've – fallen out – of the universe!"

I fell back towards the console, falling through the free-floating cloud of cards I'd dropped during the entire mess.

'It seems that we're playing 52-Card Pick Up now,' Zeke noted before I slammed stomach first into the rim of the console.

'Ow. 'I swear to god, Zeke,' I thought back at him as I drew on another self's power set to repair the damage. 'I'm going to use up a summon charge just so I can push you off a real cliff.'

'You are aware I am capable of turning into a bird even without the benefit of our pooled abilities, right?'

'It's the thought that counts, you kitschy lawn gnome, and it's one that gives me some damn good satisfaction,' I shot back as gravity started to skew again, pulling me upwards. I snapped out a hand
to the console's base and the TARDIS started drawing on me for power.

No Vortex, entering a universe incompatible with her existence… the TARDIS was probably taking everything she could get.

'She wouldn't –'

'I KNOW!' I snapped back to Zeke. She needed power? I'd give her power. I dug out a chunk of time dragon out of my shared soul and pushed it through our connection just as the Doctor managed to grab the lever he'd been reaching for.

The console exploded into a shower of sparks and smoke right as gravity reasserted itself, leaving the Doctor to flip over the controls and onto the grating, Mickey Smith to unpeel himself from the wall, and my body to introduce itself the floor yet again… this time back first.

Something – oxygen masks or Chameleon Arch set ups – dropped from the ceiling almost as an afterthought, the squeaking sound of rubber cords stretching and contracting the only accompaniment to the sizzling circuitry of the TARDIS console.

Mickey whimpered and there may or may not have been a small whine of pain on my part. Just because I could heal fast didn't mean I had a natural painkilling response other than 'adrenaline' and 'ignore it really hard'. The fact that I'd just torn out a chunk of my soul and linked the TARDIS my personal power pool didn't exactly help me either.

But on the other side of that pain and drain, I could feel something I couldn't since entering the Doctor's universe.

Magic.

It was like being stuck with a cold for so long you forgot what it was like to breathe easy and then suddenly finding your respiratory system working as intended. Except instead of only my lungs, it was part of my essential nature was suddenly restored to what it was meant to be. And better than that, I could take the edge off of the drain from feeding the TARDIS by pulling on that ambient magic.

The TARDIS hummed weakly, still present despite the unfamiliar physics of the place she had landed.

I let go of the breath I was holding and allowed the back of my head hit the grating. Good.

Good.

They were in the Void. There was no other explanation for how utterly dead his time sense was. It registered the passing of time, yes, but that was a purely internal clock. Anything on the outside of that was a great black yawning nothing, the sort of abyss that invited madness the moment one made the mistake of looking at it.

On the other hand, he could still feel the TARDIS. She was nowhere close to her usual vibrancy, a flickering candle compared to her usual star, but at least she was there. Whatever she was drawing on for power was barely a trickle compared to the ambient energy of the universe, but at least it seemed steady.

So long as it stayed that way, there was no danger of his oldest and dearest companion dying just yet.
"What's wrong with the TARDIS?" Rose asked.

"No power… well, that's technically wrong. We've still got a bit of power. Enough to keep her alive, but not enough to get us anywhere, much less back to the proper universe," the Doctor said as he flipped through the various diagnostic programs that didn't require more power than they had to spare. There –

He stared at the readout disbelievingly. It didn't make sense. How could the TARDIS be drawing this much energy from something inside of her? It might not have been enough to take them anywhere, but still… it was an impossible amount of power to be coming from nowhere.

'Unless there was another chapter in the owner's manual that we skipped over before throwing it into that supernova…'

"So we call for help then," Rose said, her eyes wide in the semi-gloom of the console room.

"Rose, even if we were in the right dimension, that wouldn't work. There's nobody left to call," the Doctor said, dragging a hand down his face. "And if we ended up where I think we are…"

"Can you clarify that open-ended ominous statement?" Delaine asked from where she still lay on the floor, sounding like she was in pain. She had been thrown around a lot compared to the rest of them and didn't have the advantage of a Time Lord's durability to absorb the damage.

'So far as we know.'

'Shhh.'

"Well, there are a few possibilities, but most likely we've ended up in the Void," he explained darkly, pushing aside his immediate impulse to go check his companion over. If there was a problem, Delaine would tell him or the Doctor would figure it out himself. Just one of the many advantages of being a scary handsome space alien genius. "The space between universes. A dimension without time, light, sound, matter, or life."

"That's a bit much for describing London, don't you think?" Mickey asked from where he had his head stuck out the TARDIS doors. Before the Doctor could tell him to get back in the time machine, the boy stepped out into the…

The Time Lord blinked at the sight of a day-lit park outside. Not even an alien one either, but a very sterile Earth example that was more cement than greenery.

'So far as 'the great infinite emptiness' goes, this is rather underwhelming,' his Eighth said, almost sounding disappointed.

'What, were you hoping we'd get rid of him?'

'I thought that was yours and Nine's purview?'

The Doctor grimaced. That had hit a little too close to the truth. 'Well, not like that.'

Rose followed Mickey outside and Delaine gingerly peeled herself off the floor to do the same. It was barely any effort on the Doctor's part to catch up with her and match her pace, though how much he could attribute to her possible injuries or simply their relative heights was uncertain.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked quietly.
'So much for giving her space.'

Delaine jerked her head to the side, the vertebrae in her neck cracking in a quick series of loud crunches that put the Time Lord's teeth on edge. "Took a bit out of me, but I'll live."

For some reason, the TARDIS's light flickered in response to that.

The park outside was… well, it looked very much like an ordinary park in ordinary London. If not for the fact that the Time Vortex was still very much absent, there would have been absolutely nothing wrong with the picture in front of him.

The Doctor took a yo-yo out of his pocket and tested the gravity a few times. All normal.


'For us and the TARDIS, at least,' his Second muttered. 'One would assume that was the initial division between our universe and this one; a different set of physical laws and sub-dimensions.'

'That leaves the question of what other differences there are between our universe and this one,' the Doctor replied as he looked around. There was a subtle discomfort running through him that wasn't entirely related to the absence of the Time Vortex.

Whatever he was reacting to, it didn't mean anything to his companions, Mickey still grinning about being 'right' about something and Rose already distracted by a some kind of advertisement poster.


The Doctor took the newspaper from him. There was an odd texture to it that didn't fit with newsprint. No, this was almost glossy – wait. He'd seen things like this before. He flicked one of the pictures and it started to move, playing a bit of soundless video before it looped and started over again.

'Curiouser and curiouser,' his Eighth murmured as the current incarnation flipped through the paper, checking the various photos to see which ones moved and which ones didn't. 'This is bit Harry Potter for London, England, Earth, 2007, isn't it?'

Well, at least for the London, England, Earth, 2007 the Doctor was familiar with. No, those newspapers wouldn't have moving pictures – while the technology technically existed at that point in time, it was more than a few decades from being widespread enough for it to be featured so heavily in something as mundane a newspaper – or articles about rising stock in International Electromatics, which was some trick considering their involvement with the Cybermen invasion of Earth in 1966 had sunk the company completely.

A large shadow passed over them, making both the Doctor and Delaine glanced upwards. Ah well, that was a bit more obvious.

"Hmm. Mickey," the Doctor called to his newest companion as he threw the paper back into the bin. The boy turned around, but didn't look up for a second. "Yeah?"

Ah, that was still something he could work with.

"So this is London," the Doctor said, making a show of looking around.
The smug, self-satisfied grin was still fixed on Mickey's face. "Yep."

"Your native city."

"That's the one."

"Just as we left it," the Time Lord continued. Honestly, someone should have guessed that he was leading up to something by now.

Today, Mickey Smith was not that someone. "Bang on."

"And that includes the zeppelins?" the Doctor asked, casting a meaningful glance upwards.

Mickey's head jerked up just in time to catch the sight of a particularly large specimen of rigid airship passing over them, propellers slicing through the air with a soft chop-chop-chop as it sailed across the sky towards… France, possibly. Italy or further if they wanted something more 'exotic'. Sussex if the person dictating its course was infinitely less interesting than someone who travelled by zeppelin deserved to be.

"What the hell," the boy breathed as he stared. Rose was staring as well, but with a shocked sort of wonder. At the idea of 'her' Earth suddenly being more than what she was used to?

The Doctor clapped his hands. "Right, not your 2007, not your London, not your England, not your Earth. Not your universe either. Think of it like a copy of yours except –"

Mickey's eyes lit up with unexpected understanding. "Except something in history got changed and now everything's different. Like us putting down the American Revolution or the dinosaurs not dying out."

There was a beat of silence.

'Can somebody tell me what just happened?' the Doctor's Ninth asked. 'Because I could have sworn that we just heard Mickey the Idiot say something clever.'

"...yes. That's right."

"I watch a lot of sci-fi, read a lot of comic books," Mickey said with a shrug.

'Maybe we should expand our library a bit more. Hint hint nudge nudge.'

The Doctor resisted the urge to grimace. 'I'm not getting into X-Men for you, Eight. I don't care how many story arcs you've missed.'

'But I haven't finished Onslaught–!'

The Doctor tuned his past self out. While it was nice to have Eight's original personality mostly recovered, there were moments were he really, really would have liked to have his later, quieter persona. Even of that quietness was more a product of trauma rather than any true character development.

"Anyway, alternate universe, very dangerous, need to leave as soon as possible before something –"

"My da's still alive here," Rose said, directing everyone's attention to a poster.

'…goes wrong,' the Doctor finished silently, wishing for the second time in that month that he was a man given to strong language. At best, this incarnation seemed only a step above his Fifth in that
This universe's Pete Tyler was, naturally, older than his counterpart that had died in 1987. His hair had largely disappeared, the face had gained more wrinkles, and between the suit and the fact the man was the focal point of an advertisement for a…

The Doctor squinted at the ad, which seemed like it should have been moving from the fact it was rendered in LEDs.

…health drink that looked suspiciously carbonated for something bearing the designation, it was clear that this universe's Pete Tyler had made something of himself.

Rose had come to that conclusion as well. "He's a success," she said, mouth twitching up towards a smile. "All those daft ideas mum told me about and he managed to make one of them work. Took another universe, but he did it."

She reached out to touch the ad, only for it to jump to life right before she could touch the screen.

"Vitex. The delicious sparkling health drink sensation. Tested by doctors and loved by everyone who's tried it. Comes in Tonic Water, Lemon, Lime, Apple, and now Cherry," a generic recorded voice declared before switching over to Pete Tyler's infinitely more genuine voice, "Trust me on this, it'll do you a world of good."

Rose smiled, already enchanted by the image.

That needed to stop. The Doctor slid himself between her and the ad screen. "Rose. You remember what happened the last time you met your father?"

Mickey's eyes widened and Delaine looked irritated – nothing particularly new there – but Rose's expression merely turned mulish. "This is another universe, I can't cause a paradox here."

"You caused a paradox–?" Mickey began to yell.

"Almost. Our Pete 'corrected' it before it could grow out of control," the Doctor explained before turning his attention to Rose. "And just because the Laws of Time can't come down on you here doesn't mean that you should. This man is not your father. Your father is dead. He died when you were a baby. This man has no relation to you, no matter what he looks like!

"Yeah he does," the blonde insisted, pointing over his shoulder at the ad screen, still going through the motions of its sales pitch. "I don't care about which universe it is, that's my da –"

"No he's not," the Doctor interjected.

"– and you can't tell me how to feel about him!"

Delaine rubbed her temple. "Look, there's only two ways you showing up at your dad's place can go, and I don't think his wife is going to take the news of her husband's unknown lovechild or her daughter suddenly having a twin well."

The Doctor agreed. Jackie was not the sort of woman to just roll over for people she didn't want in her life or house.

Rose whirled around on her. "What would you do then? You think you're so much better than me, but if one of your parents had died when you were a baby, how would you react to a world where they were alive? Of course, considering the way you react to everything else, I doubt you would
even care about them."

Delaine stiffened, opening her eyes to fix eyes that looked almost gold from this angle on Rose. There was a sudden presence of danger around her, like Rose had just stepped on a landmine. Now it was a matter of disarming that mine before it decided to explode.

The Doctor put a hand on her shoulder quickly, drawing that barely contained fury around on him with the familiar phrase of 'don't touch me' already forming on her lips. The orange-gold he'd noted in her eyes remained at this angle, a near match to the color of fire. And like fire, just looking into them seemed to draw the eye and the mind into a half-hypnotizable state.

Funny, considering that his Fourth's were often described in the same way.

But he didn't need to look into them.

He just needed to headbutt her.

---

An unstoppable force met an unmovable object and found out itself bouncing off in a humiliating display of Newton's Third Law of Motion. Still, it was enough to make the unmovable object stop and think.

---

What the fuck.

I held my hand up to my forehead, more in shock that the Doctor had actually headbutted me than out of any pain. The psychic contact behind the action didn't even register as high as those two points on the personal confusion front, because he had pretty much bounced off of my mind. Not completely, no, but Eight bridging the gap long enough to ask me about 90's comic books was barely cause for concern.

If anything, the fact that it was him actually made me relax, even if it was mostly because he reminded me of the one person who could always calm me down. So much as 'looks, talks, acts, and feels just about the same' counted. And considering that I hadn't been conscious this long without Selby since we first met, 'close enough' combined with 'Pavlovian response' went a long way.

"Feeling better?" the Doctor asked from where he stood holding his own head. Considering how quickly his mind had bounced off mine… well, there was no question most of the suffering was from whiplashed.

"Eighty percent."

"What was that?" Rose asked. "No, really, what the hell was that?"

The relief of calm started to ebb as annoyance started coming back. Nothing like the burning rage I'd felt before, but I was definitely not as happy as I was a few seconds ago. "Sixty now."

The Doctor still looked half-disoriented. "Best way I could calm her down," he explained.

True, if not exactly in the way he suspected.

"By giving her a Glasgow kiss?"

I rolled my eyes. It's not like he used a legitimate kiss for access; if he had, he probably would have been in a lot more pain than he was now. "I've got a thick skull."
The Doctor winced as he touched his head again. "So I just gathered," he muttered. "Barely picked up anything from your mind, except…"

"Like 80% of everything that happened in 90's Marvel Comics? He asked nicely."

The Time Lord's grimace suddenly looked like it had become entirely unrelated to his headache. I hoped Eight was being very enthusiastic about his new reading material.

"...I've decided I don't want to ask," Mickey said. "But nobody's going to start fighting now, right?"

I threw up my hands in mock surrender. "No hatchets present, unless Blondie provides one."

Rose stuck out her tongue, but didn't throw any more fuel on the fire. "What's next then?" she asked the Doctor.

"For now? We see what I can do about the TARDIS," the Doctor said. "Maybe try to pick up some information about where we landed on the side, just in case we're stuck her longer than expected."

Well, considering that I didn't have the power to get the TARDIS across the transdimensional barrier on my own and the Doctor's own method took time to charge, I was going to go with Option B.

Chapter End Notes

Its chapters like this that make me miss having a beta, but I did my best to make sure everything flowed well. It'll probably be a while before I get the next done and uploaded, but hopefully everything will be up to satisfaction.

Yes, Lumic is being given a bit more of a backstory and motivation (dead brother, own degenerative disease). The scientific process involved in developing something as complex as his Cybermen and the associated technology is also explored; after all, it can take years to figure out how a design works best and I think it would be no exception for something as complex as a one-size-fits-all cyborg shell body.

"Last night I stayed up late playing poker with Tarot cards. I got a full house and four people died." – Steven Wright

Delaine and Mickey's Blackjack/Tarot game is all accurate... if taken separately. I'm not sure if using card games in divination's the best idea. It seemed cool as I was writing it. But if you're interested in straight fortune-telling, you can use a regular deck of cards in the place of Minor Arcana, though you'll have to decide between or combine the Pages and Knights of the Minor Arcana when you pull a Jack.

The fact that Delaine managed to pull out a second Ten of Spades despite only using one deck is supposed to be the only warning that they're about to cross into a universe where magic and 'irrational occurrences' can happen... though it was originally just because I forgot that Delaine's hole card was a Ten of Spades and gave Mickey the second because it fit with the prophecy motif and what he needed to get a 21.

The rest of the 'prophecy' game was left kind of ambiguous, seeing as I just started writing it as a straight game and it kind of developed into the Tarot readings after Zeke's comment on the Two of Hearts, just to make Delaine's comment of 'you're reading into
this too much' funnier.

The Second Doctor serial the Invasion is what the Doctor is referencing with his comment about International Electromatics, which was under the control of one of the major villains in that story. I kind of just pulled 1966 out of my hair (partially because it was a bullshit answer that worked, but it was also the year the Cybermen first appeared on the show – which is also referenced with Luminic's 40 years of work on his Cyberman project) because the UNIT dating controversy. It… probably doesn't work that well actually, but I don't think any numbers you could slap on any of the events would make that tangle of continuity better.

The Eighth Doctor is canonically (at least in the EDA novels) a fan of the X-Men and Transformers (also train sets). At least a few other incarnations of the Doctor seemed like they might be fans of comics as the Fifth Doctor (the only companion in the story was Shayde, who was kind of a robot? I don't have access to the comics in question, so it's a bit unclear) was watching a Spider-Man cartoon on the TARDIS scanner in one comic, the Seventh Doctor made a couple references to Spider-Man in the VNA novels (including quoting the 'with great power, comes great responsibility' line), and the Fourth Doctor apparently liked Batman enough to have a toy Batmobile in his pockets at one point, though considering how much stuff is in his pockets in the first place…

The Doctor can establish psychic contact through touch… or a headbutt (Eleventh Doctor TV story 'The Lodger'), though I think in this case it was more of a 'surprise this person so I can actually get an in' rather than a quick way to get his backstory across. In this case, despite being intended to make telepathic contact easier, it didn't actually work very well, but the Doctor lucked out in that one of his past selves just happens to be a near match for one of Delaine's closest personal companions (meaning one that she has had in most of the jumps with her as the primary personality) in the visual, audial, and personality departments. While I'm trying not to info dump too much too quickly, that companion is also the reason why Delaine has been wearing Eight's old clothes; because they make her feel comfortable in a space where her default is… definitely not that.
As Mickey and the Doctor moved around the console, moving around different pieces of cooked machinery while Rose sat outside with her phone, I collected my scattered deck of cards. The doubled card had disappeared, along with anything resembling a comfortable atmosphere.

After all, there is nothing quite as fun as waiting for the hammer to fall.

The Doctor might not have said anything yet about what had happened, but there was no way he'd missed what had happened in my head or how my control over the Rider had slipped. Even if nothing had caught fire, I could feel the beginning of a Penance Stare in the second before his head had slammed into mine, and that was a move that always came with a visible warning.

As to what happened in my head…

Well, the comics trade was the most harmless thing. An offer made on reflex. Just like the way I'd tried properly mindlinking with Eight for a second, which would have been disastrous if it had actually gone through.

I couldn't entirely deny that stupid, stupid snap decision was caused by a sense of homesickness that I'd been carrying with me since I entered this universe. Selby and I had been in some form of psychic contact for every single one of my turns of being in control – along with more than a few where I wasn't – before this one and the sudden absence of his presence anywhere in the world had destabilized me. Add in the fact that the Eighth Doctor was very mistakable for the sylvan psychic at first glance and the situation was like many that Selby would have pulled me back from…

Well, the whiplash from that reveal had curbed anything that could have properly been called an emotion beyond that misplaced sense of calm that accompanies anxiety. At the moment, I felt queasy, unsettled, and increasingly restless. Those things were marginally better than 'blinding rage', but it was only a matter of time before those uncomfortable neutrals started bleeding back into irritation and then built back up to another emotional explosion waiting to go off.

I wanted to be gone, to run where I wanted when I wanted, preferably in a direction away from any problems I couldn't figure a way out of. Living with the Doctor ironically didn't come with that option. I might not have protested nearly as much if I'd been stuck with a model that didn't grind my gears just by existing, but having my life go down new routes of bullshit was par for the course.

The one upside of this stupid situation was that if worse came to worse, I was currently in the best possible position for ditching the Doctor; a magic capable universe that allowed me to operate at the top of my game, the absence of a Time Vortex meant that the Time Lord's primary advantage for pursuit was out, and if I timed my disappearance just right, I could fake my own death during the upcoming Cyberman crisis with all the effort it took to not show up at a school reunion.

On the other hand, Ten took the 'deaths' of companions very poorly and while I couldn't say how bad it would go with Rose still by his side, anything that removed her from that dynamic – say, a certain Doomsday that would be not that far away if we were still affixed to some kind of canon timeline – would only intensify his canon spiral into darkness and depression. And there was that creeping suspicion that –
"Delaine, there should be a black Gladstone bag over there full of tools," the Doctor called over, interrupting my train of thought. "Care to bring it over?"

I shoved the nebulous sense of disappointment down as I slowly did what he asked. The fact that I could ignore any orders coming from that voice was godlike, but there was no point to not doing what he asked, especially not with the TARDIS's health at stake. Thankfully, the bag hadn't been thrown too far from where the Doctor had pointed and nothing seemed broken to Zeke's eye.

Second-hand memory told me that the bag was only marginally expanded on the inside, just allowing enough space to shove all the usual suspects. Any duplicates or tools required for more specific work were shoved in other locations… at least, in theory. In reality, the Doctor tended to organize things as well as the average high school student with ADHD. There would be the odd attempt at order, but usually things were left where they lay, ideally in a way that didn't permanently damage the item in question.

More than a few of the 'kind of important' things were probably in an unideal way.

Tossing the bag into the captain's chair, I turned to go back to the task of collecting the playing cards and trying to organize the information I had into something I could navigate.

Of course, this would be the Doctor's cue to demand my attention again.

"Astro rectifier, please," he said, stretching out a hand without turning around.

I felt my nerves tense up, ratcheting the heat in my lungs again for the second time today. No, being in here wasn't helping anything. I slipped the cards under the Doctor's Gladstone bag and started to make my way towards the door.

As I pushed it open, I could just catch the Doctor adding, "And throw in the Ganymede driver and the multi-quantiscope while you're at it. Thermocouplings are tricky things to deal with," before I shut it behind me.

"What, you blow up at the Doctor now?" Rose asked from where she sat on a nearby bench, fiddling with her cellphone.

I took a second to smooth down the stress tic I could feel forming on my forehead. No killing the companion. "I'm trying to avoid it."

"I don't get why you got so angry earlier, but it wasn't like I said anything."

"My mother's dead. I would consider that 'something'." Apart from the few universes where she wasn't, but that wasn't relevant to the conversation or my feelings about the subject. I'd grown up in the shadow of her absence in my first life and what taste I'd gotten of her in the life that followed just made the absence worse.

Rose looked stricken and for half a moment, I didn't feel an iota of dislike for her. She was just a nineteen year old girl who just realized how badly she'd messed up. "I – I didn't –"

I waved her off. It was easier to deal with the issue on my own terms, when it wasn't the sucker punch at the hind end of a chain of increasing annoyance. "No, I get it. You wouldn't have known. It's not exactly tattooed across my forehead." Though it was written in scars across other parts of my body, I didn't exactly make a point of showing those off either.

"How'd it happen?"
That was almost always the second question. 'How’d it happen?' When my scars were the start of the discussion, it was almost always the first. Either way, it all came back to the same story.

"Suicide." My right hand lifted itself to my temple almost of its own accord, but the sound of a gunshot was almost entirely me. There was no satisfaction in making her flinch and none in telling the story either. After so many times telling it, it was little more than reflex. "I got to watch. I was four years-old."

That was true, but it was only one fraction of it. I'd learned to keep those cards close to my chest until the situation required they be revealed.

The stricken look was back, this time cranked up to eleven. "I'm – I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I didn't know. I swear, I –"

"Most people don't. Point to you though, most people follow that up with 'so that explains why you're crazy'." A humorless laugh escaped through my teeth. No, that part had never been fun, even when the words had been thrown out as a joke.

Rose wasn't smiling. No, she'd settled with the proper response to finding out that someone had a horrible backstory; stunned silence and more than a little guilt for careless comments made.

I turned to watch the river flow by, the sunlight dancing over the dirty water like fire. I wondered what kind of expression she'd be wearing when she heard the rest, before discarding the idea. No point in fussing about it until it came up.

'You should clean it,' one of my alters said, casting a disapproving eye over the brown-grey water.

'As you wish, Sparkles,' I replied with a roll of my eyes before I opened up one of his specific powers and began to pull the corruption towards me. To an outside observer, there would be hardly a visual difference; maybe the water would look a little less muddy for a moment, but it would be dismissed as a trick of the light. More dedicated scientific observation might pick it up more clearly, but by the time they moved to check out any possible source, I'd be gone, along with the crystals of concentrated filth I'd removed from the Thames.

It would only be a literal drop in the ocean, but it would make this world marginally cleaner… probably just in time for someone else to drop some garbage in some other body of water.

After a few minutes of solitude, Rose came over to join me at the railing. "What was your mum's name?" she asked after a minute of watching me flick the crystals out into the water.

"Delora." From the Latin 'dolor', meaning sorrows or grief. A bad fit for a cheerful woman that became all too appropriate in the end.

"You were named after her?"

I flicked another pollution crystal into the water, listening to the hard 'splosh' as it broke the surface and sank. It might manage to dissolve in a couple million years, but even that frame of time felt unlikely. "No. Someone who was nice to her in high school. Better than picking a name out of a big book of dead people you happen to be related to, I think."

"What was she like?"

I shrugged before flicking another crystal in. If I squeezed them between my thumb and forefinger in just the right way, I could make a decent distance without using anything else. "Fun. Kind. A bit wild. I've got a dozen or more stories from people about how she'd skip school and cross a couple
state lines just because she could. They tried to keep her from graduating with the rest of her class for
that. Didn't stop her from getting through nursing school. She loved horses, but she had to give them
up after a while. Too expensive. They say I look a bit like her, but taller and… well.” I gestured
vaguely at the rest of me.

Rose gave me a sidelong look. "Weird?"

I wasn't even mad, because it was true. "Sounds 'bout right."

Splosh.

Another minute or two of silence passed, it's only punctuation the sound of Rose idling with her
phone, the water lapping at the sides of the walls around the river, and the irregular splash of the
crystals I was feeding back into the water I'd pulled their source material from.

The quiet beeping of buttons being pushed suddenly stopped.

"Oh," Rose said.

I looked over at her phone. "What?"

"I don't exist in this universe."

"Ah." Another moment passed and I stretched out my hand. "Let me have a try."

Rose passed over the phone, trading it for a couple crystals to throw into the river, and I punched in
my name and the surname I'd abandoned millennia ago. Credit to the Doctor, his 'superphone'
upgrade made Rose's bedazzled Nokia fly faster than most era-appropriate smartphones.

Splack.

As the information filled the screen, my eyebrows slowly rose up in an attempt to meet my hairline.
"I'm a missing person case and my father is being investigated for my murder." I cleared out the
screen before handing the phone back. It wouldn't do for anyone to find out that the 'me' in question
was only thirteen years old.

Splash.

"Oh. Sorry."

"Ha. Don't be. He deserves the trouble." If I had the time, I'd probably go over there just to point and
laugh at him from now until his conviction… and maybe for a while after that, unless he actually did
it. Then I'd probably just kill him. It'd be a more rounded justice than most people got.

Rose's fingers played over the pink rhinestones of her phone's casing nervously. "It's just… the
universe where my da's alive and successful is the one where I never was born. What if those things
are connected?"

I knew personally that exact thought wasn't exactly a friendly one to have bouncing around your
skull. The idea that your very existence came at the cost of someone's life… no, that was the sort of
thing that grew roots if you let it sit there.

"Well, considering that this universe has touch screen advertisements and zeppelins, I wouldn't put
money on it. I mean, most deaths are the result of random happenstance that could happen to anyone
provided they're standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Forget to look both ways before
crossing the street, pick up some bad sushi, get picked up by a serial killer while hitchhiking... maybe get brained by a toilet seat from a disintegrating space station," I said, leaning back from the railing. Playing the part of a sage voice talking to a troubled young person was easier than me trying to talk to Rose Tyler. Of course, the moment I stopped playing in the abstract, I'd start remembering all the things that were annoying about her. "So this universe just happens to be one where he fell on the other side of the odds. It's got nothing to do with whether or not you exist."

Rose didn't look like she entirely believed me. "Toilet seat from a space station?"

"That's what got her attention? "Okay that one was a total crib off of Dead Like Me," I admitted. "But I was making a point. Any given universe runs on laws, work arounds, and the roll of the dice. It's like Dungeons and Dragons but with less fun and more critical failures. Learn to roll with it." I turned to look at the street. No business that I could see, but they probably weren't far off. "Anyway, you want something to eat?"

"What?"

I jerked my thumb down the road. "I'm running off to find the nearest Chinese place and I'm offering to pick something up for you. Sort of a 'sorry for almost putting my fist through your face' present. So what do you want?"

"Aren't you still upset with me over the whole bringing up your dead mum thing? And didn't the Doctor give you the whole 'don't wander off' speech?" she asked as she started to follow me anyway.

I shrugged. "It's old news, I'm hungry, you're upset, and if we pick up something for those two, we can probably avoid getting yelled at. Everybody wins."

Rose's face twisted up in amusement. "Fine, but I think I should be the one to lead. It's still my city, even if it is a different universe."

I held up my hands in mock surrender as I fell into step behind her. At least this part of the day didn't entirely suck.

It had taken the Doctor ten minutes and ten years of his life shoved into an arton crystal to realize that he was short one companion and then another three to realize that the actual number missing was two. This was almost enough time to actually register the thoughts 'oh no, they've gotten into trouble' and 'they're trying to kill each other somewhere where I can't get between them' before that entire train of thought was sideswiped by the arrival of the two young women in question returning to the park, Rose with a tray of covered drinks and Delaine carrying an array of plastic bags.

"I hear you've got a wanton wantin' for wontons, Mickey Smith," Delaine called over, lifting up a bag containing a large styrofoam container and a couple of oyster pail boxes.

"What?"

"It's a – forget it, just take your fucking wonton soup." She thrust the bag towards Mickey, muttering under her breath, "This is why I should never try to be funny on purpose."

"That's why you left? To get food?" the Doctor asked incredulously as Delaine started rummaging through the bags for the next meal. "Whose idea was this?"
Delaine waggled the fingers on her free hand before shoving it down into one of her remaining bags. "Mine. I seduced Rose with the promise of free food, fortune cookies, and MSG."

"What was the last one again?" the blonde asked.

"Very tasty – ah!" Delaine lifted up a box. "Chicken and soy sauce chow mein…"

"That's mine," Rose said as she reached over, trading one of the covered paper cups for the box.

"And some Peking duck for Sonic the Hedgehog," Delaine said, pinching her drink in the crook of her elbow as she shoved one of the two remaining styrofoam boxes and one of the oyster pails into the Doctor's hands. "Mickey, you've got like half the sticky rice; make sure Rose gets a box."

"…Sonic the Hedgehog?" he asked.

"Spiky hair, red sneakers, inflated ego, always going fast, never shutting up?"

The Time Lord glanced down at his shoes just to be sure the color was correct. "Was it necessary to wander off in a foreign universe of which we know almost nothing for the sake of takeaway?"

Delaine shrugged. "Technically, I could have cooked all of this myself but then the whole point of eating out of disposable containers with crappy chopsticks would be lost," she said as she took a long sip of her drink. "Plus, great as my many great and storied powers may be, I can't pull an Irn-Bru out of thin air."

"...somehow, I'm not surprised by this development," the Doctor muttered as he opened up his box and started to poke at his Peking duck. "I thought you'd run off," he said as he skewered one particularly good looking piece.

The girl glanced over to the bench where Rose and Mickey were sitting, the two trading the odd pinch of each other's food as they talked about something or other. "Much as I'd love to, I keep finding myself in the role of responsible adult."

"Entirely overrated," the Doctor agreed as he lifted a mouthful of meat towards his mouth, only pausing a few inches before he could complete the action. "Hold on… do you think that you're supposed to be my responsible adult?"

Delaine spared him a dry look before returning to her meal, deftly dunking a piece of chicken in the thick lemon sauce that came with it. "You may have generally good intentions, but that doesn't change the fact that you're an idiot."

"Does that make you an idiot for sticking with me?"

"Shut up and eat your damn food."

Despite the clear annoyance coloring her tone, there was no flicker of the gold eyes the Doctor had seen earlier, nor the sense of an imminent explosion. There was just a young woman whose personality sometimes seemed too old for her body eating Chinese takeaway with all the grace of the average stray cat.

"Is there some sort of technique to eating that fast without making a mess?" he asked after a moment of watching her.

"Yeah, it's called 'Fifteen Minute Lunch Breaks' with a few hints from the school of 'Nobody Steals From My Plate'. One of the techniques for the last is palm impalement."
The Doctor slowly withdrew the chopsticks he'd been inching towards her box with the intent of getting a sample and went back to picking at his own food. "So what brought about this change of heart?"

Delaine picked up another piece of chicken, chewing it for a bit longer than strictly necessary before responding, "About what?"

"Rose Tyler."

She shrugged. "She found out something upsetting about this universe and, all appearances aside, I am capable of being nice."

"I never said you weren't," he replied. "What did she find out that was so upsetting?"

"I really think you should ask her."

The Doctor looked over to where Rose was sitting with Mickey, the two chattering about something or other as they traded bits of food. There wasn't an obvious sign of distress coming from the nineteen year old girl, but her usual brightness seemed a few shades dimmer than its usual sunshine glow. He closed the lid to his takeaway, sitting it down at Delaine's side before going over to the next bench over.

"Rose?"

She looked up. "Yeah?"

"Delaine said you found out something upsetting."

Rose's face fell for a second. "I checked the internet here," she confessed. "I never existed and Delaine's apparently been murdered."

Oh no.

Delaine quickly swallowed the piece of chicken she'd been chewing on. "Missing. It's only a murder once they find a body or signs of foul play. Ideally both."

"You're taking it well," the Doctor noted.

She shrugged as she reached for her drink. "Well, the guy under suspicion is the guy who was the most likely one to have done it, so I guess that's the best the local me or I can hope for. Even if he didn't, I like the idea of him getting screwed over."

"Ex-boyfriend?" Mickey asked around a mouthful of wontons.

Delaine snorted into her straw. "Please. Like I would pick anything less than the best."

In the back of the Doctor's mind, his Sixth took a moment to preen.

"Anyway," Rose said loudly, drawing everyone's attention back to her. "My da's a success and I was never born. I want to see if they're happier that way."

What. "Rose, that's a terrible –" the Doctor started to say.

Rose cut him off. "You said we were stuck here. I don't see what else we've got to do, besides have a look around."
"We're not stuck," he replied, pulling the dully glowing arton crystal out of his breast pocket. "Once this is done charging, we'll have enough power to get back across the void to your real home with your real mother."

"And how long is that going to take?" Mickey asked.

The Doctor resisted the urge to grimace.

"…about twenty-four hours," he admitted.

That confession was probably the mistake that set all of the trouble in motion.

It was easy for Mickey to remember the way to his grandmother's house, because for all the Doctor's talk of how this other universe was supposed to be so different from theirs, the layout of London hadn't changed a whit.

Oh, there were enough hints lying around to give away that this wasn't his native stomping grounds; armed soldiers standing at certain blocked streets, different business and advertisements – electronic and old fashioned paper posters –, and the zeppelins, of course, but other than that it was still London, England, Earth.

He spared a glance at the silver buds that some people were wearing in their ears. Something about them told the boy they weren't some fancy sort of wireless headphones, even before he saw someone press one before starting a conversation with empty air.

Then he connected the dots; those were like the communicators like they had in the comics and spy movies, except these 'EarPods' seemed to work more like cellphones than miniature ham radios you could just click to turn on.

Of course, that didn't mean other people didn't have regular cellphones; just walking through the crowd, Mickey was seeing a combination of everything he'd seen at home along with a few other, weirder things that bridged the gap between the handheld and the ear-mounted communications devices… that nobody seemed to acknowledge as anything more than a representation of how much money the owner had to throw around. Sort of like how rich people insisted on buying a new Benz every year, despite having a perfectly good car of the same brand in their garage.

Least some things stayed the same…

As Mickey rounded a corner that would bring him a few blocks from his grandmother's house, he noticed something reflected in window of a shop across the street. Or, more accurately, someone.

It wasn't the best view, but it was enough to give Mickey an idea of who was following him. A shortish white man with dark hair, wearing a hat and carrying a brolly on one of the rare unclouded days in London. Nobody Mickey knew in this universe or the last fit that description, which meant that there was no reason for this person to be following him.

Well, no good reason, anyway.

The young man picked up his pace, though taking care not to go too fast. The police always assumed the person who ran first was the one who did something wrong, and when it was a young black male from the council estates running away from a middle-aged white man who wasn't tall enough to reach the top shelf at Tesco's, they tended to pick sides even faster.
Was there another Mickey Smith in this world? It wasn't that hard to believe considering that there was another Pete Tyler running around. That a Mickey Smith who'd never encountered the Doctor would be a person worth tailing was a different problem.

Did someone notice the TARDIS landing? It wasn't something that seemed like a regular issue for the Doctor, but a big blue box appearing out of nowhere would be something that people would notice.

Noticing another shop with particularly reflective windows, Mickey crossed the street to it, maneuvering himself close enough so he could watch the reflection as he pretended to look at his phone.

The man with the umbrella had changed his course again, moving to cross the street as he had... but with a fresh wariness, like he suspected the young man had caught onto his pursuit.

Mickey started moving again, slower this time as he picked the long way 'round to his gran's house. Even if she wasn't really his grandmother, he didn't want to bring someone who might be dangerous to her doorstep.

Unfortunately, his plans for losing the stranger fell apart before they'd even properly begun, because as soon as he ducked into a blind alley, Mickey Smith found himself frozen in place. Oh, he could feel his insides still working around; his lungs bringing the oxygen in and taking the carbon dioxide out while his heart tried to figure out if beating fast enough would get it out of its owner's ribcage, but it was like a set of invisible vices had locked around his arms, legs, and mouth, locking him in place without any ability to call for help.

"You put on a fairly good chase, Mickey Smith," a very soft, very Scottish voice said from behind him, the sound of hard shoe soles accompanied by the occasional click of a metal umbrella tip hitting hard stone as its owner was came closer. "Good selection of tricks, too. If I didn't have a few of my own, you just might have lost me."

His pursuer finally stepped in front of Mickey, allowing the boy his first good look at the man.

Like Mickey's few passing glances had told him, the man was small; somewhere around the heights of Rose and Delaine while somehow having the right proportions to look smaller than that. Had to be about... forty, maybe halfway to fifty at the most, even if his outfit had probably gone out of style a few decades before anyone that age would have been born.

And beneath a pair of thick black eyebrows, were the most piercing set of blue eyes Mickey had ever seen. Like chips cut out of an iceberg's heart, freezing him in a way the invisible bindings around his body didn't.

The effect suddenly disappeared as the man smiled, an expression that seemed a fairly even blend of bland politeness and actual cheerfulness. "Pleasure to finally meet you," he said, sticking out a hand.

Mickey stared at it. There wasn't much other option at the moment.

The man lowered the offered hand. "Oh right. Unable to move."

He tapped Mickey with the tip of his umbrella and the invisible vices that had locked him in place disappeared, almost letting the boy fall the rest of the way to the ground before he got his balance back.

"What the hell was that?"
"Magic," the man said mysteriously before dropping back into the faintly excited authoritative buzz that Mickey was beginning to suspect was his normal way of speaking. "Or maybe applied telekinesis, a specialized tractor beam, or any other number of options operating at various levels of fantasticalness. It's your choice whether or not you want to do in the wizard, but everyone knows that a good magician never reveals *all* his tricks."

"...'fantasticalness' is a word?" Mickey asked before mentally kicking himself for his first question being about *word choice* of all things.

The man didn't look overly bothered by it. In fact, he managed to look even more amused. "Yes. And, being that I was a thesaurus in a former life, I would know."

"How's that work out?" Mickey fought the urge to kick himself in real life. The dumb questions just kept coming, didn't they?

"Rainbows. Also being shot by energy beams and hitting your head on the edge of a table for various, all admittedly somewhat unclear, reasons. Not particularly fun. But I believe introductions are in order."

The man tipped his hat and, tucking his umbrella under his other arm in an effortlessly smooth motion, gave a small bow at the waist. "Ezekiel Septimus Sterling. Zeke to my friends, but I will answer to 'Professor' if you *must* insist on formality."

Of all my alters, it was probably Zeke I trusted the most. Strange, considering that I'd never trusted the Seventh Doctor during my time as a simple viewer of Doctor Who in my first life, but we were both long past both respective points. He'd relaxed and improved his people skills, while I'd... gone the other direction, I guess, though there wasn't much to lose in the second department. But I did trust him to see things that I would miss or overcomplicate with my fucked thought process and reel me in when Selby was unable to do so. One could almost call the relationship 'symbiotic' and, in using a summon charge to send him after Mickey, I was now experiencing that sensation usually called 'buyer's remorse'.

"I still can't believe she'd run off like that," the Doctor was saying for maybe the fifth time since we'd started following the blonde's trail through the streets of the alternate London. The conversation was old, boring, and beginning to make murder look appealing, but thankfully it didn't require a verbal response, leaving me to have a good look around this alternate London.

While the majority of things were the same as in the last Earth, there was a distinct blend of technology that had never quite existed in the 'default' setting of 2007. Flip phones, smartphones, and Bluetooth ear sets were sharing the same street as Earpods, half the posters hanging featured moving pictures and another quarter were LED screens going through more complicated motions, and the shadow of zeppelins flying above occasionally blotting out the sunlight over us. There was a newspaper stand selling glossy prints with moving pictures, the titles largely ignored by a public that seemed half-glued to their more convenient electronics.

Somethings stayed the same I suppose, though how the Earpods were better than Bluetooth without grabbing and disassembling one, I couldn't say, though I could make a guess about what it was capable of from what I could remember of the episode.

Mind control. Memory hacking. How would that translate into 'consumer friendly product'? Mentally executable commands, straight electronic to brain interface?
Maybe it was packaged with a contact lens that was an improvement on smartglasses, allowing for a visual component for users to work with. That would fit with the relative advancement of technology and the Cybermen just over this world’s horizon.

I glanced back the other way, only to find that the Doctor was looking at me with a faintly expectant expression. Ah, I was supposed to give a response.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "My turn to talk? Good. Let's start off with the fact that I don't believe you, because I seem to recall a certain time travelling alien making some comment about a certain blonde almost causing a paradox 'the last time she met her father'… oh, maybe an hour or so ago?"

The Time Lord had enough decency to look sheepish for a moment, bringing my focus back to him. "Well, yeah, but she was still pretty new to the whole time travel business back then…"

My other eyebrow rose to meet the other. "Are you saying that nearly breaking the universe is an acceptable part of the learning curve?"

"No! It's just… Rose's father is very important to her. I should have guessed she would do this after seeing that advertisement anyway."

And with both my eyebrows already in the upright position, the only way left to look more sarcastic was to roll my eyes. "And that's why you should have used Reversed Scotty Time."

"What?"

"You've heard of Scotty Time, right?"

"Yes, it's the thing where you give someone an inflated number when they ask you how long you need to do something, so that way you look suitably impressive when you do it in a quarter of the time. Do it all the time," the Doctor recited in a bored 'move on with it' sort of tone. "I don't see how—"

"Reverse the polarity," I interrupted, resisting the urge to do a proper Third Doctor imitation only by a hair. There was still probably a touch of the voice around the edges, carrying the accent through clearly enough to make the Time Lord react with surprise.

"What?"

I exhaled through my teeth. Alright. "Do it backwards," I explained slowly. "Lie. Deceive. Twist the facts. Say 'oh, it'll only be a minute' when it'll really take an hour. Treat it like your date when you're fixing your hair. That would have least kept them in the TARDIS, rather neatly letting us avoid this goose chase entirely."

"Reverse the polarity." I interrupted, resisting the urge to do a proper Third Doctor imitation only by a hair. There was still probably a touch of the voice around the edges, carrying the accent through clearly enough to make the Time Lord react with surprise.

"What?"

The Doctor's hand went up to his head at the 'hair' comment, only to drop down to his hip as he assumed a faintly disapproving pose. "Lying? Delaine, I'm shocked that you'd think I'd stoop to such levels. Absolutely shocked."

Now that was a whopper, if slightly more sarcasm laden than the typical fib. "You subjected me to white torture because I said something you didn't like."

"Accidentally. Honestly, I only put you in the Zero Room so you wouldn't run away. The place is supposed to have a relaxing effect on people, but I guess it's in your personality to be contrary." The Doctor shuffled his shoulders under his coat before adopting a mulish expression. "Besides, that 'something' was very dangerous information. Had to figure out how you got it."
The eyebrow was back up again. "Did you?"

The Time Lord looked to the side and gave an awkward fake cough.

Idiot. I turned my focus back to the task of picking Rose Tyler out from the crowd. Couldn't be that many five foot five blondes running around in bright fucking orange… aha!

Rose was sitting on a bench not that far along, looking at her phone with a forlorn look. Great.

The Doctor seemed to pick up on my annoyance, casting what he probably thought was a reassuring look my way. "Don't worry about it," he told me before he went over to the blonde and fell into a hushed conversation that carried on for a few minutes.

I looked up at the sky, wishing for a merciful deity to throw a convenient lightning bolt my way. Unfortunately, I'd never found myself over popular with gods.

"Uuugh okay, I give up," the Doctor groaned loudly, drawing my attention back to the pair. "Give me the phone, I'll find the address."

Uuuuuuuugh.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, sorry for taking so long to come up with this chapter. I just got over a month long depression funk, had a family emergency pop up, legal stuff, and rewrote several sections of this multiple times because the results didn't quite work. The last section was a particular bitch until I made like the Doctor and just gave up. Could have been better, but I just couldn't find out how.

Also there were some other things that I will explain… right now.

As some people may have guessed by this point; a lot of stuff has changed since I started writing this fic. Stuff in my personal notes has shifted around, stuff that I've mentioned in this story shifted the line it was following, character dynamics (would you believe that Delaine was supposed to be one of the more average main characters of Chains Adventurous at first?). Which is why I'm backtracking to previous / early chapters and rewriting certain bits to make everything more internally consistent, ex: moving the magic testing from the end of Tooth And Claw to the beginning of The Christmas Invasion, because me establishing Delaine's affinity for and ability to sense magic (established kind of on accident in the last chapter) makes her not realizing that she's in an anti-magic universe until she tries to use a spell a total plot-hole.

This won't be a total rewrite, because I would like to move forward on this story rather than starting over again, but early chapters especially will be seeing some pretty big changes as I take advantage of improved characterization and understanding of the general mood of the story. The first six chapters have gotten this treatment and been reposted on this fic specifically, so you might want to check that out. The fact that I was able to do that over the course of… like two days should tell you how intense these fixes are (generally not very). Really, the first chapter got the lions share and then the rest was just spit and polish. I'll work on the rest when I get the motivation/time.
Delaine's reference to 'the Rider' should be pretty clear to anyone who's checked the bio I posted on the AO3 version of the series (which I am going to keep plugging until the end of time because it's going to save me on a lot of drama on explaining what she or any other alter can and can't do as it becomes more complete), but to those who don't visit that site, one of her earlier jumps was Ghost Rider.

To further clarify for those who don't read comics and can't sit through a Nic Cage movie, the Ghost Rider is… well, the usual recipe is to have make a deal with the devil and have a spirit of vengeance shoved into your body. Then you become a flaming skeleton at night/in the presence of evil/whenever the plot demands it, universally with some kind of cool ride at your disposal and almost always wearing leather. To get a better glimpse at the version I'm using, try seeing if you can find any of the fight scenes from Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance on Youtube. I apologize in advance for the weird camera work and editing choices they employed.

With regards to Rose's bedazzled Nokia (probably a 3120, given her original year of origin and likely price range); I remembered and saw it pointed out that she originally had a different phone that the Doctor upgraded, but I couldn't find a good shot of it in The End Of The World and I couldn't be bothered to rewatch half of Series One on the off chance there was a clear shot of it, so I just gave her something I thought would suit her; a pink, mostly invincible, era and budget-appropriate phone that is extra glittery thanks to her own actions. After all, she is a teenage girl and if I had been allowed to customize anything I owned, I would have done a lot of stuff too (not in pink though).

I redesigned the Earpods into less of a directly-wired to brain Bluetooth thing to something similar to those Necomimi Cat Ears… except more powerful and precise in their ability to read (and in turn, manipulate) brainwaves. It felt like a realistic leap in technology from smartphones to hands-free capabilities and it also would make sense that the ability to manipulate aspects of the brain could be used both to relay information and take control of motor impulses. I imagine the Cybermen themselves feature a more invasive brain-computer interface that allows for more precise translation of impulse to action.

I also wrote them as being a more class exclusive status item, like how really rich people used to be the only people with smart phones and everyone else had to settle for sidekicks and Nokias… which also builds into why there would be Cybermen walking around collecting people later, which wouldn't be a problem if everyone had Earpods like how it was implied in the original two parter.

Anyway, it might be another long wait until the next chapter (or not), but I hope you all enjoyed this one!
Mickey cast another sidelong glance at the man who was walking beside him. To look at him, most would have assumed that he was someone's barmy uncle or maybe a children's entertainer of some description, but under that bizarrely patterned knit jumper and the Panama hat, there was no questioning there was something dangerous and probably not human.

This 'Professor' – Zeke was too familiar for someone he'd just met and knew next to nothing about and the odd way the man had pronounced 'Ezekiel' had made Mickey almost entirely certain the actual name was something very different from the human name and thus unsuited for the human tongue – had something to do with either the Doctor or Delaine. It couldn't be both of them, because while Mickey was fairly sure that Delaine wasn't human, the Doctor definitely thought she was. That might have been a cue for the council estates boy to revise his opinion, but Delaine had never pretended to be human. At least… she'd never pretended around Mickey.

Maybe that was a mark of respect. The girl did seem to like his company more than Rose's or the Doctor's. Rose, he supposed he could understand – his former girlfriend had never really been one to play well with other women, especially when they were anywhere around someone or something she considered 'hers' –, but with the Doctor, the dislike seemed different and not in a good way.

There was no way to miss the flinches, the way the brunette avoided physical contact with the Time Lord. Something had happened there, maybe even before that 'Zero Room' thing. Something that the Doctor hadn't realized was a problem, seeing as he kept getting up in her personal space despite all the times the words 'don't touch me' popped up.

"You're thinking very loudly, Mickey Smith," the Professor said, derailing Mickey's train of thought entirely. There was a look in his eye that seemed to imply that was the whole point of the comment. "Care to share with the rest of the class?"

"Just trying to figure some things out."

The man looked to the side, twirling his brolly around as he studied the shops they were passing. "Hmm, so long as you don't overcomplicate the matter. Twist your theories to fit the facts, rather than the other way around."

That was fair enough, even if the Professor's way of expressing the idea was probably a line that was lifted directly from a Sherlock Holmes story.

"So why did you come after me?" Mickey asked, stepping over a bit of poster that had gotten stuck to the pavement at some point in the last week, if the fact it was only slightly faded from water damage was any indication.

The man shrugged. "A friend sent me. I'm sure you have theories about that as well."

"Sure. Course, the part I can't figure out is how Delaine would know someone from another universe."

The Professor let a mysterious smile ghost across his face. "Oh, you'd be surprised what sort of connections people can collect. Though I'm surprised myself; why didn't you suspect the Doctor?"
"Dunno. You just... *feel* more like her than him." Namely, like a person who'd crossed over into their universe from a dream reality, bringing a bit of that atmosphere with them; eerie, airy, alien, and mutable without any strict rhyme or reason. Despite having seen Delaine bleed red just like any other human, Mickey wouldn't be surprised if the next cut someone managed to land on her drew glowing blue ooze or sulfur smoke.

The Doctor on the other hand... he felt real. Almost *too* real, like rolling out of a warm soft bed and touching a freezing cold floor or coming upon the realization that once something happened, it could never be experienced for the first time ever again. While the true extent of his abilities and nature was beyond Mickey, there was no sense of the mercurial about those facts after they'd been established. He had two hearts, travelled in time and space using the TARDIS, and if he died, he regenerated into a new person bound by those same rules. Sure, the Time Lord was alien, but there was only the wonder of reality behind that alienness.

To compare the two would be like comparing the stars in a science text book to the ones in a fairytale; superficially similar and too massive to fully comprehend, but ultimately too different to truly be mistaken for one another.

Ezekiel – pronounced as if the 'k' wasn't sure if it was a 'k' or actually a 'q'– Sterling seemed to ride the line between those two extremes, but even Delaine did that at times, hanging onto the illusion of being an ordinary person whenever the idea suited her. It was just that the man in the question mark jumper seemed less invested in the 'human' part.

"Intuition's a funny thing, isn't it?" the man said, tracing strange and alien figures in the air with the tip of that strange question mark umbrella. Had to be a custom piece, Mickey reasoned; it was too weird to be store bought and too quality to be some sort of cheap costume accessory. It was unquestionably the mark of a man who took pleasure in confusing people. "The unconscious mind is good at sussing certain things out, but analyzing what led to that conclusion is a bit more complicated. Is something that comes across as unnatural something dangerous or something simply different?"

"Oh, you something of an expert in psychology?"

One of the Professor's eyes flickered and Mickey Smith swore that he was back staring into that stretch of space outside of the S.S. Madame de Pompadour again – that deep, deep darkness where stars shone like diamonds on black velvet and a hundred million things or more lingered a hundred thousand miles beyond the boundaries his understanding. Then, the moment was gone, leaving nothing but a deep brilliant blue that was *just* within the range of human possibility.

"You could say that," the Professor finally replied as he turned that piercing gaze ahead of them again. "But you are correct, for a certain value of 'expert' and a generous interpretation of 'psychology'."

That statement wasn't ominous at *all*, but before Mickey could comment on it something more immediately disturbing happened; about a quarter of the people walking in the street stopped dead in their tracks. The rest failed to respond to this with the same shock that Mickey was feeling, instead moving around them while picking their own cellphones out of their pockets and scrolling through their screens.

"Ugh, I'm so glad they passed that legislation 'gainst wearing those things while driving," a man on a cellphone muttered from behind a newspaper stand, apparently unconcerned by what was happening in front of him. "Havin' someone brake in front of you on account of some stupid download would make traffic more shit than it already is, don't matter if they have enough money to pay for damages."
"Yeah," Mickey said, resisting the urge to wave a hand in front of one of the frozen people's faces. Every one of them was wearing those EarPods. "Money wouldn't do much good if someone got hurt or killed."

The man behind the newspaper stand nodded, apparently content now in the knowledge that another person in the world shared his opinion. "Exactly. The advancement of technology's all well and good, but the lack of respect for human life that's come wiv it… It ain't worth it. All this cloning and gene-customization business… What's wrong wiv normal people?"

Before Mickey could come up with a response for that, the entire street burst out in laughter before resuming movement again as if they'd never stopped in the first place.

Before he could figure out what that was all about, the Professor had pulled his phone out of his hand and started going through the menu. "Ah, automatic download," he muttered as he flicked through the options before settling on a file labeled 'Joke'. "Two frogs sitting in a… this joke's not even any good," he said as he handed the phone back. "Probably carries a package that stimulates the parts of the brain responsible for laughter and amusement through the neurocomputer interface. Saves whoever puts these 'downloads' together the trouble of cultivating an actual sense of humor."

The fact that what pretty much amount to low-level mind control was so easily glossed over bothered Mickey a bit, but he slipped his phone back into his pocket without complaint.

"Oi, you!"

The man at the newspaper stand was talking again… or more accurately speaking, was yelling at someone. A homeless person by the looks of their worn and stained clothes.

"Shove off!" the salesman snapped, waving one of his rolled up wares at the unfortunate. "I don't need mites getting in these papers. Get back in the trash wiv the rest of your lot!"

Mickey watched the homeless man scramble off into an alleyway and tried to swallow down the discomfort that had lodged in his throat as they resumed walking again.

"Alternate world were everything's better… and it's got people like that in it," he finally got out after a block of walking. "I just can't —"

"Just because something is different, doesn't make it better or worse. It just means it's different," the Professor said, tucking a newspaper neatly under his arm. Mickey couldn't remember seeing the man pay for it or even pick it up, but it was unquestionably there. "And as to your second point… I can. If you care to direct your attention to those signs that say 'Working, Not Begging' plastered all over the city…"

Mickey looked. There were a lot of posters, mostly in sharp red, black, and white. "What's wrong with that?"

"Classic anti-homeless sentiment, though it's just as easily turned against the disabled and others supported by state welfare. People have the idea that words are harmless things, but even words have their teeth if you care to pay attention… just like these." The Professor tapped some spikes embedded in the cement beneath a window with the tip of his umbrella as they passed. If not for the man pointing them out, Mickey might not have noticed them in the first place. "Hostile architecture. Old concept, constantly revitalized by those who wish to keep their property free from poor people and pigeons. It's a bit early for you, but come 2012, your London will be the first to see Camden Benches; deliberately designed slabs of concrete a person physically cannot sleep, skateboard, or even sit on for long periods of time."
That's… "That's horrible."

"It is."

There was an abrupt and extremely loud crack from behind them that sent Mickey and a number of other people spinning to see what had made the noise. The cement slab beneath the window had been broken all the way through as if by some irresistible force, the spider's web of cracks too deep and wide to possess even a prayer of repair.

The Professor's smile took on a razor sharp edge that spoke of both deep satisfaction and an utter unrepentance in having done the act. "That's why I make a point to break them when I happen to come across the things."

Once he wasn't running in a pattern deliberately constructed to confuse, it was easy for Mickey to trace the way back to his grandmother's home.

It wasn't the best neighborhood, but it hadn't been in the council estate either. The sheer amount of stairs would have killed her within a week, even if she'd managed to get up them the first time. Number 1 Waterton Street had been her residence for most of her life and she'd had it memorized to the point where if he put a single piece of furniture out of place by so much as an inch, she'd know and smack him up the head for it.

Hard to think that he missed that but he did, Mickey thought as he stared at the door. If someone opened it, would it look the same on the inside as it did in his memory? Would his grandmother – no, this universe's *version* of his grandmother even be alive? After all, it wasn't like she'd been young when she died in 2002 and there were a dozen or more things that could happen to an old blind woman living in London, alone or not.

What if it turned out that, like Rose, there was never a Mickey Smith in this universe? Taking the thought further, what if his grandmother never existed either? Just a total nonexistence of an entire Smith family; an absence that nobody would ever realize, appreciate, or mourn.

For one, it would make the conversation that followed his knocking on the door a lot more awkward.

"Who's that there?" someone snapped, the finer details of their voice muffled by the door. Mickey barely had enough time to school his expression before his grandmother pulled the door open and repeated herself.

"My eyes might not work, but my ears still function perfectly," she snarled, managing to pin Mickey with a glare despite not being having sight to aim it. "You should be ashamed, picking on an old woman. I've got nothing worth stealing, but rest assured, I can give you a boxing you won't be forgetting any time soon –"

"Hi," Mickey finally got out.

The threats immediately stopped. "Is that you, Ricky?"

"It's Mickey," he corrected as some small part of him had a time machine so that he could go back and scream –wordlessly or not – at the version of the Doctor who started that whole 'Ricky' business in the first place.

"You think I don't know the name of my own grandson?" his grandmother scoffed before shuffling forward. "Now come here."
Mickey accepted the hug reverently, trying to fight back the tears that were prickling at his eyes. It wouldn't be right to cry here, not in public and not with the Professor standing just a few feet behind him. Still, it was his grandmother, someone he'd never expected to see again.

As soon as the hug ended, Rita-Anne Smith immediately reared back and slapped him upside the head.

Definitely his grandmother, Mickey thought as he clutched his ear. Nobody else he knew had that exact technique for introducing the palm of their hand to someone else's face.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"That's for running off without a word, you stupid boy!" she hissed. "Disappear for days, especially when people have been vanishing off the streets? Should hit you again for making me worry so much."

"People have been disappearing?" the Professor asked, reminding Mickey that there was a witness to this particular family reunion. He didn't seem annoyed or… well, there was a tinge of amusement hiding there.

"And who's this? Another one of your delinquent friends?" His grandmother's unseeing stare turned to pin itself on the highly-probable alien. "Hmm?"

"I've been called worse."

"No, no. It's… he's a professor," Mickey answered quickly, escaping a bold-faced lie by technicality alone. "I've been taking a couple lessons on the side."

That defused the tension immediately. "My grandson is finally applying himself. Good." Her head turned back to the Professor. "He a good student?"

The Professor buffed his fingernails on the lapel of his jacket. "He might not be the brightest knife in the shed, but I'd hardly call him the dullest either, and Mr. Smith has enough determination to make up the difference on his own."

That was unquestionably a compliment, even if the first part had started out rather backhanded and the metaphor had almost been mangled beyond recognition. As Mickey looked away in embarrassment, something caught his eye.

"That carpet on the stairs," he muttered as he saw the long tear where the old material had come loose. "I told you to get it fixed, Gran. You're going to fall and break your neck one of these days."

"Well, you get it fixed for me," she replied.

"I should have done way back," Mickey said, letting his shoulders fall under the weight of the reminder. He could have done it just as easily for his grandmother, back in his own universe. It would have just taken a call… no, not even that. A little bit of glue would have done the job and his grandmother – his real grandmother – wouldn't have… "I guess I'm just kind of useless."

"Now, I never said that," she said, reaching out to where Mickey stood to put her hand on his shoulder. "And I don't want to hear you repeating that sort of thing either. I don't care who told you that, but if you can get a professor of all people to call you smart, you are the furthest thing from useless. Now, it sounds like what you need now is a nice sit down and a cup of tea. You got time?"

Mickey smiled. "For you, Gran? All the time in the world."
"Oh, you sweet talker. The talk is just that, but it's nice to hear you so much more… energetic. Much better than the doom and gloom that you've been since you've started hanging out with those new friends of yours."

"What friends are these?" the Professor asked.

"Oh, a lot of punks running around in some dingy old van. Missus Chan told me all about them. Accumulating parking tickets and running wild through the streets; it's a wonder they can afford petrol for the thing, the way they're going about all helter skelter. My grandson is well rid of them."

There was a shriek of brakes and tires as an engine – poorly maintained and paired with a slowly, but surely failing muffler – was gunned. There was only enough time for Mickey Smith to think 'oh bollocks' before the sound of doors being thrown open confirmed what he'd been thinking.

Namely, that they were about to be snatched off of the street by someone who probably had guns.

They had guns and they had a hideout; an absolute mansion, which Mickey assumed they were squatting in because otherwise they'd have the money to take care of their van. Though that in turn raised questions on how they got the guns and other assorted murder goods.

They also had the idea that he was Ricky Smith, criminal mastermind and anti-government master of… something, who was very admirable and absolutely flawless in all ways pertinent to their favored conspiracy theory. Of course, this all fell apart by the time they returned to the secret base and found the actual Ricky Smith waiting for them, but the fact that neither of the 'spies' had been shot yet seemed like a fairly good sign.

On the other hand, Mickey could have very much done without the strip down and the ensuing poking and prodding, even without involving the 'tied to a chair' bit of the act.

The one who had pulled Mickey into the van, a blond bloke by the name of Jake, finally stopped prodding him. "He's clean, no bugs."

"So he's flesh and blood, but he looks just like me. That's not natural," Ricky muttered, crouching down to look Mickey straight in the face. They were practically identical, but Mickey imagined he could pick out a difference or two. Like the fact that his counterpart had ever so slightly more stubble and a long scratch under his left eye that, had it been an inch or so higher, would have left his counterpart wearing an eyepatch along with his natural scowl. "So it's not Cybus's work?"

"Lumic has his fingers in biotech, yes, but nothing on this level unless they've made some big changes since I left," the one woman – one Mrs. Moore – in the group responded. She was an older sort with a no nonsense hairstyle and the manner of someone well used to handling teenagers. "Alternative hypothesis; your father had a bike."

"Doesn't make sense that he'd have the same tattoo if that was the case though," Mickey's double said, prodding Mickey's upper arm. "Looks the same age as mine, too."

"In that case, you both have excellent taste in ink," the Professor said from the chair behind him. Mickey was certain that the man wasn't in a position to actually see his tattoo, but who knew. Maybe he had eyes in the back of his head or a neck that could twist all the way around like an owl's. Regardless of the man's visual acuity, their captors hadn't seen fit to strip him down to his skivvies, instead settling for taking his umbrella, hat, and jacket.

Ignoring him, Ricky looked up into Mickey's eyes. "And your name is Mickey, not Ricky."
"Mickey Smith. Dad was Jackson Smith," Mickey replied. The information he had of his father was old and scant, but so was any feeling he really had for the man who abandoned his mother and son. "Used to work at the key cutters in Clifton's Parade. Went to Spain, never came back."

"So, what? We're brothers?"

"Not like there's a better answer for it," Jake said with a hint of annoyance. Mickey couldn't say why the blond man seemed to hate him on principle, but he was hardly going to ask the question out loud.

"If he looked a little like me, maybe that'd be the answer," Mickey's counterpart said, finally breaking the stare. "But nobody is perfectly identical. Not like this."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," the Professor noted with all the sort of tone people reserved for general statements about the weather. "I know a doctor who once got shot by a man who looked perfectly identical to his successor."

"And you! I've got no idea who you're supposed to be."

"Ah… nobody of great importance," he said, an obvious lie to Mickey's ear. "I think a more interesting question is who are you?"

"We?" Ricky said in a tone of voice that was the warning sign of an oncoming dramatic speech. "We are the Preachers. The ones that know the Gospel Truth. We don't wear earplugs or carry cellphones, which means our minds are our own. You are talking to London's Most Wanted, but for us, Target Number One is Lumic and our aim is to bring him down."

"From your kitchen?" Mickey asked, casting a look around.

Jake moved forward threateningly. "You got a problem with that?"

"No, it's a good kitchen." Probably was bigger than every room in his entire flat back home put together and at least three times older than the entire council estate building.

"Anyway, Jake," Ricky said, interrupting the minor standoff. "You get the thing that I asked you for earlier?"

"The recon? Oh yeah," the blond said, pulling a camcorder out of an inner pocket of his jacket. "They went 'round Blackfriars gathering up the homeless like the bloody Child Catcher. Took four dozen or so. Maybe more that I didn't see, depending on how many of those trucks they have running about."

Mickey was lost, but not so lost that he failed to be disturbed at the connections. "What?"

His question was only partially answered. "They were rounded up by a corporation called International Electromatics, which is a subsidiary slash front for –"

"Cybus Industries," the Professor finished.

That brought everyone's attention properly to bear on the short man.

"How do you know that?" Mrs. Moore asked.

"I'm particularly well informed and even better at making educated guesses," he replied dryly. There was the implication of eyes rolling in his voice, even if Mickey couldn't see his face at the moment.

"The Cybermen just happen to be one of the things that I know fairly well."
"Gemini?"

"I'm more of a Leo, actually."

There was a lot more going on in that exchange than Mickey actually wanted to know, but it ended as abruptly as it began as the computer that Mrs. Moore had been typing on beeped. But there was one concern that seemed particularly important to voice aloud. "What's a Cyberman?"


Jake shot a glare at the back of the Professor's head, but the older man's tone was undaunted. "Organic being reinforced with mechanical parts makes for a cyborg," he said with a shrug that Mickey felt against his shoulders. "I don't make the rules."

That was probably quoting off of someone else, because Mickey definitely saw the Professor as the sort of person who made rules, if mostly of the irrelevant and irreverent nature because he got distracted by his own thought process somewhere around numbers three and four.

Mickey was also sure that the Professor was one of those people who could use poorly worded rules to destroy entire institutions.

There was a sharp intake of breath from the other side of the room. "Gemini's put out the word; Lumic's on the move!" Mrs. Moore said, grabbing a tote bag as she scrambled to her feet. "Got trucks on the move."

"So we follow one and see what those robots are made of," Jake said as he started collecting weapons.

"Arnickleton, traditionally," the Professor muttered almost too quietly to hear.

"So what happens now?" Mickey asked the Preachers. "You going to leave us tied to these chairs?"

Ricky broke away from the bustle of activity and gave the pair an appraising look before pulling out a knife. "Ever see the Terminator movies?" he asked as he sawed through the ropes.

"Of course." He'd snuck into a viewing of the second one when he was ten and ended up having nightmares about liquid metal men for weeks. Least his adventures with the Doctor hadn't seen them running into any of those, even if the clockwork sort and the unseen Cybermen weren't exactly far off the mark.

"Then you'll know what I mean when I say 'Judgement Day'," Ricky replied.

"We're all gonna to get killed by robots?"

"What?"

"Judgement Day is when Skynet nukes everyone."

"No– I meant– Terminator 2!" Ricky snapped. "They stop it! That's what we're doing!"

"Ah. Yeah, that sounds a lot better," Mickey replied lamely as he rubbed some feeling back into his arms and legs. He looked off to the side where the Professor was slipping back into his confiscated clothing. "…can I have my clothes back?"

"Nah, we'll kit you out with some of Ricky's things, seeing as you're the same size and we're carting you along on the mission now. Probably end up being dead weight, but it's always good to have a
"pair of extra hands," Jake said, picking up a couple extra rifles. "You know how to use one of these things?"

"No, but I've played Doom. Does that count?"

From the pained expression that took over the blonde's face, it didn't.

"What about you?" Jake asked, looking over to Mickey's companion.

"Oh, I'm not one for guns," the Professor replied, eyeing the weapon with more than a little disdain. "I find the right bit of pressure in the right place infinitely more useful. Though I won't decry or deny the usefulness of a properly placed explosive device either."

"Then what good are you?"

The man who'd paralyzed Mickey with nothing more than a thought examined his fingernails with a false casualness that should have sent every hair on the back of every neck standing straight on end.

"Oh, I imagine I have my uses."

The smile that followed that was easily recognized as the veiled threat it was.

The Doctor was watching Delaine carefully as they followed the other servers through the backrooms and kitchen of the Tyler mansion. Whatever 'good' mood she'd managed to put herself into earlier was gone; its remains splintering under the parade of what he was quickly realizing were rather potent indignities where she was concerned.

He'd personally thought the maid outfit was quite tasteful, especially when compared to some versions he'd seen over the years, but something about it had turned Delaine's manner brittle and spiky, which only made her annoyance with the other points all the more obvious.

"You weren't nearly as bothered by the prospect of this infiltration earlier –" he started to say before Delaine cut him off.

"Because that was before someone saw fit to put me in a fucking maid dress," she growled. Despite the outfit being a near perfect fit for her measurements, she still managed to make it look ill-fitting, probably because every fiber of her being seemed one solid second away from taking the 'coyote solution' to wearing it. Whether that would have been achieved through tearing the uniform off or attempting to chew through her own neck was left to the imagination. "I could have pulled off a tux."

That was unlikely, given this era's accepted standards of hairstyle and Delaine's shoulder length mane, but pointing out that fact felt somewhat counterproductive to his goal of keeping her emotional state level. Whatever it was that had possessed her earlier, be it a metaphysical parasite or wholly human fury, the Doctor didn't need it setting anything on fire.

As to the irritation of the other female in their party, Rose seemed more irritated with the situation rather than the outfit that accompanied it.

"Can't say I'm best pleased about this either," she said as they got ready to collect the platters that they'd be serving to the guests, all laden with glasses of champagne and fancy finger foods arranged in specific patterns that would be entirely ignored by those partaking of those edibles. "We could have come as Sir Doctor and Dame Rose. Instead, we're the hired help."

"Well, it's sort of hard to invent a knightship in a country that's been a monarch-less republic for over a century," the Doctor muttered. He might have had an amount of leeway with the laws of physics
that most would consider the territory of gods – at least in his home universe, where his TARDIS actually worked – but even the Last of the Time Lords had limits. "Besides, if you want to know what's going on, ask the wait staff. Or better, be the wait staff."

"What's that?"

"Lucy over there," the Doctor said, nodding over to a maid who had a black bob haircut and politely ignoring the look Rose shot at her, "told me that she heard the President was coming to this party on our way over. Thought I might do a little research while I had the time and that free internet access, found out that after Queen Victoria was killed during an assassination attempt in… 1879."

"The werewolf at the Torchwood estate?"

"Yep," he said, popping the 'P'. "That's one of the points of separation between this universe and our own."

"So, what?" Rose asked. "Zeppelins everywhere, Delaine's been murdered, I never existed, and you –"

"Oh, I probably never existed either. No Time Vortex, no Time Lords or TARDISes."

"All because Queen Victoria died before she was supposed to?"

"No. Though it's hard to predict the way the ripples one event will change a timeline, I'm fairly certain that the premature death of a human empress wouldn't rewrite the laws of physics on a universal level. Probably was different from the beginning," the Doctor said before reaching up to scratch the back of his neck with his free hand. "That makes the fact that there's so much symmetry between this universe and the one we're from despite the many differences very unusual. First time I managed to slip through the Void, there was a completely different planet where Gallifrey was supposed to be. Another time, I got trapped in a featureless plain without sound or any other living creature than my current companion and… well, something less friendly. Earth's existence is fairly reliable for some reason though. Never understood that."

Delaine coughed. "Yeah, that's weird."

"Anyway. Shouldn't have to explain this, but you do not draw attention to yourself. You're here to watch, not manipulate the Tylers," the Doctor said, giving Rose a pointed look. "They don't know you or owe you anything. Remember that."

"Why would I forget?" the blonde replied.

"Personal convenience, emotional torque, jealous pique," the other girl listed, dropping her voice to a whisper before adding, "Chronic stupidity."

"And you," the Time Lord said as he rounded on Delaine. "You're a maid. Service with a smile."

Delaine gave him a flat stare, her face a blank and unsmiling mask. The Doctor gestured at his own face as he plastered a wide and pleasant smile on as demonstration. "Smile."

She still wasn't smiling. Actually, if looks could kill, Delaine's could have rendered an entire species extinct.

"Actually, go with the thing from before," he decided quickly as it became clear that the requested
"smile wasn't in the cards. "Least nobody will think you're planning on committing murder the first
time someone makes a pass at you."

"Maybe I am."

"Yeah, don't do that either. Please." The Doctor straightened his shoulders as they approached the
door that would take them into the main foyer. "Alright, let's see how the better half lives."

They emerged into the main house and were met by a crowd of finely dressed people. None of them
spared so much as a second glance to maids and waiters wandering amongst them unless it was to
take something off of the platters the servers were carrying.

Which meant it was very easy to overhear things.

"Business is doing well, despite the steel shortage –"

"– storage facility in Antarctica, of all places–"

"Yes and no. July and I had a scheduling conflict, but December's issue just happened to be
twins…"

"New Germany, yes. Lovely place, really. Not at all as awful as the Americans make it out to be–"

"I'm only here for access to Tyler's other guests really…”

"Never can go wrong investing in zeppelin stock. Even if the market doesn't go up, they still offer–"

"– irritating woman. Only goes to show that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," one
person said as they grabbed a flute of champagne off of the Doctor's platter.

"Bit rude to say that about Pete's wife in his own house isn't it?" their conversation partner noted
with a brief glance towards the ceiling.

"Bah. They're barely together as it is. Tyler might have been a diamond in the rough, but Jackie's
proof that no matter how you dress them up, a chav will always be a–" the Doctor heard as he
walked away, taking care to step over the yappy little dog that had just materialized in his path.

While it was annoying losing the threads of interesting conversations, there was no loss in losing that
one. Besides, something more interesting had entered the room.

'Oh dear…'

It was an older man, hair oiled back and face stern, but that wasn't what drew the Doctor's eye. It
was what it was wearing.

The man was not conspicuous by his way of dress, unless one counted the scaffold of burnished steel
holding his body upright and together as 'clothing'. From his head to his feet, there was some metal
object wrapping around him, from the dark lensed Lennon specs and crutches that were the most
harmless looking of the prostheses to the steel box breathing apparatus hanging in front of his chest
like a dead albatross.

All in all, the resultant image called to mind the first Cybermen the Doctor had ever encountered,
though he doubted that the Mondasians had ever had the thought to give their cyborgs a 'formal
wear' option.

"Ah!" Pete Tyler exclaimed, pulling out of the crowd to greet his latest arrival. "Mr. Lumic! I'm so
"I would not miss this night for the world, Peter Tyler," Lumic replied, his voice a toneless drone that still managed to sound like yelling.

Cognitively, it was easy enough to parse out that the breathing apparatus didn't allow for subtler modulation. In practice, the effect only served to make the hairs standing up on the back of the Doctor's neck rise further.

"Ah, yes," a deeper voice cut in. The President of this Earth's Britain stepped forward. "John Lumic. Father of the modern era of technology, the greatest inventive mind on the planet."

"High praise," Lumic replied, sidestepping the sarcastic undertone like an unwanted acquaintance. "A great pity that you refused my latest gift, Mr. President. I imagine it would have been the one that would most change the world."

The President's face went hard. "We both know why you were refused."

"Alas," Lumic replied, taking his own turn at sarcasm before he turned away, his crutches clacking across the marble floor while his leg and arm braces creaked.

As the encounter ended, the Doctor moved on, though his brain was more focused on the details of that conversation than listening in on anything new.

Now that had been interesting. A scientific mind that recalled both Davros and the Cybermen, who's mysterious project had been denied for just as mysterious reasons – likely none of them good –, and a more than obvious grudge between the two parties involved.

'I wouldn't be surprised if a platoon of proto-Cybermen showed up in the next hour,' his Fourth agreed, 'given that sort of theatric set-up."

'Unfortunately for your genre-savviness, we do not exist in a novel or television program and are thus not bound by the laws of literary convention,' Six replied, folding a set of imaginary arms.

'Are you entirely sure about that?' Eight asked.

'Yes,' several incarnations said simultaneously.

'Regardless of that,' the Doctor said in an attempt to rerail the mental conversation. 'How likely do you all think it is that something to do with Mister John Lumic will happen in the next few hours?'

They didn't need to agree for the Time Lord to know that the answer was 'very, very likely.'
I am also editing/rewriting earlier chapters as a simultaneous polishing practice and writing block breaker (among doing writing prompt fueled one-shots, which are being posted to my AO3). This might happen more than once, because I'm always improving my writing, but I'm trying not to get so tangled up in that that I fail to actually move the story forward.

Thank you for all your kind words following my breakdown. I'm in a much better spot at the moment and so have returned to writing. Hopefully I'll continue to impress you all.

This was a mostly Mickey based chapter, with some Zeke exploration, in which Zeke is a troll and Mickey hits closer to the truth than most people do without fully realizing it. Seriously, if you haven't looked at the Profiles I've been posting on the AO3 version, you're missing a bit.

Also, the Doctor unintentionally gets meta in his little section.

A lot of the anti-homeless stuff I put in here is real, actual fuckery that people do. I did a whole bunch of research on the subject and a lot of the earlier ideas for this chapter were a lot more heavy handed with it, but I realized it was taking up valuable plot time. Still, I think I sufficiently established the heavy classism in Pete's World (which is only like… ten to fifteen points worse than ours on a scale of one to one hundred).

I wrote Ricky as being a bit more like Mickey than how they were written in the actual episode, mostly so they can come across as people who would be mistaken for each other but still stand out as different; ex – Ricky using a lot of the same references and tangent styles as Mickey but being a lot more irritable and rough thanks to running with the Preachers. Ricky also almost got an eyepatch ;).

Arnicketon is one of the materials that goes into making a Cyberman, though the Pete's Universe ones start out with something very different.
Cutting Edge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I hated every part of this. The reason we were here, the outfit, the waiting, and the constant condescension and objectification were all things that I could have done without.

Did Rose Tyler need to see this 'verse's version of the Tylers? Not really. Sure, I could understand wanting some sense of validation, but 'understanding' and 'thinking it was a shit idea at every point in the conversation' weren't mutually exclusive actions. Everything after that decision I could lay at her feet, even if the exact plan for infiltration technically came from the Doctor. Her expectation of coming in as celebrities nobody had ever heard of was too stupid to actually work.

…I'd hold the dress against him though. There was no reason why I couldn't have worn a tux. Given five minutes and a knife, not even the excuse of my hair being too long could have been held against me.

'Whine, whine, whine. You should try serving it with the champagne instead of keeping it all to yourself.'

I slid in between two clusters of gossipy rich people. Very few of the people at the party were wearing Earpods. If that was a concession to the black tie nature of the event, the equivalent of turning cell phones off during a movie, or simply because the people they would usually be talking to were there in person, I couldn't say, but it would explain why Lumic had sent a group of Cybermen to the event instead of just taking over everyone in the first place.

'Seeing as you're all so clever, do you have any ideas on how to make this evening as unpainful as possible?'

'Punch a robot.'

'Already on the docket and anywhere from ten minutes to an hour off.'

'Punch a capitalist,' someone else offered.

That was tempting and not just because of the boredom. With the Rider back after weeks of being without its influence and years since I was last in the proverbial driver's seat – not that I'd ever really desynced from it when I was in control –, there was little to keep me from getting a proper 'look' at everyone around me and, once you had the ability to see every horrible thing a person has done in their lives, the impulse to start swinging was a little difficult to hold back on.

To be fair, most of the people here had casual sins; being accessories by inaction or the sort of offhand cruelty that most people committed and forgot thirty second after the fact, like cutting ahead in line or taking a parking space that someone who couldn't afford private parking could have used. Those sort of things could be glossed over easy enough.

A few others, though, were real pieces of work; willfully employing sweatshops, embezzlement, extortion, abuse of every possible stripe, fraud… oh, even a couple murderers in the crowd, that was nice. Maybe I'd jostle them so they'd spill their champagne, if getting a low level Penance Stare in on them was too much to ask for. Do a little telekinetic pinch on some sensitive nerve cluster, nothing more than what would come across as a perfectly ordinary random stab of pain.
Just as I was going to attempt a little remote activated karmic hotfoot, someone brushed shoulders with me.

"You look like you're having fun," the Doctor murmured into my ear as he matched my pace. Was that a touch of the Scottish brogue he used during the werewolf adventure that I detected? It was an improvement – anything was an improvement on not being reminded of Kilgrave –, but why was it there in the first place? "You holding up alright?"

"Ha. I haven't murdered anyone yet, have I?" I replied, breaking my focus away from my intended victims. It wasn't like I could really do anything now and getting angry at their continued escape from karma wouldn't help my primary goal of 'lay low'. "For future reference; if you ever make me do this again, I'm going to do you a violence."

He raised an eyebrow. "A violence?"

I showed my teeth in what was either an unconvincing smile or a very convincing threat display. "Just one. For the sake of it being memorable."

The Doctor didn't seemed bothered by the threats. Probably because he figured I wasn't going to hurt him. Which was true, but probably not for all the reasons he imagined. "Mmm. And nobody else is going to be done a violence?" he asked.

Oh, while I would love to do that, it just wasn't in the cards today. "I can think of a few deserving individuals, but I am more than capable of controlling myself," I muttered, casting half a look towards some choice assholes.

"I'm sorry."

My eyes flicked back to the Time Lord. "About what? I think that I've explained that I'm disinclined to hold you responsible for anything you didn't do."

The Doctor reached up to rub at the back of his neck. "I put you in this situation, didn't I?" he said lamely.

What did he think was going on? "I've been in worse," I said, brushing off his concern and then mentally kicking myself for giving him more fuel for it in the attempt. "How's blondie holding up?"

The awkwardness took a sharp turn towards sheepishness. "Ah… I'd say that her pride took a bit of a sting finding out that, er, this universe's Rose Tyler is in fact a little Yorkshire."

The opportunity was too good to let slip by. "Don't terrier yourself up too much over it," I quipped.

The Doctor managed to close his mouth before his guffaw could properly escape, though the sound that escaped wasn't much of an improvement; an incredibly loud snort cut short a few conversations as people turned to look for the source of the noise.

The Time Lord forced his face into a straight expression and the searching gazes skipped right over him before disappearing completely.

"I didn't realize puns were Kryptonite for Time Lords," I said.

This was a lie. It'd taken one week of enduring Zeke to know that, even with death hanging over his head, the opportunity for bad jokes and innuendos was one the Doctor rarely passed up.

"No, that would be aspirin," he replied. "I just happen to enjoy wordplay."
I rolled my eyes. "The corny kind, it seems."

"What's the point of being a grownup if you can't be childish sometimes? Besides, everyone knows the bad ones are the best," the Doctor grinned. "Anyway, anything interesting happen whilst you were wandering the floor?"

My flash of good humor flew away as I eyed a slick-haired man in a tuxedo from across the room. Sexual exploitation and harassment, blackmail, extortion, hired assassins on three separate occasions to eliminate 'inconvenient individuals' and dropped choice information to certain parties to insure the deaths of others for free. Completely unrepentant, the crimes hovered around him like targets I should have been taking shots at.

"Does the not-so-surprising discovery that a good third of the guest list are among the most disgusting individuals humanity has to offer count as 'interesting'?" I'd seen worse, but that was to be expected in my sort of lifestyle and, by the measure of most 'normal' people, my assessment was wholly accurate.

The Doctor followed my gaze before looking back to me. There was a concern there, faintly pitying and distinctly protective. "Someone bother you?"

I'm joined at the metaphysical hip to a being that can see every horrible underhanded thing they've done to any other person in their lives and a desire to see those wrongs returned in full. 'Bother' is something of an understatement.

"They are so… casual about their disregard for everything other than themselves. It's –" Enough to make me want to give them a taste of what they've done, except carbonizing people is the exact opposite of keeping a low profile. "– aggravating," I finished, carefully unclenching the fist my free hand had curled itself into and pulling my voice back to a neutral tone.

For now, I was only here to observe.

"The 'elites' of any given society tend to be that way. It's one of the reasons why I left mine," the Doctor said. He looked ready to say something else when something caught his eye and he switched tracks. "Anyway, I've lingered long enough. We'll talk more later. For now, behave… and keep an eye out for that dog," he murmured as he slid back into the crowd, his tuxedo proving just as good a camouflage here as a ghillie suit was in a marsh.

Not that such a thing could make me lose track of him, because I'd learned to see without my eyes millennia ago and through that lens, there was little chance of mistaking the Doctor for any mundane human. After all, willingly or not, the Time Lord had hurt plenty of people over the course of his lifetime and, while most of those hurts were the mild kind, some were the sort of sins that would haunt him for the rest of his lives.

And unlike the unrepentant slime I'd been looking at before, the Doctor was painfully aware of that fact, even if he'd never see it with eyes like mine.

The Doctor tried to shake the sense of eyes watching him as he mounted the staircase, following Peter Tyler's odd escape. He was practically invisible, no more remarkable than any other member of the wait staff. There was no reason for someone to watch him, not when he had yet to break the pattern he was supposed to be following.

'Yet that sense of being watched persists.'

He shoved that disconcernment along with the rest of him to the side as he evaluated the information
he'd gathered so far.

The economy of this world was relatively stable – at least from the point of view of the wealthy –, though certain parties were beginning to move in suspicious directions. The fact that all of those parties seemed to be tied to a single company reinforced that suspicion in his mind, but perhaps that was merely the paranoia of a Time Lord at work, though Lumic’s short-lived appearance made the Doctor loath to discard that suspicion so easily. Too many coincidences piling up in all too familiar configurations.

On a smaller scale, Rose had finally stopped following her father's counterpart around, though trading him off for this universe's Jackie wasn't much of an improvement. Still, the lack of screaming seemed a good indication that she hadn't done anything too out of line with his request for wallflower behavior. Probably still a bit miffed about the whole maid business as well, though it wasn't as if they had any other options.

Delaine… well, she clearly wasn't pleased with the situation either. Part of it he had figured out earlier – dresses clearly weren't her thing, either in the style itself or the sheer amount of skin exposed – but the subservient and often sexualized nature of the role she was playing chaffed at her just as badly, an aspect of the situation that he'd failed to appreciate until she'd left his question about someone bothering her hanging with little more than a general statement and swallowed complaint. The only good thing in that was that she was acting on her best behavior as requested rather than doing anyone that harassed her 'a violence'.

Mickey, on the other hand, was in the wind. Whether or not he would rematerialize was uncertain, but the Doctor had a feeling the boy would. Mickey Smith was… the sort of person who naturally fell into a satellite position, he supposed. Never the one to start a project, but quick to take up the work of another once inspired to do so. So long as nobody 'inspired' him while he was here, it would be easy to return him to his home universe.

The Doctor refocused as he watched Pete Tyler ascend the stairs. There was a sense of urgency around the man, like he was trying to sneak away from his own – well, his wife's, technically – party and, oddly enough, he was succeeding. Almost nobody seemed to notice his disappearance.

'Latent psychic ability on his part or lack of situational awareness on theirs?' the Time Lord wondered as he followed Tyler away from the crowd.

'Psychic doesn't need to be your answer for everything,' his Second muttered.

Upstairs, the crowd thinned out, taking the high class clamor down to an inconsistent hum of activity. Most of the entertainment and refreshments were on the ground floor, but enough guests had ventured up to the next floor that the presence of a waiter with drinks was entirely unremarkable.

Perfect conditions for snooping.

The Time Lord looked around an empty hall, trying to get a trace on his initial quarry. Pete Tyler was hiding something. Possibly something to do with John Lumic. If he could just –

The sound of a lock turning sent the Doctor scurrying backwards into an empty guest room.

Pete Tyler abruptly reappeared from a side room, eyes darting around for any signs that he'd been followed. Apparently satisfied with the empty hallway – and not even giving half a mind to the room with its door hanging open, how serendipitously careless –, the man bustled off in the direction of the party once more.
The Doctor made another quick check of the hallway – still empty – before sneaking into the room Tyler had so quickly vacated. There wasn't much in there to speak of; it was a small office type that would have been more appropriate for a small apartment rather than a mansion and it was outfitted as such, with a desk – easily unlocked and largely empty –, a filing cabinet – containing actual files, almost all of them boring, along with a few hidden flash drives that likely weren't –, and one laptop that Tyler hadn't bothered to turn off.

'Not very good at this whole secrecy thing, is he?' Four noted as the current incarnation disturbed the screensaver and discovered that the man hadn't even bothered to log out before making his exit. Perfectly daft, but the Time Lord wouldn't complain about the convenience too much. There was no call for the situation to be a plant, no reason why Tyler would suspect someone was spying on him in his own home.

'Unless there are events taking place that we have not been apprised of,' Seven added.

'Which, given our track record, there probably are,' the Doctor agreed as he accessed the Cybus corporate network. The design was crisp and clear-cut, with what little there was in elaboration being a sense of aesthetics that, while sterile, was easier on the eye than what the default settings on these sort of things tended to be. 'But I suppose we'll have unraveled the whole mess by the end of it.'

'That or the planet will be consumed by a supervolcano and we won't have to bother.'

'That happened one time.'

The Doctor slid through the various sections of the network, taking in every scrap of information. Blueprints, factory plans, mission statements, invoices… taken as singular documents, there wasn't anything to be concerned about. Just medical supplies and experimental science with the odd exploration into more conventional money makers.

But taken as pieces to a puzzle…

The Earpods, made to respond to exact brainwave fluctuations and mass-marketed to the public. Lab grown nervous tissue and organs, made to last longer than a normal human's at the cost of less sensitivity. Braces for every possible part of the body, wired into cybernetics that responded to brainwaves and pre-programmed motions. Blood replacements and ultra-compact iron lungs. Cold storage facilities all over the globe for the preservation of deceased individuals to be revived at a later date…

And no actual plans for anything in the business quarter past today's date. No shipments coming in, no shipments going out, no concerns as to profits or public relations.

"Because there won't be any need to bother with those things anymore," the Doctor murmured, closing out the computer with a calmness that was purely superficial. "Not after the Cybermen take over."

Separating myself from the party was ridiculously easy, but I wasn't surprised. To them, I'm just a server; a pair of arms carrying a platter on top of a pair of legs in a skirt. Utterly replaceable and completely forgettable until I do something outside of their expectations.

I gave a small curtsey as a pair of fashionably dressed – not politicians, too young and too pretty, not scandal mongers, not enough sin, and not old money, not enough history – celebrities accepted two flutes of champagne from my soon to be empty platter.

There are a few people on the second floor. If the Doctor was one of them – ah, and there he is,
heading back downstairs with a focused expression that implies he just found out something rather
dire. Well, he wouldn't be looking for me right away at least.

That meant I could get a little privacy and, given a little luck, make a subtle exit to do a little
percussive preventative maintenance. I slipped through the door that would put me on the perfect
balcony to do both of those things, only to find company.

Pete Tyler was standing out on the balcony, looking lost. Which was fair; his wife was ready to leave
him, the man who made him what he was doing despicable things, and he's been spying on that man
in the vain hope that the information he was sending out was getting to a party who could actually do
something about it. As far as reasons to despair go, Tyler had a wide range to choose from.

"Oh? I seem to be getting cornered by the wait staff a lot today," he said once he noticed my
presence. "You happen to know the blonde girl? Rose, I think her name was? What do you make of
her?"

Irritation welled up for a moment – why did everything have to come back to Rose Tyler? – before I
exhaled the frustration in the form of a light heat haze. Now is not the time to blow up, even if I have
had more than my fill of this… inanity for one evening. "I'm not here to think, I'm here to carry
things from one room to another and be an understated, yet tasteful accompaniment to the furniture."

And that didn't sound painfully sarcastic every other syllable for a sentence that was supposed to be
coming across as 'perky with a light seasoning of sass'. However, it wasn't my tone that got his
attention.

"You're an American?" Tyler asked. "If you had the money to come over, why're you working as a
maid?"

"I prefer the term 'citizen of the universe' and, as everyone knows, money comes and goes. I seem to
be on the tail end of a 'going' phase." I then made the switch to honesty. "If I'm perfectly frank, being
a maid wasn't high on my list of things to do before I die."

Tyler made a face that implied he knew what I was talking about before taking a sip of his
champagne. "Going to ask me how I got rich?" he asked after a moment of savoring the high-end
liquor.

No, because I know exactly how the game works. "You either got lucky, sold your soul for riches,
someone figured you'd make a good patsy, or any combination or the above," I answered. Ignoring
the sudden serious turn to Tyler's expression, I set down the platter on a table so I could focus on
looking out into the dark forest on the outsides of the estate.

The Cybermen were already out there. Not traceable by most forms of sensing I had – no hearts to
beat, only the bare minimum of original material retained to maintain structure – but they still made
noise. Not as much as the TV show had played – the earth was soft enough to cushion anything
remotely resembling a stomp –, but there was still the wheeze of hydraulics pulling their limbs
through old motions and the odd grind of joints assembling quickly and without care as to getting a
perfect fit. Unfortunately for my plans, I didn't have exact numbers. There had to be twenty at least if
they wanted to keep everyone herded together, but there probably wouldn't be more than sixty, that
would be overkill for a building of this size.

Of course, I thought as the first glimmer of steel began to become visible through the tree line, I
didn't know Lumic's mind. Maybe he was the sort that subscribed to excessive force, just to make
sure that whatever had crossed him was in no condition to do so ever again.
"What's wrong?"

Right. Tyler was still here. Just because my attention was on one thing didn't mean that everything else just disappeared until they were convenient again.

"Something's coming," I said.

He looked out into the dark. "I don't –"

Words would take too long to illustrate the situation, so I grabbed his shoulder and let him 'borrow' my sensory capability for a moment. His eyes immediately widened as he processed what I'd been looking at in the dark. As I let the moment pass and withdrew my 'gift', Tyler turned to stare at me.

"What – who are you?"

It was an unexpected show of manners, recognizing me as a person rather than a thing even after the illusion of humanity was disturbed, and it was enough to make me put him in my good books.

"Angrir. Dellingr. Raguel. The Rider. Whichever you prefer, though I guess 'the person who's going to deal with the killer cyborgs' is the most relevant to this conversation."

"Cyborgs." He looked out at the forest again, even though his own eyes couldn't hope to see anything beyond the vaguest outline of trees against the night sky. "Why?"

I glanced at him. "Why wouldn't I? If I don't stop them, it's not like there's anyone in the building that can." The Doctor, maybe, but he was a cerebral threat and not built for hand-to-hand scraps, and everyone else had read as flat-scan. If this universe had magic, maybe a few of them had more to offer than screaming, but I couldn't rely on someone else's 'maybe'.

I waved off Tyler and the tangent. "Anyway, you better get going. It's your wife's party, it's not like you can disappear. And when the Cybermen come… run. Take anyone you can with you. We'll do what we can to stop them, but there's enough that at least a few will get through."

"We?"

I didn't have time for lengthy explanations. There was only so many robots I could break in so much time without breaking the world around them. "Don't worry about it. Get."

"What?"

God I hate the language barrier. "Go. Away. Tyler," I ground out. "We both have things to do."

Ignoring whether or not he obeyed my order, I pulled a suit of armor from my Warehouse, replacing the maid outfit with fitted leather and metal in the Asgardian style. While not ostentatious, it wasn't particularly subtle either – halfway between motorcyclist and movie superhero – and it would only become more memorable with the next step in the transformation. Not to mention it was infinitely more comfortable than a skirt.

Jumping up onto the ledge of the balcony in preparation of a further leap, I exhaled a cloud of smoke. Yes, the Rider was right with me, itching to be let off the leash. It didn't suit us to take it slow, much less stand still while the world moved around us. We were creatures of action.

Still, there was still preparation to do before we could start moving.

I pulled on one of the others and a heavy weight landed on the railing next to me, the sound of nearly silent servos and wood splintering under the grip of steel fingers confirming what I already knew.
"Tsela."

"Aąʔ?" the Native American cyborg replied. The artificial voice box, likely designed for English only, made the Navajo nasal emphasis sound strange, but that didn't stop the old man from speaking his native language whenever he had the opportunity. Made sense, considering how long he'd been stuck not speaking at all, but it didn't stop his silvery hands from flashing through the same sentiment in sign language despite not needing to do so.

I never made a secret of the fact that I enjoyed mechanical work. There was a pleasure in making things work, in making lifeless material jump into motion just by building the right shapes out of the right parts. A good machine was the answer to a physical riddle – how does one lift what is too heavy for their hands?

Answer; make a lever and find a place to stand.

Tsela's cyborg body went far beyond mundane mechanics, even if I could trace familiar shapes within it. That was to be expected – after all, what was the point of making a life-long soldier into a machine if that machine wasn't in a shape his skills could be applied to? But there was no mistaking it for human.

It was, however, a lovely piece of work, even if he never let me tinker with it. Considering what he'd gone through and how many times his 'upgrades' had been consensual, I couldn't blame him. Still, I could admire it from afar.

Carbon fiber muscles and white artificial blood hid under a thin skin of Octocamo armor and sections of silvery plate covered the outer edges of the body, looking like nothing more than a little extra armor until they started shuffling themselves into different shapes that could do anything from plate an entire limb or scatter the outline of his body, when combined with the Octocamo, would make the cyborg invisible to everything short of a psychic.

The weapons – a sniper rifle across the back, a sword strapped to hip, and an antique Winchester rifle slung into an unoccupied spot between them by a handwoven three-point sling – were more ostentatious to look at, with turquoise and touches of old school Navajo silverwork popping up wherever they wouldn't be a hazard to grip or the integrity of the weapon itself. The only other sign of a human hiding beneath the steel chassis was the greying black hair that swept out and back from the face-concealing visor only to be tied in a close, minimum-nonsense bun.

The weapons were just as easily covered by the stealth technology as his body. The hair... well, it was rare for a person to see that part of Tsela in the first place, especially if they were on opposite ends of both the battlefield and the sniper's rifle, and if he really wanted to, he could rearrange the plates to cover it.

'I'd say it's going about as well as twenty plus cyborgs converging on an unprepared civilian target usually does,' I replied telepathically. Smoother, faster, and silent without room for misidentification. 'I need backup, you're good at cyborgs, and we're both fast.'

'All true statements,' Tsela thought back. His voice was more natural there; worn and superficially-soft, like sandstone smoothed over by desert winds. He reached back for the sniper rifle, sliding it into a ready position, already drawing a bead on the tree line while his finger rested on the trigger guard. Until he had a target, it would stay there too. 'Silent operations?'

'For starters. Take out as many as we can without alerting anyone in the house and, ideally, without alerting their controllers and panicking the civilians.' The last would be damn near impossible, depending on how well they were being monitored and no group of Cybermen operated without
some form of electronic guiding force in play. The only advantage we had in that was that this was early enough for this one to lack a proper command hierarchy. 'Once they hit the house, we can start the party for real.'

'Want Yooznah?'

'Sure.' While I wasn't a gun person, the advantage of range outweighed any dislike. The Winchester changed hands and, as I trace the turquoise flower embedded in the stock, I pulse just the lightest touch of the Rider's power through it. Just as good as incendiary ammunition without risk of damaging the heirloom weapon's beauty. 'Ready?'

'Ready.'

The entire interplay took perhaps five seconds at most, half of it spent on the exchange of the rifle. Then, we were gone, with the only trace of our presence a bit of damaged railing and an imprint on memory of one Peter Tyler.

The party was a buzz of activity. The murmured conversations, scattered interruptions of laughter, and the clinking of glasses and high heels were rendered claustrophobic and deafening by the acoustics of high ceilings and hard floors, which meant when all those things abruptly stopped, the silence that followed made Rose think that she had gone deaf for a moment before she heard a single pair of shoes walking down the staircase.

Her father – no, this world's Pete Tyler was standing there, a champagne glass in hand. There was a slightly odd look to his face, like he'd gone a few shades paler since the start of the party, but his voice hardly wavered as he made his announcement.

"Now, I know I'm not exactly known for speeches…" he began.

A polite titter ran around the room at that sentence coming from a company spokesman, either because it was such a patently false statement or because most of what Rose had seen was short clips and canned phrases.

"…but this is a special occasion and, as the host, I feel like it is my duty to be the one making this toast."

Pete looked up to where Jackie was standing on the second floor balcony, her hand on the railing as she watched her husband down below, and lifted his champagne glass.

"To the woman who has, bar none, held the greatest impact on my life; my wife, Jackie Tyler."

He looked back to his audience.

"I've shared over twenty years of my life with her," he continued. "I can't say they were perfect – after all, nothing really is – and I cannot begin to number the times that I should have been at her side instead of being at the office or the amount of arguments that could have been headed off if I'd just taken a little more care towards her feelings, but I can say that many of the days I've spent with her have been nothing short of fantastic and there is not a force in the universe that could make me regret a single hour of them, except for the fact that some of them weren't spent by her side."

He smiled, the expression gentle and earnest compared to the wide plastic grin of the advertisement that had set Rose on this quest in the first place. "She is a brilliant woman and I am proud to call her the love of my life. May she have as much happiness in her life as she has brought to mine."
Her mum's alternate almost looked touched by the speech, which was slightly disappointing because Rose was almost overtaken by it.

For all there were problems in the relationship – which, to be fair, was sort of a natural thing with her mum and people in general, Rose included, given her temper –, there was an undeniable love there. And, in another universe, Rose Tyler was the product of that love.

A hand on her shoulder interrupted her musings.

"Rose, where's Delaine?" the Doctor asked.

"You don't know?"

"I found you first," he whispered. "I – you haven't seen her?"

Rose thought back. "...I think I saw her go upstairs a while ago. Maybe three or four minutes before d- Pete made his speech?"

The Time Lord hissed. "We need to find her and get out. Now."

"What? Why?"

"Because –"

There was a series of loud crashes as windows broke, metal bodies tearing through the glass and wood like wax paper. The guests immediately fell to screaming, drawing back from the intruders as more of them appeared, herding the humans into the main foyer.

The Doctor pulled Rose behind him, using his body as a sort of shield for anything that might come at her. It should have made her feel safe, but in the face of these machine men, the skinny body felt awfully insubstantial.

Worse, there was a touch of familiarity in their design, something about the structure of the head, but Rose couldn't quite – wait. That 'old enemy' of the Doctor's in van Statten's collection of alien artifacts. It'd been a boxy, disco version of these robots.

"Doctor, what are they?" Rose whispered, her voice almost swallowed up by the screaming around them.

One of the machine men stepped forward before the Doctor could answer the question. "It is useless to resist," it declared in a loud, electronic voice. There was nothing to it to tell age, sex, nationality, or even emotion. A good fit for a face that had less expression than an electrical outlet. "We are stronger and more efficient and, unlike you, we can never die."

"What are you?" a man – the President the Doctor had pointed out earlier in the party – asked. There was a touch of fear in his bearing, but it was outweighed by an obvious... pity?

"We are Human 2.0," the machine man recited. "We are –"

"– the Cybermen," the Doctor finished along with it.

"They're people?" Rose asked.

The Time Lord swallowed and looked away. "They were," he said quietly.

A projector popped up out of 'lead' Cyberman's shoulder and a blue hologram of a man all bound up
"I suppose a remark about crashing the party would be appropriate," the hologram said in a dull, droning voice. It was a hair more human than the Cybermen's, but not by much. A small smirk seemed to play around the man's mouth, but that might have been an error in the transmission because nothing about him seemed to indicate any emotion at all.

"Lumic," the President hissed, looking ready to lunge at the flickering image, for all the good the pointless action would do. "I told you that this project was not to go forward –"

A Cyberman reached forward to grab the man by the shoulder, holding him in place.

"And who are you to deny progress, Mister President?" Lumic replied, enunciating each syllable of the title in the same painful style as the Daleks. "I took the derelicts, the castoffs, the abortions of society and uplifted them into something more than mere base flesh."

"You kidnapped them off the streets. Subjected them to inhumane experiments."

"And you didn't even care," Lumic said, cutting the man off. "Man is a wolf to man, Mister President, but a Cyberman will never betray his brother. Just one of many improvements I made on mankind. I have made them immortal, unstoppable."

"Someone will stop you, Mr. Lumic," Pete said, stepping forward. "The information is out there. Your Cybermen aren't invincible."

"Peter. How unfortunate. I was almost considering letting you live as one of my Cybermen, but your inability to follow orders… is not a value I wish to instill in my children."

"And as to the information you released… you do not think that I would share all the secrets of my greatest achievement with a patsy, do you?"

Her father reeled back as if struck.

"Don't worry," Lumic continued, unconcerned with the gob smacked expression of the man in front of him. "You won't have to live with your failure for very long. Goodbye, Peter, Mister President."

The hologram winked out and one of the Cybermen, the one that had taken the unofficial position of 'leader', reached for her da's face –

There was a bang, like a gunshot going off, and the cyborg's arm was simply gone, a dribble of white 'blood' leaking to the floor. It stared at the stump in what could have been surprise before its torso slipped to the side, revealing another clean cut slicing through its torso at a harsh diagonal angle.

And the thing – person? – that had done it was standing just behind where the Cyberman had been standing, a long curved sword – katana? – in shining metal hands.

Robot. Not like the Cybermen, except for the silver bits maybe, but the robot's silver was polished to a high quicksilver shine where the others were just sort of a dull steel grey. Also, it doesn't have a face. Just… uninterrupted mirrored silver where eyes, nose, and mouth should be.

All around, it was shorter, skinnier, and a lot more expensive looking, with every movement – especially when compared to the clunky motions of the Cybermen – as smooth as watered silk. Watching it take its sword and slide it back into its sheath – a boxy, high-tech looking thing that doesn't quite fit with the idea of a 'sword' in the first place – is almost hypnotizing, that's how seamless the action was.
Her father's mouth moved, like he was saying a name, but there was no sound behind it to tell Rose what the name was.

The Cybermen didn't know what to make of the arrival either. "Identify yourself," one demanded in its toneless shout, lifting up a hand.

"Naabeehó nishį́, Daaztsánée yigáłígíí nilį́́," the robot replied with a small bow as its hand slid into a firmer grip the hilt of its sword. The words were strange and, despite the TARDIS supposed to be translating any alien languages they came across, made absolutely no sense. "Doo dadíítsaal da níígo yooch’fíd áyiilaa."

The robot suddenly disappeared, the sound of a gunshot following its absence before three of the Cybermen fell to pieces, screeching as they fell to the floor as another at the back of the room was pulled out of a window by some sort of rope.

Immediately, the party fell to chaos, the guests running in every possible direction as the remaining Cybermen began to attack the guests, electrical currents jumping from their steel hands to kill whoever couldn't get out of reach in time.

Rose ran out of reach of the nearest Cyberman and crouched in an unmolested corner to try to pull together a plan. The Doctor had disappeared, Delaine was god-knows-where, her parents were somewhere, and she didn't know where to go from here.

So, while her brain tried to process the idea of escaping, she watched the brawl.

The robot seemed to fade in and out of vision like a mirage, sections of its body taking on the various colors of the room around it as it moved, but the sword flashing out to remove limbs from Cybermen sufficient reminder of its realness. By its side was another figure, seemingly less mechanical in nature, looking more like an armored motorcyclist than anything else, but that didn't stop it from matching the robot's speed. Dark knives would occasionally catch the light as their wielder twisted, using the chain that connected them as much as the blades themselves to disable and dismantle Cybermen.

Both of them had rifles – the robot's was long, black, and modern while the rider had an ancient looking wooden piece studded with silver and blue-green stones –, but it was the blades they were relying on for the fight. Somehow, that makes them scarier.

Together, they almost seemed to be dancing through the motions of some ultraviolent tango out of an artistic martial arts picture, never accidentally striking each other or the people around them – sometimes actually going out of their way to push or pull someone out of danger, though that didn't stop the people from running right back into it – and even going so far as to use each other as platforms to jump and roll over. Their similar sizes and fighting styles made it hard to tell them apart at times, especially when the robot decided to turn tuxedo black, but the weapons were as good as nametags.

Then, the motorcyclist lost its helmet.

How that one Cyberman had managed it, Rose couldn't say. Maybe the rider had head-butted it and ended up catching its helmet on something. She'd missed that bit, too slow to turn in time to catch the exact moment when it had happened.

But she was more than quick enough to see the burning skull that had been hiding underneath and the fact that it snarled before kicking a hole through – through! – the offending Cyberman's chest, leaving the cyborg to twitch on the floor while white foamy fluid drained from its body.
Then, the skeletal rider was gone again, twisting its knife through the steel 'ribs' of another Cyberman, bringing it to a stuttering halt, fingers twitching helplessly as its foe gutted it of wires and white fleshy webbing.

Rose didn't hang around to see what would happen next. She ran.

The corridors weren't packed, specifically, but there were enough people still standing to make it confusing and enough corpses to make the idea of slowing down ridiculous.

She turned around a corner that she thought would take her to the kitchen, only to run into a Cyberman. Before she could jump back, it had gripped the side of Rose's head, the palm of its steel hand pressed right against her cheek. The feeling of a building electrical charge raised the hairs on the back of her neck as her cheek began to tingle.

This was it. This was how she –

Right as the pain began, something black and blindingly fast kicked the Cyberman away with a thunderous clang, the cyborg crashing through a window down the hall.

Rose didn't wait to see what had saved her was. She ran down the rapidly emptying hall, trying not to focus on the burning that was the entire right side of her face.

She had to get away. That last encounter had been close enough but nobody was ever that lucky twice in the same day. Not even the Bad Wolf girl.

Suddenly, something tall and dark caught her, pulling her into a dark and empty hallway where the only lights were a pair of glowing golden eyes, like those of a cat in the dark, staring through her.

The skull-faced rider. The knives were out of sight along with the chain – had it lost them somewhere? The idea seemed absurd even before it finished crossing Rose's mind – but the antique rifle was still slung over its shoulder, the greyed and cracked wood with its silver studs and turquoise flowers a total mismatch for the hellish creature holding it.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Its voice was just barely understandable; a rumbling growl that managed to sound like a crackling whisper at the same time, while something that could barely be discerned as 'human' – or at least, human-like – hiding somewhere in the middle.

Still, for some reason, Rose didn't flinch as it reached for her face. As it cupped her cheek and ran its thumb over place where she'd been burned, there was a sense of warmth – the pleasant kind, like holding a freshly made cup of tea or curling up under a favorite blanket – as the pain eased and then disappeared completely.

In that moment, Rose Tyler felt absolutely, irrationally safe.

Then, the moment was gone.

"Stay out of trouble, blondie," the skeletal rider told her, breaking the spell as it pulled its hand away from her face. Then, as soon as it took a step back and, with a crack, it was gone. Instantly, as if it had teleported away. If not for the sudden wind that had followed it – that only happened when people ran – she might have called it that. But no, it had ran, faster than Rose could ever hope to follow with her eyes.

There was an uncomfortable sense of familiarity for a moment, like someone Rose could name had just walked over the site of her future grave.
Before she could figure out how running worked again, a hand – not steel, not bone – clasped around her arm.

"Rose!" the Doctor cried as he dragged her along behind him until she got back up to running speed. "Come on!"

A half-glance at a mirror distracted Rose as they ran out of the mansion. The burn wound that had been on her cheek earlier was gone as if it had never been there, leaving nothing but smooth unblemished skin behind, though the clear memory of pain and a bit of ash staining the area proved that the injury hadn't been just a figment of Rose's imagination.

It had healed her? How? Why?

The thought was shoved to the back of her mind as the Doctor pulled her free of one of the shattered windows.

Rose tried to turn back. "But –"

"We're not going back in there, Rose. If we go back in there, we will die!" he snapped back at her, pulling her away.

"But I need to save –"

"We can't save anyone!" the Doctor said as the screaming in the house turned from panic into pain. "We'll be lucky if we can save ourselves!"

He pulled her towards the woods, only for them to be met by a wall of marching Cybermen. The Doctor reversed, bringing them past the mansion again, where a few stragglers from the party had managed to pull themselves from the house. One of them was her father.

"Come on! This way!" she called back to them.

Only Pete listened, the rest running in whatever direction they could. Rose caught a glimpse of one woman running into the wall of Cybermen they'd just escaped, only to be lit up with electricity before being dropped to the ground.

How many people were dead already? There seemed to be too much screaming for how quickly the Cybermen seemed to be working, even with that robot and the rider fighting against them.

"Pete," the Doctor yelled. "Is there another way –?"

"The side gate!" her da replied, pointing in that direction.

They ran for it, Rose trying not to trip in the daft dress shoes she'd been given to go with the outfit. Somehow, she managed not to fall as they got closer to where the gate was…

And there was a van blocking the way, the headlights lighting up the night so brightly that Rose was blinded.

"Get behind us!" a familiar voice yelled.

Mickey? Had he come to rescue them? How –

The sound of gunfire and ricochets surrounded them, drowning out Rose's questions, but the the Cybermen kept marching towards them, not even the slightest bit inconvenienced for the barrage of bullets.
"Guns aren't going to do you any good," the Doctor said, the sound of something mechanical being pulled out of someone's hands and tossed aside accompanying his words. "Even base issue Cybermen are plated with inch-thick arnickelton, which, as far as anyone here is concerned, means 'bulletproof'."

The Cybermen surrounded them, leaving no gaps that they could hope to slip through.

"So what's your plan?" Mickey – was it Mickey? Mickey had never sounded that serious – snapped back. "Talk them to death or maybe let them feel bad enough about killing us that they drop dead?"

"No. There's only one way we're getting out of this."

The Doctor stepped forward.

"We volunteer for the upgrade program!" the Time Lord said, raising his hands above his head. "We're not resisting, there's no point in killing us –"

"What? What are you doing?" Rose hissed.

"Buying us time," he replied before turning back to the Cybermen. "We surrender and will go to conversion willingly."

"You are rogue elements," a Cyberman said.

"We surrender!"

"Anomalous anatomical structure detected. Subject nervous system too deviant to be converted. You are incompatible," the Cyberman declared, raising its hand up. Small arcs of electricity began to dance between its fingers. "Subject will be deleted from conversion pool."

Rose closed her eyes as tightly as she could, digging her hands into the Doctor's sleeve. If there was a time for a miracle, right now would be a great time –

The sound of a gunshot rang out, followed by the song of singing steel.

Rose opened her eyes to see the robot standing before them, almost nose to nonexistent nose with the Doctor. Its sword had stopped a breath short of cutting the Time Lord's face, the blade humming loudly from the lingering energy of the downward swing. Despite there being maybe less than a centimeter between the tip of his nose and the edge of the sword, the Doctor didn't blink.

The robot held it there for a moment as if staring through its eyeless mask at the Time Lord before finally pulling its weapon back, the silvery-blue blade sliding back into its sheath with a whisper until –

Click.

As if that small noise was their cue to react, the Cybermen started to fall apart at the seams. Hands fell free from arms, arms fell free from bodies, and torsos were cut apart… and the one who had caused it was barely paying attention at the destruction it had wrought.

"Cutting it a bit close, don't you think?" the Doctor asked.

"I don't know," an unfamiliar, softly Scottish voice chimed in as the sound of shoes and some sort of walking stick drew closer. "A stitch in time seems just fine to me."

The Doctor stiffened.
"I'm pretty sure that's not how that saying goes, Professor," Mickey said, sounding a bit more like himself.

"Not sure the old codger knows how anything goes," serious Mickey snapped back.

Wait. Rose turned around.

There were two Mickeys standing there, both dressed exactly the same though only one of them was wearing the right expression while the other wore a scowl. But that's not what the Doctor was looking at. Instead, he was staring at the little man with the brolly and the ugly jumper with an expression that almost looked like horror.

Chapter End Notes

Ayaya. That took forever to write but I'm largely satisfied with the result (the ending felt a little weak and the action a little hurried but I think I got a decent chapter overall). Anyway, sorry about the delay in updates. My life has been hectic overall (lots of medical and paperwork stuff, so much stress), writer's block has been hitting all my cylinders pretty hard, and most of my 'progress' has been in working on notes and revising earlier chapters of both this and the Pokémon fic.

Several sections of this chapter actually had to be rewritten (I think I've discarded at least 4,000 words) because they either came out too angst or too weighted in favor of one character over another. Originally it was the Doctor who ran into the Rider in the mansion and I went through four versions of that before realizing that it worked better with Rose.

I've got a decent (maybe 1/5 to 1/6) chunk of the next chapter filled out, barring any revisions, so hopefully there won't be such a long time between updates on the next bit. I wouldn't hold my breath on that one though.

Raguel is the angel of justice and vengeance. Figured they'd would be a good pick for a Ghost Rider.

Developing and writing Tsela has been… fairly difficult, both in that I'm approaching the subject as a white person who grew up in a town as white as cottage cheese and that I only have so much information to work with. Most of my information comes from Navajo websites and bloggers willing to share information on their culture, though a lot of the language comes from Wiktionary alongside the previous sources, and part of my understanding on the cultural front is that actually putting this information out isn't exactly a regular thing (a lot of what I find are familiar points being reiterated and/or given more context).

The last is probably because people who aren't Navajo like to put their hands all over the culture and make a thing out it without actually looking at it in any way that isn't 'okay so it's like [European thing that really isn't like the thing except in a really loose sense of the term] except Indian' – like what's happened with skinwalkers; the few stories I've seen about them that come from native sources online are very different – read; actually terrifying as hell – from the generic 'shapeshifter/werewolf' interpretations popular culture tends come up with.
There are a lot of cultural cues and taboos that I've come across that actively disagree with details I thought I had down pat in the first version of the character (which is being fixed here), so I've been trying to fix them as I find out more so the character is respectful. I do have fun researching things that I'm interested in (and this has been very interesting), so it's not something I consider a chore, but if any readers who know better (Navajo or Indigenous Americans in general) wish to correct any point I make, I'd appreciate the feedback.

I don't pretend to have a grasp on Navajo (hell, my grasp of English is a little funkadelic at the best of times and it's my first and only language) but whenever I'm working with a language I don't know, I try to do better than find a generic translator, punch in what I want, and assume that it's accurate (because usually, it isn't).

So, most of this is taken from what phrasebooks I was able to find online, including Wiktionary, which I really like for a lot of reasons (homophones and etymology is cool…). In doing this, I hope that the phrases are used in the correct context and grammar, even if I had to bullshit a little bit of it when my dialogue needs became a little too specific…

Ąą' – 'Well?', equivalent to 'How's it going?' in English.

Yooznah – he/she forgot about it. In context of fic – an 1873 Winchester rifle styled after the Forgotten Winchester (it's got a Wikipedia page, you should look at it), decorated with silver studs and turquoise. Alternative name – Forget-Me-Not. Not sure if it's a functional name for something, but it fits with the theme I'm going with for Tsela.

Naabeehó nishį́ – 'I am Navajo'.

Daaztsánée yigáłígíí nílį́ – 'You are zombies' is a bit more questionable on the grammar front, because while I'm 80% sure that I got the right form to make it second-person and that the first part does mean 'undead/zombies', I'm only sitting on an 70% certainty of getting the grammar right based on what little experience I have with the language. Still feels clunky but I tried.

Doo dadíítsaał da níigo yooch’ííd áyiilaa – 'He lied to you saying you would never die.' 100% on this one being correct because I found it on the Wiktionary page for yooch’ííd (which means falsehood or lie) in the examples of the word in various sentences. It was too metal not to use even if I have no idea why they chose that sentence out of every other possible chain of words.
Merry Weed, everybody! I give you a chapter after a small forever of silence! I've been busy with life and writer's block and stress and rewriting previous chapters and recalculating stuff... anyway. Onto story!

It was a good likeness. Too good.

Not only was the face, hair, and body identical to his Seventh self's, but the clothing was a near perfect recreation of that particular incarnation's sartorial style from the matched paisley hatband, tie, and scarf down to the question marked knit pullover – 'Why did he ever think that was a good idea,' the Doctor had thought to himself at so many different times – and the co-respondent shoes. The Panama hat and brolly were merely window dressing by that point, but even on their own they would have been enough resemblance to be troubling.

Altogether, the effect was quietly terrifying because the Doctor knew better than anyone else exactly what he'd been capable of in that incarnation.

As if picking up on the Doctor's discomfort, the man smiled at the Time Lord. It was one of his Seventh's favored smiles, the politely engaging one that said 'I know something that you don't that you won't like but that doesn't necessarily make me your enemy just yet'.

It was a warning and a reassurance in the same gesture.

The Doctor didn't feel particularly reassured.

'Seven.'

'I didn't do it,' his past self replied quickly. There was a sour flavor to his aura, like the presence of a doppelganger was somehow an insult directed specifically at him. 'If I forced a split timeline or duplicated myself, I would have made note of it and the circumstances behind it. And I recall doing neither.'

The Doctor admitted that, out of all of his incarnations, Seven was generally the one best at keeping track of that sort of thing.

'He might be a counterpart of ours for this universe,' Three mused.

'No Time Vortex, no Time Lords,' Four countered.

'True, but I wouldn't accuse this fellow of being human either.'

"All too right."

The Doctor's attention snapped back to the subject of his internal debate, whose polite smile had
taken a sharp turn towards Cheshire grin.

"You were thinking very loudly, Doctor," he explained.

'Telepath,' Seven hissed.

'Among other things,' an identical voice replied in the Doctor's head, wearing the same cloak of secretive smugness as the man sitting across from him. The man himself had merely tilted his head, allowing the angle and the dull light from the ceiling lights to change the nature of his expression for him. Or maybe, just maybe, it was the little detail of actual stars hiding deep in the depths of his eyes that brought the impact to the table.

Definitely not human and definitely not a Time Lord either. Was that better or worse? Considering his track record with those sort of things... worse.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced. I am Ezeqeel," the telepath said. "Professor Ezekiel Septimus Sterling. Zeke to my friends."

The Doctor pushed past his immediate reaction to 'Professor' and the barely hidden 'Seven' to focus on a less obvious slip.

Ezeqeel. If the Doctor recalled his human theology correctly, that was the name of a fallen angel and 'Watcher' whose territory was prophecy through meteorology or falling stars depending on one's preferred translation. A portentous and wholly appropriate name for an unsettling and unnatural being that, with only a slight change in emphasis, could be camouflaged as something harmless.

'Not entirely unlike Seven, then.'

'Stop it.'

The Doctor ignored the quibbling of his past incarnations as he focused on 'Zeke'. "I'd return the favor, but you already seem to know who I am," he said coolly.

"Oh yes. It'd be rather silly of me not to, don't you think?"

Yes, very much like Seven. Too much for the Doctor to even think about relaxing around him.

Before he could fall too far into trying to dissect the other's motives - though he could feel Seven picking up the slack there --, the doors to the back of the van opened and the cyborg twisted their way inside, the fingers of their hands and 'feet' tangling themselves in the webbing someone saw fit to tack to the ceiling before their owner saw fit to drop themselves down to the floor.

Now this was a puzzle the Doctor didn't mind focusing on.

The design of the entire system was clearly organic based, the cords of artificial muscle following the flow of human design, but there were touches that gave away that tendency as mere convenience. The feet in particular were a swerve from the standard, having a set-up that could switch from foot to clearly serviceable hand -- a feature to assist climbing? -- and back again without a moment of hesitation. The labels gave it away as human design -- or at least, human-intended -- but the technological curve was decades ahead of anything the Cybermen of this world would be able to produce at their preferred speed, even of they'd bothered tailoring their upgrades to their victims.

The singing sword at the cyborg's side was another curiosity -- perhaps the same idea as a harmonic scalpel applied to a larger blade? Clever and, in its own way, beautiful, even if it was turned towards violent purposes rather than anything worthwhile --, but the gun on its back was just the mark of a
soldier… no, not even that. A sniper. Soldiers at least were willing to take the chance that their intended victims could kill them back.

"We don't have any pursuers to worry about at the moment, especially with our third party bringing up the rear," 'Zeke' said after sharing a glance with the cyborg. "So Tsela figured he might as well come in from the cold."

Tsela. So there was a thread of familiarity there. How far ahead had Seven's doppelganger planned? How many other 'allies' could pop out of the woodwork? And where – and how – had he come by their acquaintance?

'Run this scenario with our own 'Professor' and you'll have the answer to question one,' Six muttered. 'As to the rest…'

The cyborg spoke in a language the Doctor didn't understand – and wasn't that an aggravating twist, considering that he was usually more than capable of translating anything he came across –, hands twisting through a similarly impenetrable sign language.

At least one of them made sense to 'Zeke' because as soon as the cyborg was finished speaking, he translated for the rest of the group. "He says that the road is clear until we hit the city. No road blocks and no ambushes that he can detect."

"And how much can he detect?" a blond man asked, holding onto his machine gun like it would actually serve some defense against the cyborg. "I don't see any eyes on that outfit."

The cyborg gave a distinctly annoyed roll of the head before the silvery plate obscuring its face slid apart, not as two, three, or even four separate pieces, but in a great shuffle that could have been twenty or more pieces – and how did that work? Magnets? Nano-machines? – that revealed the worn and clearly unimpressed face of an American Indian. The blue eye on the right side of his face was a bit unexpected, but the glint of a red lens hiding inside gave it explanation enough; it was another cybernetic addition. Why that one piece was designed to imitate a human's eye structure without actually matching the man's natural dark brown was a bit beyond him, along with the question of why that one part of the set-up was made in imitation of the live product, but the Doctor wouldn't question it aloud. Not when he had more pressing concerns.

"Bite my shiny metal ass," the cyborg said in English, the enunciation of each word clear and precise. The voice was still distinctly robotic and gave the Doctor an idea of how much of the man was still organic – likely only the head and enough of the spine for the technology to interface with properly, given how streamlined the overall design was. "My eyes work well enough to see how you were handling that machine gun earlier. Who gave you lessons, Tony Montana? You're supposed to do more than just spray and pray, and that doesn't involve doing the jitterbug on a mountain of cocaine."

The boy embraced said gun defensively at that.

The Professor, for his part, looked inordinately amused by the interaction. "Your old man ways are showing, Tsela."

The cyborg shot Zeke a flat and distinctly unimpressed look before his hands flashed through a short series of vaguely obscene sign language.

The grin was just a little too much like Four's to look right on Seven's face as he responded to the unknown jibe. "Anatomically impossible, temporally irresponsible, and not even remotely within my realm of interest, thank you very much."
The next signing was a crystal clear 'piss off'.

"Why do you keep signing if you can talk?" Mickey asked.

The old man rolled his eyes. "Spend a few decades doing something and see if you can drop the habit. Besides, it keeps my hands from getting rusty."

Ha.

"While I'm sure this is an ideal time for socializing, I'm rather more concerned with the killer cyborgs that we just escaped from," Pete Tyler said tightly before glancing at the killer cyborg in the vehicle. "No offense."

Tsela gave a shrug, clearly unbothered by the label.

"So what do these Cybermen want?" The boy with the gun asked.

"To assimilate the living, strengthen the collective, and destroy anything that doesn't fit in with their image," the Doctor recited. It was old hat, even by the third time he'd encountered them. Cybermen didn't change; they only perfected the same old pattern.

Pete gave the Time Lord a sideways glance. "You've encountered them before?"

"Yes." "Yes."

The Doctor and the 'Professor' exchanged glances before looking towards Ricky. "Let's just say that Lumic wasn't the first person to come up with the idea," the Doctor said.

"Or the last," 'Zeke' finished.

Somewhere in that exchange, Tsela had found a reason to roll his eyes. Considering the condition of the man, it wasn't hard to guess what that reason was.

"How do you know so much?" Pete asked.

The Doctor leaned back in his seat. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"I've seen cyborgs my former employer created storm my wife's birthday party for the express purpose of killing the President and held a conversation with what might have been an angel or a demon masquerading as a member of my serving staff in the last half-hour," the man replied dryly. "I think I'm fairly open to the possibilities."

Demon? "I'm a time-travelling alien."

There was a moment of awkward silence as half of the people – thankfully not the driver, though there was a sharp glance towards the rearview mirror – in the vehicle turned to stare. Neither the 'Professor' nor the cyborg were in that group.

"I told you that you wouldn't believe me," the Doctor said. "Now, what was that you said about a demon?"

"I said I wasn't clear on what she was, just that she wasn't human." Pete's eyes slid to the open doors as the sound of a roaring engine quickly caught up to the van. "And you could probably ask her yourself once we stop."

Against his better judgement, the Doctor looked out the back of the van.
There was a motorcycle, wreathed in flames and billowing black oil smoke to the point where he instinctively expected it to crash at any moment. Yet it still chased the van in an unerring straight line, the rider apparently unconcerned with the condition of its vehicle. The Time Lord was fairly sure it was the same black clad figure he'd caught glimpses of at the Tyler's mansion, though none of those glimpses had ever given him the impression of femininity. Maybe that was because Pete had seen what was under the helmet.

'But that wouldn't account for accusations of divinity…' one of his past selves muttered.

No, it likely wouldn't. And the view behind them was distinctly hellish.

"Ah, yes. The Rider," 'Zeke' said mildly, as if the sight of a motorcyclist out of hell was no more remarkable than the Sunday newspaper. There was a distinct emphasis on the word 'rider' that made it register as a definitive article. "A spirit of vengeance and justice. It's not an unfair accusation, thinking of it as a demon or an angel. One might even say that it's the truth."

Again with the touch of the esoteric mysticism. Whether it was a reflection of Seven's own cagey nature or a way of teasing the nature of this universe, the Doctor couldn't say for certain. He could, however, confirm that he wasn't pleased with it. Magic, much like the idea of ghosts, wasn't something he subscribed to. Anything he'd ever encountered that had claimed the title had either fallen under quackery, casual deception, or a massive misunderstanding of scientifically explainable phenomena.

Rose, for her part, was staring at the presumed 'demon'. Not in horror – not quite – but with a sort of wary curiosity.

"I hear you had a run in with the Rider back at the mansion," Zeke said before the Doctor could ask her what was wrong.

The girl swallowed, reaching up to touch the side of her face. "Yeah. It… they saved me from a Cyberman."

Had his other companion been lucky enough to receive the same sort of rescue? The Doctor hoped so, even if he knew that 'no' was just as likely an answer.

Seven's doppelganger gave a little smile, like he knew alone was aware of some secret facet to the situation. "Is it such a surprise that a stranger in leather might spring from the shadows to save your life?"

"What's leather have to do with anything?" Ricky asked from the front of the van as Rose redirected her stare at 'Zeke'.

"Don't do that," the Doctor warned.

"Do what?"

"You know what," he hissed back as the van began to slow. They were back in London, though nowhere near the primary thoroughfares. Those were more than likely blocked off, either by panicking civilians or deliberate blockade. Whether those would be placed by the government or the Cybermen didn't make much of a difference – in the end, the van was no longer an asset.

The other's expression might have passed for innocent if not for that spark of mischief glimmering in those blue eyes. "Do I?" he asked as he stepped out of the car with a jaunty little bounce, peering around the street with interest.
"You do," Tsela confirmed from where he sat inside the vehicle.

'Cheeky little bastard, isn't he?' Four asked.

'Shush.'

The street was small, empty, and poorly maintained, with cracks running through the asphalt at regular intervals. A few cars were parked along the sides and half the streetlights seemed to be significantly dimmer than the others. The chill wind that was running down the length of it, carrying plastic bags and bits of loose paper, didn't help with the tense atmosphere the night carried with it, though the relative silence spoke of temporary safety.

Hopefully.

As the rest of the group joined Seven's doppelganger on the street, the Rider joined them, stepping off of its bike with a fluidity that didn't quite mesh with the armored look, moving slow enough for the Doctor to evaluate it.

The Rider was shorter than the Doctor – though, he was quick to add to the thought as it stood up straight, not by much –, but that did little to diminish its sheer presence. Maybe it was the armored cyclist's suit or the absolute silence it moved with, but the fact that it moved like a predator, focus fixed entirely on what was in front of it to the point of ignoring everything else, was casually terrifying in its own way. A tiger in human shape.

Part of the Time Lord was screaming at him to run. Another was paradoxically heartened by the creature's presence. Why? He didn't believe in 'spirits' or 'ghosts'. And even if he did, why would he put stock in a spirit of vengeance?

'Justice.'

'What?'

'That Ezeqeel called it a spirit of justice and vengeance,' the Warrior said again. The words were measured and calm, but there was a low fervency buried there that the Doctor didn't quite like. 'Regardless of if we place its nature as magical or mundane, it still exists. Whether that is as an actual avenging angel, a tulpa generated by those who need such a creature to exist, or a sufficiently motivated human with supernatural abilities, we may not know, but we know exactly why it is here.'

If Seven's doppelganger wasn't lying about that. He honestly wouldn't put it past the little 'Professor'.

"Hell–" the Doctor jumped back as the knife materialized in the Rider's palm. Deft fingers twisted the blade back and threw it in the same motion, the Doctor turning to watch it sink into a Cyberman's chest. "Oh."

The Time Lord swallowed the last part of his attempted greeting. He hadn't even noticed it hiding in that alley behind them. Had it been watching them long enough to transmit their location back to its coordinator? How many others were in the area? And where had that knife come from?

No answers on any of those points were coming from the Rider, who had walked over to the felled cyborg to retrieve its weapon.

"Clean up go well?" 'Zeke' asked the Rider mildly, as if the other wasn't in the process of swiping artificial blood that had come from its most recent kill onto the pavement.

"Well enough. More alive than dead, a few heads unaccounted for." The voice was multi-layered,
the two or three components to it making it difficult to track the tone of its owner, though there was something close to human hiding between the far lines of furnace and gravel pit. The helmet turned towards Pete Tyler. "I couldn't find your wife anywhere."

Pete nodded stiffly. "But you did look."

A low incline of the head. An odd sort of gesture, but with the lack of facial features to supply the most common form expression, it made sense. "Yes. Best guess is that Lumic piloted anyone who was wearing Earpods to a collection point and had the Cybermen corral the rest." The Rider gestured at the approximate area on their head where a human's ear would be. "Jackie was wearing those diamond studded Earpods, wasn't she?"

"Yes. Mister – Lumic sent them as a birthday present." Pete grimaced. "More than likely for that express purpose."

It lowered its head. "I'm sorry."

The Doctor added that to the list of things he knew about the Rider. Sympathy indicated the ability to at least understand other's emotions, which in turn indicated a mentality that at least mirrored the human baseline.

It turned away, walking back to its bike. Every step, the Doctor noted, was a hair away from being perfectly noiseless. Not even its suit creaked, though the slightly molten look to its surface – impossible, leather didn't melt, much less bubble like boiling tar – accounted for that in its own way; it wasn't solid enough to creak.

"Wait," Rose said. The Rider stopped short of its bike. "Why did you help me earlier?"

Its head turned to the side slightly, like it was looking at the girl through the corner of its concealed eyes. "You were hurt."

"I don't know you," Rose pointed out. "There was no reason–"

"That's right, blondie," it said, its tone dropping the ambient air temperature by several degrees to something almost glacial. An odd contrast, considering its many associations with fire. "You don't."

"Raguel," Seven's doppelganger said. There was a hint of a warning hiding in his tone, like he knew where the Rider was apt to go if he didn't intercept it in time. That Tsela was giving the Rider a look of similar intent only reinforced the notion and the Doctor's suspicion that they all knew each other personally.

'Angel of justice, vengeance, harmony, and redemption,' the Doctor's Third noted. It fit with what the Professor had teased at, even if there wasn't anything remotely angelic about the figure in front of them. 'Also the archangel of speech, depending on the tradition, though I suspect that might not be the case here.'

"Zeke."

The 'Professor' flashed a small smile that the Doctor could almost call 'winning'. It carried none of the earlier danger along with it, apparently throwing it away the moment it was no longer needed. "Care to stay with the group?"

The Rider's head tilted to the side as it stared at Seven's doppelganger, who threw up his hands in the classical gesture of 'nothing up my sleeve'. That was apparently enough for the Rider to relent, posture relaxing slightly from the cold stiffness Rose's comment had brought to it, though the option
of a more involved telepathic conversation wasn't out of the question either.

Either way, there was more there than just mundane familiarity at work here. Not friendship – if the Doctor was strictly going off of Seven's example as the means to divine Zeke's motivations, there was very little chance of that –, but the three were friendly enough that the Professor's word alone was enough to placate the Rider's concerns and that insulting, occasionally obscene banter could be traded as freely as some people would trade comments about the weather.

That, the Doctor decided, was plenty of reason to keep an eye on all of them.

Mickey had a bad feeling about this.

Even without the knowledge of Cybermen prowling around, the fact that the streets were currently dead empty – not a good word, dead, but it fit – and without any sign of life beyond the occasional flicker of movement on the far side of a window or street in a city that probably hadn't been empty since someone had decided that there was going to be a town there was more than enough to unnerv e anyone. For someone who had lived in London for his entire life, it was an experience straight out of the uncanny valley.

Mickey glanced down a side road that, earlier that day, had been home to a military barricade. While the barricade was still there, the men guarding it were long gone, leaving an ominous absence behind them.

He was half-tempted to go back to his grandmother's house and check on her. He'd seen a pair of those Earpods on a table in her place, been told that without him – Ricky, without Ricky – she was all alone. The Cybermen might have picked her up already, done whatever it took to 'assimilate' her into their army – and the Doctor's vagueness on what that meant raised the hair on the back of Mickey's neck. If something could scare a near immortal alien that'd been banging around history longer than some countries had a civilization, getting into trouble the whole way, how bad was it?

"Find your gran?" Rose asked, softly touching Mickey on the arm. The unexpected contact, though harmless, was still enough to make him jump.

"Oh, yeah. She's doing well," he replied before looking down at the pavement. "Didn't get a chance to fix the carpet, but I was happy to see her. Well, after she slapped me upside the head and called me a tit."

The blonde gave a small giggle at that. "Yeah, that was her way. A good scold and then a cup of tea."

"I've got a question myself," the Doctor said, catching up with them before Mickey could fully ease into the largely harmless conversation. "Specifically about who you picked up along the way."

"The Professor?" Mickey asked, casting a glance at the man in question. He was slightly ahead of the group, conversing quietly with the Rider while Tsela seemed content to listen as he observed the area around him, umbrella spinning all the while. It was impossible to know what they were talking about, but Mickey figured that Zeke was giving Delaine – nobody else fit for the part of masked mystery person by his reckoning, even if how she managed to pick up four inch lifts.

The Time Lord nodded.

Mickey considered the question, did a quick count of his feelings towards all the individuals involved… and decided to lie, just a little bit. "Just started following me, I suppose. You know him from somewhere?"
The Doctor's expression turned a few shades darker. "Let's say that I knew a certain someone who was almost exactly like your friend more than a few regenerations ago."

"'Friend' is pushing it a bit," he replied. "But I trust him."

The Doctor made a face like he thought that was a mistake, but Mickey pushed on anyway. "So… what? Is he another Time Lord? Figure he's at least a little bit psychic."

"Psychic, yes, Time Lord…” There was another grimace. "…more than likely not, considering the physics of this universe, but that doesn't exclude outside interference and he's a little too much like the person I'm thinking of for it to be mere coincidence."

"Might just be this universe's version of –" Mickey couldn't quite account for why his first impulse was to say 'you' – he'd already figured out the Professor of one of Delaine's circle, whatever that was, so there was no reason to bring the Doctor into that thought –, but he caught it quickly enough say something else. "– whoever that person you were talking about was. Considering all the other doubles present."

"It's possible, if improbable," the Doctor admitted as the group went to turn a corner. "Still, I think you should be careful –"

The sudden presence of Cybermen, at least twenty of them, cut the conversation short. If luck was on their side, they could sneak away before the cyborgs noticed them –

"Halt!" a metallic voice called out almost immediately.

Well, so much for luck.

There was a moment where they actually obeyed the command, but really, it was just all the time it took for everyone to reverse direction and start running.

Mickey was going on instinct, tracing the pathways that would take him around to an old automotive garage that was almost always empty – if nothing else, it would be a decent place to hide and catch his breath before figuring out what to do next –, so it took a moment for him to realize that he'd managed to separate from the rest of the group.

'That's what you get for not paying attention,' he thought before throwing the immediate wave of anxiety into the background. So he'd have to recalculate his plan to include catching up with everyone again.

'Or,' another thought said as it snuck in. 'You could just… forget about that part entirely. Go protect your gran. Not have to worry about the Doctor or Rose Tyler ever again. It's not like they'll ever worry about you.'

It was tempting. It wasn't like he was really part of their group, really, they had made it clear from the beginning that he was a temporary addition at best – not Delaine, no, but one person out of three wasn't much of anything, even if 'two out of three' wasn't supposed to be bad – and he'd already planned on staying behind, if not here, somewhere else… but just running away from them without explanation or even a decent goodbye didn't feel right.

There was also the fact that if the Cybermen had somehow left his grandmother alone to this point, he might end up leading them straight to her if he went to her home.

So, that left this. Running for his life in the dark all alone in a city full of killer cyborgs.
Well, at least the city was one that he knew like the back of his hand, because that meant that he at least had a decent chance of getting out of the situation if Lady Luck hadn't set her face against him.

Shoes skidding on a bit of loose gravel, Mickey took a hard turn. There was an alley this way, one that split off into two directions. To go straight would be to end up at one of the Tube stations, but he was thinking of the garage from earlier, so he veered right instead.

About three meters down that way, he realized his mistake in assuming everything about this London's geography would be the same as that in his native universe.

An unexpected fence blocked the way to the street that might have brought Mickey to a place of relative safety, leaving him to swear softly as he calculated his options. Turning back wasn't one of them; the Cybermen had already closed off that end of the alley and were steadily making their way towards him. There was a ladder going up the side of a building a few meters back that went all the way up to the roof – and from there, Mickey could use what little parkour he had mastered to get the distance he desired – but getting to that required running a good distance back towards the killer cyborgs, so that wasn't much of an option either.

The fence in front of him… well, the gate might have been locked, but the chain-link metal was climbable, even if the bits of razor wire at the top and the fact that the whole thing was made of electrically conductive steel was a bit of a turn off. Still, it was his best shot and if – that was a very big word, if – he could get over it, it could buy him a minute or two. If he couldn't… well, there was no point in going into detail there, even if it was the most likely end to this situation.

Well, he didn't have a whole lot to lose compared to what he'd gain if he managed to pull it off.

Mickey started climbing, trying not to react to the sound of metal boots clanging on the asphalt behind him or panic when his boots slipped out of what he'd hoped was a sure foothold. A few more feet and he'd be clear –

"Delete!"

The electrical shock brought Mickey short as it stopped his heart and sent him falling back towards the ground. Still, there was enough time for him to go through a series of reactions. Surprise, indignation, frustration, and sadness followed by one question that he was so glad to have as a private thought.

Who was going to fix his gran's carpet now?

Abruptly, his fall was cut off by a pair of strong arms snatching him out of the air. As Mickey's rescuer landed, they immediately lashed out with a spinning kick, snapping the Cyberman that had electrocuted him in half like it was a piece of balsawood. Another impossible fast movement saw another losing its head to a well-placed rifle shot, which should have been impossible, given that the automatic rifles Ricky's lot had brought with them hadn't done any good in the same situation back at the Tyler mansion.

Fading out of consciousness as he was, Mickey Smith wouldn't hesitate to admit that he was impressed.

The world faded to black…

"-ickey? Mickey!"

And then came back with the sense that more than just a moment had passed. It didn't help that Mickey was laying on the ground with half of his body protesting in some way or another, but the
presence of another non-cyborg person was heartening, especially seeing as that person was wearing a familiar face.

"Whashappenin?"

"Good, I was worried I hadn't gotten to you in time," Delaine said, leaning back on her heels. Instead of the casual zip-waistcoat and half-formal coat she'd been wearing that morning, she was dressed from feet to neck in a metal-plated black leather motorcyclist suit – the same one that the Rider from earlier had been wearing, if Mickey wasn't misremembering the details. Right down to the helmet sitting next to her. "You were almost dead there for a minute."

Mickey laughed and the noise came out as a cough. That neatly explained why he felt like dirt. "I hear there's a pretty big difference between almost dead and all dead."

She cracked a smile. "Mostly dead is slightly alive. With all dead… well, there's pretty much only one thing left you can do."

"Go through his pockets and look for loose change," Mickey finished.

They both fell into laughter for a moment.

"Gotta say Mickey, I figured you'd be a little more awed at the grand reveal of the mysterious black knight's identity," Delaine said, gesturing at towards her face.

He would have shrugged, but his body wasn't quite up for the gesture at the moment. "I kind of figured out it was you under that helmet. Don't know anyone else that calls Rose 'Blondie', already confirmed that you sent the Professor after me… and even without that, I've seen you decide when it's time to get down to business; you cut a pretty distinct figure between the walk and the talk – well, the fighting. Like watching a crazy alley cat going at it."

Delaine gave him one of her lopsided smiles. "I can't even begin to understand how everyone manages to underestimate you, Mickey Smith."

"Well, I'm not that smart–"

"Don't talk yourself down. You're a smart kid; just because that smarts isn't from books doesn't mean that it ain't there." She smiled. "I'll tell you a secret; when I was growing up, everyone called me stupid. I failed so many classes it wasn't funny. Math, mostly, but I wasn't so hot at science either. Failed Chemistry at least once, managed to weasel out of Bio when I heard about the cat dissection thing, couldn't wrap my head around the different equations in Physics… Really, the only subjects I was good at were Literature and Art, and everyone knows that Art is almost always a free pass anyway."

She leaned back against the wall. "Didn't have many friends either. A few, but they were the sort that you pick up because you happen to be geographically close with vaguely similar interests. Weird kid without any talent or perks isn't exactly high in demand, you know? And even the few friends I managed to get didn't stick around. Soon as they got something better, they'd just pick up and move on without so much as a 'see you later'." A mirthless laugh escaped her mouth. "I remember the day when my best friend, Sarah – platinum blond hair, all natural by everything I could tell – turned around and looked me in the face just to tell me that she was moving on. That she'd 'grown up' and I hadn't. We were eleven years old and the only difference between us was that I was still reading comic books when she wasn't."

Delaine's head fell, along with her smile. "She never spoke to me again."
"I'm sorry."

She looked up, her lopsided smile making its return. "Heh. Don't worry about it. It is ancient history in the most literal sense of the term. I'm just saying that I am intimately familiar with what it's like being the butt monkey."

"…butt monkey?"

"American turn of phrase. Replace it with 'tin dog' for coherency purposes."

"Ah. Can't really see it."

She shrugged. "We all change with time. That's the way of life. It's just that some people have more time than others."

"And some people can change completely overnight."

"Time Lords are an… extreme example, Mickey, and you're thinking of the most unorthodox one to ever escape Gallifrey," Delaine replied as she stood up. "And, if I'm going to be honest with you, it's something of a stretch to say that he's playing by the same rules. I mean, just compare Zeke to the versions of the Doctor you've met."

And there was another sneaking suspicion confirmed, though the exact mechanics of how that worked – if the Doctor recognized the Professor, did that mean that he was a past self and if that was the case, how did everything else work in after that? Or was the answer clones? – were a complete mystery. "How's that even happen?"

"You know how some people start a story by saying they lost a bet?" she asked, reaching a hand down to help Mickey up.

"Yes?"

"It's not one of those stories."

Fair enough. Mickey looked around, noting the destruction littering the alley. While there was little damage to the buildings themselves, the cyborgs that had followed him were barely recognizable as Cybermen, instead looking like particularly shiny bits of junkyard cast off, though the occasional puddle of white liquid draining from them was harder to dismiss. "You don't do things by halves, do you?" he asked, toeing a heavily dented Cyberman head to the side.

"Not when I have the luxury of action, no."

Mickey started sliding around his collection of facts. "…that you didn't do this to the robots back on the Madame De Pompadour means that there's some condition to it. An off-switch or something." He snapped his fingers as it came to him. "That bracelet thing. Whenever you don't have it on, you have… I don't know, superpowers."

It sounded stupid now that he said it aloud, but Mickey was certain he was right. She had switched between wearing the bracelet and not during the Deffry Vale incident – which always coincided with her doing something strange, well, stranger than what Mickey had long sense accepted as hanging-around-the-Doctor normal – and had been stuck with it during the whole adventure on the S.S. Madame De Pompadour thanks to the Doctor's handcuffs, which had seen her use no remarkable abilities beyond what was already humanly possible. Today, she hadn't bothered wearing it at all and the end result was something that the mysterious Professor implied was on par with stuff straight out of an action comic book. Ghost Rider, most likely.
Delaine grinned as she opened the gate in the fence with a quick turn of the wrist. A turn, Mickey noted, that didn't involve a key or any sort of lock-picking equipment. "And here you were saying you were stupid just a minute ago. I didn't even have to tell you anything and you figured out one of my best held secrets using nothing but what you've seen and your own sense."

It was a quick walk to the street – again, empty, but the absence of Cybermen was reassuring at least. The fact that he had a superhuman being on his side was a bit of comfort against the idea of running into them at least.

"Last question – what are you?"

Maybe it was rude and more than likely he'd get a non-answer that wouldn't actually say anything, but Mickey was curious as to what Delaine's response would be.

"Ridiculously complicated." With that, the helmet descended, concealing her face. Delaine snapped her fingers and, as if it had been waiting just down the street for the signal, the black motorcycle she'd been riding earlier pulled up. "Get on – we've got a gate to crash."

The group had separated. That was inevitable, what with the lack of familiarity and instinctual trust, even if it was such an avoidable problem on paper. With Mickey and his double, the Doctor was finding it difficult to consider it anything beyond an annoyance – not that he was feeling over much concern for the rest of the group, mind –, but he was worried about Rose. She'd already had one close call that evening and there was no telling if his other companion was still alive at this point, which made the one that he still had with him a priority.

The disappearance of the Professor, on the other hand, was unsettling.

The Doctor had been following him, had made a purposeful choice in making sure Seven's doppelganger remained in sight at all times, and all it had taken was a sharp corner and all of two seconds for the man to vanish completely.

'Have I ever mentioned how much I hate you?' he asked Seven with no attempt at hiding his frustration.

'Often enough, but I fail to see how this is my fault.'

'It isn't,' the Doctor admitted as he scanned the street. There was a Cyberman somewhere, the noise was unmistakable, but there was an infernal echo that was making it impossible to pin down where it was coming from. 'But you're the closest thing I have to the actual focus of my frustration at the moment, so it's mostly a matter of convenience.'

He almost made the mistake of resting his hand on the side of a metal truck, but pulled back immediately. Just in time too – the electricity that had coursed through it had been enough to burst the headlight bulbs on the other end of it.

"You will be deleted!" the Cyberman announced as it stepped out from behind the vehicle.

Tactical thinking. Never a good sign in Cybermen. Especially when they hadn't been using this level of environmental awareness an hour ago.

The Doctor stumbled back, tripping slightly over the heels of his shoes. He had enough moment to wish that he'd been able to wear his trainers – good sensible shoes – instead before he hit the ground.

Well, that was it. He could scramble to his feet, make a go at running away, but the odds of that were
low. Lower than the chance of pulling off a regeneration in the face of an unfriendly foe.

Hah. And he'd only gotten a little over a month in this body. Might as well not have lived at all.

The Cyberman reached out, only a few feet from being close enough to kill –

And now it was being thrown to the side, crashing through a brick wall with enough force to see its chassis shatter.

The Doctor turned to see who – or more accurately, what – had saved him, only to find the Professor standing behind him, hand outstretched as darkness fell across him in shadows too deep and too dark to be the product of any natural light, his eyes once again sparking with pinpricks of haunting starlight.

Where the starlight hiding in those eyes before could have been dismissed as a trick of the light – not that the Doctor had done that, no –, now the excuse fell long short of providing even a shadow of an explanation. To look into those eyes was to catch a glimpse of deep space, where the only thing to see were distant stars and the darkness that filled the space in between. Despite being long used to such views, the Doctor found himself brought short.

As soon as it had appeared, the unearthly effect vanished, leaving nothing behind but the sight of a seemingly harmless middle-aged man adjusting his hat.

"What are you?"

It wasn't an accusation. Not quite. There was an edge of fear in there, accompanied by an edge of awe. The Doctor didn't like either of those things, especially coming from him.

The Professor glanced down at the Time Lord. "Are you sure that's a question you want me to be answering?"

He didn't have the patience required for Seven's games, doppelganger or not. "I want an answer," he said firmly.

The Professor's eyes flashed and the Doctor found himself, for the second time that day, feeling very, very small.

"I'm the one who walks on the edges of time and space, who crosses the void beyond the mind and wanders through the lands of dreaming," the man – no, not man, humans never felt like this – declared, voice taking on a sepulchral echo as his form began to fray at the edges, allowing him to pull himself up to a height Seven had never himself possessed. "I'm the darkness cast by the shadow of planets and the stars that shine inside of it."

The unnatural shadows were back, wrapping and warping until all that was left of the Professor was a figure cut out of blue-rimmed black velvet and a cacophony of impossible constellations spinning around inside. Wings – odd numbered and unidentifiable as belonging to either bat or bird – stretched out of that darkness, threatening to envelop the Doctor in a cold embrace. "I'm the uncaged night bird, blinded yet all-seeing, swiftly soaring on silent wings. My flight predicts the path of storms and cuts through the wildfire without singeing a single feather, my claws sunder and sear the hearts and souls of the wicked who deem themselves pure."

"I'm the king's demon, the child's guardian angel, and the nightmare of every monster lurking in the dark corners of the universe. I am –" At this, the impression of inherent alien danger faltered, vanishing in an instant to be replaced by something all too familiar and, for lack of a better word, human as the Professor's unassuming 'human' form returned, the darkness running back to whatever
place he had called it from to leave them back on the London street where they had started. "Well, I
suppose you already know the answer to that."

"Do I?" That was Seven's style of grand speech, apart from that end bit, designed to weave truth and
artful deception into a tapestry designed to terrify and intimidate the likes of elder gods, but there was
never a show of overt power attached. Nothing but well-chosen words and history had ever lent the
Doctor's speeches weight. This had taken another element into the equation, one that the Time Lord
couldn't properly name, and that inability to understand it frightened him.

Seven's double smiled – again, that strange, almost gentle expression that the incarnation had never
quite managed on his own. It didn't fit with what the Doctor just experienced at all. "Why, I'm Zeke.
Wouldn't really want to be anyone else." With that, he extended a hand to help the Doctor back up to
his feet.

The smile said that the statement was a true one, but it was a truth viewed through multiple mirrors
that, if one of those mirrors was moved to a slightly different angle, would show something else
entirely. If that 'something' else was a hidden piece to that truth… well, it was just as easy enough to
misconstrue the offered information into something that would have likely been an outright lie if
spoken plainly.

A set of physical laws that actively hated his existence. A self-professed demon with the name of a
fallen angel and a face out of a past the Doctor would rather forget. A 'spirit of vengeance' that could
have raced off the cover of a comic book while being infinitely more dangerous than any papercut its
source material could have given. A cyborg that was halfway between Cyberman and Raston
Warrior robot with ten times the personality of either.

This universe was strange and in directions the Doctor didn't at all like.

Chapter End Notes

Zeke plays mind games – no surprise for anyone familiar with the Seventh Doctor –
while trolling everyone in range. Mickey gets the shock of his life – and finds out
something he already sort of knew –, and the Doctor gets an idea of how far in over his
head he really is – without really understanding how deep the waters really go. And we
still have 1-2 chapters left in this 'arc'… I say 1-2 because I haven't written that part yet
and I'm a little iffy on if I'm going to put some of the stuff in. I laid the groundwork but
it's not so majorly woven in that I can't just leave it out if it comes out clunky…

Mickey figures out Delaine's identity using a combination of good instinct and the
information he has – and he lays most of it out in his explanation.

The Doctor's second section was almost cut because it didn't feel right, but Zeke's show-off session was a little too good to discard. I hope y'all liked it.

Seven is being blamed for all the things because the Seventh Doctor's thing is that he
plans and plots and is 700% more scheme-y than any other incarnation of the Doctor, to
the point that he's the only one incarnation that's sort of organized and most of the other
Doctors have an extremely low regard for him and his questionable ethics. It's a trait that
often sees him burning bridges with companions in a rather spectacular(ly awful)
fashion. Oddly enough, one of the few lines that Seven isn't comfortable crossing is
murder (like, if he has to do it himself, because he has no problem putting people in a deadly situation or getting someone or something else to do the job).
You might have also picked up that Zeke's speech – noted by the Doctor as being similar to Seven's – has a lot of similarities to the big grand speeches the Doctor's pulled off in NuWho, which is because the VNA's – Seven's books – are where the Doctor really got into the 'Oncoming Storm' business, to the point where one of the plots were directly adapted for Ten (Human Nature).
He does have redeeming features, being the Doctor, but I'm planning on Zeke having a lot of character development to separate him from Seven – though some of you have noted that there's already a distinct difference between the two.

Ezeqeeel (also known as Chazaqiel) is a Watcher – the class of angel, nothing to do with Buffy – and Raguel is, as the Doctor pointed out, an Angel of Vengeance and Justice, among other things. They both have Wikipedia pages. I think I've said it before, but I like researching things like that.

If you want an idea of how Tsela looks beyond my description, his cyborg body is mostly based on those from Metal Gear Rising (one of the Jumps I'm 100% on doing), specifically Raiden and the Winds of Destruction. Not exactly, because a straight copy paste is cheap, but the vibe is intended to be similar.
Tsela's sign language is intended to be Navajo Family Sign, which, along with Navajo, aren't languages the Doctor knows (at least in the continuity of this fic) because everything I've found in my research spells out very plainly that the Navajo keep parts of their culture very close to the chest (completely fair, considering what white people do with the scraps of native culture they do get their hands on). It's also a fun way to frustrate the Doctor, who is a character who loves being ten steps ahead of everyone else intellectually.
The Doctor does understand when Tsela flips over to more mainstream sign language, though.

Ghost Riders in comic canon usually end up gaining about four inches in height (comic books are weird about proportions though), so that's a detail that registers to those that are paying attention. Other Ghost Rider abilities – hellfire manipulation/pyrokinesis, the ability to channel hellfire through items, increasing their damage potential/physical resistance/utility (seen with vehicles more prominently), the ability to summon their motorcycle at whim, general stat improvement (super strength, super durability, etc.), soul reading (can be used for identification purposes, but usually is just part of the Penance stare), and – at least in the movie continuity with the capstone booster, which is one of the Jumps taken – healing abilities strong enough to bring back the recently deceased (Chunky Salsa rule applies – if Mickey had exploded, it wouldn't have worked).

Anyway, thanks for reading and double thanks for leaving a comment. Unless its weird demands. Then it's just a single thanks for the reading.
Tsela Keiyouma was old. Not that that marked him out as being particularly special among the others he was probably going to spend the rest of eternity with, especially given that there was a fair list of Alters who'd had had decades if not centuries worth of experience under their belts from before he was even involved, but he couldn't quite shuck off that sense of age in the same way the others could when the mood took them. Maybe that's because he'd lived his first life from beginning to what he would consider a satisfactory completion compared to so many of the others who'd simply been snapped up somewhere around their prime and spent every other life after that repeating the same loop of adolescence and young adulthood without getting any further than that.

It would account for his chronic inability to fake youthfulness, even when he woke up wearing the body that he'd sent off to war in so many years ago. Too many strange habits for a person to develop in a scant twenty years of life, too many figures of speech too old for his looks, too many pauses as he appreciated the lack of protest a young body came with.

Not that it bothered him – the Navajo had long given up any interest in the opinion of John Q. Public concerning anything about him. The looks as people stared at his missing parts, the condescension whenever he chose sign language over speech, the disregard for a soldier who'd been torn to pieces by an unpopular war and everything that followed it… all of it washed over him like water over a river stone. After a life filled with everything from war crimes – child soldiers, unwilling cyborgs, giant robots outfitted with nuclear ordnance, biological warfare of every possible stripe, and a dozen different combinations of each – and things that would have been better explained by 'magic' than the explanations he did get, there really wasn't much novelty to explore when it came to the depravities of war and the men who made it.

But, despite all that, just looking at a factory made for the express purpose of shaving a person down to the barest material required to make a mindless cyborg soldier was more than enough to rile up the same indignant rage that Tsela had felt looking at the depravities of his first life.

He shoved the impulse to go in there and reduce the entire thing to rubble away. There was a mission. A plan that, while it was still being formulated, required him to put those objectives above his immediate desires.

Objective One – disable and/or destroy the Cyberman army.

Objective Two – disable and/or destroy the factory making the Cybermen.

Objective Three – recover Jackie Tyler.

The first two would be easy between the accumulated brain and firepower on today’s duty roster – if they got just one of the three alien polymaths to the right console and the whole mission would be wrapped up in minutes. The last… well, Tsela had seen this show before and he sure as hell knew how often rescue missions ended up turning into a joint study in disappointment and field burial. If the woman wasn't converted yet – he doubted it; these places were built on cold and cruel efficiency and she'd been MIA for at least two hours –, she would be making her way to the front of the line for it shortly.

So, that left the first two and the usual addition to any hairbrained scheme ever cooked up – try not to
die in the process of completing the mission – to focus on. Fine. He could work with that. Maybe not happily, seeing as his usual solution for this was to get as many victims out alive as possible and send them on to someone else that could help, but being happy had nothing to do with getting shit done.

Tsela stepped away from the overlook that he had been studying the factory from and back towards the group, barely paying any attention to the laptop they were clustered around. It had a map of the building, one that gave a few details that were important – entrances and exits tended to be that – but anything outside of that likely couldn't be relied on if Lumic's dispassionate dismissal of Tyler's subversive efforts back at the mansion was any indication.

"For those of you just joining this meeting, we'll be attacking from three different angles. Above," the Doctor turned away from the computer to point at the massive zeppelin tethered to the factory's roof, "between," he said, dropping his finger to point at the main door, where a line of people could still be seen entering in at a zombie's pace, "and below, through the service tunnels Mrs. Moore so kindly brought up off of the blueprints."

"Tsela will join the tunnel group," Zeke said immediately, glancing over to the cyborg soldier. "He has the most experience in such territory."

Mickey – or was that his duplicate? Tsela was fairly sure that Ricky was supposed to be dead by now, but asking why that wasn't the case would probably be rude – raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

The cyborg soldier rolled his shoulders. "Not exactly 'Nam, but I'm flexible."

'Insert joke about your boyfriend here.'

He was almost tempted to roll his eyes, but with his mask off, the risk of someone who wasn't in on the telepathic conversation misinterpreting the expression wasn't worth it. 'What, you couldn't be bothered to come up with one yourself?'

Delaine, wearing a helmet as she was, wasn't so restrained, even going so far as to transmit the sensation of eyes rolling across their telepathic connection. 'Something something Snake Eater. Joke delivered, moving on.'

'You could have put a little more effort into that,' Zeke murmured before switching to speaking aloud. "And I will assist with the zeppelin takeover."

Good. The small one – small, Tsela thinks with a laugh, like he's any taller than Zeke himself – is well adapted to the sky in so many forms that it's more a question of why he hadn't been born with wings in the first place. Probably some silly Time Lord rule about sticking to humanoid forms.

The Doctor's eyes turned towards the disguised Delaine. "And the Rider?"

"Will be escorting the Tylers. Unless they would prefer to enter the building full of killer cyborgs without backup?"

"I have no complaints on that front," Pete said, looking around the circle with eyes that filled with equal parts determination and tiredness. Tsela figured that out of all the people present, Pete Tyler probably would trust Delaine over most of them, even in the absence of knowing her true name. After all, in the company of strangers, the one that offers kindness and honesty – even when it came from someone like Delaine, who was almost entirely made up of rough-edges and social awkwardness – is the one that loses the title first.

Rose Tyler, on the other hand, seems less certain. "Are you sure that's a good idea? I mean, you're not exactly subtle and it's not like you can… just take off your helmet and pretend to be a normal,
Hm. So the girl got a good look at the Rider in full fiery fury. An interesting nugget of information delivered alongside a very good point, one that Delaine recognized as well, if Tsela was reading her right. Delaine's growl, warped by both the presence of her helmet and the Rider into something that sounded like something more akin to a combustion engine than mere human frustration, wasn't anything new – the girl had a habit of hissing like a steam engine when blowing off steam even on a good day – but it was easy enough to see what the problem was; someone that Delaine was naturally inclined to clash with had made an observation that she couldn't argue with but also couldn't immediately solve, even with all the powers at her command.

'I suppose you can't just go invisible,' Tsela mused. 'Given that we haven't 'established' that as within the Rider's range of abilities…'

'Probably because it isn't.'

'…and because it plays poorly with lesser magics, it's probably better that we don't even try it. It's much less simpler to trade positions. My Octocamo is more than capable of imitating a Cyberman.'

'If by 'plays poorly', you mean 'burns through them like thermite on pig iron', you've got it right,' she groused. Her frustration was clearly mounting, the Rider's fire intensifying along with it. It was only a matter of minutes before something that wasn't attached to her caught fire. 'On any other day, I might agree with you on trading off, but I'm shit in tunnels. Not to mention that I'd show up on any heat sensors like a human-shaped slice of hell and I'd eat my hat if Lumic didn't have any installed down there. Hard to think of a better form of detection when your own guys don't have body heat.'

All logically reasoned. 'Perhaps you could improvise a Cyberman suit? It isn't like there isn't enough scrap left over from our various encounters around town and you're fast enough to put one together without messing up our timetable.'

'…that's stupid enough to work and now I'm mad that I didn't think of it myself.'

He couldn't stop himself from smiling, though the expression was small enough for anyone who wasn't looking for it to miss it entirely. 'Hágoshiį.'

The seconds long exchange finished, Delaine's helmeted head turned a few degrees towards the two Tylers. "I'll be back in a minute." With that, she blurred out of sight, leaving nothing but a gust and wide eyes in her wake. Then, she was back. "Forgot something."

She reached over to Zeke, and before the psychic could react with anything more than widening eyes and a spike of surprise through their mental connection, grabbed him by his coat and – with a yell of "YEET!" – threw him bodily into the air, the small man tumbling head over heels as he rapidly gained altitude.

Completely disregarding the looks and exclamations of alarm around them, Delaine took the time to deliver the quip, "Say hi to the sky for me, bitch," just as Zeke's distant silhouette rearranged its humanoid shape into something with wings and the sensation of laughter came down his line of telepathic contact.

'400 meters before he took over,' Tsela said as his visor fed him the numbers. 'Good throw.'

Delaine's grin, though hidden by her helmet, was completely visible through her mental presence and tone. 'Like I told him, it doesn't matter if he can fly, it's the principle of the thing.'
The Doctor wouldn't deny that there was a part of him that wanted nothing more than to just run. Run back to the TARDIS, wait until she recharged enough power to break through the dimensional barrier, and leave this universe with its lack of Time Vortex and horde of Cybermen – and other unnamable, unknowable things – behind. Another part of him, one that he liked only marginally better, was snarling for vengeance. Vengeance for dead companions, vengeance for people he didn't know the names of, a vengeance that would see everything Lumic built in the name of the Cybermen burnt to the ground.

For now, however, he'd be happy with shutting it down without losing anyone else.

The two other members of this team weren't who he would have picked first – though seeing as one of his ideal choices was more than likely dead or Cyberconverted by this point, his ideal team wouldn't have happened in the first place – but he could make do with what he had.

Mrs. Moore – what were the odds of an assumed name there? Very, very high – was an interesting case at the very least. While Mickey's counterpart – Nine was still amused every time they recalled the boy's name as being 'Ricky' – might have acted the part of fearless leader, it was clear that Mrs. Moore was the brains behind the operation. She also seemed like the only one of the 'Preachers' that seemed to know what they were doing, though that wasn't exactly a position to attain between Mickey's thorny but still identical in every practical way counterpart and his shouty, gun-happy boyfriend. Under different circumstances, he might have even considered asking her to come travelling with him.

The cyborg, thankfully, seemed to be a fairly straight forward case of 'what you see is what you get'. A melding of man and machine, the former bringing in the history and the skills while the latter merely made those skills more effective. Even the stranger things – like that harmonic scalpel sword – were built on ideas the Doctor could recognize. So far as he could see, there was nothing there that would change form or break physics as the Doctor knew them, which was fantastic after Seven's doppelganger repeatedly did just that.

'And you're still blaming me for that?' Seven asked in exasperation.

'Because he knows that if you had the means and ability to get away with those sorts of dramatics, you absolutely would have done all of those things,' Five replied. 'Right down to turning into… whatever that last thing was supposed to be.'

The Doctor still wasn't sure what that had been. He'd tracked the Professor's 'flight' for about 400 meters – was it wrong if he found the entire situation faintly amusing? – and then the small man had shifted. He'd caught a twisting of the body, fingers turning into talons, the clear development of wings… and then Seven's doppelganger was gone, save for a vague flicker that would occasionally register to the Time Lord's eye before disappearing from his senses again. There had been wings – white, polished, and wide compared to the black, shadowy wisps from earlier – and all the other trappings one would expect from a bird, but the specifics beyond that were impossible to pin down.

A form of camouflage? Dimensional shifting? For the umpteenth time this evening, the Doctor was forced to admit that without more information, all he had were shaky guesses.

'It's a bit fun though, isn't it? Not knowing,' his Second said, rubbing his imaginary hands together in excitement. 'We so rarely stumble across new things these days.'

True. There was a bit of novelty in it, novelty that was disproportionately outweighed by crawling unease.

"Right, this is the cooling tunnel access," Mrs. Moore said as they approached a manhole set in a
square of grey cement. There was little to mark it otherwise – no signposts or fences to say 'keep out'. A good sign… or not. Sometimes the last was a physical demonstration of 'show, don't tell'. "Shouldn't have too tight security on this end," she continued as Tsela effortlessly pried it open. "But I wouldn't go so far to assume it is completely unguarded. Lumic is… thorough in that sort of way."

"Bit dark down there, isn't it," the Doctor noted as they looked down the dark shaft.

"I've got headlamps," Mrs. Moore said, opening up her duffle bag. A few moments of rummaging finally saw the equipment appear. "Here." She then turned to the last member of their party. "Do you …"

Tsela's faceplate closed. "Vision mods are built in. I'll take point."

The cyborg dropped down the hole ahead of them, falling into a crouch as he touched down and started looking around the room. "All clear," he declared after a minute of searching.

The Doctor slid down the ladder and held out a hand to the last member of their party as she climbed down as he looked around the room. Dark, gloomy, rather sparsely decorated, a few shallow puddles of water from where water vapor had managed to condense instead of simply escaping… exactly everything that he'd expected from the words 'cooling tunnel'. In front of them, a tunnel snaked out, almost perfectly dark except for the miniscule dots of guidelights built into the walls.

They turned on their headlamps at that. Better to see where they were going rather than run into an enemy in the dark.

"Right. Let's get on with it. Wouldn't want to show up late to the festivities."

Tsela nodded and immediately went ahead, never once glancing back at the others as they started to make their way towards the factory, though he was clearly taking the time to check as much of the tunnel for traps as was practical, humming under his breath as he went.

The Warrior in particular seemed particularly appreciative of that thoroughness, though that incarnation had yet to make any voiced comment since they'd entered the tunnel. The snatches of song… perhaps not so much.

"What do you get for pretending the danger's not real," Tsela was singing just loudly enough for his words to be heard and understood as song. "Meek and obedient you follow the leader, down well-trodden corridors into the valley of steel…"

Pink Floyd's Sheep. Lovely. Especially when there were so many other songs that the man could be singing that didn't fit the situation nearly so well. Was it some crack about the fact that Lumic's factory was once the Battersea power station that was featured on the cover of that album?

"You wouldn't have any hot dogs in that wonderful bag of goodies, would you, Mrs. Moore?" the Doctor asked over the faint singing as they lost what little outside light was coming from the exit at their back, leaving just the wavering light of their headlamps to light the way. "I'm feeling a bit peckish."

He could just feel the woman rolling her eyes. "Of any possible food you could ask for, you pick the Cyberman of meats?"

It wasn't the best analogy – if anything, the cobbling together of whatever wasn't used up by other cuts of meat was the opposite of the Cyberman philosophy of getting rid of everything they couldn't use – but for the sake of not starting an argument over semantics, he'd roll with it. "The Cybermen of meats, yes, but also quite tasty."
"I have a couple curry MREs," Tsela offered, dropping out of his song as he produced a vacuum sealed packet that could just be read through the gloom. The words 'Future Curry' was underscored by a second line that said 'Extra Spicy', and the Time Lord wasn't sure if the label ' Legendary Taste Series' was supposed to be a joke or not. The fact that the brand logo was the image of a shattered skull with a banner bearing the words 'Soldiers Without Borders' didn't exactly inspire confidence either.

"I said 'peckish', not 'desperate'."

Despite Tsela's faceplate being back in place, the Doctor could swear the cyborg was rolling his eyes as he tucked the packet back in the pack that lay in the small of his back. "Suit yourself," he said before picking back up where he'd left off on the song.

They crept further down the tunnels, only the occasional splash of water from those shallow puddles, the almost inaudible whirr of Tsela's robotic components, and the faint sound of the same cyborg singing under his breath breaking the silence. They'd yet to run into any sign of Cybermen yet, but they were likely only half the way to the factory.

"What was that you mentioned about 'Nam' earlier?" Mrs. Moore asked after a few minutes. It wasn't clear if the question was out of curiosity or a desire to break the song before it hit the verse about bright knives, hanging hooks, and conversion into lamb cutlets but the Doctor was very much in favor of the last.

Regardless of the motive behind the question, Tsela thankfully dropped the song as he answered, "Vietnam. I was a tunnel rat. First Engineer Battalion."

"Really? That would... that would put you in your seventies. Sixties at the very least."

"I was born in 1946, if that's what you're asking. Enlisted when I was... 18? It's hard to remember if I fudged the numbers on my papers or not – I can tell you it was a pretty close thing, though," the cyborg answered. "Anyway. Got sent over in '65. Did everything from scouting to sabotage and even some straight soldiering. Being a tunnel rat usually meant doing all of them at the same time. Stayed there... eh, years longer than I probably should have, lost my legs and an eye enjoying some enemy hospitality, and then got picked up and patched up by some friends. I'll spare you the rest of my life story, but I can say that 'Nam set the tone for the rest of it."

There was an implication there, the Doctor sensed, that Tsela's cyborg conversion had been a gradual process. Otherwise, why make specific mention losing his legs and an eye when it was so obvious that everything from the chin down was artificial?

As the Time Lord began to guess at what sort of technology would go into something like that – can't point at Cybermen, they were dealing with this universe's first wave of them now –, Mrs. Moore focused on something else.

"So what does it mean, being a 'tunnel rat'?", she asked before correcting herself. "I suppose that's a bit of an invasive question, isn't it? It's alright if you don't want to--"

"Ah, it's fine. Old men are the best at telling tales anyway," Tsela said before launching into history that the Doctor already had the shape of from history books and secondhand accounts. "The Viet Cong had a network of tunnels all over Vietnam from back from World War II that went all over the place. Entrances all over the place, blended into nature like it was meant to be there. Perfect for ambushes and moving around in general. Had just about everything they could want or need down there – with the right supplies, the V-C could stay underground for months."
"Well, the brass didn't think too much of that homefield advantage, so they decided to get proactive. They'd pick the smallest guys out of the lineup, give us some gear, and point us at whatever hole they wanted us to scurry down. Sometimes, they were nice enough to wave goodbye to us as we went down."

They turned around a corner, the cyborg tracing the details of the wall – all smooth cement and metal paneling instead of the lightly decayed materials near the entrance – as he continued telling his story.

"Those tunnels were nothing like these ones. They were small, close, damp, dark, and had all these tight and crazy turns that you couldn't see anything from around, so you never knew if you were right on top of a guy until you stepped on him. Even without the Cong, there were vermin – venomous and not – and boobytraps all over the fucking place. Spikes coated with poison, tripwires strapped to grenades... sometimes the tunnels were set up to be flooded on command, to keep poison gases from traveling further down the line, but they'd work just as good against people. Sometimes you'd find what was left of the guy who went down before you. That was never a fun surprise to run into."

"Sounds positively delightful," Mrs. Moore muttered, her breath hazing out in front of her face in a mist. "I imagine that cold wasn't much of a problem for you back then, was it?"

"…no, it wasn't. The heat and the humidity…" Tsela seemed to shudder for a moment, the motion distinctly uncanny as it played across that artificial frame. "No, you couldn't get me to go back into that jungle and those tunnels for anything short of world peace. Just thinking about it brings back the smell –"

The smell of what? The Doctor had some unpleasant suspicions about the answer to that question and he would be more than happy to leave the answer unspoken. The fact that this was an old man speaking about jungle warfare was more than enough to feed the imagination, even without experience in any aspect of the subject – not that the Time Lord was short of that.

"Will you be alright in there?" the Doctor asked.

Tsela started a little before turning to stare at the Time Lord, his exact expression mostly hidden by his faceplate. For the Doctor, body language was more than enough to convey disbelief. "What?"

Was the concern that unexpected? Wait, he shouldn't ask that question aloud, considering that it had surprised him as well. "Well, this is only guesswork, but I'm assuming that whatever whoever did to you wasn't too far off of what goes into Cyberconversion… And even if it isn't at all like it, I've seen what they do in places like this and it isn't pretty."

"I'm well acquainted with the ugliness people inflict on one another. What's one more atrocity?"

There was a rueful, almost broken laugh hidden beneath the obvious weariness, one that made the Doctor's instinctual dislike of soldiers a source of guilt for a moment. He knew what it was like to see too much, to be jerked around by people one simply couldn't refuse, to be witness to something when everything was telling him he should be doing something about it instead. He'd seen enough of that 'ugliness' to understand how heavy the knowledge of its existence was and to know how desperate one could be to get away from it, even for a moment.

It was one of the reasons he kept running, after all.

Running around London in search of usable Cyberscrap, with the occasional diversion to destroy a still mobile unit? One-hundred and sixty-eight seconds.
Assembling that scrap into a passable Cyberman costume? Eight minutes at most, even though I was assembling it as we went.

Regretting the decision to put that costume on?

Instant.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Rose asked for the third time since we started moving towards the factory. We moved quickly where we could, but switching from a surreptitious run to hiding every time a real Cyberman happened to cross our paths took time.

Not really, but… "Going in there without backup is stupid," I grit out, the Cyberman faceplate giving my displeasure a robotic tone as I slipped it on over my burning skull, motorcycle long shoved back into storage. As soon as it was in place, I turned the Rider's fire down to the lowest efficient level. No point in a disguise if it ended up with a… unique hellfire, rust, and, ruin finish that no other Cyberman would have. "Once they figure out that you weren't under Earpod control, all it would take is one tag and you'll be dead… unless someone felt like revealing his grand design like a James Bond villain."

Odds were that Lumic would be the type to do that sort of thing, regardless of if he had been converted or not, but fuck if I was the type to gamble lives that weren't mine on that.

"'suppose that makes sense…" Rose admitted. "Still, I think we'd be better off moving faster."

"With a little over fifty percent of a Cyberman escorting you? Would be worse than going in alone," I said, snapping another piece into place. It was a delicate balance of care and force, putting the pieces together on the fly, but so far, the only sign of that assembly were the occasional dents left by my fingers after a particularly difficult fit. Hopefully the Cybermen didn't have eyes for that sort of detail. "But don't worry, blondie – I work fast."

Rose didn't seem particularly convinced by that, but I didn't particularly care. Her discomfort with my – or rather, the Rider's – presence was plain to see and adding in the unknown status of this universe's Jackie resulted in a clear case of anxiety over every aspect of the situation.

I could understand that. Heck, I could even respect it. I remembered being young and powerless and worried over the fate of loved ones who I didn't have the option of being honest with.

We finally met the road, switching to that path as I continued putting up my disguise. I was working faster now that I was almost done with the larger sections, leaving just a few parts of the torso and the arms to deal with. Rose had turned her attention ahead of the group, occasionally pointing out any Cybermen that she saw ahead of us.

Pete hung back a moment, giving Rose a moment to get ahead just far enough to be unable to catch his whisper. "Do you really think that we'll…?"

Ah. Well… "No," I replied honestly as I slid the last pieces of the chest plate into place. With everything but the lower arms left to go at this point, the illusion would be complete before we were in range of the factory. "It's been quite some time since we lost track of her and I've got no reason to assume that Lumic's Cyberconversion is a slow, methodical process. There's a fair chance that the best we'll be able to do is…"

I let the words trail off because how the fuck do you tell someone that the best option was killing their loved one as painlessly as possible, but Pete's tightening expression told me he'd understood what my silence meant.
"What are the other options?"

"Well, if she has only been partially converted, I could repair the organic material or make the necessary prostheses." I'd put Mickey's barbecued nervous system and stopped heart back to factory new condition without much effort, a few missing bits weren't going to slow me down much. If too much was gone, I could just build a replacement. "If she's fully converted and, "mentally intact, I could try assembling a cyborg body. Bit of a time crunch for me, seeing as I'm only going to be available for a few more hours, but I could leave instructions. Assembly, maintenance, that sort of thing. You probably have a few connections with people that could help with that."

"I don't know how I feel about that, trading one cyborg body for another."

"It'd more than likely be visually identical to a regular human's, barring cosmetic preferences," I say, falling easily into one of my realms of interest. "Might not be dependent on the same processes for survival, but I try to put as much of the sensory experience in as I can. Plus, I don't play with mind manipulation. It's an insult to my profession as a mechanist."

"You make robots that accurate?" Pete asked, surprise written all over his face. "Make, repair, modify. Anything mechanical, technical, robotical… been working with the stuff since I –" first got into this universe-hopping nonsense, "– was just a young thing. Always enjoyed pulling things together, making moving, living art. No point in doing something you love unless you take it to the highest level you can reach."

The last line was punctuated by my flexing the fingers of my Cyberman gauntlet. A clunky thing, but ultimately livable for the duration. The dents in it were a bit regrettable, but again, there wasn't enough time for perfection.

"I suppose motorcycles fall under that purview as well," he said conversationally as we caught up with Rose.

A smile spread over my face, not that anyone else could appreciate it from behind the Cyberman helmet. "First real mechanical work I ever did. Drove my mother to distraction, having me zipping about while she was stuck at work, but she knew I'd just go nuts if she tried fencing me in."

A small ghost of a smile crossed Pete's face. "I can imagine. Never had any children myself, but the very idea of a daughter of mine doing something like that… oh, I'm not sure if my hairline would have survived that kind of stress."

Rose flinched a little at that.

As for me, I laughed. "I don't need a Magic 8-Ball to tell you that all signs point to yes. Your scalp's halfway ready for a wax polish as it is."

Was that too familiar? Probably. Still, the fact that Pete snorted at the jab meant that it was taken as the joke that it was. "Haven't heard any jokes like that since I stopped going to the pub."

I finished with the last gauntlet, sliding it into place with only a touch of struggle. "Didn't get quite the same treatment from the jetsetters, I take it."

"What's a jet – oh, never mind. No, the upper class don't do that, unless its intended to be an insult on some level or another. Getting close to another person is just another way to end up with greasy fingerprints on your good suits," Pete said before sighing. "Sometimes I regret catching Lumic's eye. Wouldn't have become a wealthy man, but I would have at least had something of a life before the world ended."
I looked up at the heavy blanket of clouds above, which were outlined by a bit of red-tinged light from the city below them. How much of that was light pollution or the regular kind was unclear but considering that this was the city that managed to kill upwards of 10,000 people with a single peasouper that lasted less than a week, but it would likely be safe to say that both probably played a part.

"Oh, I wouldn't call it an apocalypse yet. A first-class shitshow, sure, but I'd say that this world has more than a little bit of fight left in it. Humanity is nothing if not determined – after all, we started out as persistence hunters. We aren't designed to roll over and die just because the going is a little tough. Nah, we just pick up whoever falls behind and keep going after whatever it is that we're chasing."

"'We'?' Rose murmured under her breath, too low for Pete to catch but still audible to my ears.

Ah. So she wasn't expecting that. Well, I've always loved sideswiping people who underestimated me.

Conversation cut off as we drew closer to the factory. Hypnotized people and wary Cybermen were lining up near the gates, the Earpod controlled people zombielike in both their movement and silence. From this distance, it was almost like watching a chain of sluggish ants going into their anthill.

"Right now is your last chance to turn back," I said. "Because once we pass through those doors, there's no way we can escape without drawing a whole lot of attention we don't want."

While I seriously doubted that Lumic had anything that could scratch me, the Cybermen were very capable of hurting everyone else. And, as I and the others have realized time and time again, I can only be in one place at a time. Fast as I was, strong as I was, I couldn't protect everyone.

I could destroy everything – I'd killed planets before, I could destroy a couple factories easy – and I could fix dead under a very limited and specific set of conditions – five minutes, no missing parts, soul still present, Rider available – but I knew exactly how easy it was to fail even with all that power at my back.

Living creatures were fragile and even if I could put them back together, there'd always be lines to show where I'd worked. It was better to not break them at all. But you couldn't just pack people away in cupboards either, all wrapped up in newspaper and bubble wrap to keep them from being hurt.

You had to give them the choice.

"I'm not running away," Rose said, her eyes going hard.

"Right," Pete said, squaring his shoulders before beginning to walk towards the front gates of the factory. "Once more unto the breach."

Of course, they would manage to set off a trap. The tunnel had turned into Cyberman cold storage long before they were even close to their intended point of entry – it would have been more improbable for there not to be a trap with that sort of firepower at the ready. The setting off of the trap wasn't even something the Doctor could blame on Tsele – the trigger was a heat-based sensor that had been positioned at the very end of the hall behind the ladder they needed to get into the factory itself, which meant that it was ultimately unavoidable unless someone had prior knowledge and the means to get around such a thing… like a cyborg body that didn't produce body heat.

From anyone else, the Doctor might have called it 'clever', but he was loath to give Lumic anything resembling a complement at the moment, what with the depravity of making Cybermen for no apparent reason other than a desire to escape death and, slightly more relevant to the moment, the fact
that a small horde of those very same Cybermen had just woken up from stasis to attack them.

'Yes, that,' his Second said dryly as a Cyberman tried to grab at the Time Lord's leg. 'I do hate it when they do that.'

"Move! Move!" Tsela yelled as he pushed them up the ladder towards the access hatch above, kicking out at any Cyberman that managed to come close enough. One of them had already had its helmet caved in by the cyborg soldier's assault, but that didn't deter the rest from swarming as quickly as their bulky frames would allow.

Ramming open the access hatch onto the hard surface of the factory floor – if they hadn't lost all illusion of stealth with the Cybermen in the tunnel, that noise had finished the job –, the Doctor leapt out of the hole and pulled Mrs. Moore out after him. As soon as they were clear, Tselo jumped straight up and out, slamming the access hatch shut on the grasping metal fingers of their pursuers. A sharp kick deformed the metal into a makeshift lock that likely wouldn't last for more than a few minutes, but that was valuable time they could use.

"Let's keep moving."

The hallways that made up the factory were and were not like the tunnels that had led them to it. They were like them in that they were sterile, cement bricks that seemed to ooze clamminess into the air, but the cooling tunnels weren't even close to this level of florescent brightness even with the aid of the headlamps.

There was also the fact that there were doors and stairs that could house so many unexpected enemies all over the place.

"What's the plan?" Tselo asked, jarring the Doctor's train of thought.

Mrs. Moore made a faint hiss as she sighed between her teeth. "Weren't you listening? We were going to –"

"Yes, yes. Infiltrate from three different angles, collect Jackie Tyler, destroy Cybermen army. First part is done, second is established, third is a broad concept. But now that we've gotten in, what's our group's target? Lumic? Whatever he's controlling the Cybermen with? Which target gets us what we want?"

"Both," the Doctor answered. "If we get rid of the control matrix, there's nothing stopping Lumic from building another. Get rid of Lumic and the Cybermen are only slightly slowed down by the loss of their primary innovator and commandant. Both need to be gone to have any hope of defeating the Cybermen in any lasting fashion."

He'd leave out how big a hope that was, because who knew what safeguards and backups the man might have made, but so far as Plan As went, it seemed to be a pretty sturdy plan.

"Alright. Then where are those things?"

"Alright, so there were a few wrinkles in the plan." While the Time Lord doubted that Lumic – likely converted to a Cybercontroller by this point – wouldn't be far from the control matrix, the question of 'where' was still relevant. "Find me a computer and I'll be able to get some information we can use."

"Nothing out in the open."

"Why not?" Mrs. Moore asked as a small group of Cyberman turned around a corner. As soon as the cyborgs saw them, they lunged, sparks already dancing around their metal hands.
Tsela dipped back around one of the strikes, a clean swipe seeing that Cyberman's arm cut off just beneath the elbow and both of its legs just above the knees, its beheading added almost as an afterthought as Tsela moved towards his next target. He turned back towards the rest of the group as the last Cyberman – now cut in two thanks to a diagonal cut that ran across its frame from left shoulder to right hip – fell to the floor.

"I'm fast, but I can't be everywhere at once," the cyborg soldier explained as he sheathed his sword. "Not to mention that working around you two means I have to slow down and account for you as occupying a space I can't move through, shoot through, or cut through. This place is a rat warren of passages and potential storage units, so it's not like I can get proactive about cutting down the numbers because that means leaving you undefended. Best option is finding a that has what you need that I can barricade and defend while you work."

"Logical," Mrs. Moore said.

"I try."

Suddenly, a new swarm of Cyberman rushed them, this one many times larger than the solitary pair Tsela had just cut down. From behind them, the sound of another horde – what were the odds that it was the set they'd 'trapped' in the tunnels? – was clanging down the hall as well.

"Right! I think we've entered part of the plan that's dedicated to running for our lives," the Doctor said, pulling Mrs. Moore into motion as Tsela cut down the first line of Cybermen. So they needed a room that could be secured? The Time Lord pulled his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket as they reached a door that looked fairly sturdy. That it didn't want to open immediately was a good sign, probably.

Finally, the sealed door opened with a hiss, allowing the pair to jump inside, their cyborg companion right on their heels. As soon as the door was shut and locked behind them, the Doctor finally turned around to see what their safe haven actually looked like.

The room was small and clearly disused, though that was more apparent through the presence of older technology than any mundane signs like dust or rust. Still, there was a chance that the terminals present were connected to the main network of the factory, which meant that the Doctor could use them.

Less helpful were the Cybermen standing in the docking stations that were built into the walls.

'Just where we wanted to be,' his Eighth said with a cheery tone that only came out when he was being painfully sarcastic. 'Right in the middle of even more Cybermen.'

There had to be about twenty or so and in such different designs that it was only by long familiarity with the evolution of his own universe's Cybermen that the Doctor recognized them as such. Most of them were built like the first Cybermen he'd ever encountered, all cloth faces and convoluted tubing, but there were others that were 'further' down the line of development, slowly decreasing until there were only two with designs that were like the ones prowling around the factory.

"These are…" Tsela breathed.

"Prototypes," the Doctor finished, flashing his sonic over one in a quick scan. There was so much… less in it compared to the ones that Lumic had marching around outside. More organic material, in this case, but it was almost… crude, how that material was preserved. Effective, but primitive by Time Lord standards. Not that a lot of things on Earth counted as 'advanced' by that same meterstick, if he was being fair. "Trial and error attempts at creating an 'ideal' Cyberman design. They're
deactivated for long-term storage, so they're no danger to us."

Why these Cybermen weren't good enough for Lumic wasn't much of a mystery – he remembered how well these designs moved, how sturdy they were compared to Lumic's armored, hydraulic powered versions –, but as to why the man would keep them around after finding them flawed…

'Sentimentality?' Six offered.

'He doesn't seem the type,' Five noted, 'And holding onto the old and useless isn't a traditional Cyberman belief. There's no practical reason for Lumic to keep these 'defective' models around, not when they could be using this space for something more important.'

That was true, which made the fact that this room was here being used for this purpose all that more interesting. The Time Lord could only hope that he'd find something on the computers here that would cast some light the subject.

"Are there any tripwires you can detect?" the Doctor asked Tsela.

The Cyborg looked around and, after a cursory search, started poking around the corners. "Nothing I can find out in the open, which means that there's no physical traps. Beyond the Cybermen, of course."

"Of course," Mrs. Moore said, casting a caustic eye at the deactivated cyborgs. "How could one forget such a small thing as that?"

The Doctor grabbed one of the office chairs in front of the computers – old material creaked from age under his fingers, giving another tell to how long this room had been ignored – and, spinning it around under his hand, sat himself down in front of the most likely suspect. He waggled his fingers above the keys as the computer ran through its boot.

"Now, absolute best case scenario, I can deactivate the Cyberman main control units and end this situation right here. That's likely not going to be the case, if the condition of this room is any mark of its importance, but chances are I can get some information that we can work with," he explained as he moved through the log-in information. The first walls were easy to breach and the next set only posed the lightest difficulty, but almost all the information available there was stuff he'd already seen on Tyler's home computer. Public information, meaningless numbers and technical babble, the barest tease of technology that was actually interesting…

"Worst case scenario, Lumic detects my invasion and sends Cybermen to kill us all." At Tsela's sharp exhale – was that a laugh? –, the Doctor shrugged. "Not to say that I doubt your destructive capabilities, but like you said, having to defend us limits what you can do."

"True."

The Time Lord turned his attention back to the system. More passwords to dig through, now going into more particular protections that actually required some thought. If he cared to go the long way around the process and pick apart the code strand by strand, maybe he could make his way through without disturbing anything but that would take time that he didn't have.

"Right, right. Of course this wouldn't be easy. Let's try… this," the Doctor said, punching in a password that he'd seen written on a note in Pete's office.

"WARNING – UNLISCENCED ACCESS. ACTIVATING SECURITY MEASURES," a mechanized voice announced as the whirring of activating machinery began to come from where the Cybermen were housed.
'Maybe we should have considered the fact that Lumic fired Pete Tyler a little over an hour and a half before we got here,' one his previous incarnations said a little too late to be helpful.

The activated Cybermen twitched, heads turning towards the intruders... and then away again as they began to wander around the enclosed space, some even going so far as to attempt to take over office chairs of their own, though that stopped soon after one of the heavier models managed to collapse one. If not for the silvery shells encasing them, they could have been mistaken for regular humans milling around a waiting room.

'Well, that was underwhelming,' Four said. 'Not to say that I'm complaining about not being attacked by Cybermen, seeing as not being attacked is almost universally a good thing, but from a purely dramatic standpoint, this is kind of...'


'Anti-climactic.'

'I was about to come to that one.'

'After making your way through the rest of the thesaurus, I'm sure,' Three muttered with an unsubtle roll of the eyes.

One of the newer 'rejects' lurched forward out of its docking station, stumbling over its own feet as they caught on a nearly invisible lip between the dock and the floor. It was almost adorable and most definitely pathetic, even before it started crying. The fact that it seemed to be, against all odds, physically crying, with rivulets of black liquid running down its face, made the Doctor feel worse than he normally would when presented with a malfunctioning Cyberman.

The fact that its crying quickly picks up a loop of the words, "I want my mom," didn't particularly help.

'And we've moved past 'disappointing' to just plain 'sad'. '

"I'm sorry," the Doctor said to the Cyberman as he crouched down to its level. Instinctively, he found himself reaching up to brush some of the tears away from its face. It didn't matter if they were 'true' tears, made of salt and other human secretions or just leaking oil; the fact that they were there and the person – a child? It can't be anything but a child under that metal exoskeleton and doesn't that knowledge just burn – shedding them was clearly in pain made them authentic enough for him. "I'm so, so sorry."

The Cyberman abruptly lunged, wrapping those thick metal arms around the Doctor's body, squeezing him in a bearhug that sent his spine and ribs crackling. On a child, it would have been mere desperate affection. On a cyborg with hydraulic powered arms, it was much more life threatening.

Thankfully, Tsela was able to pull the Time Lord free before any permanent damage could be done, prying the arms apart before pushing the other cyborg back to a safe distance. "Kid. Kid. You gotta be careful. You could hurt someone if you don't watch yourself."

Immediately, the Cyber-converted child fell into crying again, this time with its looping wail taking the form of, "I'm sorry, don't hate me," – or was that 'hit'? – the words so tightly clustered together, they almost became a pleading drone as it fell back into rocking on the floor, hiding as much of its head as it could under its hands as it raked its fingers across its face and neck, the blunt gauntlets occasionally gaining enough purchase to score in the metal underneath.
What the hell had this child done to get Lumic's attention?

As the cyborg soldier comforted the Cyber-converted child, murmuring something that quickly quieted the young one, the Doctor turned his attention elsewhere.

The other Cybermen that had activated were similarly non-violent, instead opting to either curl up on themselves or shuffle around in a haze. The last, he supposed, could have been anything from being almost entirely mindless to simply wandering through a haze of shock. Shock at their revival, shock at their surroundings, shock at their current state of existence…

"Are they here because the control software didn't work?" Tsela asked quietly. The child he'd been comforting had found a comfortable corner where, while still not displaying anything that could be described as 'confidence', they had finally dropped the attempts at self-punishment.

Good. That was… good, that the child wasn't suffering any more than they had to. The knowledge may not have put the Doctor's urge to do something, anything to rest, but at least it had calmed it for the time being.

But Tsela. His words implied a familiarity with that type of Cyber-tech and his actions implied a familiarity with children who had gone through similar procedures. Those scraps of information filled in another piece of the Time Lord's mental sketch of the man behind the machine.

"No… I don't think Lumic even tried to install it until later," the Doctor said as he quickly browsed the files, brushing past the atrophied firewalls like so many cobwebs. "The only mentions of it only come up a decade after the first tests and even then, it's only regulating the extremes. It's only about five years ago that he started on the complete mental straight jacket."

A few of the Cybermen here were from after that point and each of their files explained why the control software hadn't taken. Brain damage, mental illness, extended trauma… the fact that Lumic had bothered to gather his victim's medical records, major and trivial, prior to their conversion was another oddity – why did he care about them? –, but at least it explained why so many Cybermen had been put here rather than in the main army.

Almost all of these Cybermen had been 'broken' before their conversion had even taken place.

The Doctor stole a glance at the Cyber-converted child that had almost crushed his spine, taking note of the scuffed serial code on its shoulder. Three of the numbers were scratched past recognition – though with how the child clawed at itself, it wasn't exactly hard to guess what had happened --, which meant that he likely wouldn't be able to look its specific file up, but he could guess from its behavior that it fell under the 'brain damage' or 'extended trauma' categories of 'why is this Cyberman not acting like Cyberman', though the Time Lord wouldn't have excluded the possibility that the answer was all three.

Multiple disabilities weren't exactly rare, especially where humans were involved, otherwise they wouldn't have the word 'comorbidity' to explain how so many happened to overlap. Besides, he knew from long experience with human nature – though how accurate was that phrase when so many non-humans did the same thing? – child that was already 'difficult' would just encourage an abusive parent's worst qualities.

Another Cyberman – older model but much closer to the modern set than the majority, save for a few features that were bizarrely first generation – hung back to the side, turning its head slowly as it swayed on its feet, looking around its surroundings. In any other context, on any other body, he could have mistaken it for a dazed look. On a Cyberman…
'Do you think that the fault with this one is in the hardware, the software, or the wetware?' Eight asked.

Could have been any of the three or any combination of them. There was a delicate balance that was required to keep a Cyberman working and even if it was difficult to disturb after the fact, something going wrong internally was the most reliable way of taking down one of the cyborgs without making use of gold.

"It looks like there's a body underneath," Mrs. Moore noted, walking over to the Cyberman. Its model was somewhat 'middle of the road' between the old and new designs; it still had the mylar skin rather than the heavy armor of the current generation, but the helmet was closer to Lumic's design than the boxier shape of the older models and the life support machinery was almost entirely internalized. But what the woman had likely locked onto were the hands.

Instead of them being replaced by the clunky, one-size fits all robotics that Cybermen after the earliest generation favored, the original organics had been almost lovingly preserved and reinforced with the bare minimum of cybernetics, the silver of which curled around the skin like jewelry rather than armor while the rubbery 'sheath' encasing them was as thin as it could be while serving its purpose. The hands themselves weren't what a person would call beautiful or flawless, but they were almost… familiar in their size and shape, the long, thin fingers almost conspicuous for the presence of scars and callouses.

Mrs. Moore traced the lines of one of those hands. "They're so cold and lifeless… who do you think this used to be?"

The Doctor checked the serial number written on its chest, punching it into the computer in exchange for the answer…

The Cyberman, a woman whose name Lumic had only seen fit to record as 'Del.D.1', was apparently a suicide that Lumic had spirited away from the morgue a few hours after their death, though the file itself put the truth in much more minimalistic terms. Whatever his reason for doing so, the experiment had been a failure – while there was enough grey matter enough to manage motor responses and basic physical function, there'd been too much lost to make the Cyberman more functional than that. It had no ability to speak, listen, or react in any way to anything around it. An additional note finished the story – post-mortem conversion should take place as soon as possible if it is to be done at all and only be done on corpses that had not sustained massive brain damage.

He didn't really want to know the details of what 'massive brain damage' meant in the context of suicide.

"The full name isn't there," he replied. "But she died in 1998 and her name started with D–E–L–"

A clang of metal on hard flooring interrupted his train of thought. "Delora."

Mrs. Moore was standing in front of the Cyberman she'd been so curious about, her hand hanging half open above the faceplate that lay on the floor. The face she was staring at was, again, almost familiar.

Through the corner of his eye, the Doctor could see Tsel's stiffen.

"What?" There was no way of if the word was in response to the name or that face. The Doctor pushed himself away from the computer terminal, coming closer to the Cyberman.

As he had thought, the face was disturbingly similar compared to Delaine's, just like the name had
been. Softer around the edges, older in its lines, details thrown in and left out to shake up the resemblance... and an unsettling emptiness in eyes where he expected to find a sharp and biting intelligence. As the Time Lord looked into those empty eyes, he could agree that the name – Latin for sorrow – had been well chosen.

"Delora Deason. She was one of my co-workers ten, fifteen years ago. I was in human resources then, always filing and refiling paperwork. She was one of Lumic's favorite nurses. Caught his attention when he had a medical emergency while visiting the States. Very kind. Very good at her job. Dedicated mother." A brittle smile crossed Mrs. Moore's face. "That's one of the first things I learned about her. She had to make sure that she had good daycare for her girl, that was her one condition for taking the position."

The Doctor tore himself away from that empty, empty face that could have belonged in a wax museum if not for the fact that it was just a hair too real to be an imitation. "Sounds like a good woman."

The smile crumbled. "She was. Always trying to help, never trying to start a fight... though she really should have, with how her ex-husband treated her, claiming that he wasn't the father of their child yet still grasping for custody because he didn't want to pay child support. But I suppose her girl did enough fighting for the two of them -- last I heard, she'd bitten her father hard enough to draw blood when he hugged her without asking for permission at the end of one of his visitations. Her reward was a lemon ice."

"What happened to her?"

"She disappeared during one of their custody disputes. A few people said it had been reported as a suicide, even if the... the rumor was that they didn't have a body. Everyone thought that her ex was responsible for it, even if no charges were ever filed." She laughed mirthlessly as the mindless corpse shuffled away, bouncing off of one of the other Cybermen as it failed to move out of the way in time. "Funny to think that he had nothing to do with it."

Missing persons cases. Assumed murdered.

Something about that seemed familiar.

"Oh," the Doctor said, shoving down his immediate reaction -- it was just a story, just another human with a common appearance -- in favor of asking a question that would answer a suspicion that had been nagging him for a little bit now. "What happened to her daughter then?"

Pete, Rose, and I were making our way towards the main processing floor -- and the more than likely Cyberized Jackie -- when Tsela pinged me.

'What?'

'Delaine. I think we just found your mother.'

Now I had to ask a stupid question. 'This universe's version?'

'Cyberconverted,' Tsela replied. 'Mrs. Moore made the identification when she took the faceplate off. Apparently Delora worked for Lumic for a time before her...'

'Ah.' I stewed over the information for a second. It fit with what could be expected, even if the fact that Lumic had desecrated the dead wasn't exactly filling me with an emotion that could be considered positive. 'Anything else?"
'Yeah. You.'

That stopped me cold. 'What.'

Chapter End Notes

Tsel'a's backstory is getting fleshed out a lot in my notes (partially because I was working on it here but I was also doing some plotting on the Metal Gear jump, among other things) so that's part of why this chapter took so long to get done (though most of it was just writer's block, my own problems, and life being busy)... and why it's a bit longer than the previous ones uploaded. Lot of Doctor focused POV this chapter, but that's just the way the cookie crumbled.

Delaine having to come up with a Cyberman costume was me realizing that I had no other believable way of getting her in the building. Thankfully, it dovetails pretty good with what I have in mind for the climax (no spoilers though).

Getting a satisfactory cliffhanger was kind of tricky, but I think I got us on a good note here.

Still working on editing some earlier chapters but I'm pretty sure I haven't done any replacements yet so that's just for future reference.

Hágoshį – you're welcome.

The Great Smog was a major weather event of 1952, taking place over about four days in December of that year. It was a remarkably thick example of a London pea souper (a nickname for the thick fog that the city was known for before various environmental acts were passed, not only named for its thickness but also the yellow-black coloring caused by the low-quality coal used by people at that time) thanks not only to local pollution problems but also an anticyclone weather event that prevented the smog from being dissipated. To give an idea of how bad the conditions were, visibility was often limited to around a meter, the streetlights did nothing, and all public transport (apart from the London Underground) stopped. Yes, this included ambulances. It also got in people's houses, which is nightmarish considering how many people it killed.

While initial estimates put the death toll of that week at 4,000 with 100,000 people being rendered ill, a lot of deaths were (wrongly) blamed on influenza, with other deaths from it happening months later. More recent research puts the number of deaths related to this event at around 12,000. Most of the deaths were children, the elderly, and people with pre-existing respiratory problems.

The Cybermen in the storage room – and the identities of two – were slightly teased at during Lumic's section way at the beginning of this arc, though not very heavily. The designs are meant to be pretty close to, if not identical to those from the Doctor's universe. Thankfully, the Cybermen are pretty easy to identify even across decades of design evolution, so you don't really need to be an expert.

Mrs. Moore being familiar with Delora wasn't originally going to be in there, but I thought it worked well enough to provide exposition and some characterization. Same deal with Pete and Delaine's interaction.
Anyway, feel free to ask any questions in the comments / review section. I will either answer them in-story or in the next Author's Notes. Reviews, criticisms, and commentary are, as always, welcome.
Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings for body horror, mutilation, and torture. Cyberconversion isn't pretty and is pretty rough even when blood isn't shown. It isn't a primary focus and I've given it fairly limited description, but still. Some parts can be a bit gnarly. You've been warned.

The long steel halls might have been monotonous despite the inherent danger that they presented by dint of their location alone, but the monotony gave me plenty of time to stew over the latest bit of information thrown my way.

So Lumic had this universe's version of me cyberconverted and shoved into a closet when she failed to be a perfect obedient slave.

I wasn't surprised.

Angry – that was a child, a child whose life has been nothing but hell from beginning to end if my first was any good as a meter stick and I'd gotten no indications to say it wasn't --, yes, but surprised? No. Lumic had already established what he was willing to sink to, I knew exactly how good I was at following orders as a child, and there wasn't any shortage of opportunities for a choice 'exit' between the abusive home situation, middle school bullshit, and my own grapples with running away and suicide during that period of time. If the man had any interest in stealing that child away, there would have been little to nothing standing in his way and even less reason to keep her in circulation when she inevitably failed to meet expectations.

'And to think that everyone's first suspect was your father.'

'Probably because in any other universe, he's the one who would have done it.' It wasn't like he hadn't come close enough during some of his experiments in neglect and physical punishment. 'Also the fact that his entire personality is like if Anne Wilkes raised a fusion of Norman Bates and Dexter Morgan.'

I eyed a likely looking Cyberman as I escorted Pete and Rose past another series of doors. For the belly of the beast, this place had a certain lack of guards. Likely because most of the ones not dedicated to a specific task were on the hunt for the Doctor and Tsela.

"Any sign of Jackie?" Pete asked, a hair too loud to be a convincing zombie. Almost immediately, a Cyberman's head swiveled around, the rest of it quickly taking on the same orientation as it marched over to us.

"You are Peter Tyler, confirm?" it asked with a strange insistence.

'Ten to one, that's our target.'

"…er, confirm," the main replied awkwardly, apparently clueless as to the implications of the cyborg focusing on him of all possible people.
"I recognized you," the Cyberman explained. "My designation was formerly Jacqueline Tyler."

"No," Rose gasped.

"What?" Pete asked before quickly falling into denial. "No, you're lying."

That emotional display was exactly the wrong thing for him to do. "They are unprogrammed!" the Cyberman exclaimed before raising its voice. "Restrain–"

Lunging past Pete, I grabbed the Cyberized Jackie by the throat and initiated psychic contact.

'Kill me.'

It took Jackie a fraction of a second to say that after my intrusion, skipping past the panic of someone's first dalliance with a psychic power. Instead, it was me who was shocked by what I found, despite knowing that this was the most likely end for the woman.

The woman's psychic image of herself was a fluctuating ruin, the rare flashes of her whole and healthy quickly interrupted by much gorier images of a body flayed and then cut to ribbons. The one part that was stable were her eyes – hazel-grey with a unique gold ring around the outside and flecks of that same color within that –, and they were locked in a desperate stare full of obvious agony. Clearly, whatever Lumic had done to the woman hadn't involved anesthesia or any form of painkillers.

I'd seen worse. I'd felt worse. But I'd never been able to look at another person's injury without feeling it myself. 'I can help you,' I said, reaching out to her. 'I can fix–'

'They're still cutting me,' Jackie interrupted, eyes wide as she clawed at me with hands that were peeled down to the bone. It was disturbing, how much those eyes were and weren't like Rose's. 'I can feel still the knives. It's like burning and freezing all at once and it never ends. I can't live like this. It's too much. Just make it stop.'

I closed my eyes and counted down, trying to get my emotions under control. It was bad enough that my mother had been a convert beyond salvage, but I was hoping that I'd be able to help Jackie. 'Alright. I'll end it. I'll make it so it doesn't hurt anymore.'

I reached out to Jackie's head and let a touch of power cross over. She'd be dead as soon as I stepped back into the real world, but for now, the sight of her flickering body finally settling into the picture of woman untouched by knives – and wearing regular street clothes, which looked strange after seeing her in full finery earlier that night – was enough.

'Tell Pete I'm sorry,' she said as I stepped back into myself.

I lowered my hands, letting the disabled Cyberman sag forward before I lowered it gently to the floor. To those observing, the interaction must have taken less than a minute. "She's gone."

"She was just –"

"She asked me to do it. I offered to try and fix it, but she…" Words failed just when I needed them most. Finally, I managed to grab hold of what I needed. "She was in pain and wanted it to be over." I looked directly at Pete. "She told me to tell you that she was sorry."

"For wanting to die?" Rose asked in a disbelieving tone.

She was young. Too young and too inexperienced to realize that sometimes dead was better, though
I might have assumed that travelling with the Doctor might have shown her that fact.

Pet, on the other hand, seemed to know what my answer meant. "...was it painless?"

"As painless as I could make it."

I'd known Jackie was going to be one of the first to be converted. Not in hard facts, no, the episode had never said anything overtly, but she'd been at the site of the first attack, the only one that had been specifically planned out, and had been given Earbuds to ensure that she could be controlled like a puppet on a string before that point. There had been nothing saving her then and there was nothing to salvage now after... well, I could just look at the 'conversion chambers' and make several educated guesses as to why that was.

My mother's condition wasn't a surprise either, well, once I'd gotten past the initial shock of 'she's been what?'. I'd seen firsthand what she'd done and what was left over, even if it had taken a few centuries to pull the truth out of the distorted nightmare. A point-blank bullet to the brain wouldn't leave much to work with, even with the minimal needs of the Cybermen setup.

It was too late to do anything about that. It was not, however, too late to help the people being hurt right now.

The sound of an alarm going off ended any chance of private time for grief.

Right. "We need to get you two somewhere safe," I said, picking the two humans up as I opened up the telepathic channels and a new dimension of mobility. 'Guys, I need some options.'

Flying had always been easy for Zeke. The discovery of the fact had been baffling at first – he'd had no experience with flying under his own power before that, never been anything other than a standard humanoid subject to gravity like most of the universe –, but the moment he'd actually taken wing, he'd fallen into it as naturally as frogs took to water. After that, it was only a matter of fine-tuning his technique and enjoying the sensation of being in direct contact with the sky. Beneath him, the world sprawled. To a human eye, it would be hard to make out any details beyond the dark outlines of buildings and the blaze of lights shining from streetlamps and windows, but to him, every detail was visible. But the details of Lumic's factory were the most important at the moment – specifically, the mooring dock for the titanic zeppelin that Lumic used as transport.

It was easily one of the largest he'd ever seen of the type, though it would have to be large if it was meant to serve as a lab and living space for a disabled inventor who routinely travelled long distance. It also followed that it would have the same tech that the man would put into his terrestrial command centers.

Two guards stood at the bottom of the boarding ladder. Fully human too, though the vague surprise was cut down by his observations of the Cyberman design. Until the leg design was refined and the overall weight of the armor was cut down, any task involving ladders or stairs would be difficult for the cyborgs to manage at any reasonable speed without risk of destroying or destabilizing the structure they were meant to be climbing. A zeppelin like this... yes, it would be more practical to use flesh and bone instead of high-content metal, at least until the details of the design were hammered out. The Earpods blinking in their ears would provide more than enough control for Lumic's needs.

Landing on the side of a building, Zeke gently sank his talons just far enough into the brick and mortar to maintain a steady perch. While it was unlikely – not impossible, but unlikely – that the human guards below would be able to perceive this form beyond a faint shiver of primordial dread
crawling up their spines, the element of stealth was still a benefit at this point, given that he had no certainties on if either was capable of seeing him or not.

Right. A quick flash of the senses confirmed Mickey, Ricky, and the forgettable blonde boy – irritating, not being able to remember a name, but he wasn't particularly regretful about this one – finally clearing the ledge just enough to see the situation themselves.

The forgettable blonde was, naturally, advocating the use of guns.

"There's just two of them. At this range, wouldn't be any trouble at all," he said, barely quiet enough to avoid drawing the guards' attention.

"Except we're not here to kill people," Mickey hissed back.

"Who died and put you in charge? Because I'm pretty sure it wasn't me," his doppelganger snapped, reaching for one of the machine guns. "We're going to deal with it like Jake suggested."

Zeke stifled an irritated ruffle before it could properly begin, instead launching himself downwards from his vertical perch. Clawed hands reached out and grabbed at the guards' heads – unarmored, unguarded – and shoved them down halfway to meeting the roof. Before they could react further than vague cries of surprise, he'd jumped off of them, flipping backwards just enough to have the space to flare his wings and launch himself at them again, taking them the rest of the way to the ground and unconsciousness. A quick pulse of psychic pressure merely offered a guarantee of the last point.

"What the hell was that?" Jake asked with what Zeke was coming to assume was his standard state of confused indignation.

"What do you mean, what is that?" Ricky snapped back, gesturing in Zeke's direction. "It's a bloody great bird monster, that's what it is."

"There's nothing fucking there, you mirror universe moron."

"What the – I'm Ricky, you tit! How the hell can you mix me up with him? I've touched your fucking tonsils!"

That statement and Mickey's much quieter stare was more than enough to confirm yet another talent in the young Smith's warehouse – a certain ability to see ghosts.

Standing up on two legs, Zeke shed his Hollow guise in favor of his humanoid form, letting the expressions of awe and surprise – odd to think that it was the latter that got those reactions when the first had a double set of wings and talons that could shred steel in plain view – settle over all three of the humans. He dusted some imaginary particles off of his shoulder before focusing back on Mickey.

"Like I said earlier – you're a lot sharper than you let on, Mr. Smith." He gestured to the boarding ramp. "Shall we?"

"What are you?" Ricky demanded.

Zeke was tempted to roll his eyes or bristle feathers that are no longer present, but a smart comment would have to suffice. "Ridiculously overcomplicated," he said before gesturing to the airship with his umbrella. "Now, I believe we have other business to attend to?"

The silence of the airship interior, interrupted only by the occasional slow chop of distant propeller blades and the hum of electrical lights, was oppressive in a way that made even the barest sound of a
footstep sound like the greatest kind of intrusion, especially in the absence of any security measures.

Perhaps Lumic had assumed that the guards he'd posted outside would have been enough. Or maybe he assumed that only a fool would try to take the airship. Regardless of which answer was the truth, it was a clear mistake on his part.

"Bastard didn't even put locks on the doors," Ricky muttered as they entered the bridge. Screens and readouts of different navigational equipment and controls filled the space, though there was still more than enough room for people to walk around. Likely the last was a design choice necessitated by Lumic's physical disabilities because otherwise the space was arranged with an eye for efficiency.

A Cyberman was fixed into a wall docket seemingly designed for that specific use, the blinking lights around it giving away details such as its current energy level – fully charged – and its current state of 'sleep mode'.

The blond boy lifted his gun. "Let's deal with it."

Zeke hooked the weapon with the crook of his umbrella and pushed it down. "I wouldn't. I doubt your bullets have become any more effective than they were at Tyler's mansion. So long as it is inactive, you have nothing to be concerned about."

The Cyberman was, for all intents and purposes save the most important one, dead. The presence of the spirit of who it had once been floating just up and to the side of it, going through the motions of despair and then surprise at the presence of non-Cybus people, was more than enough to confirm that. That didn't necessarily prevent the Cyberman itself from being a physical threat, but it would make it much easier to 'pull the trigger' if that threat presented itself.

"No, no, no, you need to get out of here," the ghost was screeching, its voice stumbling over the words as it darted around the group as much as its tether would allow. Just as Zeke expected, the Smith 'twins' seemed to be able to hear it, though Mickey was the only one to visually react to the spirit, ducking out of the way of its grasping hands. "They'll kill you if they find you. They'll cut you and burn you and–"

A flick of Zeke's hand saw the errant ghost scattered to loose particles. If it had the will to pull itself back together, there would be little damage to be shown for the action. If not… well, it was one way to encourage a transition to the next stage of its afterlife.

Mickey twisted around to give him a questioning look, but Zeke waved him off before making his way to the controls.

Right. Didn't need the controls for the airship – not yet anyway – but the rest of it held possibilities. Especially the control panels that came with large screens attached. He immediately set to attacking the keys, testing the technology before tearing into the code proper.

'Guys, I need some options,' Delaine yelled across their telepathic switchboard, urgency lending her usual tones volume.

'How are things on the floor?' he asked. The abstract of bad was already clear but the details…

'Lost Jackie, trying to relocate Tylers somewhere safe. Soon as I get that done, I'm going to attempt to salvage what I can. Lumic… he wasn't gentle with his converts. No anesthetic.'

Zeke winced at the unspoken parts of the communication. Cyberconversion had never been particularly pretty or pleasant in his experiences with it and shoving an emotionally crippled empath into a factory full of it would have hardly been his first choice of action. Still, it gave Delaine
motivation to do something other than set things on fire... 'You can relocate the ones you can save up here, provided they're non-violent. It's not like there's a lack of room on this zeppelin.'

'Oh thank shit.'

'That solves my problem as well,' Tsela chimed in. 'Talk to you later.'

Something large and metallic moved behind him – that Cyberman back there apparently served as security, as he'd expected –, but before it could do much more than step forward and say, "You will surrender--", it crashed back into the wall mounting it had come from, a new hole running straight through its chest piece, the bolt of energy that had caused it destroying all the delicate equipment that kept the cyborg functional on its way through.

Zeke shook the lingering recoil from his finger as he returned his attention to the computers, ignoring the stares from the humans around him.

"Oh, look, full access to Lumic's security system and broadcast array," he said instead after a few more keystrokes. "Now what would we do with something like that...?"

The Doctor studied Delora's sparse files, finding himself more and more dissatisfied as he hit that same brick wall known as 'the last page'. There was almost nothing here. A glowing picture of the woman painted by her resume and Mrs. Moore's recollection further filled in by the set of hard facts laid out by the medical files, but beyond that, nothing. Nothing real, nothing that tied her to his missing companion beyond genetics and a thread of shared backstory that was long unraveled by time, space, and the failings of human memory.

'Well, perhaps you would have more luck if you actually had an actual answerable question about her instead of just aimlessly scrolling through the same files again and again in hopes of new information magically appearing in the system the moment you look away,' his Third snapped, the word 'magic' made a near expletive by his past self's scornful tone. 'Of course, there are better things you could be doing with your time, such as pinning down Lumic's location or, I don't know, seeing if the companion you're so concerned about has been processed or not.'

The Doctor was forced to agree. Much as he loathed to let go of this information, it wasn't actually worth anything in this situation and his current fixation on it was wasting valuable time which the Time Lord couldn't afford to lose.

Tsela took his hand away from his ear, drawing the Doctor's attention back to the cyborg soldier. "Zeke's group has taken over the zeppelin. We'll start relocating the salvageable units and non-converted rescues there." At the Time Lord's sharp look, he clarified. "I don't know how many we'll be able to save. Lumic did a number on them, between the control equipment and the conversion, but I think that we'll be able to save a few."

"I take it you'll be taking some of these up?" Mrs. Moore asked, looking over at the Cyberconverted child. They hadn't managed to get much more conversation out of it, but the way that it was muttering and tracing shapes on the floor while making an effort to avoid the other Cybermen at least spoke of mental activity.

"Along with you. Me and the Rider will be handling demolition down here and that job will be easier without having to watch out for any soft bodies in the way." With that, Tsela leaned forward. "This probably isn't going to be too heavy on the dignity, but piggyback is probably the safest and most comfortable way I have of carrying you out."
Mrs. Moore looked unsure for a moment, but complied anyway, carefully situating herself on the
cyborg's back. Tsela then reached out a hand to the Doctor, who stepped back.

"I need to find Lumic."

"That isn't –"

"Someone needs to attack the Cybertechnology at the source and that's not something you can do
with a sword, ridiculously sharp as yours may be. Kill the signal, skip having to hunt down every
Cyberman that this factory ever produced," the Doctor pointed out. "Besides, I'd like to think that I'm
distinct enough that you won't chop me in half by accident."

The cyborg soldier hummed to himself for a moment. "Fine. Be careful, though."

"Doctor!" Mrs. Moore yelled, stopping the Time Lord at the door.

The woman reached into her bag, producing a copper cylinder that she tossed to him.

"It's an electromagnetic bomb," she explained as the Doctor turned the object over in his hand.
"Rather useful for killing computers, though I wouldn't object if you saw fit to bung it at Lumic's
head when you find him."

Six hummed. 'The idea has some merit.'

'And appeal,' Nine added.

Mrs. Moore continued speaking. "Also, my name is Angela. Angela Price. Thought you should
know, considering the fact that we're saving the world together."

The Doctor grinned. "Pleasure to meet you, Angela. Now, which way is Lumic's office from here?"

Shoving the Tylers aboard the zeppelin – Rose still freaking out over the wings that I'd pulled out of
nowhere –, I launched myself backwards and down towards the factory again, opening up my wings
and my senses to any trace of life below.

This part of the mission was going to be hard. Triage had never been one of my strengths, between
my responsiveness to pain and tendencies towards over-focus and attachment, but I could manage. It
would just be the Jackie thing again, but faster. Contact, assess, then remove as necessary. The fact
that I was still wearing my Cyberman disguise would make the task a little harder, but I didn't have
time to take it off.

Instead, I let the Rider out properly, the metal correspondingly taking on a hellish black patina as my
wings partially caught fire. The aesthetic might not be one that a person would associate with 'rescue'
but it certainly would mark me as a very different creature than the Cybermen below. Whether that
was going to work in my favor – after all, hellfire and clawed wings had never exactly held positive
connotations in human culture, even if those wings usually were of the leathery variety – remained to
be seen, but I'd worked well with less.

I flared my wings just before reaching the roof and, dropping the last foot to the solid roof,
immediately started running, grabbing at every metallic face in range as I tried to discern who I could
save out of the converts and cutting down those that I couldn't.

Already, I knew that this would not be a good day for saving lives. That there would likely be more
corpses by the time we were through.
Punching through a Cyberconversion chamber, I pulled two-thirds of a woman clear of the blades, the Rider's healing ability closing up her wounds even as I shifted her to a more comfortable carry. Immediately, I reversed course back to the top of the building and the zeppelin waiting there.

But that didn't mean I couldn't save a few.

The Doctor ducked out of the way of a small squad of Cybermen who, thankfully, seemed rather more interested in getting down the hallway rather than checking any side rooms for intruders as another crash rang out from that general direction.

Mrs. Moore's – no, Angela's directions weren't terribly helpful, seeing that she'd never worked in this specific facility and had been out of Lumic's employ for well over a year but there was a bit there he could use.

Unfortunately, that bit was the fact that the way to Lumic's office was on the far side of the factory floor from where he was starting, meaning that dodging Cybermen and the Cyberconversion chambers was a time-consuming necessity.

The Doctor glanced at a Cyberconversion chamber that had been partially ripped open, leaving its partially mauled victim in a cause of clear shock. The man likely wouldn't survive without immediate medical attention, but any medical equipment the Time Lord could have had on hand had been shoved into the pockets of his usual suit, not his current tuxedo.

The image of a dark figure with smoldering wings registered to the Doctor's senses for a moment before disappearing again, leaving the absence of a body and destruction of machinery in its wake. The Time Lord could only hope that the Rider had the means to rescue the human it had rescued from the wreckage, because there was enough of them left behind that blood loss seemed like a legitimate risk.

'Just when you think you know what's going on…' one of his previous selves muttered as the Doctor took another sharp turn towards a set of stairs.

Masterminds liked being able to look over their works in every sense of the term. Lumic was likely no different, which meant the man was somewhere above the factory floor. The fact that there was helpful signage pointing the way to the CEO's office just made the Time Lord's search so much easier and he was soon standing in front of a reinforced door.

Before he could reach for the sonic screwdriver, the door opened itself, pneumatic seals hissing as the metal sheets slid back.

Unexpected, but the Doctor could use that opportunity to keep his best weapon a secret.

"John Lumic, I presume," he said, stepping into the room.

The Cyberman, sitting in what couldn't be described as anything less than a 'throne', responded immediately, fixing luminous eyes on the Doctor. "John Lumic is no more. I am the Cybercontroller."

The Doctor made a face. "Oh, really? That's kind of sad. I was interested in meeting the man who made all of this, not his replacement—"

"My designation was formerly John Lumic, before the conversion," the cyborg said, its tone almost tetchy. "You may consider your 'interest' fulfilled."

"Oh, well, why didn't you say that in the first place? Now we've started off on the wrong foot
entirely," the Doctor said, walking around the room, mindful of the Cyberman guards stationed in the room. There were only the two, but that was more than enough to make him watch his step. All it would take was one touch to end his life… or put him in a position where it would be lost regardless of how well he was able to take the voltage. And he only had the one electromagnetic bomb on hand. "I must say, you move quickly when you decide to do something."

"The bleeding edge is always rising and I must ever rise to match it," the Cybercontroller declared. "One cannot make progress if one is held back by hesitation."

"Or things like free will and ethics, I see," the Doctor said, motioning at the Cybermen standing at the Cyberconverted Lumic's side. "Did you take resumes from your bodyguards there or was it more of a kicking and screaming conscription? Oh, wait. I forgot. The Earpods. That would cut down on the 'resistance' part, wouldn't it? Assuming direct control."

He stepped to the side, approaching a bank of computers. Likely the security system for the factory if the many screens and camera feeds were anything to go by. Good. He could use that.

"It's almost brilliant. I'd call you a genius, but then again I'm in the room," the Doctor said, tracing his finger along the line of the control panel with a carefully constructed carelessness. In his other hand, hidden just by the particular turn of his wrist, was the sonic screwdriver, doing its best to find some access into Lumic's systems. "But we're a creative pair; should be easy to think of names we can call each other. Innovative. Inspired. Determined."

"Irreverent. A rogue element," the Cybercontroller added.

"That's me to a T, certainly," the Doctor agreed as he got past the first and second firewalls to begin sneaking his way through the third. "But 'monster', now that's all yours, because it takes a special kind of person to look at people and think 'I'm going to cut out and sterilize everything that makes them that makes them themselves because being an independent-thinking person with thoughts and feelings is just misery waiting to happen'. And, no, that is not a compliment."

The Time Lord spun around on his heel, throwing away his calm to let loose the storm that had been boiling since he'd seen that first Cyberman back at Pete's mansion. "You took people – even children! – and cut them up for no reason other than because you could. You didn't bother to ask for permission, didn't bother to let them keep their own minds… you didn't even bother to use anesthesia. There's no justifying that as anything 'good'. No calling it anything but what it is – a monstrous act by a man who couldn't see anything beyond himself and his own pain and desire."

Another firewall collapsed. "I don't know what 'inspired' you to do it. Could have been anything–"

"My brother."

*That* almost threw the Doctor off. "What?"

"Jacob Lumic was John Lumic's inspiration," the Cybercontroller corrected, the unconvincing illusion of emotional distance broken by its next words. "We were out on the ice. Skating. Childish foolishness, any logical mind would have known it wasn't thick enough to take a person's weight. The ice breaking was only the natural course of events."

"Jacob pushed me out to safety but couldn't climb out himself. The shock, perhaps, or lack of leverage. The same condition prevented John Lumic from rescuing his brother and other rescue came too late to do any good. Jacob Lumic succumbed to hypothermia and died within the hour. He was not resuscitated." The Cyberman went quiet for a moment. "If the Cybermen were available, he would not have been lost. That error has been corrected."
"And do you think that your brother would have wanted this?" The Doctor wasn't moved, not enough not to step back from antagonizing what little remained of Lumic. The longer he could keep the Cybercontroller focused on his words, the further he could get with his hands. "Is that why you picked those people for your first run of conversions? Because you didn't want to lose them? Even though there was no way you didn't know that what you were doing was hurting them – I mean, was there any other reason to take away their emotions? – and that what you were doing to them was the worst kind of torture, you just couldn't let them go, even if it was their time?"

"You lose one person and decide that you don't want to ever lose anything again. That you didn't want to feel despair or helplessness ever again," the Doctor surmised. "That's now how the world works, Lumic, no matter how much you might like it to."

"That is how it will work now. Just as I have designed."

"A metal world full of metal people full of metal thoughts… and not a flower bed among them, I wager." The Doctor fixed his stare on the Cyberman. "You do realize that I am going to have do something about that."

Now it was the Cybercontroller's turn to scoff. "You have no means of stopping me. I have an army. You are alone. Abandoned. Helpless. The odds of a single human achieving victory in such a situation are astronomical."

"You've got some very interesting ideas of what I am," the Doctor said. "Unfortunate for you that they're all wrong." He stepped forward. "First of all, I'm not human. Second, I'm not helpless. And thirdly…"

A pair of strong hands forced their way through the sealed door, forcing the pieces apart with an appalling screech until there was enough room for the blackened and battered casing of the Rider's Cyberman disguise and the singed wings that had forced their way out of the back of it to pass through.

Of course, one of his past selves would be distracted by the last bit. 'An interesting design. A hybridization of bat and bird-wing anatomy. I wonder how they actually work in practice…'

"I am not alone."

"John. Lumic," it hissed, smoke spilling from its mouth piece with each syllable as more of that same black haze leaked out of the rest of the casing, the glow of some internal fire just barely passing through it to give away the fiery nature of the being producing it. A few feathers dropped to the floor before burning themselves out of existence. "I've been looking for you."

"John Lumic is no more. I am the Cybercontroll–"

The Rider's gold eyes sparked at that as the creature seemed to pull itself to a height it hadn't possessed a moment ago. "No. You're still there, Lumic. I can see you. And there's no force in Heaven, Earth, or Hell that can hide you from the likes of me."

Whatever the Cyberconverted Lumic had been about to say to that was cut off by one of the Cybermen guards crashing into the wall and the Rider's hand closing around his throat – the Doctor hadn't even seen it cross the room, which meant that it had backhanded the guard and crossed the distance in a matter of milliseconds – and pulling up, dragging his body up and out of his 'throne' like the metal chassis weighed nothing at all as the connections between the Cyberman and the machinery around it snapped like old twine.
The Doctor twisted, pulling the electromagnetic bomb from his pocket and lobbing it at the remaining guard, which immediately fell screaming to the floor before going largely silent, save for a faint gurgling that the Time Lord was making an effort to ignore.

Right, that was it. All that left was dealing with the computers –

"John Lumic. You have committed dire crimes against your fellow man. The torture and murder of several thousand humans and the attempted genocide of the human race are merely the first that come to mind," the Rider declared, drawing the Doctor's attention and itself up to full height while lifting Lumic even higher. Even if its voice was calm, the crunch of steel as it closed its hand around the Cybercontroller's neck spoke of a very different emotion. "Thousands of lives cut short by your selfish desires, thousands of minds shattered by your cruelty, thousands of hearts broken by your choices. Your soul is stained with the blood of the innocent and the measure of pain you have visited on others is almost beyond comprehension."

Even though it was clear that the Rider's grip was inescapable, Lumic kept struggling.

"Now that pain will be yours, to be received as it was given, payment in full. Look into my eyes, John Lumic," the Rider said, dropping Lumic back down to its level. "And. See. What. You've. Done."

The Doctor had more than a few occasions to hear a Cyberman scream before. As much as they prided themselves on not being subject to human emotions, it wasn't impossible for that little chip responsible for that false tranquility to break. It could be overloaded, circumvented, damaged through mundane means… and usually, what followed was some form of agony, filtered through mechanical lungs and further warped by an electronic voice box until the result was barely recognizable as human.

This time was different.

The beginning of Lumic's scream was very much that which the Time Lord had been expecting; a droning, unmistakably artificial structure trying to translate a very visceral sound. But soon the electronics began to short out, warping the scream further until it sputtered out with a finally tinny shriek.

All textbook – 'Terribly tragic to think that we define that as textbook, isn't it?' Three remarked as soon as the thought crossed the Doctor's mind – as far as the Time Lord was concerned. But that wasn't the end of it, because when there was no more logical reason for there to still be any noise coming from the Cybercontroller, Lumic kept screaming.

At first, it'd been a gasping, sputtering thing like the scream that had preceded it, but this new one had been a naturally 'wet' noise, like the man's throat and vocal cords were being regrown around the broken electronics expressly for the purpose of continuing that awful noise. Then, it had turned into a very human scream of pain and terror that climbed and fell in ways a Cyberman's voice simply couldn't.

"How much blood is on your hands, Lumic? How many wrongs are on your head? How many souls did you put through the same hell that you did Jacqueline Tyler?" the Rider asked as Lumic howled in its hand, the steel casing that held the Cyberman together falling to pieces as the cyborg thrashed, rust flaking off of the metal almost as quickly as it formed. "I can number them all and can tell you this – you're not even halfway through with your penance."

It wasn't often that the Doctor found himself playing the voice of reason to a force of nature, especially when it felt like the Time Lord was sliding into a different part of the long familiar script of
a companion begging for him to show mercy, to not do something that couldn't be taken back, but there was a tugging coming from someplace between his hearts that insisted that he do something. Unfortunately, sometimes 'something' only amounted to saying a handful of words.

"Stop it."
The Rider froze and the Doctor took the opening.

"You've punished him enough— and once you stop keeping him alive, he's won't be hurting anyone else. There's nothing more Lumic can do to anyone else," the Doctor continued, keeping a level stare on the armored engine of vengeance despite every instinct screaming at the Time Lord to run.

"You've drawn it out long enough. He's a sick, misguided man who hurt a lot of people but… this… this is just pointless torture now. Just let him die already—"

He cut off as the charred remains of the Cybercontroller fell to the ground, shattering into flakes of rust and charred material the Time Lord didn't really want to attempt identifying. There was no more screaming, which left a deafening silence in its wake.

"Thank you."

The Rider huffed as it shed the flaking remains of its armored disguise, revealing the leather ensemble from earlier along with a distinct absence of helmet.

'Well, I suppose that makes them a regular Ghost Rider, doesn't it?' Eight noted as the Doctor stared at the burning skull and the black ashy residue of *something* that wasn't bone stuck to its surface. The skeletal being seemed irritated by the Time Lord's stare, quickly pulling the black helmet from earlier out of the ether to conceal its non-existent face.

Finally, he tore his eyes away from the Rider and back to the computers. Right, without the need for subterfuge, accessing and destroying all the information contained therein should be easy.

Five minutes later, he was still working.

"Aren't you done yet?" the Rider asked.

"Just about. I just need to find the self-destruct…" he scrolled through a few screens of options. "Come on! What sort of self-respecting evil factory doesn't have a self-destruct?!"

"One that the maker doesn't want destroyed with the press of a single button?" the Rider offered in a distinctly sarcastic tone.

A moment's shock at that sort of comment coming from that sort of being gave way to an annoyed glare. "Thank you for pointing out the obvious. But this does make destroying any possible remaining equipment harder…"

The Rider put a fist through the computer, causing a screen on the far end of the machine to explode and fire to spark from the keyboards. "Problem solved," it said as the Doctor tried to find words to express the level of flabbergast he'd just reached at what had to have been record speed.

Finally, as some screens on the other end of the room started exploding, he found them. "Are you really a spirit of vengeance or simply the humanoid personification of excessive force?" he asked. "Because I could go either way based on the evidence."

The Rider didn't reply, instead looking up at the ceiling. "Time to go."
Before the Doctor could ask any questions about 'where', 'why', or even possibly 'what', the leather-clad creature had picked him up in a clumsy carry and launched itself upwards. The Time Lord braced for impact, only for the steel and stone above them to shred apart before the Rider's wings could even touch the material, leaving a tunnel of warped steel leading out into the open night air.

The Rider twisted around in the air as it corrected their course to meet that of the slowly moving zeppelin. Unlike the white winged creature Seven's doppelganger had turned into, the Rider seemed ill-designed for natural flight, even if the wings it had were clearly designed for it.

Maybe that was thanks to it carrying around a fully-grown Time Lord, but still, the situation was faintly ridiculous.

After a moment of searching, the Rider found an access hatch into the zeppelin. Darting inside, it abruptly dropped the Doctor onto the floor before stalking off to some unknown room, wings disappearing as if they'd never existed in the first place.

The airship was surprisingly full. They must have been able to save more people than he'd expected, the Doctor realized. Most of the people seemed to be intact, if slightly rattled, but there were exceptions to that rule. One man that the Doctor recognized from the factory floor seemed particularly distressed by the fact that his legs abruptly ended mid-thigh, even though the smooth skin covering the end seemed to imply that it was an old injury.

"We put up the salvageable Cybermen in another room," Seven's doppelganger said, answering the Doctor's unspoken question. "A way of minimizing damage in the event of malfunction or miscommunication of the identity of allies and such sundry, you know."

"And the Rider?"

"Oh, they're likely going to go attend to the deconversion of our salvaged Cybermen."

The Doctor thought back to the Rider's actions in Lumic's 'throne room'. "Really? That's your best option?"

"The Rider's host is one the best roboticists I know and the Rider itself has a very literal touch for healing." The Professor then tilted his head to the side owlishly. "Do you find it surprising that someone with such destructive potential can also be a healer?" he asked.

The Doctor pushed his concerns about the word 'host' to the side for the moment. "Considering that the only interaction between your Rider and technology was it putting its fist through a computer because I wasn't typing fast enough, yes, I am somewhat surprised."

"Hm. To be fair, patience isn't one of her better qualities," the Professor admitted with a slight look of amusement. "But I've rarely known her to err in her art."

That one word saw the Time Lord arching his eyebrows. "'Her'?"

"Ah, I believe I've said too much." The man stepped back, doffing his hat before he disappeared into the crowd. The last lingering addition of, "Do try not to overthink things, won't you?" hung in the air for a moment.

Naturally, the Doctor and his past incarnations would do exactly that.

'If we can use Seven as a measure of what to expect from that one, he didn't say anything that he didn't mean to come out,' his Fifth said.
True, though the Doctor had the strangest sense that the Professor was an ever so slightly different
beast than Seven was. Different universe, different history, different rules, different result. However,
that didn't help the Time Lord answer the question of if could he trust the man or the creature he put
such stock in.

Once the door was shut behind me, I pulled off my helmet, the Rider's flames long gone in favor of
human flesh. There was a touch of risk in doing this, when the Doctor could walk in at any time to
throw in his opinion and expertise on the subject of robotics, but I needed to be able look like
something these people could trust. If I needed Raguel's healing touch, I would call on the angel
then.

For now, all I needed was their attention and my own abilities. And all eyes were already on me.

I exhaled.

"Right. My name is--" Delaine. Dellingr. Angrir. Orthrus. Any other number of things that were as
much mine as they were not. "– not terribly important at the moment, but you can call me Rider. Just
Rider – I don't need any fancy modifiers like 'Miss' or 'Doctor'. I'm a mechanic and roboticist."

A Cyberman that wasn't quite of Lumic's current make gave a humorless laugh. "So, what? Does
that mean you're here to give us our tune-ups?"

That one was definitely an adult. Children usually don't have that kind of humor, nor that knowledge
of connections between concepts.

"Sort of. I'm going to be building human-form cyborg bodies and prosthetics, depending on how
much of your original bodies can be salvaged."

If I had a week and all the different tools from my Warehouse, I could skip the robotics entirely, but
they didn't need to be taunted with that knowledge. Still, I had the tools.

"I'm a quick worker and familiar with this sort of work, so you don't have to worry about having a
novice poking around your delicate internals, but I'm not going to lie – it's not going to be the funnest
experience of your life," I said as I walked over to a locked door. Likely, it lead to something
relatively uninspiring, like a storage closet or hidden computer server, but the Warehouse key didn't
care about details like that. All it needed was a lock and a working set of hinges. "On the other hand,
I'll be using anesthetic for the major works, the whole process should take just a few minutes per
person, and if you want me to art up your prosthetics, all you gotta do is ask. Chrome on the joints,
lattice work… anything short of weapons, you can have."

I twisted the key in the lock and – once I felt my personal pocket universe fall into place on the other
side of it – opened the door, giving the group their first look at my personal Cosmic Warehouse.

Turning around to face my audience, I clapped my hands together. "Now, if there aren't any other
questions, who would like to go first?"

There was a moment of silence that I expected from people who's last experience with being under
the knife had been without a doubt the worst in their life, but eventually one stepped forward oh-so-
carefully. Then, the rest queued up.

I smiled. "Good. Now, if you all would follow me… and try not to wander off. It's a big facility and
there's only one of me to go around. Wouldn't want anyone to get lost or piss off the statuary.
Seriously, look out for those – they're twelve feet tall and a bit particular about people touching
things they aren't supposed to. Just think of them as very tall, very shiny museum security guards…"
The Warehouse might have been big, but it was easy enough to move around the various doors to bring the workshop around closer. Motioning for my patients to enter, I did a quick headcount and then shut the door behind them.

I flicked a few switches, turning the lights and other equipment on before silently directing the AI to keep their commentary to the minimum.

I turned back to my captive audience. "Now, if the ones waiting for their turn will sit here and whoever's going first follows me, we can get this show on the road."

Chapter End Notes

Finally, finally, the main drama of this arc is brought to a close, though we've got one more chapter to get through before leaving Namek– I mean, Pete's World.

God, this chapter took a long time to hammer out. Not just on its own merits (though it gave me enough trouble on that front), but with other things getting in the way. Health problems (my own and other people's), tech issues (got a new computer, getting a new drawing tablet), trying to plot out other parts of the series (I'll complain more about that in about two paragraphs or so)… it's been slow going.

Hopefully the next one won't take overly long, because I managed to hammer out about one-half to one-third of it while working on this one (debating on whether or not to wait longer to post a monster of an update or a double event before realizing that I wanted instant gratification) and most of what remains is pretty mundane and uncomplicated… of course, I say that before actually getting to it, so who knows.

I don't know if it was obvious, but my version of John Lumic was influenced by 'It's a Wonderful Life'. I mean, alternate reality that seems to divert from the 'original' based on the death/not-dying of a specific person… okay, it's not that good a comparison, but that idea just hit me when I started writing the Rise Of The Cyberman/Age Of Steel chapters and I decided that it was interesting to consider what would kick off that sort of obsession with making people not feel pain or weakness instead of just having Lumic have a sort of generic, unexplained motive for making the Cybermen beyond his own poor health (reason enough to convert himself, sure, but why bother with everyone else?). I mean, the man is still the bad guy, but I like to think I gave him a bit more depth than 'generic megalomaniac who wants to live forever' between his backstory and emotional reactions to the few people he cares about (much as he tries to shut the feelings up). I'm not super sure what condition Lumic had in canon (I mean, he was only put in a wheelchair because the actor busted his leg shortly before filming), but I was leaning on my version having something that was muscular dystrophy or something with similar symptoms, which would lead to the full body brace and respirator in order to survive and function.

The Doctor's speech to Lumic is somewhat parallel to one that the Fifth Doctor made to the Cybermen during Earthshock, though, to be fair, that resemblance is really only in passing and as a way to sort of fill out Ten's canon speech.

Zeke's alternate form is from the German Hollow Quest/Bleach Jump. It's a sort of griffin-type creature with a double set of wings. Hopefully I'll be able to hammer out
some sketches for the Bonus Material supplement on AO3, but I'm better at drawing humanoids than animals. Still, I've got a lot of crappy drawings that I can hopefully turn into a better set fairly soon.

Delaine's own wings are courtesy of the Card Captor Sakura Jump, where I picked the Guardian background for her (and since all the canon guardians have wings and solar/lunar themes... though I made the design of Delaine's a touch different) It's kind of funny, because when I first started writing this fic (or the original version of it), Delaine was meant to be one of the more 'mundane' personalities without too many powers to her own name, but then I just kept finding new stylistic themes to weave in through certain characters... If the in text description wasn't clear enough, they're supposed to be fairly similar to what Maleficent has in her live action movie.

Long view for this series –
Lots of brainstorming and plotting, along with more number crunching and timeline arrangement. In particular, the DCAU and Buffy Jumps are kicking my ass on that front, though the Buffy one is a lot more fun because it's researching music and fashion and other harmless junk from my childhood instead of trying to construct a timeline out of vague and mishmash-y information concerning internal references and production order. Also, trying to get my ADHD ass to sit still long enough to get through an episode of anything is impossible (like getting me to sit through 30% Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.2 and 80% of Thor Ragnarok is already an achievement even though I like those movies) without multiple sessions and lots of breaks to get up and run around in circles.

Anyway, thanks for reading and leaving reviews. Hopefully the next update is up before too long, but know that I strive for quality above punctuality (though I do generally feel bad about taking too long on updates).
Most of the volunteers to go first were recent converts, still caught in the cycle of denial and bargaining that made it easy to look me in the eye and demand that I put things right… and I was able to do that, for the most part. They didn't ask for flashy additions, but they did stick on things like wanting old scars replicated or insisting that their hair be put exactly how they remembered.

They wanted to forget the events that had brought them to my workshop and when they learned that there were some things I just couldn't put back to the way they were, like arms and legs that had been removed in their entirety, they got upset and then demanded the next best thing.

A few were a little more flexible, taking their new transhumanism in perfect stride, asking that I make additions that would keep all but the blind and most obtuse people from identifying them as cyborgs on sight. One even asked if I could replace the skin on their arms with an electronic surface they could draw on and then clear at will.

I had to point out that the 'at will' bit would require something like the Earpods be installed again.

Eventually, it was her turn. This universe's version of me, the girl that couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen before Lumic had cut her up and shoved the remains into that walking metal coffin and then shoved that into the metal mausoleum he called his 'factory'.

"Hi!"

The Cyberized girl shuffled awkwardly, the body language making the massive Cyberman frame seem a lot smaller than it actually was. "…hi."

I remembered being her age. The confidence with the structural integrity of sugar glass, worn down by abuse at home and at school and rendered all the more fragile by that mess known as puberty, and the fraying nerves that had finally, finally started snapping under the pressure.

The breakdown that had followed had been ugly, with all the emotions that had been shoved to the side or choked down being released all at once, a flood of emotions too extreme to allow even the barest control over thought or action. If not for a stray thought that had come from a place of pure spite – 'if you die, that just means that they've won' –, I might not have survived the experience.

Even an eternity later, I couldn't say who 'they' were supposed to be beyond a long list of suspects, only that even when I was halfway out of my mind, the thought of spiting that ill-defined enemy by making the choice of life had been just the lifeline I'd needed.

I pulled the Cyberized child over to a convenient bench, guiding her to a table and pushing her down into a reclining position as the AI running the medical suite found a place to put in the painkillers.

What I had to kill the pain wouldn't work quite so well as the Doctor's psychic anesthetic – I was going to have to copy that piece of equipment –, but it would work well enough to make the worst of what I had to do painless.

As automated arms began disassembling the Cyberman shell, starting with the back so other systems could take over the life support, I turned my attention to the girl inside.
"So, what's your name?"

My counterpart jumped slightly, the loosening armor rattling with the abrupt motion. "What?"

"What's your name?" I asked again. "I mean, I can call you Fred if you don't feel like sharing. Or maybe Steve. You seem like a Steve. Spidery."

She shuffled again, running metal fingers over metal arms. "…my name's Delaine," she mumbled.

"Oh, that's nice name. My mom gave me one just like it."

"Really?"

"Cross my heart and hope to fry, I too am known as Delaine," I said honestly, going through the motions. "Though I don't know if yours is the Irish version or the French. Personally, I favor the Irish. Can't exactly go wrong with 'dark challenger', can you? I mean, unless you translate it as 'descendant of the dark challenger' or 'dark river', but honestly all of those are better than 'from the elder tree grove'. Not that there's anything wrong with trees. I'm very good friends with a tree."

"How's that working out for you?"

"He won't leaf me alone."

The other Delaine gave a small noise of amusement at that, sounding like a kid in a much better way than she had before, before it turned into a sigh. "I didn't know it had a meaning. My dad said that my mom named her after herself and her mother. Delora and Eileen."

I snorted before holding up a hand at the vaguely offended look my counterpart was giving me. "Sorry, I was just thinking about what kind of mental gymnastics he must have gone through to reach that point. Or if he just addressed his mother-in-law as 'Elaine' for the entire time, thinking that was her actual name. Must have made any written correspondence awkward."

From personal knowledge, I knew it was more malice and a desire to be mean on his part, but the alternative answer of him being just that pigheaded and stupid had been funny for too long for me to willingly discard it.

"Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about yourself?" I asked, changing the direction of the conversation. "I mean, you can stick with the physical facts, if that's what you're comfortable with. How tall you are, what color your hair is, etcetera, etcetera. Bit boring, but safe enough if you're worried about 'stranger danger'. Or you can talk about music or your favorite TV shows. I'm not particular, though personally I'm more of a book person."

"Oh. I… I like books alright. Haven't had anything to read in a while."

I removed the plating on one of her arms, revealing that the flesh and bone stopped at the shoulder. Inconvenient for restoring the organics, but easy enough to remedy with inorganic materials. "Too bad," I said, motioning for the nanomachine computer to start modelling a new one, this time a few inches shorter and much more suited for a young girl used to having to stretch for almost every shelf she encountered. "Anything you recommend though? From one bookworm to another."

The rest of the armor came off cleanly, each revealing less and less person underneath. I winced at the ruin of her torso – almost nothing of the original organs were there and Lumic's life support only covered the bare necessities – but set to installing the necessary replacements as this universe's Delaine slowly revealed bit by bit of her interests. Sherlock Holmes, thankfully, was a constant and deep enough interest that we could get into a decent conversation about it while I worked on things
the girl was better off being unaware of.

"Alright. I'm going to start working on the head. You might experience some momentary sensory disturbance," I warned her as I directed the AI to go after the boxy helmet next.

The helmet came apart and I was brought face to face with... well, something a lot better and a lot worse than what I'd expected. Her human face – still too young for this – was mostly there and just as familiar as I expected it to be, right down to the sad almost black eyes and the scar on the chin, but everything behind the ears had been removed and replaced with a smooth metal plate over – or perhaps even replacing – the skull.

"Is it bad?" the other me asked, a clear note of worry entering her tone.

The last bit was something that would take a touch more effort to fix, especially considering that the others I'd de-converted had only had implants instead of this near full-metal coverage. Considering how many of the older models had opted to wait instead of going first, this was at least a warning of how those reconstructions would go. "It's not great, but it could be worse," I said, only lying a little bit as I tried to use the Rider's healing abilities on it. The scalp might have been a loss, but I was getting a reaction from the other tissues and already color was returning to her skin. "Do you have any strong opinions about wigs?"

Dark eyes flicked over to me, a faint worry creasing her forehead. "No?"

"Oh, good. Then you can have fun with this. Because you can't grow your own hair anymore."

"What?!"

"Or I can just like... permanently install some short hair that's your usual color. Makes wigs a touch trickier but I guess that'd be better-ish. Or maybe do something fancier. Maybe try to put together some sort of retracting system..."

Shock was already giving way to tears, fat oily drops of black liquid coming from glands that I hadn't switched back over to saltwater yet. "Do you know what they did at me at school when I showed up with short hair?"

"I can imagine," I said, remembering exactly what had happened and how I had to ignore calls of 'It' and other dehumanizing nicknames for the rest of the year. "But depending on what material I use, anything longer than a few inches could very easily get so messed up that you'd have no other choice but to cut it all off."

"But," I added before the wat-er, oilworks started up again, "If you want, I could make the permanent wig out of some smart material so you can change the style at will, provided it's like three or four inches or shorter. Pretty simple nanotech. Never have to muck around with hair gel again. Maybe set it up so you can change the colors too. Might have to put in a rudimentary AI if I make it that complicated to help smooth over the technical difficulties, but it's not like you don't have enough room for that. And here --" I pointed at the rudimentary beginnings of robotic limbs. "Nothing stopping me from putting in some bells and whistles in other places. Chrome on the joints, maybe a hidden compartment or two. Maybe some Heelys in your Achilles?"

The other me wore a speculative, though still somewhat watery look as she flexed what would become her new fingers. "Can you put in a grappling hook? I know you said no weapons but --"

I smiled. "If you don't mind me putting in some heavier reinforcement in the back and shoulders. Gotta make sure that your new body can take the hits," I said, going through the quick motions of a
boxer as the girl started giggling, the sound pushing my initial assumption that she was twelve down to somewhere around ten or so. "Going to take up mountain climbing or vigilantism? I bet you'd make a pretty good Batgirl."

The other Delaine dragged the back of one of her new hands across her cheek, smearing oil across her skin as the exposed artificial bones and tendons failed to absorb it. "Heh. Maybe."

An idea that was a joke for her was something I'd done plenty of times in more universes than I cared to count. "It's a good gig," I said with a shrug as I took her hand back and started adjusting the existing layout to make room for the reinforcements that would been needed. "Get to wear a cape, throw things at people, dispense justice like quarter machine. It'll be up to you to study martial arts though. Can't just hand everything to you on a plate."

"I'd been taking a class. It was mostly just on breaking holds though. Learned a little spear work when I was younger, but it was all practice stuff."

"Mm. Might want to try something else then. Maybe capoeira. I'm a little more Kung Fu, but I'd wager anything I've got more power to throw around than you do," I said as the AI started pulling together the designs needed to make what she wanted, colorful holograms overlaying black nanotech to create a piece of living art that would be just as much form as function. "Now, did you just want the grappling hook in just one arm or do you want to Spider-Man this?"

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Waiting had never been one of the Doctor's strengths. The title of 'Time Lord' had little bearing on that fact, save for the little convenience of being able to skip over waiting times via the TARDIS… at least, whenever the time machine didn't have other plans for her thief.

Thankfully, he had found ways to work around it. Anything that kept the hands or the mind busy – and unfocused on unpleasant thoughts – made waiting just another time to practice, and each incarnation had found their own preferred activities.

Two and Seven had taken up music and people watching with a seasoning of armchair philosophy, Six usually entertained himself with words – regardless of if they were his own or of others' creation – and whatever bright colors were available, while Three had filled his exile on Earth with tinkering and Four had idled between yo-yos, lofty but ultimately meaningless prattle, catnapping, and knitting, though he'd never properly gotten the knack of the last, leaving Eight to finally figure out the exact series of actions needed to turn yarn into something more than just haphazardly tangled string.

The latest model, however, was still figuring out his preferred idle hobby, which meant trying out the old ones to see if any had come to fit again and that meant that – in the lack of literature, yarn, interest in sleep, or access to his usually dimensionally transcendent pockets – people watching was the order of the day.

More specifically, the Doctor was watching Tsela interact with the people he'd help rescue.

The cyborg soldier was an interesting puzzle, managing to duck past the Doctor's usual reservations about guns and military minds despite being both a sniper and saboteur by his own admission as he presented all sorts of delicious mysteries all along the way – a body built with technology that was at least a decade or two ahead of what this world regarded as the cutting edge, a history only partially dusted off that teased at conspiracies and historical intrigue, and that sword! Inherently violent nature aside, there was no question that that sword was a work of art and that the man had clearly put work into mastering his use of it.
Of course, as fascinating a subject Tsela was, that fascinating nature didn't stop his other incarnations from finding their own puzzles to poke at.

'So which do you think is Raguel?' Nine asked. 'The Rider or its host? I'm inclined to say the first. It fits the mythology better, especially with what we know about the 'Professor'.

His Third hmmed. 'Of course, we haven't gotten any such indications from Seven's counterpart, unless we are supposed to mark 'Ezeqeel' and 'Zeke' as separate entities.'

'Hm. I want to say we have evidence for it, but that might be impulse speaking…'

'Ace.'

'What?'

'The Rider's host could be this universe's version of Ace,' Seven said again, his tone making it clear that sharing his theory was like pulling his own teeth. 'It – they've displayed some similar personality and behavioral traits to Ace, though somewhat exaggerated. The height and build is off, even from what little could be discerned through the protective gear, but what we saw of the bone structure seemed… consistent with Ace's facial type. And their connection to their… Professor.'

Here, the Doctor's past self paused awkwardly, as if getting past that word had been a hurdle he'd barely been capable of clearing. To be fair, most things related to Ace counted as that these days.

'It would fit with the pattern of mirrored relationships and backgrounds we've seen so far,' he finally finished lamely. 'And it would follow my own course of action in trying to send Ace through the Academy, if one can presume the angelic names indicate a legitimate connection.'

Picking up on the thread of theory, the Doctor's current incarnation continued the chain of thought. 'Except instead of turning her into a Time Lord, this Ace's Professor turned her into…' A psychic abomination inhabiting a human skin? A spirit of vengeance empowered by the suffering of others? An angel in the most biblical sense of the term? '…into whatever the Rider is supposed to be.'

It was an interesting theory. Disturbing, but interesting.

'It could also be entirely wrong,' Two pointed out. 'You know what sort of sayings humans have about assumptions.'

'Oh, I would like nothing more than to be wrong about this,' Seven replied. 'But what I would like is rarely what—'

"You wanted to talk to me?" Tsela asked, breaking the Doctor out of his thoughts as the old Indian sat down next to him.

"Oh. A little bit. Did your 'Professor' tell you that?"

The cyborg soldier gave a small laugh. "No. You just kept staring at me like you had a question."

Ah. That was embarrassing, being so easy to read, but it did neatly present the opportunity the Doctor had been waiting for. "A few, actually," the Time Lord admitted. "But I didn't want to be rude by demanding your attention."

"And here I was under the impression that 'rude' was your natural state of being."

Ow. "That was actually hurtful," the Doctor said. "Just a little smudge, because that's not too far off
the mark, but still. To think you think so little of me."

The old soldier folded his arms in a classic pose of vague disapproval. "You're the one who wanted to kill immediately after meeting me."

Well. When he put it like that… "Suppose I should have apologized for that," the Time Lord admitted sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Itna deiít’ééh." At the Doctor's questioning look, Tsela rephrased his answer in English. "Consider it forgiven. It's not like I haven't had plenty of meetings like that in my life."

"So what's next for you? I mean, maybe there's a few more Cybermen to deal with but…"

"They did say that Lumic had facilities all around the planet," Tsela replied vaguely. "But right now? I'm going to be helping with rehabilitating the survivors a bit. Give them tips on getting used to prosthetics, though th– the Rider will probably explain it as she works on kitting them out."

"Ah." The Time Lord tried to think of something else to say. Being at a loss for words was actually fairly uncommon for him, so when it happened, it was always a strain to come up with a new thread of conversation. "What is she like? I mean, I've gotten the 'violent' and 'vengeful' bits, but beyond that."

Tsela gave him a sideways smirk. "Fiery."

"Bit obvious, that bit."

"Always ready to go down in a blaze of glory. A real spitfire, you could say, not to be played with idly less you wish to be burned, though she's warm enough when you get close to her. Hot under the collar with an explosive temper, though her fuse is longer than most give her credit for. A deft hand with forge, anvil, soldering iron, and frying pan, depending on the time of day."

"Are you just making 'fire' jokes now?" the Doctor asked.

The cyborg grinned, the wrinkles of his face folding in interesting patterns to show off a well-maintained smile. "It is a distinct possibility."

The Time Lord put on an exaggerated pout. "Feh. I came looking for a straight answer and this is what I get."

"It's poor form to gossip behind a friend's back, Doctor, and I'm sure that you could get the answer yourself if you took the time to get to know her instead of sticking to your preconceived notions," Tsela said as he rose to his feet, the machinery that made up his robotic body giving an almost reassuring whirr. "Anyway, duty calls – I've got bodies to take to get prosthetics fitted. Was there anything else you needed to ask?"

A moment of silence passed between them as the Doctor considered if asking one question that had been itching at him since losing Delaine at the mansion was worth it. Then, he remembered another question that he'd shoved to the side on account of being somewhat silly.

"…you said something about curry earlier?"

"Finally reached the 'desperate' stage, I see," the cyborg joked as he reached into his backpack and tossed the packet over to the Time Lord, a small bottle of water following it. "Make sure to read the directions," he warned as he left, face plate closing before he was even gone.
Anthony Edward Stark had seen and done a lot of things in his life. A lot more of the latter than the former, if he wanted to be perfectly honest, and a good half of them had probably been undertaken with the aid of what might have been a little too much tequila – or whiskey, or vodka, or whatever was in the shiniest bottle behind the nearest bar – to ensure that good judgement continue to play a part in the proceedings.

Most of the time, there were no consequences for those things. A hangover, a couple scandals to cover the pages of tabloids that cared, or maybe an irate bedmate soured over the status of 'one-night stand' would be the worst of it and then Tony would move on to the next fleeting bit of excitement.

So perhaps it was natural that one of the few times that Tony did something that shouldn't have held any consequences, good or bad, that everything go to hell.

All he had done was go to a party held by one of the few people in his social strata that he actually kind of liked. Didn't bring a date, didn't 'adopt' someone else's, didn't bring any 'party favors', didn't even take more than a single flute of champagne which he didn't even finish. As far as Starks went, that was pretty damn good behavior.

Over the course of a few hours, Tony had been kidnapped by robots – designed by a man who wasn't even a competitor, which almost made it worse –, put in a line, and removed of his left leg and arm by a cheaply designed automated chop-shop before being hauled out of there by what could only be described as an album cover brought to screaming, blazing life. It had put its hands on the bloody stumps and, with the cold burn of a healing hand, had taken the blood and the pain away while leaving the stumps behind.

And now they were moving onto the next step of this mess.

"You've got to give me the number of your mechanic," Tony said to the robot man that was carrying him down the hall to their next destination, his eyes drinking in the complex mechanical biology in front of him. "I mean, out of all the robots I've seen tonight, you've got the sexiest set-up."

"I already have a boyfriend, Stark," the robot replied with a distinct tone of amusement, "so you can stop flirting."

"But I'm so good at it. That, and threesomes. Just putting that out there. Not every day that you get to fulfill a celebrity fantasy."

"And who said that you've featured in either of our fantasies?" the robot said as he pushed open a door that led into a space that had couldn't have been fully conceived by any of Tony's imaginings.

What he saw was a massive room full of shelves that went higher and higher without any clear sign of stopping, in no small part because there was no ceiling to require there be a stop, even though logic dictated that one should have existed seeing as they had just been standing in a storage room above a zeppelin.

More immediately attention grabbing, however, was the ten-foot tall statue of some Egyptian god complete with jackal head looming over them with a distinctly un-statuelike look of appraisal guiding its doglike nose up and down while its friends – different designs, almost to the point of looking like completely different creations, but the same massive size – loitered around the shelves as smaller robots of various sizes and makes busied themselves with various cleaning tasks.

Tony needed a minute to regain control of his jaw, but he knew exactly what question had to be asked first. "What the fu--"
"Watch your profanity."

Finally, the rest of Tony's brain caught up enough to start questioning the science. "How – this is physically impossible. You can't fit this large a space inside of –"

"It's not inside of the zeppelin. The door is, but the rest of it isn't. As far as we've figured, it's a pocket universe with its own laws of physics."

"You figure?"
"It's not like this kind of bullshit comes standard with an owner's manual, Stark, but one learns as one goes."

"The vague implication that there's more than one of these physics breakers is more concerning, if you want my opinion," Tony said as they passed through a doorway that gave way to a room that did have a ceiling, though it was still a lot higher than the dimensions of Lumic's zeppelin should have allowed.

Unlike the generic appearance of the last area, this room clearly screamed 'workshop', as there were tools and schemata mounted on almost every available wall. Dozens of robotic arms danced around from their rails on the ceiling, floor, and walls, carrying bits of machinery back and forth from one end of the space to another, with bits that could be recognized as Lumic's work being thrown into some obvious refuse bin in one far corner.

Tony didn't care a lot about that – or his ride's responding comment of "I didn't." –, but it was part of actual Candyland he'd been carried into and was now memorizing every detail of because why wouldn't he? This was what he would have designed his own personal Heaven to be if he'd ever thought he was going there and had assumed that this sci-fi stuff was an option.

It looked to be mostly empty, apart from the robots, but 'mostly' wasn't 'completely'.

A woman wearing half-familiar leather biker gear was sitting beside a large round table near the middle talking to an eccentrically dressed younger kid with clear prosthetics replacing almost all of their visible limbs about basic mechanics using their left arm as an example. There was a vague resemblance between their faces, but how much of that was legitimate or just a coincidence of coloring wasn't for Tony to judge, what with his legendarily poor memory for faces and names and general everything that didn't have anything to do with cars, robotics, or cool – which more boring people might call 'mad' – science.

"– see, while you could technically use a wire-and-pulley system to recreate the motion and the general theory behind the organic version, the problems of winding and unwinding would make themselves apparent the first time something tangled. On the other hand, while pneumatics don't have such obvious issues, there is trouble with delicacy and, once again, repair, though that's mostly in finding a replacement in the first place, because believe me, you wouldn't believe how much of a pain it is shopping for that stuff at the 'measured in millimeters' scale," the biker woman was saying, gesturing at a few different holographic displays as she went. "Nanotech is a lot more flexible, but I try not to use it on anything that's not going to be in regular contact with someone who knows how to handle it, because when that shit glitches, it glitches."

The kid looked like they had gotten halfway through the spiel before deciding that 'smile and nod' was the best response, which they were now carrying out.

"Got your next patient, D," the robot said, hefting Tony up to rest on a table.

There was only a minor flicker of recognition in the woman's dark eyes as she looked at him, one
that was impossible to label as good or bad save for the fact that there was a small smile to
accompany it.

"Tony motherfucking Stark. I thought I recognized you on the floor."

So she knew him… though to be fair, most of the planet that had access to the internet or newspapers
did by this point in his life. But it was the smile that threw him off. That was a smile that he only saw
on the faces of his friends – too subtle and lopsided to be a proper press-release smile while being too
rough and real to be the sort of false familiarity those cruising for a date usually put on –, usually
when they were about to make an amused echo of some statement Tony had made and immediately
ruined by doing something opposite that.

"Sorry, do I know you? I'm usually better about remembering people who are actually interesting."

"I'm not quite sure if that's supposed to be an insult or not, Stark."

"You know what I mean, Barb Wire."

That almost got him a snort of amusement. "Keep it PG, Stark."

Right, kid present. "Aren't you done with the kid?" he asked.

The woman – 'D', that had to be short for something, but
– shrugged. "Technically, but it's not
like she has anywhere else to be right now."

"I like to watch the moving parts," the kid said as means of explanation as she tried to catch one of
the automated arms, which dodged her hands at the last second. "Robots are cool."

Fair enough.

"You have to know me from somewhere." At the raised eyebrows, Tony clarified. "Somewhere that
isn't the internet."

"That doesn't exactly round it down, Stark."

"And here I would have thought the fact that I'm obviously not a model would have ruled that out."

"Hey, I don't discriminate when it comes to people I–" The presence of the kid, still within earshot
despite being focused on the army of robotic arms riding the rails running around the entire lab, made
Tony reevaluate the next words that would be leaving his mouth. "…spend my private time with."

The smirk returned with a vengeance. "A save and a self-burn all in one go – nothing less than what
I'd expect from you."

"But I think I'd remember a set-up like this. Seriously, did I die and manage to sneak past Saint Peter
or something? Because this has got to be some kind of Heaven and I seriously doubt that I'd forget
about a setup like this on Earth," Tony said, playing with a hologram before attempting to catch
another, only to find it an actual physical object that quickly fell apart into grains of black sand. "I
thought I caught you saying that you didn't like using nanotech."

"Do I come into your house and okay with your toys without asking permission?" 'D' asked as the
nanotech reformed in her hand, turning into a black polyhedral sphere dancing around her fingertips
as it fell through what looked like models for a full set of nerd dice. "I don't like leaving it just
anywhere for just anyone to misuse and break. In my super special secret lair where I do most of my science? Completely different thing. And as to your question if this is heaven…"

Tony flinched back as the black ball hit him squarely between the eyes.

"…I think the presence of pain should tell you what you need to know about current state of existence," she said as she settled back onto her stool.

"Hey," he said, rubbing the afflicted area with his hand. "You know you can't just drag a man into the Cave of Wonders and not expect him to touch anything…"

"Well, Aladdin managed it just fine… but we're not here to talk about how awesome I am, much as I may enjoy the praise," 'D' said as holograms started to sketch out the form of a new arm and leg where Tony's left off. "We're here to fix you up with some new limbs. So let's get started; what sort of fun features do you want me to install? I'd offer rollerskates, but it'd be a bit pointless with only one leg. But let's see… could always sneak in a compartment for a portable tool kit, you're the type who's always on board for shit like that… What do you think? Finger flashlight? Pez dispenser?"

"Might want to skip the last one – I've already found a couple dozen ways to ruin the regular kind – but the tool kit is definitely something I could and would use," Tony said as he looked over the holograms, noting the fact that the designs seemed to be adjusting to the suggested add-ons as they were speaking about it, the designer actively sketching out corrections that the computer was accounting for in real time. AI? "I don't see any connections to the nervous system – are you going wireless on this?"

"Yeah. I'm using a version of Lumic's Earpod controls – I didn't really feel like subjecting anyone to more surgery with technology that might not be as easily understood and most of the Cybermen I deconverted already had something similar installed. All I did was sleek it down – little patch you can put in your skin on your temple or behind your ear, depending on how open you want to be about it – and tweak it until it was what I needed it to be. Doesn't work as a communications device to avoid hacking and they're pretty strictly paired to their specific prosthetics, but the tactile response and reaction time is only a hair off of what humans naturally have. Saves on time, pain, and learning curve, though I won't try to say there won't be one."

"Eh. Sometimes you've got to fly before you can crawl," Tony said as he accepted the little patch and stuck it behind his ear. Despite being somewhere in the area of a half-inch the whole way around, the sensation of adhesive in a strange place made it feel conspicuous.

"That kind of advice ends up seeing people faceplanting on cement more times than they'd care to admit," 'D' replied, reaching up to receive a gift from one of the automated arms running around the ceiling. "Now, let's see how this fits you."

As the woman attached the robotic arm, Tony tried to keep a running tab on every sensation he was getting from it. At first, there was nothing but the same sense of conspicuous adhesive attachment as the control patch – that that was sufficient to keep it in place was almost conspicuous in itself –, but then there was a buzz of sensation, like his long-gone flesh-and-blood arm had fallen asleep and was now just waking up again.

"Well? Go ahead and try it out. Might want to try crawling before breaking it in with any more 'delicate' tasks."

"And here you were warning me about being PG just a minute ago," Tony replied as he focused on twitching the fingers. Thumb, index, middle, ring, and pinkie all responded with only a hair of hesitation. "Seems a bit slower than you sold it as."
"Part of that is you adjusting to it. The other half is it adjusting to you," the woman said as she grabbed a leg of similar appearance to Tony's new arm. "Same drill here. Start out slow so you don't acquire a taste for linoleum."

"How's this working out for the full body replacements?" Tony asked, nodding his head towards the kid, who had finally caught one of the robots and was now poking around the machine apparently in a quest to see the mechanism behind the movement.

"Pretty well. Like I said, they had a pretty similar set-up with Lumic's Cybermen builds, so most of it is just adapting to the weight differences and more involved feedback. Once they get those felt out, they shouldn't have much in the way of problems. The organs I replaced… well, they're about as good as the original ones, save for the fact that I couldn't make them wholly self-regenerating, what with the not being there to correct anything that might go wrong, so they'll have to get new ones in about thirty years or so, depending on how well they take care of themselves. The ones that decide to live on a diet of straight booze and solid garbage might find themselves quite unpleasantly surprised in about a decade."

"And where are they going to get these replacements? The way you're talking, you're not going to be hanging around—"

"From the only super-genius on the planet that I happen to trust with my tech, of course," 'D' said, holding a hand out over a computer, which quickly spat out a smartphone sized external drive into her waiting hand. She handed it to Tony. "Here's the schematics. Covers repair, upkeep, modification… and you're smart enough to make your own innovations to it if you care to. Pete Tyler will likely help you if you ask; he's a good man."

"Woah, woah. Hold up. You said you knew me – you're just going to hand the next wave of prosthetics and medical technology to the planet's premier weapons manufacturer? Why would you trust something like this with someone like me?"

Tony pushed the drive back, only to have it forced back into his hands again.

"Because," she said, wrapping his fingers around it with a firm gentleness that felt almost alien compared to most of the physical contact Tony had received in his life. "I know you, Tony. I know what you're capable of, good and bad, and I think that if you had the opportunity to do good, you would without hesitation. You might not believe me, but I believe in you."

Tony felt something start to crawl up his throat. "That's so corny," he said thickly.

"Sometimes corn is good for you," D said, her face and voice completely deadpan as she patted him on the should.

A half-broken laugh escaped his lips at that. "Just sometimes?"

"Has a lot of starch. Also the logistics of raising it can be a bitch."

The implication of first-person farm knowledge was weird, but Tony decided not to pursue it. "Thanks," he said instead.

D nodded before looking up as a knock sounded at the door.

"I'm going to be at this all night," she sighed before turning her attention to Tony. "Can you keep the munchkin occupied while I get to work on my next set of patients? Okay, thanks, bye."

Tony was left sitting there, an external drive full of world changing technology in hand and a kid that
was mostly robot from the neck down spinning around in the chair behind him.

Okay, he could do this. Pick a topic, something harmless…
"See any good movies lately?"

"I've been in a storage closet for like two years."

Right. "Uh, what's your favorite movie then?" Kid had to be somewhere around ten years old, not a lot of options that could go wrong –

"Have you ever seen Weird Science?"

…so much for PG.

As I guided my last patient out of the Warehouse and closed the door – which revealed that there had been two loiterers that I'd missed as it expelled them –, I checked the time.

Half past eight. Measured up against an adventure that had started at seven the previous evening and only taken roughly two hours from start to finish, that meant that I'd spent almost eight hours working on fixing what victims we could salvage.

I might not have needed sleep, but the task had been exhausting in its own way and I wanted nothing more than to crash for a few hours, but I had places to be, a time crunch on them still being there when I arrived, and certain illusions to put in place before I got there.

'And if you go now, you may just manage to be back in time for tea, Dinah.'

'Alice, I don't drink tea,' I replied, brushing off the nickname as I teleported out of the airship to land in an alley near the Chinese restaurant we'd gotten takeout from the day before. Once I was sure I had no witnesses, I called the maid dress back from where I'd shoved it into storage, slipping it on effortlessly and with no small amount of distaste.

Hm. A touch too clean and pressed to look convincing for someone who'd just escaped a fate worse than death. A little tearing and a touch of fire would fix that, though I wouldn't deny that there were other, less practical reasons for me to disfigure the thing.

'I never said you had to participate. Merely that you would be able to attend. Though some argue that attendance is as good as participation, particularly with regards to criminal deeds…'

I set a corner of the dress on fire before squeezing the flame out of existence before it could travel too far. 'Alice, please. I'm trying to work here.'

Snapping the limiter on, I considered my other options. The gravel could be scratched against my skin, roughing it up while leaving a convincing trace of dirt behind. Messing up my hair would be easy; 'mess' was its natural state of being anyway, all it would take to make it worse was a little deliberate action…

"Please. You need to put a little more effort into it than that," Zeke said, making me jump slightly as he appeared behind me. A little beyond him was Tsela, moving just as silently despite all the metal in his body. "You might have destroyed the dress, but one cannot be certain of convincing an audience of injury without going all the way."

"What are you – motherfucker!"
Tsela stepped back as I hopped around holding the foot he'd stomped on. "I would have gone for the hip or the knee, but one takes the opportunities presented."

"I'm wearing the damn limiter, bitch, this hurts at full strength!"

"All the more convincing the act will be then," Zeke said before flicking a small lance of energy at my head that I ducked just in time to keep the damage limited to my hair.

"Assholes. Why do I keep making friends with assholes?"

"Like attracts like?" Tsela offered as he kicked out my hip and knocked me to the ground.

"I'm going to superglue the insides of all your guns," I informed him from my facedown position in the gravel. If the foot hadn't been enough to leave me limping, the hip had pushed it the rest of the way there.

"Like I can't remove it just as easily."

"It's the principle of the thing. And that thing is 'fuck you, you broke my hip'."

"Displaced it."

I pushed myself upright, almost falling down again as I put weight on the wrong leg. "It still hurts so I'm still mad."

"Sorry."

"You know you aren't."

"Eh. I might be. Just a little."

Looking myself over, I figured my 'disguise' was complete.

My fall and Tsela's 'help' had seen one leg of the tights almost completely destroyed, with the holes outnumbering the amount of intact material by almost two times over, which matched the destruction of the dress well. The fact that the cyborg had mutilated the shoe almost past the point of being wearable was less helpful, but it was once again a livable sacrifice. The dress itself was rumpled, ripped, and ever so slightly singed thanks to my own contributions to the process, but not so roughed up that it made my own survival seem unbelievable.

Zeke straightened the collar and sleeves of my dress before dusting off one of my shoulders. "There. Perfectly presentable for the part you must perform."

"Which is to say I look like I crawled out of a dumpster fire behind a cleaning service."

"Exactly." A deft twist of the wrist saw my limiter disappear into thin air, leaving me to squawk at its theft. "You weren't wearing it at the party," Zeke said by way of explanation.

Right. "Thanks for catching that," I said. While I might have preferred to keep it in place to avoid any unfortunate slips, continuity was a major part of this deception and the leather wrist strap played no part in it.

I smelled like burned hair, felt like shit, and probably looked like I'd just pulled myself out of a shallow grave with nothing but bloody-minded vengeance keeping me moving.

Considering how many times I'd actually done that, I was probably close enough to an expert to say
that my current look was a few degrees off of what the usual result was, but it wasn't a point to be argued right now. I just had to show up and say 'guess who isn't dead' and move on with life.

…which, once again, had probably happened to me more times than was necessarily healthy.

"Right. You two going to keep yourself busy until the summon charge runs out?" I asked.

"Two days to deal with a Cyberman infestation. Not the best time table, but one makes due," Zeke said with a shrug. "At the very least, we'll be able to mitigate some future casualties and reduce their rate of conversion."

"Sounds like a plan to me." A step forward saw me stumble and catch myself against a wall. "As for me, well, I think that getting back to the TARDIS might be a task in and of itself." Gathering up my willpower, I took another step and another, which turned into a limping walk that, while slow, would eventually get me where I was going. "Right. Best be going."

It was only three blocks to the TARDIS from the Chinese restaurant, but with each step being followed by a stumble, it felt longer than that. And since I couldn't use any powers without risking discovery, that left lifting one foot up and putting it down in front of the other. Rinse, wash, repeat. Rinse, wash, repeat. Rinse –

"You alright?" Mickey asked. How the boy had managed to sneak up on me was an easily solved mystery – I'd been too focused on my feet to take any note of what was happening around me.

"Yeah. I'm fine." I grimaced as I put more weight on the bad leg than I should have. "Mostly fine," I corrected.

"You don't look fine. You look like someone ran you over."

"That was intentional," I said.

"You hurt yourself on purpose?" Mickey asked, slightly aghast. Well, he wasn't wrong, technically speaking. "Why would you do that? Because the Doctor doesn't know what you are?"

"And I don't particularly plan on telling him any time soon."

"Because of the Zero Room thing?"

"In part," I said vaguely, casting my thoughts back to a secondhand accounting of Time Lord history, particularly concerning things that Time Lords didn't trust. "I take it you told the Doctor you were staying behind to take care of your gran?"

"How'd you kn– never mind. That part's not important." Mickey shifted awkwardly, like somehow caring about someone was something shameful and embarrassing. "I know it's not exactly–"

I reached out to touch his shoulder, making the boy jump again. "I would have done the same thing if it was me. Just remember to live for yourself as well."

"Do you want me to look for this world's version–"

"She's been found." I smiled at Mickey's clear look of alarm. "And she's fine. Find Pete. He should be able to point you in her direction. Don't expect her to be just like me – she's only ten or so. Lot less experienced and a lot more fragile. Doesn't know how to play Blackjack either."

"And how old are you, then? You'd said you'd had time – how much? Cause you have to be older
than you look."

I laughed. "Many times more than that, I'm afraid. Older than the Doctor, certainly."

"Sounds lonely."

"It is, a bit." Never being able to make plans for an actual life, always being on the outside no matter how much history might have been there to begin with, never knowing which friends will follow or get left behind… and learning to prepare for the last because the odds of one following were so slim. "But I'm used to it."

"Is it okay if I hug you? I know you're not big on touching –"

Mickey cut off as I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed.

"Mickey Smith. You are such a good boy. The best boy." I stepped back to look him in the eye as I touched him on the shoulder again. "Take care of yourself. You're too brilliant to let fade too easily."

He shifted awkwardly under the praise, though his small smile told volumes about how much it meant to him. "Thanks."

"Now, I've got a timeflight to catch and no skill at goodbyes. Must dash."

'Smooth,' one of the others said as I scuttled away from Mickey at full cripple speed.

'Shut up.' Neither statement was a lie. I was terrible at social situations, either existing at extreme distance or too close for anything less than casual bluntness. Neither hellos nor goodbyes came naturally to either position and I had nothing even close to approaching the middle ground.

Three blocks became two and two eventually closed to one as the TARDIS came into view. A faint psychic trill brushed across my senses as I approached and I couldn't help but smile.

'Did you miss me?' I asked, giving her a little pulse of energy.

The TARDIS's psychic signature chirped in response, though there was a faint edge of concern to it.

'I'm fine, I'm fine. Just a little dinged up. Nothing I couldn't fix myself if you and your thief don't get to me first.'

The time machine made a vague 'huff' response as she turned her attention elsewhere, though the vague sense of concern and worry remained.

A familiar form was circling the TARDIS, checking every corner and detail in preparation for her coming jump through the Void.

"Don't go rushing off just yet, Sonic," I called out as they reached for the door.

The Doctor spun around, eyes almost cartoonishly wide and widening further as they locked on me.

I must have been a sight. Ruined dress, scorched hair, dirt and gravel all over, Olympic-level bruising turning one leg into an angry display of red and purple in all possible shades… all of those things would drive a normal person to distraction, but to someone who'd taken a sort of responsibility for my safety…

Really, with that in mind, I shouldn't have been surprised by the Time Lord running straight at me and practically tackling me. The impact almost knocked me off my feet, but the Doctor's crushing
hug was inescapable, even by gravity.

"I thought you'd died," he murmured into my hair before he pulled back to look at me as pain, relief, and despair crashed over his too-intense Aura like the ocean over a lighthouse. One could only imagine what he'd assumed my fate was before I had made my reappearance and even I could only make vague assumptions about that. "Are you alright?"

"Leg's messed up a bit, but I'll live," I said, making a point to avoid eye contact. "You don't have to poke me with the anti-zombie stick I'm all too certain you have stowed away in that doctor's bag of tools you have in there, but I won't argue against the trip to the infirmary you'll inevitably insist on."

"Mm. You know me so well. But it'll have to wait until we get the TARDIS across the void. The dimensional barrier's almost thin enough for us to make the jump and I don't want us to miss it," he said as he pulled me towards the TARDIS, watching my limp with a concerned eye the whole time.

I felt bad about the whole deception. If I wanted to, I could fix my leg right this second but that would tell the Doctor exactly what I was and was not, which would then lead into arguments about my lying which would then spiral further and further out of control until everything just blew up.

'Whereas that most definitely won't happen if you keep it going for the entire relationship.'

'Get out of here with your reasonable arguments that would have helped if you'd brought them up a month or two earlier instead of saying 'I told you so' now.'

"Mickey's staying behind, just so you know he's alright. I know you're friends with him," the Doctor said as he opened the TARDIS doors and led me inside.

Rose looked up almost immediately, some spark of excitement in her eyes quickly turning to something closer to horror as she recognized me. "Delaine? You look--"

"Like I just crawled out of a post-apocalyptic dumpster fire? Yeah, I am intimately aware of that fact." I reached up to pull the hair out of my face, only to end up pulling off a clump of it, all burnt and brittle from Zeke's contribution to my condition. "Fucking – at least I was planning on cutting most of this off anyway."

"Really?" the Doctor said, as if I'd just recommended kicking a puppy he'd just adopted.

"Don't sound so disappointed. You've seen what this mess looks like on a good day – it's too thick to style, it's hellish in the heat, and it frizzes like a nightmare. When it's fucked up this badly? Simpler just to chop it all off and keep it short."

"Then why have you been wearing it long?" Rose asked.

My mind blanked.

"Because," I finally said in as level a tone as I could manage, drawing out every sound as I tried to keep my many mixed emotions about the subject under a lid. "I am a fool with almost zero control over my life."

Silence reigned for a good minute.

I coughed. "Anyway, you said something about having to get across the dimensional barrier before I can get medical attention?"

"Exactly. The thickness of the dimensional barrier seems to be fluctuating madly around here and if
we can time it right, we can hit the barrier at its weakest and go right on through with relatively little fuss." The Doctor paused before adding, "well, as compared to last time."

"Rather like the sound of that," Rose said, giving the command chair and the imprints left over from the death grip she'd had on it during our last crossing.

The Doctor went to the console, pulling the screen around to face him as he began twisting dials and pulling switches. Then, he laid his hand on the capital 'L' Lever.

"Alright. You better grab onto something, because this might be get a little bumpy," the Time Lord said, giving us all of ten seconds to anchor ourselves before pulling it.

The TARDIS screeched in and out of existence three times before making an unholy howl that was our one warning before we hit turbulence and everything went crazy. The lights were flashing wildly, parts of the console were sparking, and the Doctor was yelling direction, only half of which I could catch as actually understandable words. Rose had once more locked herself onto the command chair, holding onto it for dear life as the rest of us were thrown around with every buck of the TARDIS.

For my part, I locked my hands around the edge of the console, ignoring the pull of a gravity that couldn't decide on where it wanted up and down to be, battering my already bruised body with each fresh bout of turbulence.

'Take it!' I snapped at the TARDIS, shoving more power through the connection we'd made with each other the last time we'd travelled through this null space. The magic of Pete's universe might have been slipping away from me like so many grains of sand, taking my ability to feed off said magic with it as it became less and less reliable, but I still had enough to give the time machine the last boost she needed to get across the Void.

The TARDIS almost let go of me, but I only latched onto the connection harder, forcing everything that I could afford to lose through it. If I had to, I'd cut even more out of my metaphysical being for her to take. After all, I'd recover from that, but there'd be no recovery if we all died here.

'Take it! Take it! Take it–!

Finally, just as I reached my limit, gravity went back to where it was supposed to be. I let go of the connection and the console, allowing my body to fall to the floor.

There. We'd done it. Everybody safe. That's all anyone could ask for.

The TARDIS hummed soothingly as my senses faded out and into the great nothingness of unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

Merry friggin Christmas, readers. I thought this chapter was going to take a couple days more, but instead of being a Birthday upload, it ended up being ready Christmas Eve, which is a lot more interesting so far as the rest of you are probably concerned. I'm a little 'eh' on some of it, but it seems functional to my eye, so this is how it is passed on to you. Delaine returns to faking normal, Mickey moves on to a new world with new possibilities, the Doctor makes more theories that suffer for lack of information, and we
leave off on a cliffhanger, though, admittedly, not that big a cliff.

Also RIP Stan Lee, one of the great influences on my childhood via Spider-Man and all the other Marvel Superheroes.

Tsel'a's Navajo – it's been fairly sparse but I've been a bit too busy to do a lot of language research (says the person who keeps on going on crawls through ancient Norse).

"Iiná deít’ééh." — life goes on.

The 'Steve' thing is based on something one of my internet mutuals used to do with their anons. I think I ended up introducing myself to them talking about Spider-Man or something and ended up being 'Spider-Steve' for a month or two, but this was several years ago so I'm a little iffy on the deets.

Tony's reference of 'Barb Wire' is to a 90's comic book (and a movie – starring Pamela Anderson, so you can start making assumptions from there – very loosely based on said comic) featuring a biker chick protagonist in a Mad Max-like setting. It didn't last long, mostly on account of the movie. Beyond reading the Wikipedia article or someone else's review, I don't really recommend looking for it. Really. Don't. It's not worth it.

I do recommend Weird Science, if only because it holds a special place in my heart, not only as a movie I probably not have seen at age 5/6, but as a fairly good 80's sex comedy. If you skip that one weird sorta-racist scene that adds almost nothing to the movie.
As more familiar laws of physics flickered into existence and the TARDIS sent a trill of happy noise — a signal of safe landing instead of falling through the Void — along their connection, the Doctor finally released his death grip on the console.

"Is everyone alright?" he asked his companions.

"Yeah," Rose said shakily as she stood up out of the chair, stumbling slightly before she properly regained her balance. The worst damage done seemed to be to her hair, which was now in a state of near perfect disarray, with a few sections appearing to be in the middle of some strange escape attempt that defied both gravity and their owner's attempts at smoothing them back down again.

Still, a little mussed hair was hardly anything to worry about and the Time Lord would take that over the many worse things that his companions had suffered over the years.

…Wait. There should have been two voices responding to that question.

The Doctor leaned around the console. "Delaine?"

The girl was lying on the floor next to the console, the fingers of one hand hooked around the edge of it like a lifeline. She did not respond.

The Doctor closed the space between them, rolling over Delaine's body so he could begin checking for vital signs. Her breathing was slow and shallow, her pulse — the Time Lord switched his grip from her wrist to her neck when the first refused to give up any information other than 'cold' — was thready, but both were stable enough for the moment, which was enough reassurance to let the breath he'd been holding escape in the form of a relieved sigh.

Watching a companion fall was always worse than just having the knowledge that they were dead. The second was a matter of fact and time, two things that were inevitable where Time Lords were concerned. The first, however, was often a much more personal failure and the fact that it hadn't happened here was...

"She alright?" Rose asked. "What happened?"

"No idea." Could she have knocked her head during the confusion? It wasn't like there hadn't been plenty of opportunity for such an injury — or perhaps she'd simply fainted?

Three immediately rolled his eyes. 'Yes, the companion that once tried to engage a werewolf in a knife fight is most definitely a fainter.'

'Perhaps it was a poor reaction to the dimensional jump?' Five mused.

The Doctor dismissed that idea. 'She was fine the first time across.' Other than the part where she'd been slammed against various parts of the ceiling, wall, floor, and intervening bits of the TARDIS. Really, that precedent only added to the Doctor's suspicions about a potential head injury this time around. He touched the side of her head just long enough to make the lightest psychic contact –

Only to find nothing but darkness and the vague sense of some distant light and sound. Music, like a
fairground organ, accompanied by light that was just on the edge of invisible, reflected off of too many dull surfaces to be anything more than proof of movement. It was impossible to tell if that was the product of Delaine's own mind or just her own senses picking up something else. Perhaps the TARDIS? It was impossible to tell without her being awake to explain it from her point of view or diving further into her mind.

"She's completely unconscious," the Doctor declared as he retreated from the contact. While going deeper into Delaine's mind was a tempting prospect, the last time had given the Time Lord a taste of what would likely happen if any part of her, conscious or not, detected his intrusion. Even if that time had been a fluke or a temporary influence from some being picked up in the Void, he wasn't exactly eager for a repeat showing. "Doesn't seem to be concussed at least, but until I get some better equipment scanning her, I can't say more than that."

"Do you – do you need my help moving her to the infirmary?" Rose asked, awkward concern making the offer almost sound like she wanted the answer to be 'no'.

"Wouldn't say no to having a spare set of hands," the Doctor said as he picked Delaine up, the girl's spidery arms flopping downwards as he gingerly arranged her limbs to avoid jostling her injured leg. An insistent knock at the TARDIS door distracted him for a moment. "Of course, I wouldn't say no to having someone explain to your mum why I parked the TARDIS in her living room."

The blonde seemed to be caught between offense, excitement, and that previous concern that Delaine's fall had brought out. "You –" Another insistent knock cut Rose off. "Alright. But you get to explain just how you picked up Delaine in the first place, Doctor."

The current model's immediate predecessor winced at the thought. 'Oh, that'll go over well.'

Yes. Jackie had a talent for absorbing just enough information to jump to a conclusion that was usually followed up by the sort of domestic drama the Doctor made a point to personally avoid. A young athletic woman close to Rose's age being inserted into an equation that had formerly involved the Doctor, Rose, and the newly absent Mickey Smith? That wouldn't go over well, regardless of if Delaine regained consciousness or not by that point.

'But,' the Doctor decided as he picked the girl up and carried her to the infirmary, 'that's a problem for later.'

As they passed through the last door, Delaine made a small mumbling noise, cracking her eyes open just as the Doctor looked down at her.

"What was that?"

"I'm sorry," she murmured again, slurring the words badly enough that it took a bit of actual effort to recognize them as such. She made a weak attempt at moving her body, only for that effort to fall apart into a vague full body twitch. "…careless."

"Don't apologize for things you have no control over," the Doctor replied as he laid her down on the examination table. "Go back to sleep."

Delaine made a small sound that could have signified anything from amusement to agreement as her best efforts to keep her eyes open finally failed and she fell asleep again, the vague discomfort in her expression smoothing out as her consciousness went other places.

The Time Lord wondered what she would dream about once the psychic anesthetic took the rest of the pain out of the equation. For now, however, his main concern was the condition of her body.
'Diagnosis – impact injury to right hip resulting in displacement, impact injury to right foot resulting in sprain, bruising all over right leg with highest concentration on previously listed injuries, minor abrasions to hands, face, and knees. Hypothesis – subject has been injured in an impact event delivered by some point of transport vehicle or aggressive animal.'

"That doesn't explain why she's unconscious," the Doctor informed the TARDIS as he looked away from the scans and started plotting out Delaine's treatment plan, pulling the psychic anesthetic attachment down into position as he passed it in his quest to gather the necessary supplies. The nanopaste was in no danger of running low anytime soon, but it'd probably be wise to check the supply anyway, if this companion was going to insist on being so careless with her physical wellbeing. "And with the dearth of wild horses available in modern London, alternate universe or no, I'd wager the first our more likely cause of injury."

Not to say that he believed that Delaine was the sort of person to recklessly run out into traffic either, not without good reason at least, but it at least fit the time period.

The TARDIS's medical display blinked for a moment as it thought over the problem. It then slowly typed out its answer.

"Exhaustion?" the Doctor read incredulously.

'Diagnosis – exhaustion,' the TARDIS scanners said, accompanied by a vague sense of ill-ease and guilt from the time machine. 'Hypothesis – caused by dimensional transfer. Prescription – rest.'

How that was even supposed to work was beyond him, but it fit with what he'd initially assumed and what little Delaine had said. The fact that the TARDIS felt bad about failing to protect the girl from it only reinforced the idea.

Still, the Doctor thought as he leaned back to allow the skeletal realignment matrix to do its work, the answer felt incomplete. She'd been steady enough on her feet on her return to the TARDIS, despite the clear injuries slowing her down… so what had happened between the universes to change that? Had the shock from whatever had caused the injury finally worn off? Had she adjusted to the physics of a new universe only to fall as they got stripped away? Or had that strange gold light that had taken up occupancy in his companion so early after their arrival in that strange universe left at the least opportune moment?

Regardless of whichever answer was the right one – or maybe all of them all together –, the TARDIS was right. Rest was the only real cure for exhaustion, no matter how many cheats for pushing the deadline back were developed.

As if in spiteful response to that thought, Delaine's eyes cracked open again, catching the light just right to look almost gold. Not the bright, blazing gold that she'd displayed during her burst of temper the day before, but a mundane amber-brown that was still enough of a change from her usual near black shade that it registered as immediately odd.

"Sshhh… don't like white rooms, D'ctor," she mumbled, the words coming out with a slightly different emphasis than she usually put on her vowels. "Don't like them at all."

White – ah. To those unfocused eyes looking almost directly into bright lights, the TARDIS infirmary probably did resemble the Zero Room to some degree, despite it being a distinctly darker shade of grey in reality. "I remember. But you need to sleep. I'm putting you on strict bed rest until I tell you otherwise. Doctor's orders."

Delaine snickered a little at that, closing her eyes slowly as she seemed to drift off again. Still, the
Time Lord caught the glimpse of another color shift, the gold turning to a very specific shade of blue-grey. The first might have been brushed off as a matter of catching the light at the right angle – 'if you're particularly desperate to excuse that sort of thing,' Seven muttered – but blue-grey was a completely different sort of animal. "You're a good… alien space bastard man, even with… that stupid ass face…"

Again, there had been a minute shift in accent, one that muddled the difference between 'R's and 'H's while recalling another American companion at the same time. It wasn't quite as strange as her last venture into Highlands Scottish – honestly, compared to some of the mysteries surrounding Delaine, her penchant for imitating voices and accents was one of the more mundane things – but it still stood out when the fact that she kept doing it at the strangest times, like when drifting in and out of consciousness. The fact that it was so often accompanied by that inexplicable shift in eye color that couldn't be explained away as a trick of the light any longer…

Putting away the incomplete theories about the 'why' and the 'how', the Doctor checked the TARDIS scanners again – not the ones for injury, but the ones that could pick apart DNA markers at a distance. The last time he'd attempted to scan Delaine, the readings had all come back as 'human, nothing special', but this time…

'Harian variant.'

Human variant. Now that was interesting… and also incredibly vague, because 'human variants' could run the gamut from 'hybrids' to 'mutants' and onto deliberate alterations applied before or after birth. But something that it did cross out was that 'nothing special' that had put so many of the Doctor's more unpleasant theories about her background to bed. "Can you be a bit more specific?" he asked the TARDIS.

Somehow, the Time Lord wasn't surprised that the time machine's immediately response was a clear and somewhat mulish 'no'.

Still, that mystery of what just happened could wait to be unraveled. Delaine wasn't exactly in any state to run off and didn't have any reason to do so until the issue of exactly who and what she was finally got dragged into the light. For now, there was just waiting, allowing his previous incarnations to amuse themselves with the title Delaine had so generously bestowed on him in her delirium.

"Alien space bastard man. I don't believe we've ever been called those words in that order before," Eight mused. 'Doesn't 'space' usually come before 'alien', grammatically speaking?"

'I, for one,' Four said grandly, 'accept the nomination of 'alien space bastard man' with great pride and honor.'

'Doesn't hurt that you're a bastard to begin with, Four.'

'But we're a good one. That's positively a compliment compared to our usual 'bastard' titles.'

Letting that conversation go as he picked up his just mended companion in his arms, the only real question left was if getting Delaine to stay in bed would be harder than getting her past Jackie Tyler.

"You could always just… leave her in the TARDIS,' Five suggested, having stayed out of the 'alien space bastard' conversation long enough to keep up with the Doctor's current thought process. 'It's not like she doesn't have a room that she's already comfortable with and she's in no state to wander off. It'll also permit the old girl more opportunity to run scans to narrow down what exactly she meant by 'variant'."
Yes, technically that would work, but there was a part of the Doctor that deeply disliked the idea of having that amount of physical distance between him and his companion. Besides, with injuries – 'What injuries? You saw to them already,' Seven pointed out – like what she had sustained required constant observation and quick response.

'That sounds a hair too close to you making up excuses, you know,' Seven muttered. 'Because that reasoning wasn't connected to your impulse until you made the effort to justify your immediate reaction as part of your duty of care.'

That made the Time Lord stop short for a long moment before he started walking again, his grip on his unconscious companion distinctly tighter than what it had been when he'd first picked her up.

When Rose saw her mum again – alive, not a distant stranger with a familiar face, not torn apart and shoved into a cold metal suit that only dying would get her out of –, she crossed the space between them in a heartbeat and wrapped her mother in the tightest hug she could manage. Questions like –

"What happened? Why are you dressed like that? Why do you smell like smoke? Where's Mickey? I thought you said he was going off to space with you two… and while we're at it, where's the Doctor at?"

– could wait until Rose Tyler completely and totally confirmed that, yes, Jackie Tyler was alive and in one piece.

'But that doesn't change the fact that you watched a woman who was just like her in every possible way die,' a less pleasant voice that Rose hesitated to call 'reason' pointed out. 'That's two for two isn't it? Get to watch both of your parents die, get to see how good their lives would have been without you… and see all of that fall apart the moment you show up. You really are a jinx, aren't you, Rose Tyl–'

The poisonous thought cut off as Jackie pulled away from Rose, a very clear and present worry etched into the lines of her face.

"You look like you could use a cup of hot tea," she said as she maneuvered Rose over to the settee and took a step back. "I put the kettle on just a bit ago – should be ready any minute."

Rose almost wanted to tell her mother to forget the kettle and just stay with her, but that would just make those worry lines worse. Besides, the kitchen wasn't that far. It wasn't like the woman was going to just… disappear the moment she was out of sight.

Was this how Mickey felt when he found his grandmother in that other universe? Or maybe it was backwards for him, seeing someone he thought was gone forever back again, not dead and broken at the bottom of a staircase, but alive and still handing out smacks to the side of the head like they were bulk purchase sweets.

And without anyone or anything – not even a reputation, thanks to her mother's attempts to 'avenge' a murder that never happened – to come back to in their universe, well, was it really any surprise that he decided to stay behind? It's not like anyone had given him any reasons to come back.

Her mother came back with Rose's favorite cup, filled with tea that was mixed just the way it always was whenever there was a nightmare or a bad breakup – one sugar, a splash of milk, a dash of cinnamon, and a touch of honey to give it another dimension of warmth. It was a rare use of spice in the Tyler household, but that made it… special. Like a secret only Rose and her mum were privy to. A small luxury, but when a girl lived in the council estates, it wasn't like she had any chance of
"So. Tell me what happened?"

The universe decided to script itself in a perfect series of events designed to punch Rose Tyler in her emotions. "A… a lot happened, mum," Rose finally said. A lot of people died. A lot of people got hurt. "…Mickey left."

That was the smallest thing that had happened over the last twenty four hours, but somehow it was one of the things that was sticking with Rose the most besides the death of her mother's alternate universe self.

"What?" Jackie asked. "Where'd he even go? The boy's scared of everything!"

"He…" Words failed her for a moment. "I think I took him for granted too many times," she admitted. How many times had Rose slipped in and out of being Mickey's girlfriend because it was easy and convenient? How many times had she laughed at jokes about Mickey being stupid when he was the one that stuck through to the end of his schooling or skittish around things that most people would be terrified of? How many times had she been the one making those jokes? "And when he got the chance to make something better, he took it, instead of waiting around for me to take him for granted again."

"Is that what he told you?"

"Nah. I just… finally figured it out myself." Rose stared down into her tea. "It's just not fun, looking in the mirror and realizing that you don't really like what you see on the other side of the glass, is it?"

"Rose, there's nothing wrong with the way you look. Nobody's gonna come out looking like those magazine types, especially not when they—"

"No, no. That's fine. I'm not having… *those* problems again," she said, backpedaling quickly. "I like my body. It's mine. I just… someone pointed out that it's not all about me, even after I said something… really awful. I mean, *really*, really awful." Maybe that hadn't been Delaine's point, saying that everything came down to random odds and accidents being accidents, but…

Her mother hummed. "On a scale of 'your mum's a cow' to… I don't know, the sort of talk that ends up starting celebrity feuds, what sort of awful thing did you say to this person?"

Rose cringed. "I…I'd rather not say. But it was closer to the second one than the first, even if her mum was involved somewhat."

"Did you apologize?"

"Yes."

"Did this probably not-Mickey person accept it?"

Well, it had been more of a brush-off than anything, but… "I think so."

"Then what's left to be upset about?"

Sometimes, Rose wondered what it was like living in her mother's world, where things seemed to be so less complicated, where upsets could be put into a box after the fact and never be brought up again…

The thought was interrupted by the opening of the TARDIS doors as the Doctor stepped out, his
arms full of unconscious girl, still dressed in that ruined maid's dress, though the lack of bruises and scrapes proved that they'd been to the infirmary.

"Which way to the guest bedroom?" the Doctor asked, his head swiveling around as he looked around the flat. "I wasn't exactly in a state to remember exactly where it was the last time I was in it…"

Jackie jerked her head back towards the hall behind her. "To the right of the front door. Should be easy enough to find – it's still got a bit of damage from when that bloody murder Christmas tree broke in."

As the Time Lord left the room with his cargo, nodding a small thanks as he left, Jackie's expression changed immediately. "And who was that?"

"Another friend of the Doctor's," Rose said, wincing as she caught her mother's pointed look. "Don't be like that – there's nothing between them. Honest, the Doctor's mostly keeping her around because she knows some secret about him that would be dangerous for anyone else to get a hold of."

That was a faint twist on the truth, but it was accurate enough. Wasn't it?

"I can think of a few choice possibilities…" Jackie muttered. "But you're sure of it? That he isn't interested in her? Sometimes you can catch a man's eyes wandering…"

Rose bit the inside of her cheek at that. The thought had crossed her mind whenever she caught the way that the Doctor's eye would occasionally break away from her to check on Delaine. Like somehow, the other woman was made of glass despite being one of the roughest people Rose had ever met from her own planet. Of course, that hadn't stopped her from limping back to the TARDIS covered in scorch marks and bruises, looking like she'd been hit by a car... "No. Never."

Her mum shook her head. "If I didn't know he was an alien already, that would have been the proof. Never knew a man who didn't at least glance at another woman, unless he wasn't interested in them in the first place." There was something in her tone that seemed to say, 'I don't really believe you,' despite the lack of a direct needle at Rose's 'No'. "But are you sure she feels the same way?"

Now that was a question Rose could answer with total confidence. "She thinks he's an obnoxious, immature chatterbox with no respect for her personal space," she replied with no small amount of delight at knowing that fact. "And I did ask her about what sort of men she went for when we first met – the most I could get her to say about the Doctor is that his hair is ridiculous and looks stupid."

And that she vastly preferred the likes of Kelly LeBrock, though that little detail could be left out. No need to spring a surprise lesbian – or omnisexual, given that Rose hadn't exactly drawn much more information on Delaine's preferences than that – on her mother.

"Well, that isn't so odd, seeing that it's the truth. The first one was much better to look at. Leather and all that. Pity he never took that jacket off during any of his visits…"

"Mum!"

"What? It's not like you didn't have any thoughts like that. I'm your mother, I know how you think," her mum said before looking Rose in the eye. "…you did see that one without the jacket, didn't you?"

"And without the jumper, once." Rose looked back on the memory carefully, doing some mental arithmetic as she went. "He was actually thinner than you would have expected. Wiry, that's the word. Not as skinny as the current one, but…" She gestured vaguely, trying to find the right words
to sum up the subtle differences in physical presence she'd noticed between the Doctor she'd met first and the current model.

"Having an interesting conversation?" the Doctor asked as he exited the guest room, apparently satisfied with Delaine's current condition. There was a faintly smug grin on his face, one that almost made Rose think that the Time Lord had somehow overheard their mostly whispered conversation about the relative fitness of the last model compared to the current one and found it immensely amusing.

Or, a more bitter voice suggested, maybe Delaine had made her way back to consciousness with a witty quip. That seemed to be the usual reason for the Doctor smiling whenever that girl was involved. Even if she wasn't interested in him, there was a part of Rose that didn't quite believe that disinterest was a mutual thing.

"Rose is telling me all about your new traveling companion," her mum said, leaning back to take a sip of her tea in a way that said the gesture was meant to be imperious before anything else.

"American, is she? Where'd you pick her up? Or is the question 'when'?"

The Time Lord shrugged. "London, Christmas Day. The last one, with the Sycorax."

Jackie turned to Rose, raising her eyebrows in a 'well, what do you think of that?' sort of expression. "That was quick."

The Doctor winced, bouncing on his feet awkwardly. "Well, Rose was at an ABBA concert and I didn't have much better to do —"

"You could have stayed with her," her mum pointed out.

"He can't *stand* ABBA," Rose said conspiratorially.

That was apparently greater cause for offense than any implications of a rushed romantic affair with a strange foreign woman. "What? Don't you have any appreciation for art in space? Or whatever it is your home planet is called? How can you *not* like ABBA?"

"A few of my previous selves agree with you on that point, but all I can say is that something about the pitch they work at really, really irritates me this time around," the Doctor said carefully as he sat down next to Rose. His focus quickly went to her tea, which Rose surrendered with a smile. "Mmm. Lovely. Could use more sugar, but I've been informed that I've a tendency to overdo that."

"At least you had some taste in the past," Jackie sniffed.

The Doctor took a second sip of Rose's tea before giving it back to her, the cup still warm and a hair over half full. "I think you'd take that comment back if you saw some of the things I wore in the past."

"Like that scarf Delaine almost tripped to her death on in your scrap room? Or that patchwork coat in the wardrobe?" Rose asked.

"You found that?" the Doctor asked in dismay.

"Delaine did. I just took the opportunity to laugh at it." Was it wrong if she left out the part where Delaine defended it? It wasn't as if it was –

"She did? Oh, that's worse," the Time Lord said as he clapped his hands over his face. The rest of his words were muffled, but the thing about sitting right next to someone was that it was impossible not
to catch even the quietest muttering. "That is the absolute worst thing she could have found. Well, not the absolute worst, but close enough to be absolutely terrible."

Rose grinned as she squirmed a little closer to the Doctor. "How so?"

His hands lifted just enough to stop the muffling but that changed nothing about his tone of melodramatic despair. "I don't want to go into it. It was another life that made other decisions that I cannot be held accountable for, but seeing as that's never stopped anyone before…"

"It can't be that bad," Jackie said with the sort of veiled joy that hinted at her anticipation of it actually being worse than whatever her imagination had already supplied.

Rose, for her part, would've been delighted to prove that it was indeed that bad, even without the prospect of finding out exactly why Delaine specifically knowing about the coat was so terrible. "I can go get it, if you want to see--"

"Please don't." "Please do."

Jackie Tyler and the Doctor traded looks, the Doctor's look of tired resignation bouncing harmlessly off of Jackie's smug anticipation as Rose stood up and turned to enter the TARDIS.

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I crawled back to consciousness slowly, having to double check each sense as it came back – for a moment, I could have sworn that I felt Selby, but then that feeling slipped away almost as quickly as it came – until I was left laying on a bed under an unfamiliar ceiling, the faint smell of brimstone and tea hanging in the air.

The brimstone made me cringe slightly. It wasn't uncommon for the Rider to leave some sign of its presence after the fact, so the smell wasn't a surprise, but it still was a mark that I'd fucked up in my attempts to present as 'normal, harmless human' because no normal, harmless human smelled like fucking hellfire.

The tea… well, all it took as a look to the side to see where that was coming from; a glass beaker that was half full of the stuff, which was boiling away on a small portable heater like some homebrew medical humidifier. What the fuck it was supposed to achieve –

Oh. Oh, that… stupid motherfucker, I thought as I sat up. He's definitely getting punched for this.

'I don't know. It's kind of cute,' Shumari noted.

'It's fucking a fucking leaf water humidifier. There's nothing cute about that.'

'Just because you don't like tea doesn't mean it's not a nice gesture,' Duke said with a shrug, which was fair for him to say because if it had been a coffee bean humidifier, he would have been spitting nails over its very presence.

I fought the impulse to snarl in irritation. 'He's assuming that I work on the same level of nonsense that he does!'

'Well, that's not entirely off-base, is it?'

That soured my mood a bit. 'Do you think he suspects us?' I asked as I stood up, testing my legs. No weakness or lingering aches that I could detect in my body, even if my energy reserves were still lower than was necessarily healthy. That was good at least, though the idea of the Doctor carrying me to the infirmary while I was out was a little irritating.
This time, it was Max that came in, which, considering that our usual expert on all things Time Lord was out dealing with another universe, made sense. 'I'm going to go off what we know about the Doctor from Zeke and say 'he certainly suspects something'. What that something is remains to be seen.'

Ugh. Lovely. Like my existence wasn't complicated enough. At least it was within my mortal powers to change clothes into something that wasn't a dress.

I opened the door, ready to go find the TARDIS.

Any expectations for what I would see on the other side were immediately smashed to piece by the reality as I looked at the Tyler's sitting room.

Rose was posing dramatically in the Sixth Doctor's coat as her mother looked on in delight. The current incarnation of the Doctor was laying in the corner of the sofa with his hands over his face, looking like he was preparing to astral project out of the situation and leave his successor behind to deal with it.

'You know what? The coma made more sense than this. Let's going back to that.'

While beating myself into unconsciousness had some appeal, I wasn't quite sure that the walls of the Tyler apartment would stand up to that kind of abuse, even if I had the limiter taking me down to human levels of strength.

Right. Option two then.

I had the door leading out of the Tyler's flat halfway open by the time the Doctor – apparently regaining his will to live the moment I caught his attention – caught up with me, twisting around me to take up a spider's position in the doorway, blocking my exit with his twiggy legs and arms.

'It'd almost be impressive… if I was five years old and had no idea how stupid some spiders looked doing the same thing.

"Y'know, there's probably easier ways to block a door than that," I noted, nodding at his unnatural perch and the two and a half feet of empty escape route he'd left at the bottom of the open door. Thanks to his current body's lanky frame, there wasn't much of a gap, but it was more than enough for someone of my size if they felt like getting through, superpowers or not.

Despite his current position relying on him staying almost entirely still, the Time Lord still managed to shrug. "Yeah, probably. But of the options, I thought this one would work best. Especially with consideration to your 'no touching' rule."

Huh. That was a bit more consideration than I was expecting from 'Doctor Hug Anybody', especially given his history of invading my personal space without hesitation.

'He's putting together the puzzle pieces. Not enough to get the whole picture, but you've never been subtle about your dislikes, Delaine. And you've been very clear about not liking him touching you.'

"You know that my 'no touching' rule doesn't exactly cover me from hitting you. All I'd have to do is kick out your leg about here," I gestured at the Doctor's right leg, which was about level with my chest and carrying most of the Time Lord's weight, "And then it'd just be a matter of stepping over your body from the ignominious sprawl you'd be left in."

The Doctor grinned, clearly pleased with the fact that despite not being explicitly protected by my personal rules, he still was under my umbrella of 'protection'. "Bold of you to assume that I'm
Was that a titch of Six on display? The cockiness was very Ten, but bigger words that weren't technobabble or Buffyisms were less of that. Well. I could hardly help but return the serve, regardless of where it came from. "I believe you're very capable of being ignominious in every possible capacity."

"Are you two going to keep flirting for the rest of the day or will you move your ignominious selves somewhere else so I can close the door to my flat sometime within the hour?" Jackie asked from behind me, a vague scoff in her tone.

"Nah," the Doctor said smoothly as he moved back to a normal standing position, closing the door behind him before taking me by the arm and gently pulling me towards the Tyler's living room. So much for 'not touching'. "You should be taking it slow. Second trip to the infirmary on the inside of a week."

It took actual effort not to tear my arm out of the Time Lord's grip, but the feeling that I could end up doing damage to more than just his mood – fingers were rather fragile things, even on a species designed to be much sturdier than humans – made it a touch easier. "You never said anything about being reckless in an alternate universe," I snipped. "And I can handle myself at whatever speed I happen to be going."

"Good Gallifrey, it's like dealing with Leela all over again – I'm the Doctor here, if you won't accept bedrest, at least have a seat and keep it." With that, he pushed me down into the sofa and started to wave the sonic over me in what was likely supposed to be an all over medical scan – to me, it was mostly an exercise in not overreacting to the buzzing noise that everyone else was either incapable of hearing or making a point to ignore. "And stop trying to run away."

"I wasn't going to." I was going to go get some fresh air and ride out my conflicting moods in solitude. Which would have required running away to find enough privacy to stretch out for at least an hour, possibly longer depending on how many emotions I had to deal with.

Life was easier when I could establish my own territory and could reliably retreat back to it when I needed my space.

Finally satisfied with whatever the sonic had told him, the Doctor pulled back. "Alright. You're slightly dehydrated—"

"Ply me with hot leaf water and you'll be wearing it."

"— and you could probably stand to eat something, but other than that, you're in perfect condition," he continued, ignoring the threat. "Now, if you can keep it that way for, oh, I don't know, at least the rest of the day..."

I gave him a Look.

"Fine, fine. I figured that was a bit much to ask for." If the quip hadn't been aimed at me, I might have laughed. As it was, I simply let my Look intensify. "Anyway, I've got to go clean up. Don't go anywhere."

Wasn't planning on it. I settled into the corner of the sofa and tried to get a feel for the Tyler residence.

Bit too far away from the ground for me to be completely comfortable, but it didn't have the manicured minimalism that made most apartments unsettling to my senses, so there was that much
going for it. Maybe the color scheme was a touch grey-and-beige for my taste, but I grew up poor – aesthetic coordination and poverty didn't play together well in the same sandbox. You could fake it, especially if you had a lot of antiques in similar shades of hardwood, but it'd never look quite as put together as a full room set sold as such… which was fine with me. Could never stand existing in a photoshoot-style home.

A small cough broke my out of my thoughts. I looked up at Rose, who had Six's coat in her hands and a distinctly apologetic look on her face.

"I remembered that you liked this coat. I figured…" She trailed off a little, apparently not quite having finished the thought before deciding to act on it.

Huh. An oddly sensitive gesture that I wasn't really expecting. "Thanks," I said as I took it from her and wrapped it around me like a blanket. There was a pleasantly soft smell to it, like that of kitten fur and malted milk with just a hint of something harsher behind it, like ozone or a minor electrical fire.

"I'm just going to – go help the Doctor with… whatever," Rose said, her hands awkwardly flitting around to gesture at everything from the ceilings, the windows, three very different walls, and a coffee table which was very distinctly Time Lord-free. Eventually, the rest of her body caught up with her stated intent and allowed the girl to beat a swift retreat elsewhere.

Teenagers. Impossible to communicate with, yet so adorably helpless when they tried to cover up their soft spots.

The sound of a throat being cleared broke me out of any musings about the haplessness of youth and brought my focus back to the Tyler apartment and the one person in it that I hadn't officially 'met' yet. Jackie Tyler, for her part, didn't look exactly enthusiastic about my presence here.

Still, there was no call for me to be anything but polite. "I don't believe we've been introduced… your name was Jackie, was it?" I asked, sticking out my hand to shake.

Jackie brushed aside the pleasantries and my proffered hand to open up with what could only be an accusation; "Rose told me about you.

Five little words, so open to interpretation. "I'm assuming from your tone that it wasn't anything good," I said mildly. That, or Jackie was making assumptions on her own initiative, which was entirely in character for her.

Jackie crossed her arms across her chest, clearly not willing to give me anything remotely resembling an inch of slack. "She says you're not a problem and you don't look like you'd be a problem, but two women with one man travelling god knows where in the universe... I might not be an expert on space/time nonsense, but I know that there's only trouble that way unless you know to keep your hands off –"

There were likely a long list of people who would have liked to argue that assessment of me not looking like a problem, but there was a different point for me to argue. "I promise you, there's not a force in this universe that could make me sexually or romantically interested in the Doctor. Or Rose, for that matter. Neither are mature enough for my taste."

"How do you get more mature than a nine hundred year old alien?"

"Ask me that question again after you catch him eating jam out of the jar with his fingers. Without washing his hands beforehand," I said as I rolled my eyes. Technically, that hadn't happened yet, but it was inevitable from what I'd already seen of the Time Lord's eating habits. "However many
thousand years old he might be, he still acts like a fourteen year old boy."

The Doctor, who'd been just walked out of the bedroom with his makeshift tea humidifier and Rose just behind him, found himself on the receiving end of a patented Jackie Tyler stare.

"Thousands? I thought you said nine hundred."

"That's what I said. I've been fairly consistent about that number too." He squinted at me. "And who are you to call me out on that?"

The person who knows that you've been arbitrarily throwing out the number nine hundred since your Sixth regeneration in between other numbers that probably had as much accuracy behind them, considering that my own version of Seven admitted to not having a clear idea of the number beyond vague assumption of which millennia he was on.

So unfortunate that the truth was ruled out by necessity, but it did make it possible for me to reply, "The person saying the Doctor can't count."

The Time Lord looked positively scandalized at the accusation. "Excuse you, I can count. I do mathematics for fun! Happy primes. Recreational probability calculation. High end equations on my tea break!" He punctuated the last point by taking a sip of from the beaker of leaf water before making a pinched expression. "Might have left that alone for too long," he muttered as he rushed to the kitchen, the sound of gagging and liquid being dumped down a drain telling us exactly what became of the tea. Whatever mouth cleansing he had to do, it didn't stop him from coming back on the inside of a minute, which was just in time to receive his next question from Jackie.

"You take tea breaks? Breaks from what? Saving the universe?"

The Doctor shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat as he rocked back and forth on his heels, very distinctly not making eye contact. "On occasion. To be fair, most of the time it's not the universe that usually needs saving," he noted, stopping with his toes up in the air. "Individual planets and the odd civilization, now that's a bit more common. Not always Earth either, so you don't have to worry about that… much."

"Doctor, don't tease my mum."

"But it's so fun – ow!" The Time Lord ducked away from Rose, his arm wrapped around the ribs she'd just elbowed. "Deception. Disgrace."

"Don't quote the Lion King at me."

"The sequel, actually – ah, not the ear!"

Watching the domestic display, I couldn't help but laugh to myself. Maybe this 'bedrest' wouldn't be so bad after all.

Chapter End Notes

I have returned, after so many months of constant headaches and personal drama killing my writing muse. Updates will probably remain fairly sporadic and spaced out, but I hope the quality makes up for the wait. Chapter is a bit shorter than normal, but it ended where it wanted to end, I think, and I can finally follow up on my promise to delete the
earlier version of this fic.

With generic regards to Doctor Who, I haven't really been consuming that much of the show or related fiction lately, which is kind of sad because I usually really enjoy it. Still, I hope that getting this chapter out helps me get back into the swing of things.

The Doctor is finally beginning to puzzle out Delaine's true nature, though it'll still be a bit before the full story gets out. It's kind of fun writing a slow-burn friendship, but it's somewhat telling that I have delete a lot of interactions between Delaine and the Doctor for being over-intense and going too far in the 'argument' department. Thankfully, Delaine and Rose's thawing relationship is going that much more smoothly, if mostly because the two are handling each other with kid gloves for their own reasons.

I'm sure that small Delaine will make another appearance somewhere down the line. In fact, I might even be certain of it.

Something I should probably note – while I'm not against people theorizing about future developments (it's actually quite entertaining to see what you all come up with and what details you use to spin your theories together, because more than a few of you have pinned down my exact thought process in writing this fic), it does get a little annoying having people tell me what I should do with my characters, especially when their ideas go against the character completely or I've already explained that I'm not going that. I make an effort to be polite, but it does get aggravating having to go 'there's ten different reasons why I'm not doing this thing and here's those reasons listed' so often.

Feel free to ask any questions in the comments / review section. I will either answer them in-story or in the next Author's Notes. Reviews, criticisms, and commentary are, as always, welcome.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!