



Sunset

By Mad Maudlin



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by Mad Maudlin (madmaudlin034@gmail.com)

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Rose thought she just might get her happily ever after this time around. She was wrong.

Infinite thanks to Marginaliana, my beta reader, who sat through this whole damn thing while I was being hysterical at her. Also to the people on my flist who helped with some Britpicking and medical questions. And to MA, who is my Grace. No Time Lords were actually injured in the production of this fanfic.

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ACT 1 – Ride Into

*So let them all dissolve
And welcome a new resolve
Here's where the credits run
Riding off into the sun*

*And love is real
Reading your eyes in the glow
Play on, play on
Happy endings*

--Better than Ezra, "Happy Endings"

Chapter 1

"I love you."

They were words she'd never thought she'd hear, lips she never thought she'd kiss, not like this; for a moment Rose Tyler wrapped her arms around the Doctor--a Doctor, *this* Doctor—and lost herself in the feel of hands and lips and a powerful need that she'd been struggling with for so long she'd almost forgotten she could surrender to it. To this Doctor, apparently *her* Doctor, who clung so tight that she imagined perhaps he needed her, too.

Maybe there was such a thing as destiny. Maybe, just maybe, there was such a thing as happily every after.

The sound of the TARDIS taking off barely registered for a moment, and when it did her heart lurched and she nearly shouted with frustration—it was hard enough following one Doctor, how was she supposed to keep up with two of them? She pulled away and took a few lame strides down the beach, until she realized it was already too late—except for the dome light, the TARDIS was already half-faded, too far gone. *Always running away*, she thought, her frayed nerves caught somewhere between fury and grief. He hadn't even said a proper goodbye! She hadn't had a chance to say...well, anything at all, even though she didn't know what she would've said if given the chance. *Goodbye. Thank you. Don't forget about me. Don't go just yet.* All the words she could've spoken seemed to jam up and stick in her throat.

A warm hand caught hers and held it tightly. She looked up to see the Doctor...the other Doctor, that is, looking down at her. "He knows," he told her quietly. "Just can't stand the mushy stuff. You know how he is."

"And you?" Rose asked, studying the too-familiar face. "What about you?"

He swallowed slightly. "I'm...good enough. I hope."

She realized she was seeing him *uncertain*, something she'd never thought possible before. Well, no—once before. When he'd regenerated that first time, after Space Station Five. He'd looked a bit like this, then, even with a different face—a bit lost and a bit nervous and a bit excited, because at the end of everything he was still the *Doctor* and loved not knowing what would come next.

At the end of everything, he was still the Doctor.

She squeezed his hand and pressed her other one against his chest, to feel that single heartbeat again. "You really want to stick around here for the rest of your life?" she asked.

"Well, maybe not just *here*," he said, and reached up to touch her face, hesitant like she might break. "Unless that's what you want. I mean that, Rose, I'll follow wherever you go."

They were the words she hadn't know she needs so badly to hear, and she kissed him again, savoring it this time. These *were* the lips she'd stared at in the dimness of the control room, the lips that had laughed and scowled and told her tales; this was the ridiculous hair that she used to think up the lamest excuses to touch; here were the ears, the rough jaw, the sparkling eyes that watched her like a wonder worth crossing a universe to see. The arms that she used to ogle when he stripped off his jacket now seized her tight, like he was never letting go, and she wrapped her arms around the thin shoulders that bore the weight of all the worlds and clung back, because this was hers, now, finally, exactly what she wanted. *And they all lived happily ever--*

"Bollocks!"

Jackie's cry across the strand snapped them both out of it. The Doctor pulled back, blinking and licking his lips, probably because he had Rose's gloss all over them. (She was suddenly, irrationally glad she'd worn makeup on this mission at all, and to hell with anyone who said it was impractical or vain.) Rose carefully wiped at her own mouth, though it was probably a futile effort, and asked, "What is it? What's the matter?"

"Oh, I've got no reception," Jackie grouched. "Bloody stupid Norway. Couldn't you have set us down somewhere else? Somewhere with people?"

"Oi, I don't make the rifts in Time, I just use them," the Doctor protested.

Rose smothered a laugh, not because it was funny, but because after so many days and weeks of searching and running and darkness and parallel worlds and Daleks and death and life, the sheer *normalcy* of something like her mum and the Doctor bickering—well, for some definitions of normal—it crossed the border of relief into giddy joy. She squeezed the Doctor's hand and said, "It's fine, I've still got my phone, I'll make the call. Unless you want to, Mi--"

She looked around the bleak gray Norwegian strand, and realized for the first time that Mickey wasn't with them. But he'd been right there, until—no, wait, he hadn't disembarked from the TARDIS with them, had he? She turned in a complete circle, searching the horizon like he might've run off and hid,

not because he did things like that but because he was supposed to be there, should've been there, he was *always* there. She kept turning until Jackie said "Rose--" in a low, sad voice.

"Where is he?" Rose asked. "He didn't—did he?"

"He decided to stay behind," Jackie said, in the same gentle voice she used for breaking news like *Granddad's died or I'm out of a job again*. "He—said he'd done all he meant to, here. You know, with his gran and all."

"Why didn't he say anything to me?" Rose asked, mind still flying to every empty space where Mickey could've been, jamming up on his absence. "Why—how could he just leave like that?"

The Doctor squeezed her shoulder, and Rose suddenly had a very good idea why, and it made her a little sick. "I'm sorry," he said. "I...it was a good thing, that he came, you know. I was glad to see him."

She shook her head but leaned into his hand, so she'd have at least one point of reference when everything briefly seemed to spin around her. "Why didn't he say anything to me?" she asked.

"Maybe he thought it was better this way?" Jackie offered, but Rose shook her head again, thinking evil thoughts at any many who'd rather run away than talk about feelings. Two in one day was a little bit much to take, and while the other Doctor was frustrating, Mickey hurt, somewhere deep and close to her heart.

The Doctor rubbed her shoulders without saying anything—he probably knew there wasn't anything to say. Eventually the cool, damp breeze reminded Rose that they were trying to get home, and she managed to shake off her shock long enough to fish her Torchwood-issued phone out of her pocket. "I'll just," she said, "I'll call us a ride, hold on."

Jackie nodded, but the Doctor watched her fumble with the phone with interest. "Why'd you get a signal when she can't?" he asked.

"Hyperwave technology," Rose said. "Cribbed it off the Cybermen. Only thing that works across the Void, so they gave me a modified phone while I went looking for your universe."

"That's brilliant," he said warmly. "Can I have a look?"

"Later," Rose said, and finally managed to dial the right number. "Control, are you there?"

"*Affirmative*," came a bland, anonymous voice, probably some technician or mechanic that she'd seen but had no time to get to know. She had no idea where the rest of her team were, though after the day she'd been having she wouldn't blame them if they'd all run off to catch some sleep. "*It's been a while, ma'am.*"

"Yeah, well, adventures are like that," she said. "Say, is the idiot there who let my mum jump into the cannon after me?"

"I don't know what you mean, ma'am," the receiver said blandly, while Jackie rolled her eyes and waved around a dimensional portal button. Oh, *well*, no wonder how they'd slipped under Torchwood's radar then...maybe it was a good thing Mickey hadn't come back, because Rose might've killed him.

"Never mind," she said into the phone. "I'm back in the home universe, can you get a lock on my location?"

"Running a sweep, just a moment...ah, we have you. Bad Wolf Bay, Norway. Do you need assistance?"

"Yeah, get us immediate pickup at our current location, three persons, no medical attention necessary. If anyone asks, it's Torchwood authorization ninety-nine. Oh, and have a message sent to Pete Tyler's office letting him know when we'll be back in Britain." Rose tugged at the collar of her jacket. "And could you hurry it up? There's sort of a breeze."

"Three persons for immediate pickup, confirmed," Control repeated. *"A UNCF helicopter will be at your location in thirty minutes."*

"Brilliant. Thanks." She hung up. "They're sending a helicopter for us. Thirty minutes."

Jackie snorted. "Thirty minutes, who takes thirty minutes?"

"Hey, you can swim if you don't like it," Rose said, and looked back at the Doctor, who was watching her with a little frown line between his eyes. "What? Something the matter?"

"No, nothing," he said quickly. "Just—'Torchwood authorization ninety-nine?'"

She shrugged. "That's the rule that says 'in case of dire emergency, forget all the other rules.' I figured it'd help speed things up a bit."

He folded his arms, though she wasn't entirely sure it wasn't from the chilly breeze. "Since when have you worked for Torchwood?"

"Since I got here," she said. "They're not so bad, in this universe—I reckon it's more like Jack's version than Yvonne Hartman's."

"Oh, I'm not saying it's bad," he stammered. "Just...surprising, is all."

She grinned at him. "What, did you think I was just sitting around waiting for you?"

He smiled a bit ruefully. "Well, I may have had some romantic notions..."

"Arrogant notions, you mean," she said. "Besides, if you can go off with Martha and Donna and all them, why can't I have Torchwood?"

"So fair's fair," he agreed. "All right. What do we do for thirty minutes until the helicopter gets here?"

Jackie responded by collapsing to the sand. "We sit *down* for a bit," she said. "I'm knackered. You know, the other thing about that TARDIS, it hasn't got any proper seating at all." The Doctor rolled his eyes at

her, but he too sat down, heedless of the damp, and when Rose sat next to him he put his arm around her shoulders like it belonged there and then looked down at her like he was asking for permission. She shut her eyes and pressed close into his shoulder, soaking in his warmth and presence like a shield against the last three or four days.

The helicopter, when it finally came, had to hover over the beach while they shimmied up a swaying rope ladder; this had Jackie making distressed little noises all the way up, like it was any more dangerous than hopping back and forth between dimensions. The Doctor came last, flailing a bit to get inside, while Rose got herself belted in and switched on the radio in her headset. "Thanks for the ride," she said to the crew.

"Not a problem, Ms. Prentice," the pilot said, waving to her. "Mrs. Tyler. Sir."

The Doctor, who had put his ear protectors on the wrong way round, looked up from where he was fussing with his seat belt. "What? What?"

"This is," Rose said, with only the slightest pause, "Dr. John Smith. He's my guest and I'm granting him full security clearance."

"Understood, ma'am," the pilot said. "I'm Flight Lieutenant Penn, my copilot is Pilot Officer Ambrose. We're about ten minutes from the defender *Valiant*, and you'll transfer from there to the airship *Prince Edward*, which will take you to London-Heathrow."

"That's brilliant, thanks." She switched her headset off the crew's channel and smiled at her mum and at the Doctor, who was toying compulsively with his radio controls. She batted his hand away and set them. "You catch that? We'll be home in about an hour."

"We will?" He blinked. "I mean, yeah, of course we will. Home." He grinned at her and then looked out the little window, where the North Sea was already rippling away beneath them. Rose settled back into her seat, but couldn't stop herself from snatching looks at him every few minutes, any time some part of her tried to insist this wasn't real.

The *Valiant* was buzzing with life, and an airship—presumably the *Prince Edward*—was already at station-keeping alongside it, the closed gangways dangling through the air like strands of spider silk. The bloated balloon of the blimp looked a bit silly next to the muscular outlines of the defender, but the Doctor was looking everywhere at once and judging nothing. "This is just like the *Valiant*," he said. "I mean, other Earth's *Valiant*, the one UNIT built. Where'd you get it?"

"United Nations Office of Homeworld Security," Rose said. "They oversee the combined multinational forces—basically what's left of the army that fought the Cybermen. They also technically have oversight over Torchwood, but it's more of a benign neglect thing most of the time."

"Homeworld Security," he echoed, and made a face. "I guess they can't all have clever acronyms, eh?"

A young officer in a crisp duty uniform came across the deck to salute them. "Ms. Prentice, Mrs. Tyler, Dr. Smith. The *Prince Edward* is experiencing some delays casting off; the captain has invited you to wait in the officer's mess while things get sorted out."

"That's lovely, thank you," Rose said, and winced when she got another salute. "You really don't have to do that, you know."

"Ma'am?" the officer—lieutenant commander's insignia, despite his age—blinked at her.

"Never mind," she sighed. "Lead the way, Commander."

As they went below decks, the Doctor leaned into her ear. "Ooh, look who's all that, eh? Salutes, officer's mess, *ma'am...*"

"It's not like I ask them to," Rose protested. "I just can't make them *stop* it." Somehow, that only made him grin wider.

The officer's mess was functional, as befitted a vessel of war, but there were touches that probably set it apart from the regular mess, like the comfy seat cushions and watercolors on the walls. A waiter brought round some tea and sandwiches, simple stuff, but Rose hadn't realized how hungry she was (or how *thirsty*—all that shifting from here to there caused dehydration) until the food was in front of her. She started attacking the tray immediately, leaving it up to Jackie to smile and say, "Thank you, airman. And tell the captain thanks for us, too."

The waiter blushed, and his arm twitched like he didn't know whether he was supposed to salute or not. "Yes, ma'am," he mumbled. "Of course, ma'am."

The Doctor stared at him as he left, then at Jackie. "What was that, then?"

"I don't know what you mean," Jackie said primly, selecting a sandwich.

"That," he gestured, "with the," and then mimicked the boy's star-struck expression. "Who are you people, and what have you done with the Tylers?"

Rose couldn't choke down her sandwich fast enough to protest verbally, so she settled for swatting him on the arm while she chewed. "Oi, we're no different than we were," she said when she could speak again. "Just got different jobs, is all."

"And before, I wasn't married to the Secretary for Homeworld Security," Jackie added.

The Doctor smiled while he fixed himself a cup of tea. "Really? Good on Pete, then. Couldn't think of a better person in the whole world to get that sorted."

"You only know like five people in this world," Rose pointed out.

The Doctor snorted. "Details, details. So Pete's the Secretary of Stuff That's Not UNIT and you're...what, his trophy wife?"

This was directed at Jackie, who made a face. "Don't be daft, Doctor, I've got a job of my own."

"She's got a foundation," Rose added.

"A foundation?" The Doctor looked worried. "Please tell me you're talking about a building..."

"No, no, it's a charitable thing," Jackie said. "We help children who lost their parents in the Cyberwar. Make sure they get an education, health care, that sort of thing. The Cybermen mostly ignored the kids, you know, so there's a lot of them who need the help, and I figured if I've got to put up with playing the part of That Woman--" this was the only way Jackie would refer to her late alternate self these days, probably some compromise between uncomprehending disgust and the urge not to speak ill of the dead-- "I might as well do something useful, you know?"

"She just likes to pretend she's Princess Diana," Rose added.

"Oh, stop it," Jackie said, without actually denying the charge. "I just wanted to do my bit, is all, and since I'm not a politician like Pete or a space detective like Rose or a soldier like..."

She hesitated like she'd said something wrong, and then Rose realized she *had* said something, sort of, but before the awkwardness could transform into a full-blown emotion like anger or sadness, the Doctor cleared his throat. "Well, I'm going to admit I'm surprised," he declared. "Never thought you had it in you to run a foundation."

"Oh, I don't *run* the place," Jackie said, sounding scandalized. "Who d'you think I am, an accountant? No, I've got people to do all the technical bits, with the money and all. I just, you know, do appearances and things. She was quite famous, That Woman, and everyone thinks I've had such a change of heart, the press even called me Scroogella for a bit."

The Doctor grinned. "Now, see, *that* I can picture just fine. That's brilliant, Jackie."

The lieutenant commander came back to let them know that the *Prince Edward* was ready to cast off, if they were ready, and so they finished their tea and sandwiches and back up to the flight deck. As they walked, the Doctor asked, "So what is it you do for Torchwood, besides loading yourself into a dimensional cannon a few times a week?"

She laughed. "It's not that exciting, trust me."

"Oh, don't listen to her," Jackie said. "She's famous, our Rose. Saved the world from the Sycorax herself this time round."

"Really?" He looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"The others helped," she protested. "My team—I'm a unit leader in the field division. The Sycorax in this universe decided we'd be easy pickings after the Cyberwar, but my team managed to chase them off. Didn't have to blow them up, either."

"They were on the telly," Jackie confided in a stage whisper. "The head of the Institute called them Earth's greatest defenders. They got *medals*."

"Stop it," Rose said, feeling herself blush. "It's not *normally* that exciting. There's lots of paperwork."

They were at the gangways, now, which swayed in the combined drafts of two sets of engines. "Sounds like you've done well for yourselves," the Doctor said, sounding strangely quiet, as they stepped into the plastic tubes. "Both of you, I mean."

Rose seized his arm, balancing herself on the safety railing with the other. "And now you're here," she said. "And that makes everything even better."

He looked at her as if surprised by her confidence, then smiled. "Yeah?" he asked. "I mean, yeah. Yeah, it will be. It'll be brilliant." And he leaned in suddenly to kiss her again, and Rose didn't protest until Jackie started griping and poking them both in the back.

Chapter 2

The *Prince Edward* put them down at Heathrow, and a car brought them from the military landing elevator to the main terminal. They were greeted inside the airport by Pete Tyler, who looked about as righteously angry as a man possibly can when a toddler is making jammy handprints on his shirt and neck.

"I am not going to ask now," he said, "but at some point today you're going to explain to me how it is that I left to pick up my son at nursery school with the intention of reuniting my family under one roof in these trying times, and came home to discover that one of you had volunteered herself for a dangerous—though authorized—mission to another universe, and the other had conned Mickey into helping her tag along." He blinked at them a moment, and batted Tony's hands away from his face. "Where is Mickey?"

Rose suddenly realized what it looked like, coming back without him, but she couldn't bring herself to say it; it was Jackie who piped up, "He's all right, Pete—he stayed behind. I'll tell you everything later." She hugged him and Tony both, and then for extra effort ruffled the baby's hair, which was so pale and fine it was nearly translucent. Rose couldn't be sure, but she thought that in between she heard her mum whisper *I'm sorry*.

Rose was next, dodging Tony's grabby hands so Pete could give her a one-armed squeeze. "I guess I should've told you I was going," she admitted.

"No, you shouldn't have," he said wearily, "because then I would've had to try and stop you." Pete turned to the Doctor next, sizing him up while the Doctor was busy looking in every other possible direction at the people coming and going around them. "Doctor," Pete said, drawing his attention at last. "Didn't really expect to see you again."

"Ah, you know, I couldn't keep away," the Doctor said with a grin.

"Wouldn't have known that by the amount of effort we went into trying to contact you," Pete said dryly.

The Doctor frowned, and looked at Rose. "What? You were trying to contact me?"

"Well, you didn't think jumping into that contraption and flinging ourselves through the Void was our Plan A, did you?" Rose asked. "We tried to broadcast a message by hyperwave, but without a lock on the TARDIS we couldn't be sure anything was getting through."

"Huh," the Doctor said, and then his attention shifted suddenly, like he'd just noticed who Pete was holding against his hip. "Is this Tony, then? The baby? Hello, Tony!"

Tony turned around to look at the Doctor (who had bent down precariously close to his face) and, with a squeal of baby-babble, made a grab for the long protruding plume of his fringe. The Doctor laughed and made a half-hearted attempt to dodge, then let Tony smack him in the face with his jammy hands. (Where *had* all the jam come from? Had Pete just given him the jar?) Pete huffed and stepped away, so Tony was out of range.

"You'll be happy to know that the stars are back," he said, struggling to keep on his Serious Business face. "They reappeared that first night you were gone."

"Wait, how long were we gone?" Jackie protested. "Mickey said it'd only be a couple of hours!"

"You know how the TARDIS is, Mum," Rose said. "At least it's the right year this time, yeah?"

"Oi, don't blame the TARDIS," the Doctor said. "It's Time that gets all slippery between the worlds. How d'you think you lot saw the stars going out before the Reality Bomb went off?"

"It's twenty-seventh July now," Pete said; Jackie made angry hissy noises because she couldn't swear in front of the baby and started fiddling furiously with her mobile. Rose couldn't say she wasn't surprised herself—she'd let over a week ago, apparently, though it all felt like one long day. Pete added, "Everything indicates that space is stabilizing—or at least, that's what some very smart people with lots of letters after their names promise me."

"Oh, it is," the Doctor said, circling around behind so he could continue to make faces at Tony. "The Reality Bomb is gone, so all the foreshocks will have ceased."

"And you know for certain the threat's neutralized?" Pete asked; he tried to turn to face the Doctor, but Tony squealed and squirmed every time he tried.

"Pretty certain," the Doctor said, and pulled down the corners of his mouth with both fingers, so his next words came out sort of lisped. "Seeing as I killed them all."

Tony laughed and reached for the Doctor's hair again, but Pete turned sharply, so the baby's laugh turned into a protesting shriek. The Doctor straighted up, face falling a bit, and they all stood about awkwardly for a few moments, nobody speaking (except for Tony's unhappy burbles). Rose wanted to blurt out *they deserved it, they always have, I'd have done the same thing—I have done and I would do it*

again, because wasn't it a bit rich for Pete to be shocked when he'd helped lead the war against the Cybermen?

Luckily, before Rose could leap to the Doctor's defense, Jackie clapped her hands together briskly. "Well, the important thing is, it's over, and we're all safe and sound," she said briskly, bright as neon. "So why don't we go home and celebrate properly, yeah?"

"I don't think I really--" Rose started to say.

"This is a *good day*," Jackie said fiercely, and wrestled Tony into her own arms. "We're going to *celebrate*. As a *family*. All *right*?"

Rose made eye contact with the Doctor, and he grimaced slightly. Not even the Destroyer of Worlds necessarily wanted to cross Jackie Tyler in a mood like that. "Sounds lovely," he said, plastering on a grin. "Where's the car?"

The driver was waiting for them just outside the main terminal, in one of those lanes reserved for emergency vehicles; that more than anything told Rose exactly how worried Pete had been, even if he didn't want to come out and say it. She helped her mum shuffle around the baby things in the back seat, while the Doctor said something quiet to Pete that she didn't quite hear. "Where are we heading, house or flat?" she asked once everyone was in the car.

"Oh, the house," Jackie said. "I don't think I could cook right now if my life depended on it."

"Could you ever?" the Doctor asked with a little smile; Jackie swatted him with a blanket from the baby bag.

~*~*~*~*~

It was a long drive from the airport to Pete's mansion, and they spent it passing Tony around from lap to lap, talking without really talking; Pete surely had a million questions, but he seemed content to let them wait just a little bit longer. Instead they stuck to the weather (still miserably hot, but improving) and the UN (useless as ever) and Tony (and why on Earth Pete had let him have a jam sandwich for tea.) They quickly got off the main roads, into the green summer trees and grass baked into shades of khaki and sage by the July sun. It all seemed so fragile when they'd come so close to losing it, and Rose caught the others stopping and staring almost as much as she did.

She thought she felt the Doctor tense a bit when they came up the drive to the house, but of course, his last memories of the place were all steel and blood; to Rose, it had become home, and she found herself looking forward to a hot shower and a square meal in the warmth of the kitchen—there was nothing further from the echoing cold of Davros's lair, as far as she was concerned. As they came up the drive, Oleg and Lena came out to meet them, waving and grinning.

"Who's that?" the Doctor asked, leaning forward.

"That's the Janislowskis," Rose said. "Dad hired them on as caretakers since he and Mum travel so much. They were going to get deported otherwise."

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. "Oleg used to work for Cybus Industries," Pete explained slowly. "He was a plant foreman, not a mad scientist, but during the war some people had trouble telling the difference. It was just supposed to be a few months, until things calmed down, but...well..." He made a vague gesture, as if to encompass all the strange ups and down since then.

"What he means is, he can't bear to go without Lena's desserts and they're more than happy to get paid to live here," Jackie said, gathering together Tony and the diaper bags. He was sliding into nap mode, lolling grumpily against her shoulder, and she paused to smooth down a cowlick, which made him gurgle.

"There's nothing wrong with a fine appreciation of dessert," Pete said with a put-upon sniff that made both Rose and Jackie laugh at him. The Doctor just smiled, broad and deep, though Rose couldn't tell if it was the teasing or the baby or the thought of pierogis that brought it on. Maybe all of it, or maybe it was something else entirely. He was like that sometimes.

"Peter!" Oleg boomed as soon as they started climbing out of the car. "It is *good* to see you! It is good to see the stars again!"

"Well, I can't take the credit for that," Pete said. "Oleg, I'd like you to meet the Doctor—he'll be staying with us for a bit. Doctor, this is Oleg...Lena..."

The introductions went around, handshakes and hugs—Lena even gave Rose a wet kiss on the cheek. "So if it was not Peter who brought the stars back, surely it was you," she said.

"Well, I had a lot of help from my friends," Rose said, nodding at the Doctor. Lena hauled him down to her level to kiss him, too, and the look on his face was sheer alarm. "Oh, don't, Lena, you'll make him blush."

"I cannot help it!" she said. "We were so afraid, it was like Cybermen all over again, and now you save us..."

"It's, er, all in a day's work," the Doctor said. And over Lena's head, at Rose: "Besides, I never *blush*."

"So what's this, then?" Rose said, reaching up to pinch at his cheeks. He stuck his tongue out at her, which she took to mean he conceded her the point.

Jackie immediately headed up to the nursery with Tony, and Oleg took Pete off by the arm, saying something about the garden, and Lena disappeared back into the kitchen. That left Rose and the Doctor standing in the foyer, and the Doctor was starting to look a bit lost again. "You want to wash up?" Rose asked, in case he was thinking gloomy thoughts about that first Cyberman assault.

"Oh! Yeah, that would be..." He sniffed the back of his own hand and grimaced. "Yeah, definitely. I hate the smell of Dalek in the morning."

"Oh, you had to say that, didn't you?" Rose said, because she'd managed not to notice it until now, but the strangely sterile stink of the Crucible had managed to follow them home. "C'mon—race you."

"Not fair!" the Doctor yelled as Rose took off for the stairs. "I don't know where—aha! Come back here! You didn't say where we were racing *to!*"

Which resulted into some rather chaotic running about, up and down stairs and through the kitchen and gardens (not to mention a near-accident with the dumb waiter, and Jackie screeching at them to *set an example for the baby!*) before they found their way, exhausted, to the upstairs bathroom. Rose collapsed on the toilet to catch her breath while the Doctor took to examining himself in the mirror. First one side of his flushed face, then the other; then under his chin, the top of his head, his teeth, and then he reached around back as if he were checking for the existence of a certain mole.

"You're him," she said when she could say it without choking. "I mean, you look the same."

"Really?" he asked. "Even the nose? I think I see a bit of Donna in the nose here." He prodded it, frowning.

Rose rolled her eyes at him. "Yeah, even the nose. What are you worrying about?"

He immediately stepped back from the sink and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm not worrying. I'm not worried about anything. Who says I'm worried?"

"Fine," Rose said. "You're not worried. So wash up already."

He scrubbed his hands with an intensity not befitting Jackie's decorative seashell-shaped soaps, then dunked his head under the tap and came up shaking like a sheepdog. "So Lena is nice," he said, once Rose had beat him into submission with a towel.

"She's super," Rose said. "Like the best next-door neighbor in the world."

"The best neighbor that you pay," he said from under the towel.

Rose shrugged. "Like mum said, they get to live out here and do whatever they want when none of us are around—and we're not usually around, what with Mum and Dad doing all the traveling and me at Torchwood...and they really are more like neighbors than, you know, staff."

"*Staff.*" The Doctor tossed the towel aside, reveal hair that stuck up even more chaotically than usual. "Aren't you all posh, then?"

Rose rolled her eyes and retrieved the towel from the floor. "I'm not posh," she said. "I just...have really wealthy parents." He smirked at her. "It's not like I live here," she added. "I have a flat of my own. They're the posh ones. *Tony* is posh. *I* am a self-sufficient, bootstrapping individual."

"Course you are," he said, still grinning.

"That's right." She rearranged the towel and started the water running again, but the Doctor remained perched on the edge of the tub, giving her that fond loony grin. "What?" she asked.

"Oh no, nothing," he said.

"What're you smiling like that for?" she demanded, crossing her arms.

He shrugged. "You just seem...different, a little, is all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said with a wave of his hand. "Well, I mean, not nothing, but nothing bad. It's not a bad different. Or maybe you're not different at all, I dunno. Ooh, look, duckies!"

He swooped down on the multicolored rubber ducks that occupied a plastic caddy on the side of the tub—the only things that could currently get Tony to settle into the bath—and thoroughly perused them while Rose washed her face and hands. A faint smell still lingered whenever she turned her head—something like motor oil and gun smoke and ozone, though she didn't know if it was due to the Daleks or her own weapon. Shame the gun had gotten lost in the shuffle like it had; she'd rather liked it.

"So what do we do next?" Rose asked, trying to fold the towel in such a way that Lena wouldn't see the mascara streaks she'd just left on it.

The Doctor opened his mouth at the same moment his stomach gurgled loudly. He looked down at it with a small frown. "Well, nobody asked you."

Rose snorted. "Have you eaten at all since...I mean, at all?"

"I think I grabbed a bag of crisps 'round the back of the TARDIS while we were dropping people off," he muttered.

Rose pretended to shudder. "Crisps...god, Lena will kill you. C'mon, she's probably cooking enough to feed an army." She took his hand. "You know, if you stay around here long enough, you might actually put on weight."

He let her tug him out of the bathroom, but his eyes bulged in mock horror. "What, and lose my girlish figure?"

They invaded the kitchen, where Lena was presiding over exactly as much food as Rose expected, in several different stages of preparation; she bribed them with a bunch of bananas and a huge packet of biscuits to make them leave, and they tried to watch television in one of the lounges. But Rose had been awake for going on twenty-four hours, and somehow went from snickering at the Doctor's opinion of a toothpaste advert to waking up groggily, with her face mashed into his sleeve while he ever so gently touched her cheek—as gently as if she were made of spun glass.

"Hey," he said while she blinked at him. "You still want dinner?"

Rose smiled, feeling amazingly content with the universe. "Do I have to move to get it?" she asked.

"Well, I suppose we could always ask for a tray, and we can always find out if I'm still ambidextrous..."

She stretched upwards, as far as she could reach, and pressed her lips against the end of his chin. He grinned at her and tipped his head down to kiss her properly, and Rose had another minute to relish doing this, being able to do this, finally having the Doctor here to stay.

Then his stomach rumbled again, and she broke away, giggling. "Dinner," she said.

"Are you sure?" the Doctor asked with innocent eyes. "I can probably put it off another hour or four...."

Pete and Jackie were already at the table when they got down to the dining room, trying to get Tony to stop fussing and eat his peas. "There you are," Pete said mildly as they sat down. "I was beginning to worry he'd taken you away again in his TARDIS."

Was Rose seeing things, or did the Doctor flinch again? "Ah, no more worries on that front, Pete," he said. "I'm sort of stranded."

Pete raised his eyebrow. "Really? Is that why you ended up in Norway again?"

So of course, they had to explain everything, starting with the Daleks, and then the stolen planets, and the Reality Bomb, and the biological metacrisis bit, only parts of it were not in that exact order. There was a lot of arguing and talking over each other, especially from Jackie, since she wasn't even supposed to have been there in the first place. "But Mickey said you were going, and that he meant to go after you, and I—well—" She stabbed into her chicken with more force than necessary. "You're my *daughter*," she declared.

"You could've been hurt, mum," Rose said, as she finally started to realize the magnitude of what they'd done. "Or stranded over there. There was a reason I volunteered for the mission, and a reason it was supposed to be solo!"

"What's done is done," Pete declared, and yeah, he'd probably already had that conversation with Jackie and said everything Rose could've said, only louder and more indignantly. He turned to the Doctor.

"What I don't understand is this metathingy biocrisis..."

Which sent them round and round again, with the Doctor using words altogether too long for a dinner table and Pete trying to write things on the napkins over Jackie's indignant protests. Finally, he sat back in his chair and said, "So let me get this right. You're not the real Doctor."

"Technically, yes and no," the Doctor said, sipping his wine. "I've got all his thoughts, memories—" his eyes flicked ever so slightly to Rose-- "feelings, and so on, plus a few extra bits tossed in for bonus, but physiologically speaking, I'm human."

Pete's eyebrows rose considerably. "Really?"

The Doctor rapped his knuckles over his chest. "Thunk, thunk, thunk. Just the one. Think I'd notice the other if it was there."

Tony, finding this a great game, slapped his hands against his tray. "Tuck tuck tuck!" he squealed. Jackie shushed him.

Pete's attention barely even flickered from the Doctor, and Rose got the idea that her dad was interrogating a suspicious first date. It made her simultaneously want to slap him and giggle into her napkin. "Must be a bit of a shocker for you," Pete said easily. "Change of species and all."

The Doctor just shrugged, chasing bits of chicken around his plate. "Well, it's different, I'll grant you that, but I'm looking forward to it. Human life, human limits, just...I don't think I've ever been *ordinary* before, if that makes any sense. I think it'll be a great adventure."

Pete frowned. "Isn't that what Peter Pan said about death?"

Rose choked on her cauliflower. Jackie attempted to kick Pete under the chair, though from the sound of it she hit more wood than flesh.

The Doctor smiled, though he suddenly looked a little wild around the eyes. "Well, it's all the same thing, really. The price of a human life is a human death. Something new either way, and after nine hundred and four years, that's sort of refreshing, innit?"

"Actually," Rose couldn't help but put in, "weren't you technically just born yesterday?"

The Doctor's grin relaxed a little, and he nudged her with his elbow. "Oi, you. Show a little respect."

"You respect your elders!" Rose said, flicking him with the corner of her napkin. And then they were giggling and nudging each other, until Jackie reminded them to set an example for the baby, and whatever shadows had crept into the conversation just as quickly slipped away.

Despite her unintended nap earlier, Rose was yawning by the time they were clearing the dishes. "I'm not tired," she protested after a big one. "I can't be tired, the sun's still out."

"Well, I'm exhausted," Jackie declared. "Maybe you'd like to take care of Tony's bath for me?"

"It's just time traveler's lag," the Doctor added. "Nothing to be ashamed of." He himself yawned, and then frowned, as if he hadn't been expecting it.

"So are you turning in, then?" Rose asked, and managed to surprise herself with a sudden surge of anticipation.

The Doctor shrugged. "Eh, maybe in a minute. I wanted to talk to your dad about something."

Whatever it was, it couldn't possibly take more than a few minutes, Rose was sure. She left a messy pile of plates in the sink and quickly wiped her hands. "I'll just go wash my hair, then," she said. "You, ah, you know where all the bedrooms are?"

The Doctor nodded and flashed her a little smile while he stacked the serving dishes on the draining board. "Yeah, yeah, I think I got it sorted while we were running around up there."

Rose practically flew up the stairs, but her heart was pounding for an entirely different reason. She thought back to the promise of the kiss in Norway, and of course they were both exhausted and her entire family would be just down the hallway...and the fact that she had wanted this for so long, and so badly, would probably make it that much more awkward. She *told* herself this. It didn't change anything.

She would have the Doctor in her bed tonight, and every night to come. Nothing could be better than this.

Her room had a private bath, and she left a trail of clothes across the floor leading to the door. She nearly tripped over her own panties, clumsy from rushing, and quickly jumped into the shower to wash the last smells of battle and evil out of her skin and hair. She slipped again climbing out of the shower and nearly brained herself on the sink; spent four minutes trying to blow-dry her hair before remembering that this was the *Doctor* and he'd seen her covered in *slime*, he wasn't going to mind a bit of bedhead in the morning; and then sorted through the bureau and wardrobe in her room for something to put on that wouldn't be outright embarrassing. (The clothes that migrated to her room here tended to be ones she didn't wear often enough to miss, and for good reasons.) She entertained the thought of just waiting for him stark naked, but he could be weirdly prissy about some things, and so she eventually settled on an old, worn t-shirt that went down nearly to her knees. It might've belonged to Mickey once upon a time, but the first runner-up involved appliqué snowmen, and besides, it wasn't like she was going to keep it on.

She flopped down on the bed, squirmed into a position that hopefully didn't look too much like she was sitting and waiting for him. Then she sat and waited for him.

And waited.

And waited.

When the clock on the nightstand said half an hour had passed, not counting the time she'd spent in the shower, Rose decided that the Doctor and Pete couldn't possibly still be talking about anything important. She threw on her dressing gown (a horrible ruffly thing her mum had bought her) and poked her head into the hall, telling herself that she'd see the Doctor come walking towards her the moment she did.

Instead it was her mum, in her own dressing gown, shuffling past in the direction of the master bedroom. "What are you doing, still awake?" she asked when she spotted Rose. "I thought you were turning in early."

"Are Dad and the Doctor still talking?" she asked.

Jackie blinked at her. "Of course not, the Doctor went to be ages ago. He's in the guest room if you're heartless enough to wake him." She hooked a thumb over her shoulder at the door on the other end of the hall. "Or are you looking for Dad? He's down in his office talking to Edinburgh--"

"No," Rose blurted. "No, that's...I was just wondering. G'night." She quickly shut the door and took a deep breath, rallying her composure. So the Doctor was sleeping alone tonight. Maybe he was waiting for some privacy. Maybe he really was honestly too tired. Maybe they were rushing things a bit, considering he'd only been born yesterday. Maybe he somehow thought *she* wanted to be alone, because for all his genius this was the same man who'd managed to overlook the London Eye.

Tomorrow night, she promised herself. Tomorrow, in Cardiff, even if I have to club him and drag him into the bedroom.

She climbed into bed and barely remembered her head hitting the pillow.

Chapter 3

Rose slept until nearly ten and woke up with her hair a complete mess, which she was tempted to blame on the Doctor at least in part. When she made her way downstairs she found the others presiding over a late breakfast; the Doctor was drinking coffee altogether too fast to be healthy, but he grinned when he saw her, which made the whole fiasco last night more embarrassing than annoying. "Morning, dear," Jackie said. "We were just about to send up the Sherpas to recover you."

"Yeah, thanks, no," she said, snagging some toast as she sat down. "I think I earned some beauty sleep, personally."

"So that's your secret," the Doctor said with a manic waggle of the eyebrows. Yep, definitely too much coffee in him. Rose nudged the orange juice his way with a grin.

There was a bang at the back door, and Oleg came into the kitchen with a suitcase in his hand. "Peter, your secretary brings these up the drive," he called out, waving the suitcase. "He says you bought them?"

"Mmm, yes, thanks, Oleg." Pete got up to take the suitcase, and almost immediately handed it to the Doctor. "I had to guess at the sizes, but since you don't have your wardrobe with you..."

"Aw, thanks, Pete, you shouldn't've," the Doctor said. He popped the locks on the suitcase and peered inside. "Or is it just 'cause you want your pajamas back?"

Pete ignored this as he seated himself again. "I put through a request to get you some identification, too," he said. "Passport, birth certificate, the whole thing."

Rose hadn't even thought about that. "Is that what you were talking about last night?" she asked.

The Doctor nodded. "Sort of a symbolic thing, really. Well, that and a legal necessity. Well, that and, I've been thinking about this really fantastic car I used to have, only I'll need a license and all...what are you smirking about?" he demanded.

Rose stopped trying to hide her smile. "Just picturing you driving a car. You'd be a menace on the road."

"Hey, at least a car is built for a single pilot," he said defensively.

"Driver," Rose corrected.

He turned his nose up at her. "If it's my car I can call it how I like."

"In any case, it'll take a bit of time to put everything in order," Pete added loudly as if they hadn't interrupted. "We'll have to search the database of the missing and dead first, see if there's anyone who's a reasonable match for you."

That damped the mood. "Not sure I like the idea of taking on a dead man's identity," the Doctor said with a little frown.

"It's easier than starting from scratch," Rose said as she served herself some eggs. "That's what we had to do for me—I mean, it's common knowledge that the Tylers didn't have any kids before the war. I think I'm officially..."

"Second cousin, once removed," Pete supplied. "Not that we love you any less for it."

"That explains the Prentice," the Doctor said, as if to himself. "I was wondering about that back on the airship."

Rose shrugged. "It was weird at first, but I reckon I'm used to it by now."

"Rose Prentice," he said, like he was testing it out. He made a face, but only for a moment, and then grinned at her. "Reckon I will be, too, soon."

"Are you going back to Cardiff today, then?" Jackie said.

"Well, I do need to go back to work someday, Mum," Rose reminded her.

Jackie frowned. "But do you have to go right back, is all I'm asking? Surely they'll give you a few days off when you just saved the universe, and we never see you..."

"Wait, you work in Cardiff?" the Doctor asked, frowning again. "I thought you worked for Torchwood."

"Torchwood's in Cardiff," Pete put in. The Doctor blinked.

"London's like a ghost town these days, really," Rose explained quietly. "So many people were converted, and so many people who weren't couldn't bear to stay...most of the government's up and moved to Edinburgh, but Torchwood already had a good infrastructure in Cardiff, we really just needed to expand it."

"You didn't tell Jack about it, did you?" the Doctor asked. "He might've been jealous that yours is bigger."

She smiled. "Jack seems pretty happy with the ones he's got."

"Well, if you have run off like that, don't forget to book your train early," Jackie said. "You know you're not actually supposed to run around flashing that ID card at people to get your way unless it's a proper emergency."

"Missing my train is an emergency!" Rose protested. Both her parents glowered at her. "Kidding. God. Lighten up, you two, we saved the world yesterday."

"And life goes on," Pete announced. "You'd better have brushed your teeth, too, young lady."

Rose rolled her eyes at them and ate her toast.

After breakfast, she went into Pete's office, brushing aside a small mountain of top secret documents so she could use his laptop. She had emailed her supervisor to let him know when she'd be back in the city when the Doctor wandered in, having changed into a gray pinstrip suit—Rose congratulated Pete on getting close on the first try. "Hello," he said, leaning against the doorway. "All booked up?"

"Yeah, we're good," Rose said. "Leave this afternoon at four."

The Doctor's eyebrows went up. "So it is 'we,' is it?" he asked, sounding hopeful.

Was *that* why he'd stayed away from her room last night? Rose came around the desk to embrace him, pressing her cheek into the soft blue silk of his tie. "They're never gonna split us up again," she said firmly. "Just let them try."

He huffed a laugh and folded his hands around the small of her back. "Rose Prentice," he said again, and it still didn't sound right, but close enough. He suddenly lifted her up, and smothered her surprised squeal with a kiss; but just when Rose started to make it interesting, nuzzling and nipping at his lower lip, he pulled back. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"What?" she asked.

'You," he said, "need to pack."

Rose groaned. "Only if you help," she said. "And don't get out of it, you were done when Dad brought you the suitcase."

"You don't know that," he said. "I could've unpacked the whole thing just to spite you. I could have a wicked plot to steal all of Pete's pajamas."

She snorted at him. "As it happens, I don't have much to pack," she pointed out. "All my things are at home in Cardiff."

"Still," the Doctor said. "Don't want to forget a toothbrush. Very important, dental hygiene." She smacked him right in the chest. "Ow! I'm not joking, it's a serious concern!"

They ended up going through her clothes, quietly mocking half of them (even the well-intended gifts from Jackie and Lena) before Rose tossed a few things in a small backpack. Lena filled the rest of it with food to eat on the train, because she seemed to think that one wasn't *allowed* to ride a train without a three-course meal along the way, no matter how short the journey. Pete called the driver for them, and Jackie kissed Rose goodbye, and then to everyone's surprise she also hauled the Doctor down by his tie for a smack on the cheek. "Do take care of each other, you two," she said, and then all but shoved them into the car.

The Doctor grimaced as they drove away. "Take care of each other, what does she think we are, a couple of babes in the woods?" he grumbled. "Take care. Doesn't she think we can take care of ourselves?"

"Well, you were just born yesterday," Rose pointed out.

He rolled his eyes. "I think I'm going to put a limit on how often you're allowed to invoke that one. And it's two days ago now, thank you." He glanced out the window to watch the house roll away. "I've doubled in age overnight. That's a trick not even most Time Lords could've managed. Well, not without an interociter, a black hole and an adjustable wrench. I'm impressed with myself."

"Aren't you always?" Rose was conscious of the driver in front of them, and so she contented herself to lean against the Doctor's shoulder and let him wrap an arm around her waist. "We're on our way home," she said, just to see if it sounded real yet.

"Yeah," he said, sounding mildly surprised. "So we are."

~*~*~*~*~

It was an uneventful train ride, and the trip to Rose's flat was about as uneventful as a crowded bus could get; it was surreal to be traveling with the Doctor again, especially by something as mundane as a public bus, but they passed the time with a lot of discussion about migration patterns since the end of the Cyberwar and whether the woman sitting across the aisle from them knew she had a spot of mustard on her lower lip. (Rose voted no, and thus they should tell her about it; the Doctor insisted it was performance art, and anyway they'd been noticing it too long now to politely say anything. That ate up far more of the journey than Rose would care to admit.)

"Nice building," the Doctor said when they got to her flat. "Very, er, yeah. I like it."

"I know what it looks like," Rose said; over the past two years she'd gotten accustomed to the crumbling brick exterior, spreading rust stains and all. "But I'd never get a flat this big in any other building. It's nicer inside anyway."

"Don't Torchwood pay you for all the running-jumping-fighting aliens business?" the Doctor asked as they climbed the stairs. "It's dangerous work, after all. You should get reimbursed."

"You haven't seen the size of my flat yet," Rose said. "I might spend too much time at work, but when I'm home, I want to *love* the place."

"Well, that settles it," the Doctor said. "It must be brilliant. I'm tingling with anticipation, want to feel?"

Rose found her door, and was about to say something sassy about feeling him tingle when she came to a horrible realization that stopped her in her tracks. "Oh, bollocks," she said. "I left my keys at the office."

The Doctor's face fell. "What? Why?"

"I was going through to all those different universes, wasn't I?" Rose said, going for her mobile instead. "I wasn't going to lose my keys on a Dalek mothership in an parallel universe. Hold on, I think there's somebody at the office this late, I can...do something." Because she didn't relish traipsing to work at an hour like this, especially with the Doctor and their bags in tow, but she'd be fantastically lucky to reach somebody who'd come out here to rescue her.

But while Rose was fumbling around with her phone, the Doctor reached out to rattle the knob. It turned easily in his hand, and he pushed it inwards about half an inch. "Hello," he murmured. "Are you sure you didn't leave the gas on, too?"

"I always lock my door," Rose said, and a thrill of alarm went up her spine, along with a heavy sense of *no, no, no, not now, not when I've finally got everything sorted!* She put her phone in her pocket. "Stand behind me, okay?"

"Hardly," the Doctor sniffed. "I'll have you know I'm well schooled in the gentleman's art of Bartitsu. I defy anyone to come at me with a walking stick." He set aside his suitcase and reached automatically into his breast pocket; he seemed surprised to come up with nothing but the wrapper of a Mars bar he'd bought at Paddington Station. "Or, you know, a piece of plastic," he said. "I'm very deadly with a piece of plastic."

Rose sighed. "If someone's expecting me, they probably won't expect you," she said. "Doctor, please."

He lowered his brows at her, but took a step back. "All right," he said. "Just...be careful. This isn't my best position."

She nodded, and ease open the door, fully prepared to duck the onslaught of an alien assassin or rogue Cyberman or some more mundane, home-grown threat, like terrorist. She thought she heard a slow intake of breath, a shift of clothing, the creak of the floorboard near the kitchen, and then she pushed the door open all the way and--

"Surprise!"

It seemed that she'd developed a slight infestation of Torchwood in her living room.

Her team were clustered near the sofa, with Tosh holding a banner that said CONGRATULATIONS ROSE AND MICKEY and Grace clutching a bunch of balloons in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other.

Jake was standing a little bit away from both of them, as if to distance himself from the balloons, but still grinning like an idiot, with Pierre stationed just over his shoulder. In the direction of the kitchen, Mr. Winslow, her direct supervisor, was standing with his hands folded behind his back and a wide grin on his face; it seemed he'd freshly waxed his mustache for the occasion, and also taken the rare opportunity to change out of his suit jacket in a cardigan knit in rather alarming pattern of green and maroon. Over his shoulder, Brynn was leaning against the counter (which had rather more food on it than Rose remembered leaving out last time she'd been here) and next to her, Ianto stood at something that looked far too much like parade rest for somebody who was never, to Rose's knowledge, in the military. (And who was wearing blue jeans for the first time ever that she'd seen, which was alarming in and of itself.) Dr. Varma was standing over by the television, coughing and looking almost as awkward as Rose felt, and there were other people standing around that she knew only by sight rather than name, and she sensed the Doctor stepping up behind her as she said the first thing that came to her mind, which was:

"What the hell is this?"

"A surprise, natch," Jack said eagerly, taking a step forward. "And look who the cat dragged in, eh? You got Mickey hiding back there, too, Doctor?"

Rose felt her throat go dry under the weight of everyone's intent gazes, but the Doctor's hand on her shoulder gave her something of an anchor. "Mickey...isn't coming back," she said. "He decided to stay. In the other universe, I mean."

Tosh very quickly lowered the banner, as if everyone hadn't already seen it, and Grace's face fell in shock. Mr. Winslow cleared his throat. "A great loss for Torchwood, of course," he said, and: "I'm sure we all wish him well." Jake sure didn't look like he was wishing anyone well, though; he looked like he'd been punched in the stomach, and Rose didn't know if she should apologize to him or vent right alongside him. (She hadn't even realized until now that she was angry; it wasn't a hot anger, but something that lingered in the back of her head like a toothache, ignorable until she pressed on it.)

The Doctor shut the door, like a little afterthought, and Pierre put his arm around Jake's shoulders. Grace cleared her throat. "Well," she said. "I'm still glad to see you," she declared, and then everyone was moving and Rose no longer had time to think of Mickey or anger or anything else.

They had brought food; rather alarmingly large amounts of food for a total of about twenty people, including multiple pizzas and enough alcohol to stock a small bar. "Most people celebrated when the stars came back," Tosh explained, dishing out a small sheet cake covered in multicolored frosting stars. "We held off until we knew about you." She reached across Rose to hand the Doctor a slice. "I'm Toshiko Sato, by the way, and you are...?"

"The Doctor," he said. "You seem awfully familiar. Are you a doctor?"

"Of mathematics, but I don't usually use the title," Tosh said uneasily.

"Hmmm," the Doctor said, and then shoved an enormous wad of cake in his mouth when Mr. Winslow approached him. He pointed to his own furious chewing as if to pre-emptively avoid any conversation.

Mr. Winslow was looking mainly at Rose, though. "Difficult news about Mickey," he said. "Difficult to hear."

Rose didn't know what to say to that, except maybe, "I should've phoned it in sooner. I'm sorry, sir."

Winslow waved one hand near his face. "Think nothing of it. We've all had a rather rough few weeks. The report can take as much time as you need; I daresay you've earned it."

"Thank you, sir," Rose said. Writing up a dry professional report on the whole adventure was the furthest thing from her mind just then. She was aware of the Doctor, at her elbow, finishing his cake in a single bite. "Er, Doctor, this is Mr. Winslow, the head of my division. Mr. Winslow, this is the Doctor, I think I've mentioned him before..."

"Charmed," Mr. Winslow said offering a hand, "I've heard quite a bit about you from Ms. Prentice."

"Mmm mmwagh mmagh," the Doctor said, pointing at his mouth again before he juggled his fork and plate to shake hands.

"Ah, yes, sorry. Perhaps we'll talk again later," Winslow said vaguely, and he wandered away again, clutching a plastic cup full of champagne.

They moved away from the cake and the Doctor finally swallowed. "That was a lot of sugar," he said lowly, and looked around the room with bulgy eyes. "Who are all these people?"

"Co-workers," Rose said. "At least a few of them. That's Dr. Varma, the head of the medical division...dunno why he's here, exactly...and Ianto Jones, our administrative assistant." She paused. "He was hanging around Jack's Torchwood too, wasn't he? With the woman who looked like Gwendolyn?"

"Mmm-hmm," the Doctor said, studying from afar while Ianto poured another cup of champagne for someone who might possibly work in the archives—Rose didn't remember. "If I read between the lines correctly, he and Jack have something together. To the extent that Jack...well, you know Jack."

"I do," Rose said. "This Ianto thinks nobody knows he's been shagging a security guard named Freddy for half a year, but he makes one hell of an espresso. Doesn't talk much, though."

"Makes more room for Jake, though, doesn't it?"

Rose looked around, but Jake and Pierre had disappeared; of course he'd need a minute after hearing about Mickey. "I should probably talk to him," she said. "Tell him--" What, though? That Mickey had some reason to stay in the old universe, some reason greater than all the people who were waiting for him in this one? That she was sorry, when she hadn't even done anything—Mickey was the one who chose envy, who chose to leave. That she was just as angry?

The Doctor rubbed her shoulder again. "Let him be a bit. He'll come back out when he's ready. He had his, uh, whoever that fellow was..."

"Boyfriend," Rose said. She took a bite of her cake instead. It was about as good as a cake from a supermarket could be expected to be, but she did appreciate the sentiment. "Pierre. Jake and Mickey tried to single-handedly liberate Paris from the Cybermen and Pierre kept them from getting themselves killed on the first try."

"Well, see, there you go," the Doctor said. "Obviously this Pierre has a good head on his shoulders and will get Jake sorted. Don't worry about him just yet."

Grace came out of the kitchen with a paper plate full of more substantial hors d'oeuvres—little crackers with coronation chicken on them, that sort of thing—and waved it under Rose's nose. "Go on, take some for when you finish the cake," she said. "I didn't make fifty ants-on-a-logs for nothing. Who's your friend, anyway?"

Rose took a piece of celery filled with peanut butter and dotted with raisins, more to encourage Grace than any actual desire to eat something called *ants on a log*. "Grace, this is the Doctor," she said, because she saw the other woman eying him in speculation. "Doctor, this is--"

"Grace Holloway," the Doctor finished in unison with Rose, only he said it in *that* voice, the one he usually saved for *Rose Tyler* or *Sarah Jane Smith*. He juggled his empty cake plate and shook her free hand with a funny little smile on his face. "Grace Holloway, I've met you."

"I'm sorry?" she asked, corralling a stray ant-log.

"Well, the other you," he said breezily. "In the other universe. San Francisco, 1999. To perfectly specific she killed me," he added in a low tone, more to Rose than Grace herself, "but I got better, so no harm done. What are you doing in Britain?"

Grace had learned the hard way by now how to recover from such a conversational U-turn. "I joined the California Defense Forces when the Cyberwar broke out, and when they started discharging volunteers I switched to the UN program for a while." She smiled wryly. "Turns out they don't appreciate people taking the initiative, though—at least, not as much as Torchwood does."

"Taking the initiative, good on you," the Doctor said heartily. "Good to see some version of you again."

Her smile turned a bit wary. "Thanks, uh, Doctor...?"

"Yes, that's right," he said, and Rose pulled him away by the elbow before he traumatized the poor woman any further. "I'll talk to you again," he called over his shoulder, then looked at Rose. "Can I? She's not secretly evil or something? Because that would be awkward, I'd quite like to see Grace again."

"Grace is lovely," Rose said, and tried to remind herself that she meant it. "Maybe you two could bond over being foreigners—she's American and you're an alien."

"Well, technically we're both aliens, but I'm the only extraterrestrial," he said softly, then grinned at the approaching Dr. Varma and shoved Rose's ant-log-thing into his mouth in a swift motion.

Rose's flat was big, but not that big; she tried to make nice with the whole crush of people, but she couldn't help but notice how close the Doctor kept to her and how much he was eating (and how quickly). Everybody wanted to congratulate her on a job well done, and meet the Doctor, and about half the time offer condolences for Mickey like he'd died and she was his widow or something. It wasn't that Rose wasn't glad to see everyone, because she *was*, just not all at one time. By eight o'clock her desire to chase everyone out with a frying pan was winning out over her good manners.

That, unfortunately, was when Brynn, who had spent most of the evening joined at the hip with someone who might possibly be a medic, sidled up to Rose and flipped her dark hair over her shoulder. "It's good to see you back, Ms. Prentice," she said brightly. "We were all pulling for you, you know, down in front."

"I didn't think you had clearance for that," Rose said, wondering if there was any more obvious way to send out go-away vibes. "The project was need-to-know."

"Oh, you know, we hear things," she said. "What with the stars and all, Mr. Winslow wanted us to know that Torchwood wasn't sitting idle."

"Well, that's...good." Rose considered shoving a biscuit into her mouth as an excuse to leave.

"It's a shame about Mickey, though," Brynn added obliviously, with a little pout. "He was such a great guy. Do you know why he stayed behind?"

"No idea," Rose lied, and shoved a biscuit into her mouth.

"Shame." Brynn's eyes focused over Rose's shoulder, and she broke into a grin that would put some large predators to shame. "But who's this tall, dark and handsome?" she asked.

Rose turned and saw the Doctor lurking behind her, staring out a window; her movement caught his attention, though, and he blushed, because Brynn was looking him up and down in a way that made Rose want to club him and drag him into the bedroom by the hair just to clarify the situation.

"He's an old friend of mine," she said instead. "Dr. John Smith." The Doctor made a sudden noise behind her, but didn't actually speak up. "Doctor, this is Brynn Darby, the receptionist. She knows four ways to kill a person with a computer mouse."

"I don't like to brag about it," Brynn said coquettishly.

The Doctor plastered a smile on his face and bent down to shake Brynn's hand. (And down, and down—she was four inches shorter than Rose even in her heels.) "Enchante, mademoiselle," the Doctor said, but his glance to Rose was a bit wild about the eyes. "Rose, is there a place where I could, ah, get some air? Just for a minute?"

That decided it. "I've got a better idea. Excuse me," Rose said to Brynn, and then maneuvered her way back to her kitchen table, which was still covered the wreckage of a sheet cake. Still, it wasn't so difficult to climb on top of it without putting her food in anything edible. "Oi, everybody!" she called, and then whistled until she was sure she was the center of attention. "Look, it's been really, really lovely, and I want to thank you all for the surprise and the food and everything, but I'm really a bit wiped, and we all know how much paperwork there is after saving the world." That got a little laughter and a few catcalls, but people capable of taking a hint were already setting aside their plates and cups. "So, yeah. Thank you for the nice welcome back, but please, if you could start heading home...thank you...I'll see you all soon at work..."

It took a little more prodding to get some people away from the food and drinks, and there was some confusion about jackets, and then Tosh had to be forcibly evicted from the kitchen ("Let me just put this away for you, it'll spoil--") and Rose realized that at some point Jake and Pierre must've slipped away without her seeing, but eventually it was just her and the Doctor and some bags of trash and more food that the two of them could probably eat in a week.

"Finally," she declared, sliding the deadbolt home. "Alone together."

"Oxymoron," the Doctor said, picking the raisins off another ants-on-a-log. "You've got a lot of lot friends."

"I have a lot of co-workers," Rose corrected. "Though they don't usually go to this much effort...if I'm lucky, maybe they'll pay for my drinks one night."

The Doctor grimaced. "Oh. Right. Sorry about, you know, spoiling the party."

"You didn't spoil anything, I didn't really want such a big crowd--" Rose paused, and studied him carefully. He was standing over one of the snack plates, shoulders just barely hunched, trying to press crumbs of something or other into his fingers. "You were being shy," she said slowly.

"What? No," he shook his head and glowered at her. "No, I'm not shy, when have I ever been shy?"

"Okay, Mr. Go-Use-The-Wrong-Verbs," Rose said. "That's why you were eating so much, so you wouldn't have to talk."

He pointed at her. "Slander."

"No, I think it's cute," Rose said. She hadn't thought it was possible for the Doctor to be shy, not when he had such a healthy ego to prop him up, but there was a first time for everything. "Was it just because they surprised us, or because they all know me already, or what?"

"You keep talking as if I've admitted to possibly feeling a little bit shy around your friends," the Doctor said. "And I haven't. I'm just, ah, fatigued. Yes. From all the traveling."

He stuck out his chin at her and folded his arms across his chest, and Rose smothered an outright laugh which would only have gotten misinterpreted. "Fine," she said. "You're not shy."

"Not at all," he agreed.

"And you didn't spoil anything," she added.

"So you say."

"And anyway, I'd much rather spend the night in," she concluded, passing him a box of pizza. "Just you and me and the junk food."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow at her as he took the box. "A disk of bread, a jug of wine, and thou?"

"Sounds about right." Speaking of the wine—she poured a glass for each of them from one of the bottles Ianto had already opened, and passed the Doctor his. "To home," she said.

He looked around again, like he was just now seeing the place properly with all their well-wishers gone. "To home," he said, and he sounded a little uncertain, but he clicked his glass to hers and drank it down anyway.

Chapter 4

They spent the rest of the evening slouching around the flat, migrating from couch to chair, sprawled on the floor or hunched over the kitchen table, not doing much of anything. Rose started work on her report to Torchwood in a desultory fashion; it was hard to put her thoughts together, even though the whole fiasco had ended barely forty-eight hours ago. Or perhaps that was why it was so hard. Far easier to let the Doctor distract her, which he was more than capable of doing, especially once he found her photo albums—the ones Jackie had put together from all the pictures on Rose's hard drive in a sort of protest against technology. After the third or fourth time he tugged on her sleeve or foot or hair to ask about this picture or that person, she set her laptop aside and curled up next to him on the rug, pizza in one hand and wine in the other, spilling out stories and memories and more than a few of the long lonely stretches in between.

He told her a bit about Martha, then, and Jack and the Master and the end of the world. He told her about somebody named Astrid who had saved his life, and about Donna—lots of bits about Donna, and he sounded sad while he did it, but Rose couldn't figure out why.

"I'm glad you haven't been alone," she said, leaning her head on his shoulder.

He looked down at her, eyebrows knit. "You are?"

"Well, I mean, I'm also totally jealous," she said, "but...you do need people around you, Doctor." She thought of Donna's parallel world and her heart tightened up at knowing just how *much* he needed people. "You need people, and I'm glad you had good ones."

"What about you?" he asked. "Looks like you've got yourself some faithful companions as well."

She shrugged. "They're just people from work," she said again. "Mum. Pete. Mickey." They'd both had a few more glasses of wine by then, and somehow Rose was having a hard time keeping hold of the knowledge that Mickey was *gone*—that the walls of time were truly closed, that he hadn't said goodbye. Every time she saw his face in a picture or mentioned him in a story, it seemed to creep up on her all over again, though she couldn't decide if the tight feeling in her chest was anger or sadness or guilt.

Easier to have another glass of wine and turn another page of the album, the Doctor's arm around her and their legs all tangled together. Easier to put the whole painful mess out of sight and out of mind until she had recovered the energy to deal with it properly.

Going on midnight, they were both yawning again, though Rose wasn't sure whether it was mostly the wine or the hour. When the Doctor nearly knocked over his glass with a careless gesture, Rose took it as a sign they were done for the day. "Probably ought to go to bed soon," she said, carefully transferring their wineglasses to the table.

"Good idea," he said, and climbed to his feet, stretching a little awkwardly. He looked around, blinking in a slow and sleepy fashion. "Er...where do I sleep?"

Rose wondered if he really could be that thick, and then remembered once again who she was talking to. "I do have a bed, you know."

"Yes, but...oh. *Oh.*" He looked at her like he was seeing her for the first time, eyes wide and wondering, and he licked his lips in a gesture that was far too suggestive to be deliberate. "In my defense, I've had quite a bit of wine tonight," he said huskily. "And I'm still getting used to metabolizing alcohol the human way."

"Not to mention you're underage," Rose added, climbing to her own feet. "Just two days old."

"Oh, well, if I'm underage then I should certainly sleep in the bath or something," he said. "Wouldn't want to tempt you or anything."

"Jailbait," Rose told him, and then reached out and goosed him, right through his trousers, because she could *do* that now. He yipped and gave her that look again, like she was something brand-new to him and wondrous. "I get dibs on the bathroom!" she declared.

"You've got two bathrooms in here!" he stammered after her, still frozen where he stood.

She gleefully brushed her teeth, washed her face and hit the deodorant again, just to be safe. *We're really doing this, we finally get to do this*, she thought as she stripped down to her underwear, and oh, god, what if it was awkward, what if it was weird, what if he decided he didn't really love her like that after all...no, no, he'd said it on the beach in Norway, he'd whispered it in her ear and then he'd showed her. They were really doing this. Happily ever after, dammit.

Rose darted out of the bathroom and stopped short to find the Doctor already lying on the bed, on top of the covers. He'd stripped down to his boxers and was lying on his side, one arm propping his head up, the other braced on his hip so that his elbow stuck up in the air; he was grinning in what he probably thought was an alluring manner, though it made him look slightly insane. Rose couldn't help herself: she burst out laughing, almost doubled over from it. "Oh, thank you very much," the Doctor said, but his grin didn't slip. "That's exactly what a man likes to hear from his lady friend when she sees him in his pants."

"You're impossible," she gasped, and it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to cross the room to him, to push him flat, to press her lips against his. He opened his mouth to her and wrapped his hands around her hips, and if he didn't care she was wearing granny panties and a mismatched bra she wasn't going to comment on the fact that his boxers had little yellow duckies on them.

His hands went higher, past the ticklish spot on her ribs, and then he was feeling her up through her bra, scratching gently at her nipples and tracing the edge of the band. "Can I?"

Rose tightened her grip on his shoulders, feeling the bones and tendons straining underneath. "Jesus Christ, Doctor do you really have to ask?"

"Some of us," he said, fumbling with the clasp, "have manners, Miss Tyler."

"Oh, sod manners," Rose sighed, and squeaked as he suddenly rolled them over so that he was above her, gently lifting her bra away. "I want this too much to be polite about it." She raised her arms to get the bra off and then wrapped them around his shoulders again, pulling him down so she could feel all of him, every inch of skin not covered by the crisp new cotton of his pants, and under those the hard length of him nudging at her leg. *I did that*, she thought, *he wants me*, and she kissed him hard, matching his own movements and arching up into his hands.

When she started to push down his boxers, he pulled back, just a bit. "Moving a bit fast, are we?" he asked, though he didn't sound nervous, just surprised.

"We've had four years' worth of foreplay," she pointed out. "I don't think it can get any slower."

"Well, on some planets--" She slid a hand under his waistband and pinched his arse, just a bit. "Oh! Right, shutting up now." He rolled onto his side to kick his pants down and gave an encouraging tug to her panties. "Okay. Um. How do you want to do this?"

Rose started to say *wait, let's get the condom first*, and then froze, a horrible thought dawning her.

"No," she whispered.

"No?" he echoed, eyes going wide. "You don't want to do it?"

She checked the nearest bedside table, then lunged over him to check the other. "No, no, no," she chanted, because it wasn't *fair*, not after she'd been waiting so long...she just hadn't planned on this...

"*Fuck*. Doctor, I'm sorry, I...I haven't got a condom."

"You don't have a condom," the Doctor said slowly, the flush draining out of his face.

"I don't really get out much," she muttered, fisting her own hair. So close, so damn close...

"You don't have..." he started to echo. Then his eyes widened again. "Oh, my god, we *need* a condom. Rose, *I need a condom.*"

"And...you wouldn't've...before?" she asked, not quite seeing the cause for such hysterics.

"Of course not!" he said, and leaped up to start pacing. "I had conscious control over the motility of my sperm!"

Rose did not know how she was meant to respond to that.

Luckily—or rather not—the Doctor wasn't done panicking. "Humans don't have that! *I don't have that!* Do you know what this means, Rose?" He got down in her face. "We could have *babies.*"

"Is that a problem?" she asked, not liking his scandalized tone one bit.

"Well, I mean, not with the proper precautions in place," he said, and finally sat back on the bed only to fret at a corner of the sheet. "You know, you need a, a strategy, back-up plans, you need contingencies...I mean, look at me, do you honestly trust me with an infant?"

"I've trusted you with a hell of a lot more important things," she pointed out, but to her surprise he looked genuinely disturbed.

"I'm a crap parent, Rose," he said, shoulders sagging. "I'm absolutely crap until they're walking and talking and doing trigonometry. You know those people who lose their children in shopping malls? Try losing them in the space-time continuum! I did that once and by the time I'd tracked him down he'd hit puberty!"

There were a thousand things Rose could've said to that, but the one she managed to say was, "You're not traveling anywhere without me now, you know." She moved closer and leaned against his shoulder. "I wouldn't let you lose the baby in the space-time continuum."

"I know," he said quietly, "just...*babies*, Rose." It was the tone of voice he usually reserved for exploding stars or planets where the oceans were dry white wine. "We have to think about babies now. *I have to think about babies.* I have to think about a million things and that list now includes babies and flats and mobile phones and..."

He trailed off, and she supplied for him, "Mortgages and curtains and wallpaper?"

"Yeah," he said, and sounded so genuinely miserable that for a moment Rose pulled away and just looked at him, so thin and bent on the side of the bed. He looked to her over his shoulder and frowned. "Not that...I mean...I meant what I told your dad, Rose, I want this. It's just a lot to think about all at once."

"It's a lot for both of us," she pointed out, although if she were honest with herself she'd been thinking about this—or, well, a variation on this, a variation that didn't include hysterical rants about sperm motility—for ages; long before Torchwood ever thought of their army of ghosts.

He turned and pulled her to him, so she could rest her head on his shoulder, but he also said, "Yeah, but only one of us was born yesterday. Cut me some slack."

She pinched him for that one, though the result was more of a giggle than a yelp. "Jailbait."

"Evidently you like it that way," he said, low and teasing.

She glanced down into his lap, and noted that he hadn't entirely lost interest in the proceedings.

"Y'know, there are a few things we could do without a condom," she said.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. "So there are. If you, ah, if I haven't utterly wrecked things."

As an answer Rose kissed him again, and again, pulling him back down to the sheets and into her arms.

~*~*~*~*~

The next morning, Rose woke up with the kitchen a disaster area and the Doctor snoring softly on the other side of the bed, his pillow having gone missing entirely. She rolled over, pressing her back into his side, and tried to tell herself that this wasn't real—that she'd dreamed it all, and when she opened her eyes the Doctor would still be sealed outside her universe and the stars would still be going out.

No luck. She couldn't keep a stupid grin from spilling over her face. And why should she? She had everything she'd ever wanted right here in bed with her.

"Ehh?" the Doctor muttered after a moment, and she felt him fumble around groggily behind her. He'd always been instantly alert before, on the rare occasions he did sleep, coming awake like a switch flipped; perhaps that was another Time Lord thing, another part of the price of this life. His hand found its way into the curve of her hip and squeezed gently. "Oh, hello there."

"Hello yourself." She rolled over to face him. "Any idea what time it is?"

"Not a clue," he said, and nuzzled the side of her face. "Mmm. This beauty sleep trick is working for you. I even like your morning breath."

She swatted him, not really intending to hurt, and succeeded in making him laugh. "You need to work on your pillow talk."

"Are you offering to tutor me?" he asked, making puppy eyes at her.

She kissed his forehead. "I think we can arrange some lessons."

"Starting immediately?"

That look in his eyes was hopeful, but Rose remembered the condition they'd left the rest of the flat in and sighed. "Got to clean up, first," she said. "Otherwise we're going to be living in a biohazard containment site."

"Oh, all right," he said with an exaggerated sigh. "I suppose I can make one small allowance to personal hygiene...."

She let the Doctor have the shower first, and after pulling on a well-worn pair of pajamas she attacked the kitchen and lounge, sorting out the recycling and tossing a few dishes they probably should've put in the fridge overnight. His suitcase had made it to the bedroom, but her bag hadn't, which meant she also had to sort through all the food Lena had sent which they hadn't ended up eating on the train. It still felt like a hideously mundane thing to be doing around the Doctor, like it meant he wasn't quite real, even though all her sense were telling her otherwise.

But when the Doctor emerged, towel tucked around his waist, warm and damp and with his hair sticking up in even more exotic ways than usual, Rose felt herself start to grin again automatically. *Mine*, she thought affectionately. *Now and always*.

"What you smirking about?" the Doctor asked, scratching at a sliver of stubble he'd apparently missed.

"Just," Rose said, but suddenly felt silly voicing the thought, and so she busied herself with the coffee maker. "Nothing."

The Doctor grabbed her from behind and pulled her to him. "That's not a nothing smile. Tell me."

"I was just thinking," she plead, and squirmed around to face him.

He smoothed her pajama top down her sides but didn't let her go entirely. "About...?"

"We can buy condoms now," she blurted.

His eyebrows went up drastically. "Indeed we can," he said. "And lots of other things, too, I reckon."

"Other things?" she asked. "Are we getting creative, then?"

"Mmm, you have no idea," he said. "Jack's got a point about twenty-first-century prudishness, you know."

"What happened to Time Lord prudishness?"

He blinked, and one corner of his mouth turned down a bit, but only for a moment. Then he was striding off towards the entryway. "Time and a place for everything Rose, and unless I'm mistaken, we now have a mission to complete. *Allons-y!*"

The giggles escaped as she watched him stride towards the door. "You might need your trousers for this mission, you know."

He looked down at his folded towel. "Ah. Yes. Right. Trousers are, in fact, incredibly useful things."

"And I need a shower," she added. "Ten minutes tops, I promise."

He got that wicked look in his eyes again. "What if I helped you in the shower?"

She gave his towel a tug. "Then we'll never get out of here and make a mess on the floor, most likely."

"I fail to see a problem with that," he protested, and made no protest at all as she peeled the towel completely away.

"After we make our supply run," she said before she headed into the shower. "I promise."

~*~*~*~*~

Unsurprisingly, they didn't get much accomplished that day, or the next either; and Rose was okay with that, because it was so rare she got any actual downtime between missions and crises, and besides, there was something to be said for making an utter mess on the bathroom floor. They had enough food and drink (some of it even non-alcoholic) in stockpiles that they didn't need to go out for anything after that initial shopping trip, and between the computer, the television and each other, they had more than enough to occupy their time. It was possibly the best holiday Rose could remember having, at least in the last two years.

People phoned, of course, to check that they hadn't died or something. Her mum rang to ask how the Doctor was settling in, and announce she was going on another goodwill tour of Chinese orphanages and would Rose please check up on Pete and Tony from time to time? "Yes, mum," Rose assured her. "You know you can leave them alone for a few days without them going savage."

"It's not just a few days, though!" Jackie protested. "I'll be gone nearly two months!"

"What can possibly happen in two months?" Rose asked.

The Doctor, who was eating cold pizza in front of the telly, raised his hand. "I know!"

"Was that the Doctor?" Jackie asked fretfully. "Does he think something else is going to happen?"

"Of course not, Mum, he's winding you up." She stuck her tongue out at him; he retaliated by flashing a mouthful of chewed-up pizza at her. "Because he's acting like a five-year-old."

"Five days, thank you!" he called.

"Well, you two take care of each other," Jackie said. "I'll try to call you from China, but you know how the phones are over there..."

"We'll be fine, mum. Love you."

Jake also called, late enough in the evening that Rose wondered whether he'd been at work until late and only just got free to call, or if he hadn't gone in at all and had only just now got up the courage.

Either way, she took the call in the bedroom while the Doctor leafed through her collection of random take-away menus. *"What did he say to you?"* Jake asked. *"Before he left. Or stayed, or whatever."*

"He didn't say anything," Rose said, and yes, she was angry; she had decided she was allowed to be. "He told my mum he was staying but he didn't say a word to me about it."

"Coward," Jake said. *"Who does he think he is, some fucking cowboy who gets to ride off into the sunset once the problem's solved? Like he doesn't have to live with his messes like everyone else?"*

"He didn't say anything," Rose repeated. "I didn't even realize he wasn't with us until the TARDIS was gone. He just *left*."

"Yeah, where is your mate's little blue love machine?" Jake asked. *"Thought you'd be traveling in style in that thing by now."*

"He doesn't have it anymore," Rose said, peeking around to watch the Doctor wandering naked through the living room. At least he'd remembered to close the blinds this time. "It's complicated."

"Simple enough to me," Jake muttered. *"Mickey ran off and left us hanging. Fucking coward."*

And then on Friday afternoon Mr. Winslow phoned, all pompous good graces. *"I'm sure you and Dr. Smith are having quite a jolly time together,"* he said, and she could picture him fiddling with his glasses. *"We do miss you around the office, you know. I look forward to seeing you back at work."*

Translation: get in here yesterday. "I just wanted to get the Doctor settled in, you know, make sure he's all right." Rose said quickly. "I'll be back in on Monday to hand in my final report."

"Excellent, excellent. I look forward to reading it."

Which meant the rest of the weekend was spent actually *writing* her report, and somehow she managed to resist most of the Doctor's attempts to distract her. When he wasn't surfing channels (and making Rose finally understand why she shelled out for so many of them) he was tickling her, playing with her hair, or trying to drag her into a conversation in his usual style.

For instance, by announcing: "You know, on some planets, they do office work naked."

"Must be hell when they spill their coffee," Rose said.

"Mmmm," he said, fiddling with a teacup. "And imagine the paper cuts."

Or: "We need to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" she asked.

"I dunno." He reclined across the couch and tried to put his head in her lap. "Usually I'd just go find a holiday when I felt like celebrating, but in this case the holiday will have to come to us..." He snapped his fingers. "I know! It's Harry Potter's birthday!"

Rose snorted, and nudged his head around so he wasn't resting it on her laptop. "I'm not throwing a birthday party for Harry Potter," she said.

"Why not?" he demanded. "He's a national treasure! Oh, when I read Book Seven, I cried..."

"He doesn't exist in this universe," Rose explained, while looking up appropriate synonyms for *evil*. "I looked it up. No J. K. Rowling here. And even if there had been, his birthday was yesterday."

The Doctor suddenly sat up. "Really? No Harry Potter?" Rose shook her head, and he knit his eyebrows. "So if I were to, say, rewrite them all from memory..."

"Isn't that plagiarism?" Rose asked. "Besides being really tedious?"

"Well, okay, technically...but they're instant classics of literature! Think of the children here!" And he spent the better part of four hours with Rose's other computer, typing furiously and muttering under his breath, and when he finally gave up Rose didn't dare ask if he'd forgotten the name of a Weasley or just gotten bored.

And then were the moments when he rested his chin on her head or shoulder and just read what she was writing, offering helpful comments like, "I think there were four of them, actually" or "Don't forget what Jack said, it was really clever, what was it again?" or "You spelled something wrong."

Rose scanned the paragraph she'd just typed. "Where?"

"I'm not telling, you guess." Then he saw the look on his face and immediately retreated. "Or not, you know, the answer is 'Osterhagen' actually, and I'll just be over here now." He fixed himself a cup of tea while Rose tried to convince her computer that she wasn't actually trying to type *osteopathy* and when he sat back down he kindly let her concentrate for a whole three hours.

By the time Monday morning rolled around, she had a nice, concise report, with everything spelled correctly and the illusion that all loose ends had been worked away. If anyone asked why Mickey had stayed behind, she could offer up a dozen reasons—including his gran's death in this universe and his unauthorized travel to a parallel world with Jackie—and Rose knew none of them would be the right ones. They would have to do.

The Doctor made a whimpering noise when the alarm went off and tried to hide under her pillow (as he was so adept at knocking his own off the side of the bed). But when she got out of the shower, she found him shuffling around the kitchen in his boxers, a lonely piece of toast in one hand and an empty coffee cup in the other. "You didn't have to get up, you know," Rose said.

The Doctor just made a vague grunting noise at first, but then he turned to look at her and his eyes went wide. "Well, hello," he said. "Do you always wear that sort of thing to work?"

Rose looked down at the suit she'd put on, with a pinstriped blouse and open-toed flats. "Well, when I'm talking to my boss, yeah," she said. "Usually they don't mind jeans, though."

"You look good," he said, with a little smile, and then the coffee machine clicked and he was in such a hurry to pour himself a cup that he dropped his toast.

Rose was in the middle of a bowl of cornflakes when there was a knock on the door. They looked at each other, and the Doctor's frown matched her own unease. "You expecting anyone?" he asked.

"Not at this hour."

There was a knock again.

Rose answered, and the Doctor lurked on the other side of the door (and insisted on holding a skillet at the ready, just in case). On the other side was nothing more harmful than a soldier wearing the uniform of the UN integrated forces. "Ms. Prentice, ma'am," she said with a crisp salute. "Mr. Tyler asked me to deliver you these. He said they're for the Doctor and you'd know what that meant."

She handed over a plain envelope, saluted again and left. Rose shut the door and turned the envelope over, wondering what Pete could possibly be sending the Doctor. But the Doctor took the envelope right out of her hands and carried it to the table. "Excellent! I was wondering when he was going to send these."

"Send what?" Rose asked blankly.

He ripped open the envelope and slid out a short stack of documents, including a passport and a driving license. "I need my papers, remember?" he said. "Symbolic, necessary, first step to getting a really cool car?"

"Oh, right..." Rose picked up the passport, just to see what the picture was—she supposed they must've taken it back in London but she had no idea when. It looked about as good as any passport picture ever did—his hair was a mess and one eye was open slightly wider than the other—but then she glanced at the personal data written in next to it. "Doctor..."

"Hmm, yeah?" He was alternating between admiring his driving license and reading what looked an awful lot like a contract.

"Did you know you were born in Kent?" she asked, first of all, because she couldn't quite believe her eyes.

"I did not," he said. "But I probably should. What's my sign, hmm? Am I a Scorpio? I've always sort of wanted to be a Scorpio."

The name on the passport didn't change, and Rose wasn't sure why she thought it would. She glanced up at him. "John Noble?" she asked.

He looked oddly sheepish. "Oh, er, yeah. That." He cleared his throat. "Yeah. John Noble. That's the new alias."

"What happened to Smith?" she asked. "I was going around introducing you to people as Smith..."

"Yeah, I should've said sooner..." He scratched his head. "Just, um, just tell them all I suddenly decided to have my name legally changed. Or that Smith was my married name and the divorce just came through. Something."

"But...why?" Rose asked, knowing full well it sounded petulant. "You've always been John Smith when you needed a name. Why switch it to Noble?"

He sighed, still looking down. "That's Donna's surname," he said. "Noble. I just...it seemed, right, you know? Something to remember her by."

He smiled at her then, a little distant, a little embarrassed, and Rose bit her lip. She could've asked *can't you remember her otherwise? or what's so special about her anyway? or why didn't you just tell me?* She didn't ask any of them. All she said was, "Okay."

"Okay?" he echoed hopefully.

"Okay," Rose said. She wasn't going to be paranoid and jealous. She wasn't going to worry about it. If the past few days hadn't proved what the Doctor felt about her, she wasn't sure what would. She would just...be calm. "If you feel that strongly about it...I mean, it's your name. Not many people get to name themselves."

"Well, what about you?" he asked. "Ms. Prentice?"

"It's Mum's maiden name," she said. "I'm supposed to be a cousin on her side, not Dad's."

"Huh." He started to top off his coffee, and must've caught sight of the little clock. "Oh, hey, didn't you have to leave to catch a bus...um...now?"

Rose checked her watch and cursed. "Yeah, okay, leaving." She ran across the dining area to kiss him goodbye. "I'll see you tonight. Don't be too bored without me."

"Mmm. I will strive mightily," he said, and even shut the door behind her as she raced downstairs to meet her bus.

ACT 2 – Down to Day

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.*

--Robert Frost, "Nothing Gold Can Stay"

Chapter 5

Rose managed not to think about it too much on her way to work. Well, not *too* too much. It wasn't as if she was *obsessing* about it. After all, Donna Noble was gone, off in the other universe, of no consequence to them now. The Doctor was hers, and he'd made that abundantly clear over the past few days—not just physically, though that had been great, but with little words and the way he said them, with casual touches and secret smiles. And Donna had been important, not just to the universe but to the Doctor himself, Rose knew that, so it didn't matter if he wanted to use her name. She just had to come up with a good reason to give the others for why he'd changed it.

By the time she'd got off the bus, she'd come up with a plausible story, and decided to test it out as she made her way through the security gates and across the lobby. "Morning, Ms. Prentice," Brynn said as Rose passed her desk. "How's your friend?"

"Doctor Noble is fine, thanks," she said smoothly. Maybe she could even get used to it.

Brynn frowned. "I thought you said he was Dr. Smith?"

"Yeah, about that..." Rose leaned over the edge of the desk. "He's sort of trying to keep his identity secret. Need to know basis, I can't really say anything else, you know how that is. So if you could just forget I ever called him Smith..."

"Oh! All right." Brynn nodded. "My lips are sealed."

Rose nodded back, smiling; Brynn would gossip until she was blue in the face about stupid stuff (such as Ianto and his security guard) but no one lasted long at Torchwood unless they could keep a proper secret.

She found a cup of coffee waiting for her in her office; the rich smell told her before she'd taken a sip that it was a gift from Ianto's private stash, his own small personal welcome-back gift. Since she'd emailed her full report to Mr. Winslow the night before, she just had to wait until he called her in for debriefing. In the meantime--

"Hey," Grace said, poking her head around the corner of Rose's open door. "Saw you come in. Got a minute?"

"Sure," Rose said. Grace entered, wearing a set of scrubs liberally streaked with something brown. "Oh, god, don't tell me we have a case already."

"What? Oh." She tugged on her scrubs. "I was assisting Varma with something that fell out of the Rift. Turned out not to be as dead as we thought it was when we started the autopsy."

"Ew," Rose concluded. "Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

Grace leaned against the door. "No, no, I just wanted to apologize for ambushing you last week with the party." She flashed a small smile. "It was mostly my idea, and I guess I didn't think it through very well."

Rose shook her head. "Don't worry about it. I appreciated the sentiment, that's the important part."

"I just...I didn't know about Mickey," Grace said with a shrug. "It wasn't the best way for that to get out."

"We hadn't told anyone yet, not officially," Rose said quietly. "So it's just as much my fault as yours."

She nodded. "Still, for what it's worth..."

"Yeah, thanks. Apology accepted." Since they were already talking about it, Rose braced herself, and went onto the main document server to find the forms necessary to register the missing and the dead. "Has anyone closed his file yet?"

Grace shook her head. "Jake and Tosh swept his apartment and packed up his things, but most of the paperwork is yours." She paused. "Is he...I mean, you don't have to answer if you don't want to, because I know this is personal. But I wanted to ask...is he happy, over there? Is that why he stayed?"

Rose considered Grace for a moment. She'd always treated Mickey with a mix of motherly nagging and grouchy sarcasm, but they'd still worked together for nearly a year. Tosh had worked with him even before Rose had come across the Void—she'd helped to develop the dimension-jumping technology—though they obviously weren't as close as Mickey and Jake had been. Mickey and Jake had *liberated Paris* together, for God's sake. So many people he'd worked with, made friends with, and Mickey only seemed to care about his gran and...

"I guess so," Rose said quickly, and looked back down at her keyboard. "I mean, I hope so. He made his choice."

Grace nodded. "Yeah, we have to live with that." She looked at Rose sharply. "If you want to, you know, talk about it...I mean, I know you two were close..."

"I'll be fine," Rose said, a little more harshly than she meant to. Then she forced a smile. "Really. It'll be okay. We'll all learn to live with it, right?"

Grace nodded and left, and Rose whiled away her morning in the tedium of paperwork. There were forms to fill in to report Mickey as missing in action (she thought about reporting him dead, but the thought hurt more than she expected it to, and it wasn't like she'd ever wished him gone). Then the routine forms to account for their lost weaponry, a form to comment on the functionality of the dimensional cannon, and some hasty back-dated forms to explain why her mum had been on a dangerous mission to another universe at all. Suddenly turning Jackie Tyler, Noted Humanitarian into a pro bono consultant on a tactical mission took some startling acts of rhetoric, but Rose managed to make it look like it had been part of the plan all along, which would at least keep Mickey's last act with Torchwood from being insubordinate. She supposed she could allow him that much, even if he hadn't said goodbye.

Tosh stopped by to say hello, and Ianto brought her more of the good coffee without being asked, and while Jake stayed hidden in his office he used the intranet's instant messenger to check in on her.

simmondsjw: finally coming back 2 work then?

prenticere: Just try to keep me away. :-)

simmondsjw: got boxes from mickeys

simmondsjw: putting them in the archies

simmondsjw: *archives

simmondsjw: if you want anything

prenticere: Maybe. Thanks for covering that

simmondsjw: np

She couldn't see herself taking any of Mickey's things, but she did appreciate the gesture. She wondered if Jake had lifted something, some memento or keepsake, or if he'd just boxed up what he couldn't fit in the bin. She couldn't really blame him either way.

Mr. Winslow didn't get around to seeing her until after lunch. She found him back in his usual natty brown suit, the kind that made him look like a misplaced schoolteacher, and he was holding a marked-up hard copy of her report—he drove the administrative staff mad with his insistence on paper copies of everything, as if that made the text immortal in a way digital backups couldn't. "Please, Ms. Prentice, have a seat," he said. "I don't think this will take long at all. Your report was remarkably thorough."

"Thank you, sir." Rose sat down and watched him shuffle. She had some idea already of what he'd choose to nitpick and argue, from a long history of previous battles. She was fully prepared to spend the rest of the week writing an amended report, if need be; it wouldn't be the first time she'd had to.

Winslow finally settled on a page and considered it for a few moments. "Here now. Your friend Dr. Smith. You seem to be a bit confused about his name."

Had the Doctor gone into the file and changed his name in her report? Before he even told her about it? Rose fought the urge to make fists and pushed the thought out of her mind. "He's asked to be known as John Noble, sir, from now on," she said.

He raised an eyebrow. "Any reason for that?"

She'd guessed he wasn't going to be as easy to snow as Brynn, but that was why her excuse had two stages. "It's for his own safety, sir," she said straight-faced. "He's fairly well-known in the other universe and he's concerned that if he has a double in this one, he might attract some dangerous enemies."

"But he is, in fact, a clone of the individual designated The Doctor in your prior reports to Torchwood and the UN?" Winslow asked.

"That's right," Rose said, grateful he was accepting her story at face value. "All the same memories and skills. Mr. Tyler has prepared him a cover identity to let him integrate into our universe."

"But he's physiologically human?" Winslow pressed. "He's not going to set off any panics if he ends up in the A&E? Father any babies with tails? That sort of thing?"

"He's as human as we are, sir," Rose said, and didn't add that there would apparently be no babies at all for the foreseeable future.

Winslow looked at her sternly. "And in your unbiased opinion, is he a threat to the safety of Earth?"

That almost drew a laugh out of Rose—the Doctor, a *threat*? Were the two Torchwoods in the two universes merging together? "Absolutely not, sir," she said. "He's...well, mostly harmless. And in the other universe, he's saved Earth so often that he might as well be named our patron saint. I'm certain we have nothing to worry about if we let him walk around as a private citizen."

Winslow shuffled the papers again. "Yet you say in your report that it was Mr. Noble, not the original Doctor, who exterminated the Daleks?"

Rose found she rather liked hearing *exterminate* and *Dalek* together as long as they were in that order, but she understood where Winslow was coming from. "The original Doctor was willing to show mercy to the Daleks, even under the circumstances, if they agreed to cease hostilities," she explained. "Dr. Noble concluded that they were too much of a persistent threat and couldn't be trusted to keep any sort of truce, and since the means to destroy the Crucible were at hand..."

"Clearly you agree with that assessment," Winslow murmured. Rose wondered if she should've disclosed that she'd tried to eradicate the Daleks once before herself, so perhaps her judgment was a little biased. But there were some stories not even a director of Torchwood was likely to believe. "Has he told you why he chose to remain in our universe rather than in the one of his origins?" Winslow continued.

"He was asked to stay here by the original Doctor," she said. "And...partly...he stayed because of me."

Mr. Winslow raised one eyebrow very slowly. "I see," he said, and then cleared his throat. "As for Mr. Smith—by which I mean Mickey, this time—you say that you do not know why he chose to remain in the other universe. Haven't you any clue at all?"

"His grandmother died," Rose offered lamely, then realized she needed to tell the truth, or at least part of the truth, at least here. *Show some ovaries*, said a voice in the back of her head that sounded more than a little like Grace. "Also, he has some history with the Doctor which wasn't...perfect. I think he found the prospect of living on the same planet as Dr. Noble a bit hard to face, let alone in the same city."

Winslow nodded slowly. "I think that can be left out of the final version with no loss of accuracy," he said, and straightened his stack on the desk. "So if you can submit a revised version with the names in order, I think this can be signed and archived."

Rose managed not to let her mouth hang open stupidly, but only just. "Are you certain? You don't have any more questions? I spelled everything right on the first try?"

Winslow smiled a bit. "Ms. Prentice, not so long ago I did not expect this world or anyone on it to survive more than an hour. Consider this my thanks to you for a job well done." He paused. "Also, your team has been assigned a new case in your absence, and I expect you to be fully briefed and active on it tomorrow. Mr. Simmonds can forward you all the relevant the files."

That sounded a bit more Winslowish, and the awkwardly emotional moment passed. "I'll see to that, sir," Rose said. "And thank you."

Back her office, she set to polishing the report. It turned out that the Doctor had just done a messy stupid find-and-replace, which caught only about half the Smiths in her report, including references to Mickey and Sarah Jane. And of course she couldn't find-and-replace right back without messing up at least half her references to Donna. She had to go through line by line to fix all the names, catching a few more typos and missing words along the way, but then she resubmitted the whole thing to Mr. Winslow and was done with it, which had to be the fastest she'd ever been shut of a report in her two years with Torchwood so far. Then she got on the messenger again.

prenticere: Oi, what's the case now? I missed it while I was in the other universe.

simmondsjw: i kind of like workin in a place where you can say that.

simmondsjw: sorry mr winslow, i was in a nother universe at the time

prenticere: Are they packing up the cannon? Maybe you can tranfer to your own team.

simmondsjw: na, like it here too much

prenticere: So. Case.

simmondsjw: go home to your doctor. briefing tomorrow @10. you bring the biscuits.

Rose smiled at her computer screen. Perhaps Jake was taking the whole thing better than she thought, or perhaps he'd had some time to come to terms with everything.

prenticere: You're brilliant. My favorite tactical expert.

simmondsjw: i'm ur only tac ex love, but i'll take the complement.

Mr. Winslow forwarded her the documents necessary to register the Doctor as an alien national—apparently Pete hadn't gotten around to those yet—but the weather was lovely and Rose decided this was one occasion when she could just take the whole mess home with her. "Out early today, lanto," she said as she passed his desk. "I'll make it up from home, I promise."

"Of course, ma'am," lanto said. "I'll forward all your calls to your mobile."

"Stop calling me ma'am," she said automatically, and then called over her shoulder, "And thanks for the coffee!" She was rewarded by seeing lanto, ever so slightly, blush.

~*~*~*~*~

She stopped off at a shop along the way—they still, improbably, had some food from the party left over, but she also thought they probably ought to eat some things with fiber and vitamins in them, too—and decided to walk the rest of the way. She called the flat along the way, but got no answer. Huh. The Doctor would've have gone out, would he? She realized he didn't have a mobile yet, and resolved to get that sorted out first thing, because if he'd gone out to buy himself a fancy car or something like that she would really like to know about it. Though she wasn't sure if it would be to remind him that she didn't have any parking near her building or to help him pick out the upholstery.

Her amusement went cold as soon as she entered the flat, however. A cheerful "Hello...?" died off in her mouth, and her grip on her keys automatically shifted so they protruded between her knuckles, the better to scratch with. The chairs at the table had been pushed around haphazardly, and one had been placed in the center of the kitchen floor for no clear purpose. The refrigerator and freezer hung open, merrily defrosting all over the floor, and their contents (along with most of the dishes Rose owned) were strewn across the counters. The other furniture was subtly out of place as well, as if it had been moved and then put back in a hurry, and the vacuum cleaner stood lonely and unplugged on top of the television

It was the vacuum that convinced Rose she wasn't looking at a robbery—well, that, and the fact that all her electronics were still in place. She shut the door behind her and called out, "Doctor? Are you here?"

From the direction of the linen cupboard, she heard a distinct *thump*.

The door of the cupboard hung partway open, blocking Rose's view of the inside, so she approached it with caution. She didn't have a weapon except her keys, which weren't much of a weapon at all, so she switched on the small LED torch that hung from her keyring and led with that. In a smooth motion, she opened the cupboard door the rest of the way and aimed the light straight into the murky depths.

Her heavy duvet and two pillows flopped out at her feet. There was that *thump* again, and a rather pathetic whimper.

She yanked the duvet aside to find the Doctor laying on his back on the floor with a screwdriver in his mouth. His arms and legs were in the air, supporting with obvious difficulty the shelf which housed Rose's household cleaning supplies, and which had previously been attached to the wall several inches higher, albeit not very securely. In the cramped space of the cupboard, he clearly couldn't shift himself out from under the pile without dumping the lot of it, and the screwdriver appeared to be playing an integral part in his scheme to keep the shelf balanced above him. He whimpered again, making puppy eyes at her, and Rose did what any good friend would do, which was laugh until she was literally rolling on the floor.

The Doctor squawked at her indignantly, but really couldn't do anything until she wiped the mascara-dark tears from her eyes and delicately removed the screwdriver from his mouth. "I'm not going to ask," she said. "I am not even going to ask."

"This," he said fiercely, "is why they ought to be *sonic*."

She kicked the duvet aside and then shifted the contents of the shelf carefully onto the floor, out of range of any possible kicking or flailing. The Doctor extricated himself successfully and immediately stretched his arms out behind himself, making his back pop in altogether alarming ways—Rose wondered how long he'd been stuck under there. She also noted that he was wearing suit trousers and trainers today, but instead of his shirt and tie he had a pale blue t-shirt with a yellow submarine on it. Also, an inexplicable smudge on his nose. It was endearing.

"Looks like you had a busy day today," she said while he did some deep knee bends.

"Er, yeah," he mumbled. "I meant to have that all cleaned up before you got home."

"But you got trapped in the Cupboard of Doom instead?" she asked.

He glowered at her. "Not doom," he said. "That is nowhere even close to doom. It's not even peril. At the best, it's a Cupboard of Extreme Inconvenience. And aren't you home early?"

"Mr. Winslow liked my report," she said. "Once I fixed all the mistakes you added into it." He didn't respond, too busy doing some sort of awkward tai chi moves and rolling his shoulders in between. "And I think this decides it—we're getting you a mobile phone."

He made a face. "Not the kind that plugs into your ear and eats your brain, I hope?"

"Those are illegal now, actually," Rose said. "Too much risk, now that it's been proven they can be tapped and manipulated. Everyone's back on the handsets now."

"Excellent," the Doctor declared. "Proof that the human race can eventually pull themselves back from the brink of self-destruction. I want the kind with the camera in and I want it to be blue."

~*~*~*~*~

That evening—after the shopping was put away and the floor mopped and a camera phone with a custom blue casing purchased, programmed and played with—Rose said, "You know, if you're that bored around here, you can call me at work."

The Doctor, who had started the process of making tea and somehow ended up toasting a bagel instead, looked at her suspiciously. "Bored? Who said I was bored?"

"You did sort of take apart the flat today," Rose pointed out, and hopped up to sit on the counter next to him. "I'm just make an educated guess."

"Well, I'm not bored," he said. "I'm a Time Lord. Was a Time Lord. I'm perfectly capable of entertaining myself for a few hours while you're doing whatever it is Torchwood does when they're not being evil or shagging Jack Harkness. I don't get *bored*."

Rose rolled her eyes, but he didn't notice, as the toaster had clicked but refused to give up his bagel. He jiggled the handles irritably. "I'm just saying, on the off chance that you are...curious," because *lonely* was likely to go over just as poorly and *unoccupied* made him sound like a public toilet, "you can call me. Or text."

"Will you think I'm uncool if I text you but I use actual words spelled with letters?" he asked, and grabbed a fork from the draining board .

Rose reached out and unplugged the toaster the moment before he inserted the fork into the slot to fish for his bagel. "I'm just saying, Doctor, I don't mind hearing from you during the day. It'll be nice."



"Really?" He retrieved half a bagel, slightly mauled, and then looked up at Rose. "That Winslow fellow isn't going to make you write lines if your phone goes off in a meeting or something?"

She smacked him on the shoulder with the trailing end of the toaster's cord. "You're being deliberately thick about this," she informed him. *You need people*, she wanted to add, but thought it would be a little too patronizing.

"And you," he countered imperiously, "are being your mother."

Rose folded her arms over her chest and looked down on him from her perch on the edge of the counter. Well, slightly down. At least they were on a level. "Were you planning on having sex tonight?" she asked frostily.

The Doctor looked up at her with big eyes. "I take it back. You're perfectly reasonable and also very attractive and I will text you every other minute."

"Well, maybe not that much," she said. "Just, you know, if you need someone to talk to."

"I don't--" he started to say, but then he freed the other half of his bagel and apparently thought better of it. "Well. I mean. We did just pay for this fabulous phone plan, it'd be a shame not to use it."

"That's what I like to hear," Rose said, and stole half his bagel from him.

Chapter 6

The next day the Doctor got dressed when Rose did and drank about three cups of coffee in alarmingly rapid succession. "Busy day," he declared when she pointed out he was going to shake himself to bits. "I've got plans." Just what those entailed, he wouldn't explain, though, and while Rose usually liked the sort of surprises he could come up with, the scene the day before had her a little concerned about what sort of trouble he might get himself into without a monster or a mystery to occupy his attention. She tried not to show any misgivings as she kissed him good-bye, though, and he kept grinning at her all the way out the door.

Before the meeting, Rose got around to sending a mass email that thanked everyone for the ill-fated party and reassured them that she and the Doctor weren't cross about anything and appreciated the sentiment. She also sorted through her inboxes, both computerized and physical, and was on the verge of tipping all of the latter into her recycling bin when her phone trilled at her. A text message from the Doctor and she hadn't even been gone an hour. She smirked.

I strongly suspect the buses in this city are designed deliberately to make people insane. Ⓓ, he'd written.

Deep breaths. Count to ten. Try not to strangle any fellow passengers, she wrote back.

The reply came more quickly than she expected. *They are not the problem. The drivers will receive no mercy. Ⓓ*

Rose snorted. *Please don't make me spring you from jail when you've scarcely been here a week. It will look bad on your record.*

I have a record? Is it rock 'n' roll? Ⓓ

Fine, it'll look bad on my record if I've got to fetch you out of a lock-up during work hours.

Oh dear god I think I'm being stalked by a standard poodle Ⓓ, he sent, apropos of nothing, and before Rose could get clarification on that one her email gently pinged her.

It was an agenda for the meeting at ten, along with a briefing for her. Though Ianto had sent it, the agenda had clearly been written by Jake, as it consisted of two lines: *1. talk about evil people 2. vanquish them*. Rose clicked on the briefing, because Jake at least took those seriously; indeed, it was several pages long, and it had footnotes. She fetched herself some fresh coffee before settling in to study their new assignment

It seemed the All Earth party—the reactionary whackos with the deceptively cuddly name—had actually organized their more militant wing, and started making veiled references to their exact intentions. They

were calling themselves the Horatii, of all things (Rose had to Google that to understand the reference) and naturally with the stars going out and all, they'd gotten quite a lot of support for the idea of going out into the universe to beg, borrow and steal whatever technology they could get their hands on. No one was quite sure where they'd go next with the crisis past—All Earth had a lot of very wealthy backers with a vested interest in securing rights to new discoveries, and it looked like the money was flowing freely between the two organizations even though All Earth was careful to keep their official distance. Jake had a whole list of suspect bank accounts and persons of interest, and that was even before Rose got to the part that explained why this was relevant to Torchwood.

And she didn't, because her phone rang. *The Doctor calling*, the display said. "Hello?"

"Do you have any food allergies?" he asked casually.

Rose blinked at her wall calendar. "No, I don't think so."

"Are you sure?" he asked. *"Peanuts, shellfish, citrus fruit, nothing like that?"*

"I'm pretty sure I'd have figured it out by now if I did," Rose pointed out.

There was a rattle in the background, though Rose couldn't tell where the Doctor was, only that it was crowded. *"What about lactose, eh? You're not lactose intolerant? I don't think that counts as an allergy."*

Rose brushed her hair from her face, staring at the day on the calendar marked *Find the Doctor, Save the World!!!* "Of course not, Doctor. What are you asking for?"

"It's a secret! Bye!" He hung up on her, and Rose was left staring at her phone in bewilderment for a few moments. Not that she wasn't used to the Doctor doing and saying some utterly bizarre things, but usually she was right along with him and had a bit of context to go along with it.

The phone rang again. "Hell--"

"One more question, how do you feel about mushrooms?"

"I don't," Rose said. "I mean, I have no opinion about mushrooms. Doctor, what are you--"

"So don't like them?"

"I don't care about them!" she said. "They're fine! Why are we talking about mushrooms?"

"You'll find out when you get home, byyyeee!"

At this rate, she wasn't sure she wanted to find out...but, no, this was the Doctor, she'd trusted him in far more bizarre situations before, and more often than not things had turned out for the best, or at the very least nobody had been killed. Much. How much trouble could he really cause without a sonic screwdriver and a TARDIS behind him?

Actually, strike that, she didn't really want to find out.

Jake knocked on the door of her office, more of a warning than a request for permission to enter. "Oi, meeting in ten," he called. "You done your homework yet?"

"Working on it," she said, shaking her head. "The Doctor called. Have you been doing anything but snooping around bank records while I've been gone?"

"Best time to do it is the aftermath of a crisis," he pointed out. "Nobody's paying attention to the little details when they're celebrating the fact they still exist."

"Sneaky," Rose said. "Now get lost so I can finish reading."

Of course she didn't, because the Doctor texted again (*did you know that the tomato is technically a berry? Ð*) but she had enough facts that when they invaded the conference room she could sit down, look competent, and say, "All right, now tell me which were the important bits," in a stern voice that made it sound like she was asking for opinions instead of getting a summary of things she should know.

Jake shrugged. "Maybe all of it, maybe nothing. Without the stars going out, AE is going to have a harder and harder time beating the homeworld security drum in people's faces."

"Which never stopped them before," Grace pointed out. "Remember that guy from New York? Everything he says come down to a noun, a verb, and 'Cybermen' and he's leading his re-election bid. It's kind of ridiculous."

"But it's not AE that we're worried about," Rose said. "It's these Horatii."

"To the extent there's a difference," Grace muttered.

"My sentiments exactly," Jake said. "And those lorry manifests I mentioned prove they're moving an awful lot of cargo around Britain, and it's awful secret to just be car parts and soy protein."

"Weapons?" Rose asked, even though that wouldn't explain why it was Torchwood's business. Embarrassingly, her phone started to ring as she was finishing the word; it was the Doctor, of course, and she felt a little twinge as she ended the call and then set the phone to silent. "Sorry."

"That's what MI-5 thought, weapons," Tosh said as if there had been no interruption. She passed Rose a large glossy print-out. "But then the old Cybus satellite network picked up this. It's a radiation graph, and the spikes there are consistent with some of the alien technology in our archives—possibly a photomorphonic power source. So they kicked it over to us."

The pretty colors on the graph didn't mean anything to Rose, but she was more than ready to take Tosh at her word on the science bits. "What can you do with a photomorphonic power source?" she asked.

"Theoretically, lots of things--" Tosh started to say, but Rose's phone suddenly vibrated, making a harsh rattle on the table. *Message from the Doctor*, the screen said. She shoved it into her pocket with a grimace. "Lots of things," Tosh carried on. "They're small, powerful, and rechargeable from nearly any source of visible light."

"But it's probably weapons," Jake said.

"We can't say for sure," Grace pointed out.

"It matches with their rhetoric," he shot back. "What's the slogan, 'security is strength' or whatever? It's no long hop from telling people to arm themselves to actually arming yourself, especially if they mean to swoop in on the next set of monsters and save the day."

"You think that's their plan?" Rose asked, shifting as she felt her phone vibrate again against her thigh. "Build up some kind of militia, like their own Torchwood?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Grace said ominously. "I mean, we still don't know for certain if it's weapons or not--"

"So what do you think it is, digestives?" Jake asked.

"—But if they are arming themselves," Grace continued, talking over him, "there are targets a lot more tangible and close at hand than the next hypothetical threat to the human race."

Tosh's eyes widened. "You don't think they'd start a war, would they?"

"They didn't do so bad in the last couple of national elections where they stood," Jake pointed out, looking thoughtful now. "But they're still a long way off from controlling a government, and that keeps them shut out of the UN."

"And you know what they say about the road to hell," Rose said, looking again at the abstract colors of the radiation profile. Her phone vibrated again, and she took a deep breath. "Just a minute. I need to make a call, sorry. This'll only take five minutes."

She paced all the way down to Ianto's desk while she looked through the text messages: *Rose I have a question for you! Call me! Ð and This is actually a very difficult question you know, Ð and Rose is this a bad time for you to call? Because you don't have to call. Ð*. Since Ianto wasn't at his desk, she sat in his chair to dial the Doctor's number and fiddled with the leaves of his bamboo plant while the phone rang.

It took altogether too long for the Doctor to pick up. *"Hello, Rose! Guess what?"*

"There's some horrible emergency that explains why you've texted me three times in five minutes?" she asked.

"...no." He cleared his throat awkwardly. *"But I did have something to ask you."*

"I guessed that, yeah," she said. "Go on."

"What sort of toothpaste do you like?"

Rose could only sit for a moment and watch the fish on Ianto's screensaver go back and forth while she tried to wrap her mind around this. "Toothpaste?" she echoed weakly.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm actually in the aisle right now and I didn't even know there were so many different kinds of mint, but there's also vanilla lemon chamomile, which sounds disgusting, but I thought maybe you had an opinion even though you don't on the mushrooms."

"Why are you buying toothpaste again?" Rose asked, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

"Secret," he replied gleefully.

"You know we've got toothpaste at home."

"If you are fishing for spoilers, my dear, you shall be disappointed."

She stood up and straightened her shirt. "Right. Doctor, I don't really care what my toothpaste tastes like, and I'm supposed to be in a meeting right now and can't really talk about this, so just...get yourself a shiny box or something."

"There are lot of shiny boxes," he said, and Rose shouldn't actually be able to hear a pout, but she thought she sort of could.

"Blue and shiny," she suggested. "I'll talk to you later, okay? Love you."

"Love you, too," he said distantly, and Rose took a few deep breaths between hanging up and going back into the meeting room, because they had to discuss the evil people before they could vanquish them.

She thought that maybe after that conversation, the Doctor would get a hint and stop calling her, and she could get some work done—after all, even without speculating on the motives of the Horatii, they still had unlawful possession of advanced technology to pursue and not many leads to start with. Tosh could track the radiation traces by satellite, but not with any accuracy, so they could only really spot their targets when the lorries were on isolated bits of motorway or country road—that is, where there was nowhere else for the target to be. She was working on refining a tracking method, but until then they were going to have to do some blind groping around with nothing but the lorry manifests and the public face of the Horatii in Britain to start with.

But of course, whatever rules of logic allowed normal people to get a clue did not apply to the Doctor. He called—or texted, each one signed with that dashed D for God only knew what reason—a dozen more times between the end of the briefing and Rose's lunch break. If he'd had genuine, reasonable questions—things like "How do I get to the post office?" or even "What's the number for emergency services in this universe?"—she'd understand, really. Probably still be annoyed, but she'd understand. But most of the messages weren't even questions; just more inane comments like *Guess what I am looking at* or *Did you know toothpaste is sticky?* or *I've got bananas!*

Eventually, thought not without a stab of guilt, Rose turned her phone off.

By the end of the day they hadn't made much actual progress, but Rose felt they'd fairly clearly figured out what information they needed to gather, which was close enough. After all, sometimes with Torchwood, the first question to ask was what the question was. She caught the bus home and spent

the ride slumped against the window, watching Cardiff roll by as she considered how to tell the Doctor to ease up on the calling without upsetting him. After all, she'd been the one to encourage him to start, and somehow she didn't think it would sound very encouraging to say *Whoops, changed my mind, leave me alone*. She did want to know what he was up to, keep that connection like when they'd traveled together and lived in each other's back pockets. But she didn't think she could take another day of constant interruption, either. Maybe if she made it sound like a new order from Mr. Winslow...no, no, he deserved honesty, and if she wasn't confrontational about it he'd surely understand...

These thoughts distracted her right up to the door of her flat, where they were then utterly obliterated by the smell that greeted her upon entering. It was one part burnt hair, one part cabbage and one part soap, and the source seemed to be the Doctor, who was darting around the kitchen with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, wreathed in steam (and smoke) as he...cooked?

"What are you doing?" Rose asked, just to be certain, because she'd learned the hard way to *never* make assumptions around the Doctor. The counters and the table were covered in wrappers and puddles and torn-up bits of packaging, and in the bin (which he'd moved to the center of the kitchen) she could see quite a few potato peelings and a squashed-up tube of toothpaste.

He grinned at her and called over the sound of various things sizzling, boiling and intermittantly bursting into flame. "Surprise!" he said. "I made supper! Go wash your hands, it's almost ready."

Rose cautiously approached the kitchen instead. She hadn't been aware that she owned so many pots and pans, and then realized that she hadn't—there was a stack of boxes in the corner behind the counter. "Where did you get money for all this?" she asked, because usually he just hijacked a cashpoint and she really didn't want the police to show up any time soon.

Thankfully the Doctor answered, "Pete," and gave her another grin while prodding something in a saucepan. "Didn't you see the contract he sent by with my papers and things? He's hired me on as a consultant to his department. Not quite UNIT, of course, but all I have to do is come when called and tell him if he's being a tit, and I happen to be quite good at one of those, if not so much the other."

"He didn't mention he was going to do that," Rose said, though of course it should've been obvious from the beginning that the Doctor needed a job—she made good money at Torchwood, but he was the last person who'd consent to being some kind of...*kept man*. (And the mental image that conjured up nearly derailed her train of thought completely.) "You know that means you have to pay me back for the phone, now, though."

He snorted and switched off a burner. "I think an authentic six-course Faniflaxarian ceremonial dinner is more than payback enough, thanks."

"Authentic?" she echoed warily.

"Well," he shrugged. "Obviously there are a few, er, substitutions, being that we're not in the Faniflaxaro nebula. But this is going to be great, just you wait." She just kept looking at all the bubbling, steaming (and smoking) pots and pans, and he gave her a narrow look. "What?" he demanded.

"Nothing," she said quickly, taking a step backwards. She bumped the table and nearly sent the debris of the preparations tumbling to the floor.

"That's not a nothing look," the Doctor said severely, and waved a spoon threateningly at her, dripping a thick white sauce on the floor in the process.

Rose busied herself with taking off her purse and arranging it on the table by the door. "I just," she said, then, "never mind, it's stupid."

"Say it," he ordered sternly

She raised her chin. "No."

"Rooooose..."

"I didn't think you could cook," she admitted, remembering the disused galley of the TARDIS.

He looked positively offended by that, pausing with a colander full of greenish noodles half-tipped in one hand. "What made you think I couldn't cook?" he demanded.

"Well, you never did!" she said. "We always ate out, or used the food...pill...thingy..."

"I," he declared, folding his arms (with the now-empty colander still in his hand,) "can cook *many* things. I just never had the free time for it, what with all the traveling and exploring and spot of diurnal salvation here and there."

"So why'd you decide to start now?" she asked, leaning more carefully on the table.

He shrugged a bit. "Curtains and a mortgage, you know?"

She knew, and suddenly had the bizarre thought that she was domesticating him. Which immediately made her imagine him on a leash having a pee on a piece of newspaper, and she put that thought right out of her mind before she started to laugh and he got the wrong idea entirely. "I'll be right back after I wash my hands," she said, and he beamed at her, and dropped the salt shaker into a stockpot.

By the time she'd washed up, changed into something more comfortable and braced herself, he'd got the table cleared off (though there were still smudged of flour and ketchup here and there) and set it for two. There was barely room for their forks on account of the serving dishes, which looked about as bizarre as they smelled. "Voila!" the Doctor declared, pulling out Rose's chair for her. "The best of Faniflaxarian cuisine from circa the fifth century."

"The fifth?" Rose asked.

"Fifth B-C." The Doctor sat down and started dishing out onto Rose's plate. "They were wiped out about two thousand years ago when their nebula catastrophically collapsed into a star. Fun civilization while it lasted. though."

Rose looked at the first course, which consisted of the green noodles under a lumpy bluish-white sauce studded with what were either reduced the shriveled remains of grape tomatoes or a chopped-up red candle. The Doctor was still grinning, proud of himself in a way that usually required a puzzle solved or a life saved, so Rose gamely prodded the mess with her fork, wound up a noodle and shoved it in her mouth.

It was the foulest thing she'd ever tasted, a combination of mint and cabbage and something that she was now positive was candle wax. She managed not to gag outright, but she couldn't stop her face from screwing up as she spat the gritty, sticky concoction into a napkin. Then she looked up, terrified that the Doctor would be disappointed in her.

She was rewarded with a most fascinating series of facial expressions she'd ever seen as he choked down his own first bite. He followed it with a deep swig of water and a grimace. "Well," he said, brows knit. "Hmm. I suppose I didn't...I mean, last time I had this, you know, I had a different tongue. I...hmm..."

"Maybe try another one?" Rose offered, in hopes of wiping the guilty look off his face.

It was no use, though; all six courses were equally disgusting, albeit each in its own unique way. Rose still gamely tasted all of them, though, and was relieved that by the end they were spending more time laughing at each other's silly puckered faces than worrying over their inedible dinner. Rose tried to guess what he'd put in each dish as they prepared to throw out the whole lot of it, and then they both lay on the floor munching on pink bismuth tablets for a bit, and when the Doctor silently handed over some cash, Rose took it down the block to the take-away curry house for a proper dinner and didn't even tease him about it.

"You know," the Doctor said, getting a certain sly look in his eye as he prodded his vindaloo, "I've been to a planet inhabited by intelligent curries."

Rose paused with her fork halfway to her mouth and looked at him carefully. "You are so lying," she said after a minute.

"I'm not!" he protested. "It's in the seventy-sixth century. Masala Nine. Very peaceful civilization, the Masalans. They're ruled by a cadre of senior philosophers." He gave her that look again. "The debates tend to get quite heated." Rose threw a cushion at him. "Oi! It's true!"

It was gone nine by the time they finished all the washing-up (which was really more like decontamination in some ways) and found places to store all of their new cookware. That was when Rose remembered what she was supposed to talk to him about, and just the thought of it put a damper on her mood that the Doctor noticed. "What's up?" he asked. "Find something we missed on the first sweep?"

"No, no, it's just...just thinking about work," Rose said.

The Doctor's eyebrows rose sharply, and he gave a drawn-out "Ahhh," as he went back to drying the dishes. "I take it you're not about to relate any wacky hijinks or daring adventures?"

"Sorry, no," she said, knotting off another bin liner and setting it with the others that they'd already filled. She took a deep breath. "It's just...Look, Doctor, I know I told you that you could call me any time, even at work, and I *meant* that, but..."

He jumped into her pause, giving her low-intensity puppy dog eyes. "Too strong, right?" he said. "Is that why you stopped answering? Did I interrupt any very important top secret Torchwood business?"

She couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not. "I'm just not always free to talk," she said. "Or answer texts. And I don't want you to think I don't want to talk to you, because I do, I just get...busy."

"Busy," he said, and looked down at the plate in his hands. He carefully set it on the draining board. "No, I get it, I was being a little...I suppose I got overexcited about dinner and all. I'll rein it in from now on."

"Thanks," Rose said, and got up on her tip-toes (and a leg up on the edge of a cabinet) to kiss his cheek. "I do like hearing from you, you know, I meant that bit."

"I know," he said, and even smiled, and Rose finally relaxed fully. That hadn't been so hard, had it?

Chapter 7

The next two days were not entirely interruption-free, but somehow the Doctor managed to restrain himself. He continued to cook, but he also took to exploring the city, absorbing all manner of strange facts about Cardiff: Its Culture And History In This Universe. That meant, of course, that their evenings were filled with his rambling monologues on things he'd learned during the day ("Leeks, Rose! Can you imagine?") but she found she didn't mind as much as she could've; if all else failed, she could just tune him out and enjoy the sound of his voice, which she didn't think would ever get old.

She could push aside their plates of his latest culinary experiment and lay her head on his chest, listen to him speaking, and under it all hear the one steady heartbeat that meant he was hers.

Work stayed low-key, mostly because they didn't have any firm targets to follow after; Tosh continued to look into the photomorphic cells, laboring alone now that Mickey was gone, while the rest of them tried to flesh out the information Jake had procured about financial and corporate ties between All Earth and the Horatii and the firms that owned the suspicious lorries and ships. The big win came when Tosh announced that she'd cleaned up the radiation profile and found a way to pinpoint individual pieces of tech from space.

"It's a long way from real time, of course," she said while the rest of them were ogling the maps she'd produced. "The logarithm takes a couple of hours to run, even on our mainframes, but it does give us confirmation of the presence of alien tech on these specific ships and—oh my!" she squeaked, as Jake had leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "It's not that much," she said, blushing.

"It's brilliant," he said gustily. "Better than all this legal crap by a million miles."

"You're the one who started the legal crap," Grace pointed out, pushing her reading glasses down her nose.

"It's a dead end, though, isn't it? Even if we find out the Horatii own every single ship and lorry personally, they've still got plausible deniability," he said, and waved one of Tosh's profiles at them. "From these radiation levels, there's maybe one ray gun per cargo container—maybe per ship. Easy enough to say 'Whoopsie, dear me, look what fell out of the Void' and meanwhile they freeze all their other movements and we're back to square one."

"It seems like an awful lot of trouble to use a whole cargo ship for one ray gun," Grace said. "If that's even what it is."

"They'll be in an awful lot of trouble when they're caught," Jake pointed out. "Besides, they've still got all those Brazilian bankers padding the bottom line, they don't have to worry about keeping to a budget."

Rose wrote *Brazilian bankers* on the edge of her notepad, but what she said was, "I think Jake's right—we need to go for the source, and now we've got a way to do that. Where is the tech coming from and who is moving it? Ladies, I need you on that." She turned in her chair. "But Jake, I'd like you to--"

Her phone rang.

The Doctor calling, her phone said, and her heart sank, but since he'd been so good for the past few days, she decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. She gave everyone an apologetic smile and stepped out of the conference room, though she knew the closed door was mostly a symbolic gesture—it did nothing to keep out the sounds of the hallway. "Hello?"

"Hello, Rose," the Doctor said in a tight, sing-songy sort of voice; it was hard to hear him over the background noise. "Would you like to know where I am?" he asked.

"Possibly," she said. "Does it involve Cardiff Castle again?"

"No, actually," he said. "I'm in Aberystwyth."

"What?" she blurted, and then remembered the door and lowered her voice. "What are you doing in Aberystwyth?"

"If I knew that I wouldn't be calling you!" he snapped. "I must've gotten on the wrong bus and then I was reading this dictionary and the next thing I know I'm halfway here!"

"You got on the wrong bus," she echoed, and smacked herself in the forehead with her palm from the sheer stupidity of it. "I thought you could feel the turning of the bloody Earth, how hard is it to notice that you're suddenly on the M4?"

"It's not my species that didn't bother evolving a sensitivity to local magnetic fields!" he protested.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Dr. Noble?" she replied.

"Just tell me how to get to a bloody cashpoint so I can buy my return ticket," he growled. "I spent everything in my pockets on biscuits and the dictionary."

Rose opened her mouth to tell him how utterly *absurd* it was to expect her to know where the nearest cashpoint was in Aberystwyth (especially considering that she didn't know *where* in Aberystwyth he was, and why couldn't he just ask someone there for directions?) and perhaps then she'd ask how it was her responsibility to rescue him from his own idiocy and also, yeah, where did he get off giving her orders when he was the one who needed her help? There was so much she wanted to say that it all seemed to get jammed up in her throat, and so with an inarticulate growl she stalked down to Ianto's desk and thrust the phone at him. "Dr. Noble is lost," she snapped. "Find him."

As she walked away, she heard Ianto say with surprising calm, "Hell, Dr. Noble, this is Ianto Jones, I'll be helping you find your way. I'm afraid Ms. Prentice is in an urgent meeting. I'll be certain to tell her that, sir....and that as well. Are you finished, sir? All right, can you tell me where you are? Hmm...all right, I've got a map right here on my screen..."

Rose stalked back to the meeting room, but Tosh and Grace had already gone; Jake was stuffing his face with biscuits, but swallowed quickly when she came back in. "Everything all right?"

"Oh, it's delightful," Rose said. She slumped in the nearest chair and took a deep breath. "I'm going to kill him, you know."

Jake finished wiping the crumbs off his mouth. "So what would you like me to do?"

She shook her head. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm being figurative. I swear, if I didn't know better I'd think--" That he was an alien, she almost said, and the thought nearly made her laugh. Because he was and he wasn't, and even when he'd had two hearts and the power to change his face around, he'd been as at home on Earth as she was. Taking the wrong bus—it was something a regular old tourist would do. Not the Doctor.

Jake cleared his throat. "I mean on the Horatii," he said. "Before you went running out, you said you'd like me to what?"

That. Oh god. Rose rubbed her eyes. "Right, yes. I want you to look into the shipping lanes anyway—tell me how feasible it would be to set up a coordinated sting on a couple of the ships. Catching lorries, maybe, too, at the same time. If we got enough of them at once it'd be hard to say the tech was an accident."

"Sounds like a fun way to spend the week," Jake said, with a roll of his eyes. "Especially without Mickey to split the work."

That was about as subtle as Jake ever got. "Mr. Winslow's working on it," she promised. "We'll have a replacement in a couple of days, I'm certain. In the meantime...make Ianto help?"

Jake snorted. "Oh aye, he'll be real useful for keeping me topped up on coffee while I'm working through the night."

"Don't be so dramatic," Rose said. "Pierre's rubbing off on you."

"In more ways than one," Jake said with a salacious smirk. Rose groaned. "Don't, now, you walked into that one."

Ianto knocked once on the conference room door before stepping partway inside to wave Rose's phone at her. "He's got a ticket and is waiting for his bus," he said. "He'll arrive in Cardiff at eight-ten. Shall I arrange for a car?"

Rose hesitated, part of her saying *yes, or he'll end up in Bristol!* But that was nasty, and paranoid, and now that the little adrenaline rush had passed she knew he'd be cross with her already and she didn't want to pile on the insults by implying he couldn't get home on his own. But on the third hand, it would be so much faster than making him take a city bus... "Don't send a car, but call a taxi for him," she said finally, taking her phone back. "I'll pay the charge personally."

"Yes, ma'am." Ianto nodded at her and at Jake before closing the door.

There was a moment of silence in the room while Rose considered whether she really wanted to go home at all, or perhaps just flee the country, because honestly, fighting over the wrong bus? Jake cleared his throat loudly and said, "You know, Mickey used to sleep on our couch at least once a week. Wouldn't mind you using it a time or two, if you bought us dinner and a movie first."

Rose had been vaguely aware of the arrangement, but hadn't realized it was that often. "Didn't Pierre ever get jealous?" she asked, hoping for a bit of the earlier banter back.

"No," Jake said earnestly. "We both knew Mickey only had eyes for one person."

Rose shoved her phone into her pocket and stood up. "Feasability report," she said shortly. "As soon as you can. If they're bringing in the technology from outside the Commonwealth, we can call in UN forces as backup."

"Yes, ma'am," Jake said with a sneer, and Rose left the conference room with her head held high.

She spent the rest of the afternoon hiding in her office though, and when she ran short of constructive work to do she played computer card games until only Brynn and Ianto and a few security guards and fervent nerds were left in the building. Her clock ticked inevitably down towards seven, and she was halfway hoping the Doctor would call again, but he didn't and eventually she had to decide whether she was going to take Jake up on his offer or not, balancing his potential smugness against the prospect of an honest-to-god fight with the Doctor.

She got as far as buying the pizzas before she forced herself to picture the Doctor coming home to an empty flat. *Dammit, Rose, show some ovaries*, she told herself, and carried the boxes all the way back home, bumping into just about everyone she passed in the process. It was just an argument. Couples

had arguments. Just because she'd never really argued with the Doctor without the fate of the known universe hanging in the balance didn't mean anything. *It's not the end of the world*, she thought to herself, and nearly broke up giggling. *Not this time, at least.*

It took a little longer to get back with the pizzas than she'd planned; as she approached her building, she saw a light come on in her windows. She thought about trying to call to let him know she was on her way, but realized that juggling her phone and the pizzas would take longer than just climbing the stairs after him. He left the door unlocked, at least, so she didn't have to knock on her own door; she braced the pizzas against her hip while she turns the knob and forced the door open with her knee.

The Doctor was sitting at the kitchen table, watching his own hand as he followed the wood grain with his fingers. He looked mildly surprised to see her there, and a little guilty—who knew what sort of conclusions he'd jumped to when he found the flat empty. "Hello there," he said, and cleaned his throat roughly.

"Hey," Rose said as she kicked the door shut. She offered him the pizza boxes and he jumped up to take them, setting them out while she locked the door. He examined the pizzas without commenting and silently fetched them some plates, even though they could just as easily eat out of the box, while she arranged her purse on the table and checked that her keys and phone were both still in her pockets. They both sat down.

"I'm sorry," Rose blurted, at the same time the Doctor started to say, "So about earlier..."

They chuckled, and the Doctor waved at her a bit, as if inviting her to go first. Rose took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I was bitchy with you on the phone," she said. "I shouldn't have tossed you off on lanto like that. I'm glad you made it back in one piece...and I reckon I owe you for the taxi, don't I?"

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm sorry I was bitchy on the phone, I just...I'm a little..." He stuffed a piece of pizza in his mouth and chewed for a few moments. Rose wasn't hungry yet, so she settled on staring at a little bit of sauce that got caught in the corner of his mouth. "I'm slower," he announced after he swallowed.

"Slower?" Rose echoed.

"Than I was." He picked a piece of sausage off his pizza, examined it, and put it back where he'd found it. "I'm only human now, I make mistakes."

"You made mistakes as a Time Lord, too," she reminded him.

"Yes, but I made them faster and more decisively," he said. "I paid attention to my bus tickets. I figured out how to find the cashpoint all on my own. I didn't get *flustered* like...like I was today."

"I don't blame you for being flustered if you don't blame me," she said. "Price of a human life, right?"

"Right," he said with a glum sigh. "A short, stupid human life."

It seemed the a fist closed around Rose's heart. "Bit late for regrets, now, isn't it?" she asked.

The Doctor looked up with wide eyes and grimaced. "Oh, god, no—Rose, I didn't—see, this is what I meant about *flustered*. I don't mean...I don't regret *anything*." And he said it so firmly that she decided she had to believe him, because he said it in the same voice that he used for *Rose Tyler* and *I'm so sorry*. "This is just me being stupid and feeling sorry for myself because I can't...I'm not..."

"You're fine," she said, and reached out to squeeze his hand. "You've just got to get used to it all. I'm sure you'll be back to your old self in no time."

His brows moved together, but he didn't reply; just clung to her hand for a few minutes staring into her eyes. "I love you," he said, apropos of nothing—or maybe of everything—and kissed her knuckles, such an odd gesture that it made her smile. "And thanks for the pizza," he added.

"You love me because of the pizza?" Rose asked, which was a stupid thing to say, but closer to normal than the rest of the conversation.

"I love you for many things, though pizza ranks high among them." He put a slice on her plate and nibbled on his own some more. "So. Erm. Anything interesting happening in the world of Torchwood?"

"Exact opposite, actually," Rose said; if he was asking her about work then he was definitely reaching for something to say. She racked her own brain. "Er...you know, they're running all the Quatermass movies tonight. I forget what channel."

"Quatermass? Really?" He glanced at the television, as if it could answer him, too. "How many did they make in this universe?"

"Something like six," Rose said. "And I know how much you hate them, so..."

"Oh, with a passion," he said, and that was how they found themselves camped out on the couch, channel surfing (because Rose wasn't sure if the marathon was even happening, or if she'd made up the whole thing subconsciously) and making fun of any old science fiction movies they could find. There was something called *Ticks* that had them laughing until their bellies ached until an altogether ridiculous hour of the morning, and when they finally crawled into bed half-dressed Rose snuggled down against the Doctor's side, heedless of his boney corners, to remind him that she wasn't going anywhere.

~*~*~*~*~

For three days the Doctor managed to keep himself busy, and Rose wasn't entirely certain how; nor did she ask, because they were settling into a fragile calm at home, a routine composed of one part adventures in gastronomy, one part reminiscence and one part satellite television. He seemed broody and detached, often staring off into space or stopping himself in mid-sentence, and Rose found herself picking up on the mood, biting her tongue like a visitor in a library or a hospice. She didn't know what to say to snap him out of it, or if she even could; but she told herself that he'd come out of it all on his own,

given enough time, and until then at least he wasn't calling her every other hour of the day or wandering to the other side of Britain by accident.

Then he got arrested.

Rose was in Tosh's office when it happened, looking over her and Grace's work on mapping the Horatii's drop-off points, when her mobile rang. For a small, ugly moment, when she saw the Doctor's name on the screen she considered just switching it off. Then she scolded herself for being immature and answered. "Hey—what's wrong?"

"So there's been a little misunderstanding," he said.

Rose took a deep breath and told herself that she was going to be patient as a goddamn Buddha this time around. "Are you still in Cardiff, at least?"

"Oh yes," he said. *"No worries on that front."*

"Where are you, then?" Rose asked, because he sounded weirdly tense, and all she could think of was that he'd ended up in the A&E or he'd been...

"I'm at a police station," he said, and Rose bit down *hard* to keep from screaming into the phone. *"Like I said, big misunderstanding, but they've taken away my shoes and I don't think this ink is coming off and I would really, really like to not be here if I possibly could, so if you could...?"*

"How did you get arrested?" Rose managed to ask, which made Grace and Tosh look up at her with wide eyes. She waved at them, not sure if she wanted to signal that everything was under control or that the sky was falling and she needed to go prop it up.

"I'll tell you when you get here," the Doctor said. *"Only they're asking for my phone back now, and they're really very rude people so I don't think I should—oh, no, here we go, goodb--"*

The call ended, and Rose took a few deep breaths, wondering how on Earth she was supposed to explain this to Mr. Winslow. Grace stood up halfway from her chair. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," Rose said. "Just a misunderstanding." Which it had better be, or she wasn't going to be responsible for her own actions. She shoved her phone in her pocket, turned to the door, turned back. Now *she* was flustered. "There's something I need to take care of. Some one. I'm just going to..."

"Of course," Grace said quickly. "We've got this, we'll just email you the rest."

"Right." Rose ran down to her office to collect her purse and her rain coat, and decided it was better to ask forgiveness than permission. As she hurried past Ianto's desk, she called out, "I've got a bit of a family emergency, I'll be back later this afternoon, my mobile's on." Ianto didn't even look up from where he was carefully watering his desk bamboo, just nodded, because at Torchwood one got used to this sort of behavior.

Her mood swung wildly between worry and anger while she waited for a bus, then realized she didn't know *which* station the Doctor was at. Luckily a few phone calls invoking her Torchwood credentials took care of that, and a rather alarming taxi ride later she was walking up to a bored-looking desk sergeant with her badge out.

"Rose Prentice, Torchwood," she announced. "I'm here to see a suspect."

"Name?" the sergeant asked, taking a pen from behind her ear.

"Dr. John Noble." The sergeant snorted softly as she waved to somebody standing nearby. "Is that going to be a problem?" Rose demanded.

The sergeant shook her head. "No, no, just...odd one, isn't he?"

"Among other things," Rose said. "What are his charges?"

The sergeant referred to her computer. "Jaywalking and assault on a constable in the execution of his duties," she announced. "The old bird wanted to file assault against him, too, but we talked her out of it."

"What 'old bird?'" Rose demanded.

"Ask him yourself," the sergeant said, and nodded in the direction of the cells. The Doctor was coming from that direction, his jacket folded over his arm and his tie gone entirely. He smiled warily at her, and aside from a slight limp (which could easily have been exaggerated) he seemed to be in one piece.

Which was lucky, because she was going to kill him.

"I'm taking him into custody," she told the sergeant. "The Institute will deal with the charges. I apologize for any trouble he might've caused."

"He an alien or something?" the sergeant asked.

"Used to be," Rose said, and turned to face him. Whatever the look on her face was like, it had stopped him smiling. "The taxi's waiting outside," she told him.

"Just need to get my—thank you," he took a bag from another officer, with his personal effects—the tie, his phone, his wallet, a packet of jelly babies and an astounding number of pennies. Rose lead the way out of the station because she didn't trust herself not to lose it entirely once they started talking.

Of course, inside the taxi the Doctor immediately said "Thank you," and swiftly added, "I'm really sorry, I just—they weren't listening to me. They're remarkably unhelpful people at times, police."

"I just want to know," she said, "how you got from jaywalking to one, possibly two counts of assault, involving a police constable." She commended herself on how level she kept her voice during the entire sentence.

He grimaced. "Funny story, really—not, you know, funny ha-ha, but funny like we'll look back on this some day and wince. I was trying to help this little old lady across the street—no, really, God's honest truth," he added when he saw the look on her face. He even put his hand over his heart (the missing one) and held up three fingers in some sort of salute. "I am not even joking. I went for a walk--"

"In the rain?" Rose asked.

"I like the rain," he said. "I was having a walk and I saw her, she had a cane and big bag of cat litter and I thought she was going to fall over dead any minute."

"So you ran into the street to save her," Rose said.

"There was a crosswalk," he protested. "The light was just, um, it must've changed right as I stepped off the curb."

She sighed. "So there's jaywalking. What happened next?"

"Well, after a bit of screeching tires and blaring horns and whatnot, I got to the lady," he said, "and I tried to take her arm, only for some reason the moment I laid a finger on her she started screaming 'rape' and hitting me in the shins with that cane. It *hurt*, too. Want to have a look?"

He tried to maneuver one leg around the seat in front of him, apparently for show and tell, but Rose wasn't interested. "Where does the policeman come in come in?"

"Well," he said, seeming disappointed in her lack of interest in his bruises. "So there's cars honking and this old lady is screaming—I never did get her name—and a PC comes running up and starts shouting at us to clear the crosswalk—very unfriendly, these Cardiff police, you know. She's yelling rape and murder, I'm trying to explain myself—I suppose the light was still green—and he starts pulling on my sleeve and I, well..." He coughed. "I may have...slightly...pushed back."

"While you were standing in the middle of traffic?" Rose asked.

"Not so much the middle as to on side," he said meekly. As meekly as he ever got, anyway.

Rose kept her mouth shut the last few minutes to their apartment. She kept it shut so hard it hurt. The Doctor scooted away subtly until he was leaning against the door, his body angled towards her like he was expecting to get mauled. *Good*. She couldn't remember the last time she was this angry with him—maybe when he tricked her into leaving him on Space Station Five, but even that had been more betrayal than outrage. This was...this...

She slammed the door of the taxi and left the Doctor to pay the fare, but he easily caught up with her on the stairs. "You know, you could say something," he said, looming close behind her.

"Like what?" she asked.

"Oh, Doctor, what a horrible story," he said in a squeaky falsetto. "Aren't these police just awful? You were so right to kick him in the shins."

"You kicked him in the shins?" she asked, incredulous.

"Well, no," he admitted. "But I may have threatened to."

"I don't believe you." She had trouble getting her key in the lock, and when she finally did she threw the door open and stalked straight to the windows, looking down the street rather than at the Doctor.

She heard him shut the door behind them. "A little support would be appreciated, here, Rose," he said, sounding wounded.

"Support?" She spun around. "You want support for harassing the police?"

"Maybe I do!" he shouted back. "Maybe I want you on my side!"

"This isn't about taking sides!" She took a step forward, because he had, and she was aware that they were crowding each other's personal space but didn't care. "This is about you being completely reckless!"

"Oh, I'm reckless, am I?" He folded his arms across his chest, raised his chin. "Funny, that never seemed to bother you before!"

"Because you were never this *stupid* about it!" she shot back, and she could see something slam shut in his face, knew she'd drawn blood. "I just used my Torchwood credentials to take you into custody, which means there is going to be an official report made to my supervisors, who are going to want to know why I didn't leave you there to face the consequences for yourself, and just now I don't know what I'm going to tell them!"

"Oh, yeah, because I keep forgetting you're such a high muckity-muck," he snarled. "Rose Tyler Prentice Whoever-you-are, Defender of Earth, Filer of Paperwork. You know, we used to make fun of people like you."

"You used to know what really mattered," Rose shot back, "and I didn't have a job to do."

"I was referring," he said crisply, "to me and *Donna*, actually."

For a moment Rose felt like all the air had been pulled out of her lungs, and she was exquisitely aware of her own rigid body, the slight pins and needles feeling in her fingers from all the shouting, her pounding heart. The Doctor just kept looking at her, looking *down* on her with a little smirk like he knew exactly what he'd done to her, and Rose couldn't even remember why they were screaming, or why she cared. "Then maybe you should've just stayed with her, eh?" she said softly. "Back in the other universe. If that's what you want."

The smirk fell off the Doctor's face, and his chin dropped. "What I want is to know why you're so angry about this," he said. "What ever happened to no harm, no foul, eh?"

"I just told you, this wasn't harmless, this was *petty* and *stupid* and now I'm on the line--"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he said, and took another step forward, pressing in on her. "What's this really about, Rose? You're not scolding me like a naughty little boy just 'cause your reputation's hurt. Why're you really so pissed off?"

"Because you could've been hit!" Rose found herself saying in shrieky tones that reminded her far too much of her mother. She stepped back, because somewhere in the flat there had to be air. "You could've been killed," she added, aiming for something calmer. "You were standing in the middle of the road, you could've been hit and killed and you can't cheat that anymore, you can't regenerate and I...I don't think I could lose you twice."

The Doctor's face fell into blank shock, and his arms fell halfway out of their tight fold. Rose hadn't even realized until she voiced the words that it was nagging at her, but once she did, it played out in her mind's eye as large as life: the screeching tires, the blaring horns, the thud of impact and most of all, the Doctor's face, surprised just like he was now, because he did these things without ever thinking about the consequences. He would be broken and gone, just when she thought she'd got him back, their second chance wasted with no hope of a third. And if *that* didn't make him see reason, she had no idea what possibly could.

"I," he said, then paused, looked down. "So. Erm."

"I need to get back to work," Rose said. She pawed at her purse, because it felt like she should be grabbing something, taking something with her even though she hadn't set anything down inside the flat when she came in. "I'll, um...later."

"Yeah," he said hoarsely. "Later." And as she was on her way out the door, "I'm sorry."

Rose didn't answer; she found another taxi and had a good cry in the back seat, then paid him to circle Roald Dahl Plass until she had fixed her make-up. She'd have to talk to Mr. Winslow again today and she needed to look like a responsible adult, not a hysterical teenager. And she and the Doctor could sort out everything else later, when they weren't screaming or terrified. Because they could do this—they deserved this—Rose had finally gotten her happy ending, dammit, and she wasn't going to let anyone split her and the Doctor up now. Not even the Doctor himself.

Chapter 8

Of course there wasn't any "later;" she did some fast talking to Mr. Winslow and spent the rest of the afternoon settling the paperwork instead of investigating the Horatii, and when she finally got home the Doctor had made lasagna and rented as many of the Quatermass movies as he could find. They made fun of the movies and dropped noodles on the couch, and if it wasn't entirely comfortable, it at least wasn't angry.

In fact, the fresh reminder of his mortality seemed to settle the Doctor's spirits for a few days. He talked more and brooded less, and things calmed down again except for a late-night trip to the A&E for what turned out to be a moderately severe electrical burn. (The microwave's injuries, in contrast, turned out to be fatal.) They spent the weekend doing silly touristy things like taking boat rides in the bay, and the

Doctor talked some more about his hypothetical really great car without making any moves towards actually buying one. They did not bring up the arrest, or anything related to it at all; Rose had the idea they were both guarding their emotional scabs, and that was fine by her. She tried to take more of an interest in what he did all day, to show that she didn't *really* think he was stupid, even if he might occasionally act like it.

And the Doctor, for his part, suddenly decided to take an interest in Torchwood. He didn't say anything specific about it, but he did start making more of an effort to ask her about her day and then actually pay attention to what she said, which was new. There wasn't much to say, as the Horatii case was stalled in the looking-at-maps-and-tax-returns phase, but it was a nice gesture nonetheless. "So what's new with the great defenders of Earth?" he would ask, and at first she suspected he was taking the piss—or trying to distract her from something he'd been up to during the day—but then he asked insightful questions and maintained eye contact and generally looked at her again like she was something wonderful. Rose liked that feeling too much to hold onto any suspicions for long, even if all she was just telling him about the tedious process of sorting through names and deeds and contracts and bank accounts.

Until, of course, there was something else to talk about. It started when Jake arrived to hand her a flash drive and declared, "No fucking way."

"Sorry?" Rose asked.

"Your sting idea? No way." He sat down in her other chair while she plugged in the flash drive and looked through the files. "The number of individual ships we'd have to board is ridiculous, and Pete's never going to hand over enough manpower for us to search them properly. Unless Tosh has a way to track the little bastards in real time and narrow down the location to a lot further, we'd be playing the odds."

"Worth a thought, though," Rose said. "Thanks for getting this to me."

"Eh, whatever, it's better than reading about old contracts and corporate structures." He examined his fingernails. "How're you holding up?"

"Well, I haven't gone blind or decided to become a lawyer yet, so that's something," Rose said.

Jake glanced at her. "I meant with the Doctor. I heard he got in some trouble last week."

Rose copied Jake's files to her computer and returned his flash drive. "Nothing to worry about. It was a...a misunderstanding."

"Right," he said slowly. "And you're just fine with misunderstandings?"

"I'm just fine," Rose said firmly. "*We're* just fine. It just takes sometime to adjust."

Before Jake could say anything to that, Grace came bounding into the room with Tosh on her heels.

"Okay, how much do you love us?" Grace asked cheerfully.

"Depends," Jake said. "Did you bring me a raygun?"

"Possibly," Tosh said, which immediately had Rose's full attention. Tosh set up a laptop on a free corner of Rose's desk and brought up a map. "See, I've fine-tuned the radiation scans a bit—not too much more—but within a city block or so. And we noticed that while most of the targets seem to be staying in England, there was one faint reading that went all the way up to Edinburgh."

"So we closed in on the address," Grace said, "and it turns out to be a hotel. A hotel that just happens to be hosting a fundraiser on the twenty-first, which was put together by Citizens for a Secure World."

Jake snapped his fingers. "That's one of AE's echo chambers," he said. "Do you have a guest list?"

"Not yet, but I have the program off the website," she said, and pulled a piece of paper from her pocket with a flourish. "How would you like to see Mr. Lawrence Hadley, the first All Earth MP elected in Britain, sharing a podium with Mr. Everett Schafer, the author of *The War To End All Wars*?"

"Schafer hasn't publicly supported the Horatii," Rose pointed out.

"Yeah, but they've sure been supporting him," Grace said. "If we can get the guest list I'm positive we're going to find somebody on there who's signed the Horatii membership pledge and got the merit badges and the decoder ring."

"That doesn't mean we're going to catch them red-handed with a ray gun in their pants, though," Jake said. "If you can't spot it any finer than a city block--"

"I'm working on it," Tosh said. "The more data we get, the more I can refine it the logarithms. But it's a tradeoff of speed for accuracy."

Rose stood up. "Then we need to be ready to move in as soon as we get a location. Grace, go make our reservations. I'll let Mr. Winslow know where we're going."

"I thought you were supposed to get permission first and then start setting up travel?"

"I thought you knew a thing or two about taking the initiative," Rose said with a wink.

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There were reasons Rose had gotten her position that had nothing to do with Pete or Mickey pulling strings; her ability to convince Mr. Winslow to sign off on an operation that she was making up off the top of her head as she told him about it was one of them. They signed out a van and all the gear they could possibly need and made Ianto load it up for them while they went to their respective homes to pack.

Rose found the Doctor waiting for her—well, not waiting for her, but there rather than out on one of his excursions. He was watching a Welsh-language soap opera with intense fascination, and barely looked away to say, "You're home early, aren't you?"

"Yeah, about that," Rose said. "I have to go away for a little while."

That got his attention. "Go away? Go where?" he asked.

"Edinburgh," she said. "Possible alien technology at a fundraising lunch. Really sorry about this, but we've got to move fast or we'll never catch it."

She fished a rucksack out of the bottom of her wardrobe and started packing more or less at random—her hands seemed to know what she wanted even if her brain wasn't very well engaged. The Doctor stood in the doorway and watched her. "Okay, so you're going to Edinburgh," he said. "Just like that?"

"Fraid so." She grabbed a fistful of underwear—you could never have too much back-up underwear—and stuffed it in the bag. "We just got the lead today, and it could disappear at any time."

"Oh, no, no, I get that." He examined something on the back of his hand. "D'you know where you're staying, though? That sort of thing?"

"Grace made reservations somewhere," she said, because she knew from experience they'd probably all end up sleeping in the van instead. Extra deodorant, right, just in case. "I'll have my mobile, though, if you need me."

"I think I'll be all right for a few days," he said. "It will be a few days, right? Not like a month?"

Rose shook her head. "Probably no later than Friday. Saturday, tops."

"Then I'll be fine." He smiled. "I've got some, er, plans, you know, anyway."

"Really?" She squashed down the clothes in the rucksack (maybe not *that* much back-up underwear) and then ran into the bathroom for her travel bag of toiletries. "With who?"

"Oh, you know, people..." He made a little wave. "I'm not sure I'm allowed to talk about whatever it is I'm doing for Pete, you know, all top-secret like."

Rose rolled her eyes. "I've got the same security clearance as you have, you know." She grabbed him by the tie and kissed him again. "I'll call you some time tomorrow, okay?"

"All right," he said. "No worries. Go save the planet." He squeezed her hand and held the door for her on her way out, smiling a little, and Rose found herself thinking, *thank God, that went easier than I thought it would*. It was a petty thought that made her feel guilty, and so she squashed it in favor of getting back to Torchwood, because Jake wasn't above driving off without her if she ran too late.

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They drove halfway and stopped for the night, renting one room from a roadside motel and making Jake sleep in the bath. ("Mickey would not have stood for this," he grumbled, but went without a fight.) He slept in the back of the van, too, for the last leg of the trip, while Grace complained about driving on the right and Rose watched the sun come up through the windscreen. Their hotel rooms were in the

building directly opposite the target, but Tosh confirmed they'd be doing most of the surveilling from an alleyway, so van it was for the most part. Still, Rose decided to enjoy the rooms while she could, so they all sat on her bed with legs crossed while she laid out the plan.

"I want to know," Grace said, "why I'm the one who has to pose as an extremist."

"It's 'cause everybody knows you Americans are gun-toting whackos," Jake said, patting her on the shoulder.

"I want to submit that I'm Californian and there's a reason we seceded," she shot back.

"It's because we need Tosh in the van to run the equipment and I'm too well-known to blend in," Rose said. "Jake, you'll be posing as a waiter in case Grace needs any backup, but I don't want either of you to take any unnecessary risks. The objective is just to confirm that the device is here and, if possible, who has it—we need names and faces above all."

"I've got the sensitivity of the satellite down to fifty meters," Tosh said. "As of the last update, the device was still in the hotel, somewhere in the south wing. No idea what floor, though."

"Can you get us internal security cameras?" Jake asked. "Make the whole thing a hell of a lot easier."

"Maybe," Tosh said. "I'll work on it."

"First priority is getting inside that fundraiser," Rose said. "We can scope out the south wing the old-fashioned way if we have to."

And they did; while Grace practiced how to talk like a fascist and Tosh did unspeakable things to other peoples' computers, Rose and Jake walked most of the hotel grounds, casually mapping them out. Rose took the occasional photo with her phone, but she counted on Jake to remember most of the details, like where the fire exits were and how long the elevator took between floors. They had a very discreet meeting with the hotel manager, in which they lead him to believe they were monitoring the rally as a potential target for liberal backlash, and then spent far too much time skulking around the south wing, on the off chance something suspicious might happen.

By the time they headed back upstairs, Grace had brought back chips and eaten all of hers and half of Rose's. "Sorry," she said. "Radicalism makes me hungry."

"Do we have the cameras or not?" Jake asked, tipped some of his chips into Rose's basket.

"Not," Tosh said. "I don't want to tip the hotel off to an attack and I don't imagine it was part of your discussion this afternoon. But Jake, you go on shift and seven tomorrow morning, and your uniform's hanging in your room. No facial jewelry."

He made a rude gesture at Tosh and stole some of her chips. "That just means you're up at the same time to fit my wire, right?"

"Wires, cameras, and hyperwave transponders," Rose corrected.

Grace made a face. "Come on, you don't think they're going to kidnap us and take us to an abandoned lead mine, do you?"

"I was thinking you could tag a suspect with him in case he goes into an abandoned lead mine," Rose corrected. "You did bring them, didn't you?"

Tosh thumped a case at her side. "Complete with a four-week battery. But if you tag whoever's carrying the device, it'll interfere with the satellite read and I might lose the signal on the goods."

"Like we're going to get that close," Jake said. "We'll be lucky to see the bloody thing."

"I've got it down to twenty meters," Tosh said. "If you do see it, we'll know so—it'll just take about a week to find out."

While Jake complained at length about his uniform (and Grace about having to socialize with wingnuts) Rose slipped out of the room and down the hall to a window. This far north, it was still somewhat light out; she leaned against the pane and called the Doctor. It took him a dozen rings to answer. "*Yes? Hello? Everything okay?*" he asked rapidly.

"Everything's fine," Rose said. "Hi. I just wanted call you."

"*Oh. Erm, hello.*" She heard a rattle like he was moving something. "*How's Edinburgh?*"

"Normal," Rose said. "Boring. Gonna be stuck in a van all day tomorrow, watching Jake and Grace watch crazy people."

"*Sounds thrilling,*" the Doctor said, and something crashed in the background. "*Oh. Oh my.*"

"Is everything okay down there?" Rose asked.

"*Oh, yes, fine, jolly, everything's under control,*" he said.

"'Under control' isn't the same as 'okay,'" Rose pointed out.

"*Well, that depends on your definitions, doesn't it?*" he asked. "*Look, you sit in your van and do whatever. I'll be fine. I'll see you soon.*"

"Yeah," Rose said. "Just wanted to check in, is all."

There was a high, piercing noise, quickly muffled. "*Consider yourself in-checked. Love you.*"

"Love you too." Long after he hung up, Rose looked at her phone, and told herself that it was irrational to ask Ianto to check in on the Doctor while she was gone. He wasn't a cat, for God's sake. And Ianto was probably celebrating his reduced workload with his security guard tonight. Just because the Doctor wasn't by her side didn't mean he was going to leave her again. Just because he was alone didn't mean he was going to get into trouble. She slipped her phone in her pocket and wandered back to her room. "Oi—anybody want pizza? I'm buying."

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Jake reported to work at seven, wearing a wire, an earpiece, and a tiny camera disguised as a stud earring along with a really very silly polyester uniform. His transponder was around his neck on a chain, and he had two back-ups clipped to the band of his watch so he could drop them at a moment's notice. Rose was in the back of the van at the same time, nursing a coffee and watching the secret lives of hotel peons with vague interest.

At nine, Tosh joined Rose in the back of the van while Grace checked in and registered for the fundraiser. "Fifteen meters," she said, offering Rose a fresh coffee. "Also, I never realized one person could be so ticklish."

"She's on the list, though, right?" Rose said. "They're not going to give her trouble?"

"Not at all. Watch." One on one screen, kitchen staff wandered about while Jake collected room service, but on the other, Grace (with a camera in her glasses) was talking to a man at a desk with the stylized Citizens for a Secure World logo on a banner behind him. He looked confused, but when he typed something into his laptop, whatever he saw made him nod. Rose released a little breath when he handed over a badge and a program. "Of course, we did have to transfer a few thousand pounds in her name to their coffers, so it's entirely possible we're funding terrorism here."

"Not unless we catch them first," Rose said. Then she pointed at the feed from Jake. "Hey—that bloke didn't wash his hands! God, I'm never eating room service again."

Eleven o'clock and Grace was walking around the south wing again, allegedly schmoozing, while Jake started setting up for the fund raiser. "Awful lot of security for a political fund raiser," Rose noted, as muscular men in drab, dark suits watched the proceedings.

"Hadley claims he's received death threats," Tosh pointed out. "And Ann-Marie Taylor's on the guest list as well, she's definitely got people out for her head."

"Isn't she the one who said the Cybermen were God's punishment for Communism?" Rose asked.

Tosh nodded. "And the Sycorax ship was actually a giant vengeful fetus from space. I suppose it's one way to get your own radio show..."

Twelve o'clock and people were starting to line up and wait to be seated; Jake had already dropped multiple forks and given them a cursory wipe on his vest before putting them right back on the table. "If anyone here gets food poisoning, we know who to blame," Rose said teasingly into the microphone, but he ignored her.

Tosh sat up straighter when her laptop beeped. "All right, I'm finally getting some telemetry from the mainframe on the refined signal...The twenty-meter radius puts it in a block of four rooms, or two suites if they're on the top floor."

"You can't get any relative height?" Rose asked.

Tosh shook her head. "It's not precise enough to triangulate...but if I cross-reference these coordinates to the guest list and the hotel register..." She tapped at her computer for a few moments and then switched on her microphones. "Okay, Jake, Grace? I'm emailing you some pictures and a list of names. These are people are suspected of possessing the tech at some point earlier this week. I'm still trying to work out more recent data."

The screens confirmed that they both checked their phones, scrolling through the names and pictures. Rose knew the hand-off could've already happened, but this was the most tangible lead they had so far—names and faces rather than just phantom sums of money floating from account to account. She checked out the list herself, and did a little Google searching on her own phone. "I think Arthur Dale is out," she said. "He's one of Hadley's assistants and I don't think they'd risk the connection. Jan Liebowitz is a writer, sounds like a strong possibility. Christopher Paulson is ex-military, a good man to be handling weapons if they have one. Thomas Donahue...shares his name with a porn star, apparently."

Tosh leaned over to look at Rose's phone. "Actually, they might be the same person. I wonder if Grace can convince him to take off his shirt so we can prove it."

One o'clock, and they started serving food, which looked so good on the monitors that Rose went off in search of something to fill her stomach. She ended up bringing back sandwiches for both herself and Tosh, which filled her up but didn't make her any less envious of Grace. Jake probably hated all of them. That was also when the speeches started, just loud enough to be clear over the wires, and Rose had to switch off her microphone so she could comment.

"Never more acutely have we been aware of our precarious position among the stars," the emcee intoned gravely. *"And never more urgently have we needed a strong hand to guide us through the hard decisions we must now make."*

"A strong hand, right, but the little mustache and the jackboots are optional," Rose muttered.

"The time has come to shake off fear. We must be bold; we must be decisive; we must be ready."

"We must be melodramatic." That made Tosh giggle.

"We must take up the weapons of our enemies if we wish to secure a future for ourselves and our children against the rising tide of the extraterrestrial threat. We must be prepared to fight fire with fire if we wish to protect our legacy as a species. We must not be squeamish about seizing any advantage in the face of enslavement or extinction by the shadows from the stars."

Rose pulled out her phone and started texting the Doctor. "Who writes this stuff?" she asked, while typing, *did you know we're under attack by mixed metaphors?* She hit "send" on her phone.

A moment later, there was a loud pinging sound audible over both Grace's wire and Jake's. On the screen, Rose saw people looking around for the rude bastard who'd left a phone on; Grace turned her head fast enough to make Rose a little motion sick. From Jake's camera, she saw the emcee and several people at the head table turn around, as if the sound had come from behind them--

And then suddenly the curtains behind the podium parted, and the Doctor came out.

Several things happened all at once, though later Rose remembered them in a sequence. She dropped her phone. Tosh said, "Hey, isn't that your friend Dr. Noble?" Grace, over her wire, said, "What the hell?" and Jake said "Fuck." The Doctor's eyes were a little wide, his face a little sweaty, but he was grinning widely like this was the most fun he'd ever had, waving jauntily as he came out of his hiding place. *"Hello,"* he said. *"Sorry, forgot to switch it off, I know, terrible manners of me."*

"Grace, do not take your eyes off him," Rose blurted; Tosh leaned over to switch on the microphones again. "Grace, listen, keep watching him. Jake, show me security."

He turned his head from side to side, and the burly men Rose had noted before were whispering into wrist-mounted radios and moving slowly towards the Doctor. The emcee was demanding *"Who are you, sir?"* but the Doctor, being the Doctor, paid him no mind; he had seized a plate of appetizers from the head table and was nibbling. *"Mmm, pate, I like pate, though this could use a little less salt--"*

"Tosh, can you hear what security are saying?" Rose hissed.

"Give me a minute," Tosh murmured.

Lawrence Hadley stood up and seized the Doctor by the arm, causing him to drop the plate. *"Just what do you think you're doing here?"* he bellowed.

"Would you believe I was looking for the little boy's room?" the Doctor said, straight-faced. *"Only I heard those wonderful mixed metaphors over there and just had to come have a look—hello!"* He tried to shake Hadley off and stumbled, nearly falling into someone else's lap. A great deal of shoving and scuffling started even before the security men came over and seized the Doctor by the elbows, and while he didn't actively resist he also didn't go easily—he kept catching his feet on tables and chairs and legs, falling down, knocking people into other people, and of course shouting *"Oh! Terribly sorry! I'm sure the stain will come out with a little club soda! Ow! Steady on, I've got a heart condition! One of them's missing! Oh, hello, there, let's keep hands above the belt, please..."*

The noise was steadily rising throughout the room, and people were starting to get up and move around—maybe to get out of the way, maybe to get a better look, even though the emcee had picked himself up off the floor and was calling for calm. Rose broke out of her shock staring when Tosh cleared her throat. "The chief of security is ordering a new perimeter sweep and they're re-checking badges and invitation," Tosh said quietly.

"Right." Rose took a deep breath. "Grace, Jake, get yourselves out of there. Regroup in the lobby."

"Thank you," Jake murmured, and as the video on both screens began to bob crazily Rose escaped the van to standing outside and swear under her breath.

I've got plans, he'd said. Plans, right. How could she have been so stupid? She'd practically drawn him a map, answering all those questions about the case and things. Had he been planning this from the

beginning? No, he hadn't known she was going to Edinburgh until she was going...but he'd followed her, he'd lied to her, and what the hell was all that crashing about last night, then? And god, they weren't going to carry him away to an abandoned lead mine, were they?

Tosh stuck her head out of the van. "They're clear. It looks like Dr. Noble just got dumped in the lobby."

"Right. Okay. Good." Rose took another deep breath. "Go put the van back where it belongs. I'll go...I'll just go."

Tosh drove away while Rose stalked around the perimeter of the hotel and into the lobby. It wasn't crowded, and she spotted her people easily enough, especially with all the noise they were making. In fact, she arrived just in time to see Jake punch the Doctor squarely in the face. The Doctor crumpled like a sack of hammers, and Rose barely even thought about rushing forward and shoving Jake hard in the chest. Jake glared at her. "You saw what the wanker did to us!"

"Not here," Rose said, "not like this." She turned to the Doctor, who was picking himself up gingerly, with some help from Grace, but all words seemed to have escaped her except an incoherent sputter of "You...you..."

He raised his hands in a peace offering. "I can explain everything."

"You fucking better be able to," Jake growled.

"Not here," Rose repeated. She grabbed the Doctor by the arm, no more gently than Jake might've, and pulled him along behind her, across the street to their own hotel. Luckily he didn't try to talk to her, or she might've broken a wristbone or two in the process.

Only when they were secure in their own room did Rose turn on the Doctor and ask, "Just what did you think you were doing back there?"

"Hey, if you hadn't texted I'd have been perfectly safe," the Doctor said.

"You just ruined our best chance at gathering information on these fuckers!" Jake snarled.

"Hey, I brought you that, didn't I?" The Doctor pointed to Grace, who had trailed them up, and Rose realized she was examining a small box wrapped in plain brown paper. It was about three times the size of a matchbox, long and thin, and secured with Sellotape, which Grace picked at with no particular enthusiasm.

"What is it?" Rose asked, willing for the moment to let herself be distracted.

Grace shrugged. "No labels, no distinguishing marks...though somehow I doubt it's a vibrator."

Rose looked at the Doctor, who shrugged. "Don't look at me. One of those fellows sitting at the long table had it in his lap. I managed to snag it on my way out."

"In his lap?" Jake echoed. "How did you even notice something in a bloke's lap?"

The Doctor huffed. "Right, sorry, forgot looking at men's crotches was your department round here."

Jake took a step forward, and the Doctor immediately darted behind Rose, as if she was tall enough to hide behind. Rose took the parcel from Grace and gave it her own once-over. "Tosh has a scanner in the van. I want to know what this is before we open it."

"Right, because they'd be holding armed plastic explosives next to the family jewels," Grace said.

"Doesn't mean we shouldn't be careful about opening it up." Rose tucked the box into her bag and stepped aside, so she could glare at Jake and the Doctor equally. "You two. Wait here. Do not say a single word to each other, is that clear? We'll finish this conversation when we know for certain what you've found."

She walked out without waiting for them to answer. Grace hurried after her, tucking her camera-glasses into a pocket. "You sure that's safe?"

"They won't kill each other," Rose said. "Jake's not that angry and the Doctor isn't that violent." At least, not with non-Daleks. "And if they break each other's noses, they'll deserve it."

Tosh was just parking the van when they got down to her, and whatever questions she had about the Doctor must've vanished when she saw the look on Rose's face. Her eyes flickered ever so briefly to Grace, who must've winked or shaken her head or given some signal, because all Tosh said was, "What do you need me to do?" and when Rose explained, she did it.

"It's giving off radiation, all right," Tosh said after she'd subjected the box to some of her devices. "It'll take a while to confirm whether it's the same profile as our targets, but I don't think there's any harm in assuming we've found it."

"Doesn't look like a ray gun to me," Grace said.

"Any sign it might not be safe to open?"

Tosh pecked at her keyboard. "Chemical sniffers detect no explosives, ultrasound is negative on possible detonators, not heavy enough to be holding any significant mass of radioactive matter...as safe as it can be, I suppose.

Rose rummaged in the cabinets in the back of the van until she found the evidence bags, rubber gloves, and a box-cutter. Carefully, she removed the paper wrapping and tucked it away for fingerprints—though at this point, so many people had handled it that it was likely a lost cause. Inside the paper was a slim metal case with a sliding latch. Rose opened it up, and realized that they were definitely not looking at a ray gun.

Each piece was long, and thin, like the box they came in, and seemed to coated with a thin colorless slime. A cylinder made of delicate steel wire was connected with a solid sphere of the same material by a long strand of opaque white...*stuff*, gelatinous and glowing. A small blue light on each sphere blinked

rhythmically, but not in synch. Grace gasped, and Tosh said something succinctly Japanese and pushed herself back from the table.

Rose stripped off the gloves and reached for her phone, dialling Mr. Winslow's direct line. "*Winslow, Torchwood,*" he answered briskly.

"Mr. Winslow, this is Prentice," she said. "I'm in Edinburgh and I'm looking at Cyberman technology."

Chapter 9

"*Are you certain?*" Winslow asked after a short, shocked pause.

"Positive. We've got..." Rose counted quickly, "five synthorganic devices of unknown specification. They were recovered from a guest at a political fundraiser."

"*Cybus branded?*" he asked sharply.

Rose used the blade of the box-cutter to examine one of the things, turning over the steel bits at both ends. "No, sir."

"*Who was in possession of it?*"

"We're...trying to determine that now, sir," Rose said, because of course the Doctor had just grabbed the box without noting who he's been grabbing it from. Here she'd thought Jack Harkness was the only one with a thing for sticking his hand in random people's crotches. "There's been a slight complication."

"*Get those devices to Torchwood Two immediately,*" Winslow snapped. "*I want you back in Cardiff making a full report tomorrow morning. I'll notify Mr. Tyler of the discovery.*"

"Yes, sir," Rose said, and hung up. "Tosh, give us all the tape you got from the cameras and all the data on guests, speakers and room assignments. Then take those things to the Edinburgh office for examination. Grace, you're with me."

"To do what?" she asked.

"Mainly, to keep me from killing the Doctor before he figures out who he got these from."

~*~*~*~*~

The news that their alien tech was actually a Cybus synthorganic device actually got both Jake and the Doctor to shut up for a moment. "You're absolutely certain?" the Doctor asked.

"Totally," Grace said. "I saw enough of that stuff in the war, it was genuine synthorganics."

"Could the Cybermen be involved?" the Doctor asked, turning to Rose. "Just a small number, manipulating the organization? All it took was one or two to get things started at Canary Wharf, after all."

"There's no Cybermen left on this planet," Rose said firmly. "They're all in the Void. We have ways of detecting any new comings or going into our universe now, so we'd know if they came back."

"Does it matter if the tin men are back?" Jake asked. "Just possessing synthorganics is illegal. Whoever you got that off of is going to a UN prison for a very long time."

The Doctor nodded gravely. "Right. So the question is, who did I get it off of?"

They had the list of attendees, the list of rooms that potentially housed the devices that morning, and the tape of the Doctor flailing his way out of the room. After listening to him say "This one—no, him—or maybe her? She *is* wearing trousers—er—" Rose gave up on his memory and started making lists. Of the people sitting at the long table of speakers (for he was quite certain he got it from *one* of them) as many as six had stayed in rooms in the south wing close enough to have potentially held the devices overnight, and four of them had been actively grabbed or manhandled by the Doctor according to the tape.

"Lawrence Hadley, Arthur Dale, Moira Hearn, Eoin Collins," she declared. "Those are our suspects."

"An MP, his personal assistant, a professor of economics and an retired army major who writes a right-wing blog," Jake said. "You couldn't meet a nice bunch of people."

The Doctor squinted at the video of himself. "They were all wearing the same color of suits," he muttered. "If only they'd been in different suits, I'm sure I'd have it."

Tosh brought back the van around four o'clock, and with her was one of the synthorganic devices—now resting in a clear plastic tube. "They gave us one for luck," she said grimly. "They'll have fingerprints on the wrapper back by tomorrow morning, but figuring out this thing is going to take a bit more time than that."

Rose checked her watch and carefully calculated a route. "If we leave now and drive straight through, we'll be back in Cardiff by midnight," she said. "Start packing up."

"You want us to drive all night?" Grace asked, sounding basically resigned to the decision.

"Winslow wants our report tomorrow morning," Rose said. "And at this point, driving's just as fast as taking a blimp." She looked at the Doctor, who was still peering at the video, and braced herself to ask the necessary questions. "Where are you staying and how did you get up here?"

He cringed a little, and she allowed she was maybe a little...strident there. "Blimp," he said. "And I'm across the street in the economy rooms."

"Give Tosh your key card and she'll collect your things," Rose said; it was too risky to let him be seen again around the scene of the incident. "You can ride back with us."

"That's really not..." he trailed off and swallowed hard, pressing his lips together tightly while his brow furrowed; Rose must've been looking quite scary to get that reaction. "Yeah. Okay. What, er, what do I do in the meantime?"

"Already done more than enough," Jake said ominously before sulking out of the room.

Rose exhaled loudly. "Help get this equipment sorted so we can stow it as soon as Tosh gets back. We need to leave as soon as we can."

~*~*~*~*~

Precisely because they were in a hurry, it took absurdly long to get on the road; Rose insisted on driving the first leg, and then stayed in the front while Jake took the second. She could hear, in the back, Grace and Tosh conversing quietly at times, but the Doctor stayed silent and Rose kept her eyes on the road.

They made one stop at a charging station, Jake plugging in the van while the others ran inside to use the toilet and stock up on crisps, sweets, soft drinks and depressing little sandwiches wrapped in plastic. By that time, Rose's anger had sort of mutated from the fiery I-will-stick-pencils-in-your-eyes sort of thing to a smoldering sort of I-do-not-know-if-I-can-speak-to-you weight. Still, it gave her the willpower to stick her head in the back of the van and offer the Doctor one of the sandwiches. "I got this for you if you're hungry," she said, fully aware that she sounded like a snotty teenager.

"Thanks," he murmured. He was hunched over on a bench a manner that would almost certainly be painful in the morning, and she realized he was poking at the synthorganic device with one of Tosh's long, thin instruments.

"What are you doing?" she asked, probably too harshly again.

He looked up at her with his eyebrows raised. "Toshiko said I could," he said quickly, pulling the device closer to his chest

Rose took a deep breath. "I'm sure she did, but what are you doing?"

"Oh," and his shoulders relaxed a bit. "Just playing about with it. Trying to remember some tricks."

"Tricks?"

He gave the device a few more prods, and suddenly the blue lights on the round end started blinking rhythmically. "There," he said, a bit of life coming into his voice. "Knew I'd get it eventually. It's now broadcasting the fourth act of *Othello* in Morse code."

It was such an odd thing to say and do that it made Rose smile; it took a moment for the practical implications to catch up to her. "So you know your way around this technology pretty well."

"Eh, so so," he said with a shrug. "It's your basic synthorganic circuit, half difference engine and half synapse. Sort of a cornerstone of Cyberman technology, but not that hard to program."

"So they're not all steel," she said.

"Or silver, depending on where they're coming from." He put the tool away and let the circuit blink away inside its plastic casing. "Wonder what the wingnuts were doing with one in a hotel, though."

"Wonder how many they have and what they're using them for," Rose said.

Jake knocked loudly on the side of the van. "All aboard what's going aboard," he shouted. "Some of us want to sleep tonight before we start apologizing to Winnie the Pooh."

Tosh climbed back into the rear of the van and curled up with her laptop again. Grace deliberately took a bit longer to finish some gentle stretches before she ambled up to Rose. "You still calling shotgun?"

Rose glanced at the Doctor, who was staring at the circuit a little too hard. "Nah, it's your turn to drive," she said. "I'll kip back here for a bit."

They didn't talk for the rest of the ride back, and when Rose did doze off a bit, it was on the other side of the van and she ended up with a crick in her neck. They didn't talk while they navigated around Cardiff, the dashboard clock rolling over past 12:00 while Grace and Jake argued dully about the most efficient way to drop everyone off. They didn't talk as they plodded up the stairs to their flat, and when Rose collapsed on the bed in her underwear she thought, *There has to be a later this time*, and then fell asleep so fast she didn't remember the Doctor laying down at all.

~*~*~*~*~*~

When Mr. Winslow said *first thing in the morning*, he usually meant eight o'clock sharp; Rose was dragged awake all too early by her alarm, and the Doctor managed to sleep right through it. *Later*, she thought, but didn't wake him before she slipped out the front door.

Everyone gathered around Ianto's desk in their formal serious-business attire—Jake was even sporting a tie—though Ianto was the only one who looked the slightest bit rested. He passed around little cups of espresso to all of them while they waited for Mr. Winslow to call them in. "A lot of data at the fifteen-meter radius dumped last night," Tosh said between sips. "I'm checking it against the hotel register again, but I think we can exclude Collins from our list of suspects."

"Which one's he again?" Grace asked blearily.

"Blogger," Jake said. "Author of brilliant pieces of shit like 'Pete Tyler Will Kill Us All' and 'I Like Big Guns and I Cannot Lie.'"

"Those other wingnuts can't deny," Rose said, spontaneously, and it wasn't really funny but they all ended up giggling insanely from a combination of sleep deprivation and caffeine, and Tosh had to retouch her eye makeup before they could go into Winslow's office.

He already had a stack of marked-up files on his desk, and a row of chairs across from it, like a reverse firing squad. "Sit down, please," he said. "I've just gotten word from the Edinburgh office. The devices are a synthorganic circuit manufactured to Cybus specifications, but they're working on documenting the exact materials. You brought a sample back with you?"

"It's already been delivered to the labs," Tosh said. "The radiation profile fits the one we've been tracking, but it's much fainter than we expected—probably the regular shipments contain several times as many units as the one we intercepted."

"Yes. About that." Winslow humphed and fiddled with his papers again. "I understand a certain Dr. John Noble was registered at the hotel where all this occurred."

"That is correct, sir," Rose said. She sat up straighter in her chair and leaned forward, determined to take the blame via body language if nothing else. "Dr. Noble followed us to Edinburgh and...intervened in the surveillance operation."

"She means he stumbled into the middle of it and nearly blew our cover, sir." Jake said firmly.

"He's also the one who actually recovered the circuits," Grace said. "Sir."

Winslow raised an eyebrow at them. "I wasn't aware that Dr. Noble was an employee of Torchwood," he said. "How was he aware of your planned activities?"

"The Doctor has the highest security clearance Mr. Tyler is authorized to grant," Rose reminded him. "I wasn't aware that Torchwood was in the business of keeping secrets from the United Nations."

"We are in the business of keep covert activities covert," Winslow said. "Mr. Simmonds, what's your assessment of Dr. Noble's involvement?"

Rose bit down on her lip while Jake sat up a little straighter. "He's lucky he didn't get himself arrested again, sir," he said. "Dr. Holloway and I were undercover in the room when he blundered in and we could've been compromised. The fact that he recovered the circuits isn't an excuse for his behavior, it's the only reason we shouldn't be prosecuting him ourselves."

Winslow turned. "Dr. Holloway?"

Grace glanced nervously at Rose and said, "I agree that Dr. Noble was reckless, but the fact is that we weren't compromised and we did obtain valuable intelligence."

"And the Horatii know we've got it," Jake pointed out. "They're not going to miss the fact that their toys disappeared just after a random party-crasher started sticking his hands in people's crotches. They've got to suspect either us or the government."

"Because wandering into a room and stealing the appetizers is the kind of stealthy infiltration we're known for," Grace said.

"Dr. Sato, your thoughts?" Winslow said, before Grace and Jake could start going at it.

Tosh looked surprised to be addressed with the honorific. "I...can't really say, sir," she said. "He did recover the circuits in an...irregular way, and he made some comments that were quite helpful in figuring out their function, but...well, as you said, he isn't Torchwood."

"A succinct assessment," Winslow said. He looked at Rose again. "I'm going to want a full written report on the incident as well as regular updates on any suspects you might have. As for Dr. Noble, perhaps you could have a talk with him about his manners, Ms. Prentice?"

Rose swallowed hard around the bitter taste in her mouth. "Yes, sir. Will that be all, sir?"

"I think so." He made a note on one of his files. "You're dismissed."

Rose dove into her report for the rest of the morning, mostly to avoid talking to Jake. She knew she'd be too tempted to ask him what happened to the anarchist who'd liberated Paris, and knew him well enough to know the resulting verbal knife fight would leave them both flayed. She also wanted to avoid Grace, more because of guilt than anger; she wasn't sure how much of that defense of the Doctor was an honest opinion and how much of it was Grace trying to protect Rose because of...something. Some spirit of sisterly solidarity, or perhaps she just didn't want to lose her team leader, or just wanted to wind up Jake. Maybe she'd just decided that she liked the Doctor and was going to take his side; Lord knew he'd warmed up to her fast. It probably didn't matter, but it made Rose uncomfortable.

She was deep into the delicate task of describing what happened when the Doctor burst out without making it seem like he was completely insane, when Ianto knocked politely on her door. "Ma'am? Can I order you something for lunch?" he asked.

Rose glanced at the clock on her screen and winced. Now that she thought about it, she actually was hungry—no amount of angst could replace a meal. *I'll get myself something a little later*, she almost said, until she remembered what had to happen *later* and decided roundly to fuck it all. "I'm going out for lunch," she announced, saving her report and closing it with a sentence left dangling. "Transfer anything urgent to my mobile."

"Yes, ma'am," Ianto said with a little nod. "Also, Jake would like you know that he did only what he had to do."

If he was resorting to using Ianto as a messenger boy, he had to be truly worried about her reaction. She sighed. "Let him know I understand," she said. "I'll be back in an hour."

The bus home took too long, and Rose was sort of afraid to call ahead and confirm the Doctor was home—she wasn't sure if she'd rather he was or he wasn't. *Coward*, she told herself in her own head, but it didn't stop something from knotting up inside her when she unlocked the door and immediately heard the Doctor call out, "Hello?"

"Hey," she said, as she shut the door behind her. "Taking a long lunch."

"Ah." He'd been sitting on the couch in his pajamas, watching television—weather reports, it looked like, and Rose didn't remember if she ordered the weather channels or not and decided it was best not to know. There was a glass of milk and half a banana on the table between his propped-up feet, and he sank back down into his seat before saying, "Left early this morning, too."

"Mr. Winslow wanted us early," she said.

Mild, but a feint: "You didn't wake me."

Evenly, a retreat: "You looked like you needed the rest."

She thought about fixing herself a sandwich before they did any talking and then realized that she was looking for a way to keep delaying. She set aside her purse and walked straight to the couch, sitting down on the arm. "We need to talk."

He didn't look at her. "Just a minute," he said, "They're about to run a story about the flooding in Guangdong and I know that's, well, nowhere near where your mum is, but I'm still curious and--"

Rose snatched up the remote control and switched off the telly. "Let me talk," she said, more frostily, and his mouth shut with a little snapping sound. "What you did yesterday was so far out of line that I don't even know where to start. You lied to me about where you were and what you were doing this weekend. You interfered with my work and embarrassed me in front of my team and my boss. You put Grace and Jake in real danger, and yes, you got us the circuits, but now the targets know they're being watched, they know that we know part of their plan, and they are going to take steps to cover their tracks even more thoroughly. It could easily be two steps forwards and three steps back and I am the one who's going to be held responsible for it."

The Doctor squirmed for a minute, nudging his glass of milk with his toe, then said, "I'm sorry." He grimaced. "I mean it, I really am, I'm not just saying it. I just...I wasn't thinking about, you know, all that. Consequences and stuff."

Rose took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "What were you thinking of, then?" she asked, and hoped it didn't sound too much like an accusation.

"I miss you," he blurted, looked up at her with the sad puppy eyes. "I miss us. I thought...those first couple days, we were good, yeah? But now you're at the office all bloody day and I'm just some kind of house boy...I mean, I said I'd do the curtains and mortgage thing for you, but I didn't think I was going to end up like this. Just...this." He flapped a hand around the disheveled flat, then sighed, and his shoulders seemed to collapse in on themselves a bit. "I just want things to be like the old days, I suppose."

Rose shifted off the arm of the couch and sat down next to him, leaving a sliver of space in between. "Then I guess I'm sorry too," she said, hating the words and the truth underneath them. "For leaving you here by yourself. Should've known that a bored Time Lord is a dangerous thing."

It was a feeble joke and it didn't work. "I reckon I'm a bit jealous," the Doctor said instead. "Or, I guess it's envious, isn't it? Envy, jealousy—I used to know how those went and now I get them confused." He rubbed his nose. "I get envious because you're out there having all the fun, you know, Torchwooding it up and I'm...here. Making spaghetti and toothpaste."

"I'm sorry," Rose said again, and closed the gap, leaning gently against his arm. "That doesn't mean I totally forgive you yet, but I'm sorry for my part in this mess."

"Snot your fault," he mumbled. "If Pete wants to hire me he should bloody well give me something to do."

Rose suspected that Pete had only drawn up the contract for the same reasons Oleg and Lena ended up as mansion caretakers, but now wasn't the time to tell the Doctor that. "We need to find you something to do instead," she said. "Something besides the spaghetti and toothpaste."

The Doctor wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and then suddenly brightened, looking at her with a ghost of the old manic grin. "We could take a trip," he said. "Wouldn't be quite like the old days, I know, but there's a whole planet here I haven't seen properly yet except through the History Channel and they're always on about the Nazis anyway."

"All right," she said. "When do we leave?"

He shrugged, jostling her. "Right now! Well, I mean, right away! Our bags are still packed, we've got credit cards, just book ourselves a flight and we're off!"

Rose tried to straighten up a bit despite the weight of his arm. "I don't think..."

"Oh, come on," he said, "we can go to the Yucatan—I loved the Mayans, they did such a good hot chocolate, you know, with the chilis—or maybe India--"

"Doctor--" she tried again, but he talked right over her.

"--Japan, or maybe Turkestan, did you know there's a Turkestan here? They've got *hordes*."

"Doctor," Rose said, seizing him by the hand. (She may have applied a little fingernail to the move.) He stopped this time. "I'm in the middle of a case, remember? I can't just take off for the Yucatan like that."

"Oh," he said, shrinking again. "Right. I...sorry."

"Maybe next time I get a holiday?" she said, hoping to reassure him, but he just looked broodier than ever. "Look, I'm sorry, Doctor, but I didn't have a job in the old days. And no, that doesn't mean you should blow up Torchwood. I like it way better than I ever liked Henrik's and--"

"That's it!" he blurted, and straightened up so fast Rose nearly got an elbow in the ribs. He grinned at her. "Rose Tyler, you are a genius."

"Of course I am," she said. "What'd I say?"

"I need a job," the Doctor declared. "A proper one, not this consultancy, because really it's a bit like being your dad's kept man and that's *weird*. I--" he leaned close to her like a conspirator, "am going to work for Torchwood."

For a minute, Rose blinked at him, as his words got hung up somewhere in her brain and refused to process. "Are you—I mean—Doctor, are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," he said. "It'll be like the old days again, you and me, helping people. Somebody's got to replace Mickey, right?"

She really wished he wouldn't bring up Mickey in the middle of this. "I'm not the only one on the team," she reminded him. "You'd have to work with Jake and Grace and Tosh, too."

"What's wrong with them?" he asked. "Aside from the bit where Jake hates me, of course, but I've always been able to work around that before."

Rose groped for a tactful way to say this. "You're not exactly at your best when you've got rules to follow," she finally said.

He made a rude noise at her. "I'll have you know I spent years working for UNIT back in the day," he said. "I can do teamwork and rules and everything just as well as the next fellow. Just ask the Brigadier." His face fell a little bit. "Which I mean totally metaphorically, of course, since he's in the other universe and all. But you get my point."

"What if Torchwood decide you're not a fit for Mickey's old job?" she asked, not even sure where she was taking this.

"Rose, Rose, Rose," he said airily, "the wonderful thing about being a recovering Time Lord is that I have a nine-hundred year skill set. There's got to be an opening *somewhere* for *something*. The statistics are all in my favor."

She bit her lip and thought furiously. This could all go horribly wrong. If the Doctor got rejected—and his recent actions didn't exactly provide a ringing endorsement—he would be even worse off than before. If the Doctor got hired, there were still a lot potential disasters lurking...but like he said, they'd be together again, on the same side, and he'd be with her, where at least she could keep an eye on him...

"All right," Rose said, and turned to peck him on the cheek. "Let's write down your CV."

The Doctor made a face. "Oh, do we have to? I hate writing those, I never know how to sort out all the dates and things."

"That...might be a problem," Rose allowed. "But just think of the look on Mr. Winslow's face when he gets it."

That got her a grin, and so she snatched her laptop off the coffee table, and they spread it over both their laps and got to work.

ACT 3: Sächliche Romanz

*Sie gingen ins kleinste Café am Ort
und rührten in ihren Tassen.*

Am Abend saßen sie immer noch dort.

*Sie saßen allein, und sie sprachen kein Wort
und konnten es einfach nicht fassen.*

--Erich Kästner, "Sächliche Romanz"

Chapter 10

The CV they came up with over the course of the weekend was several hundred pages long, and at times veered more into the domain of true-crime thriller than professional prose, and some of the dates had to be cross-indexed, but at least it all fit into one e-mail message. Early Monday morning they sent in the whole thing with an application that listed Pete, Rose and Jackie as references and a cover letter that the Doctor, despite her protestations, wouldn't let Rose see. All day she tried to finish her formal report on the Edinburgh incident while squirming in her seat, and fought the urge to ask Tosh to tap into the security system so she could spy on Mr. Winslow.

(She gave no specific orders to the Doctor with regards to Torchwood's security system, and her phone was suspiciously silent considering he'd been practically vibrating over breakfast; still, Rose thought it better to maintain some plausible deniability there.)

Jake and Grace and Tosh came in and out, and Jake at least was trying to act like nothing upsetting had happened in Edinburgh, which Rose interpreted as a kind of non-apology. They had more satellite data on the radiation signature, but Tosh admitted that they couldn't track every single signal as closely as they'd done the ones at the fundraiser or they'd crash even Torchwood's impressive mainframe. The fingerprints turned out to be a bust—when they were done sorting out Rose's and Tosh's and Grace's and the Doctor's, there was nothing left but a few partials too smudged to match anything. So they still didn't know who exactly had the package, and they had no idea who the intended recipient was, and she was pretty sure they couldn't just arrest everyone who was in the room at the time, no matter what Jake suggested.

Rose was just thinking about whether she ought to be heading home when her office phone rang at her. Mr. Winslow never did warm up to instant messengers. "Prentice," she answered, trying not to sound too eager.

"Ms. Prentice, could I see you in my office for a bit?" Winslow asked, as blandly as ever.

Rose kept a measured stride down the halls and forced her face to be calm and professional and innocent of all charges, even though her stomach was full of butterflies. She wondered if this was what parents felt like when sending their kids off to school for the first time. Of course there were perfectly good reasons for the Doctor not to get hired on, ones that had nothing to do with his qualifications or

her wisdom in helping him, but she could already see herself doing damage control for him, reassuring him, finding some kind of friendly little lie to tell to make rejection hurt less...not that she'd ever lied to the Doctor before, but he'd already lied to her, and at least she'd be doing it for the right reasons...

She found Mr. Winslow staring at a stack of pages the size of a phone book and realized he'd printed out the entire CV. He looked up at her with bleary eyes and asked, "Ms. Prentice, is this some kind of a joke?"

"No, sir," she said, folding her hands behind her back so he couldn't tell if they were sweaty. "I believe that's a job application."

"This is..." He flipped over a few random pages. "Why exactly is Dr. Noble applying for a job with Torchwood?"

"He feels he's not being challenged enough by his work for Mr. Tyler," she said, which was technically true. "He's looking for a more hands-on way of utilizing his skills."

"Skills," Winslow said weakly. "His *skills*. Do you know he claims to have invented the duck-billed platypus?"

"He's told me that before, yes," she admitted.

"And been present at the formation of the Earth?" Winslow echoed. "As well as the destruction of Pompeii? And been knighted by Queen Victoria? But not in that order?"

Rose fought down a smile. "You do remember he's got the memories and abilities of a nine-hundred-year-old-Time Lord, sir," she said.

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes like they pained him. "So you're saying I'm supposed to believe everything he claims."

"I'm saying we haven't got much choice whether to believe him or not," Rose demurred. "Seeing as he's a time traveler from a parallel universe, it's not like we can get independent confirmation."

"Do *you* believe him?" Winslow asked.

"Well," she said, and thought about his *plans* while she was in Edinburgh, but then squashed the feeling. "I'm not totally sure I believe the bit about the platypus, but everything else I would stake my life on."

Winslow sighed and paged randomly through the CV some more. "Skills," he muttered. "What are we supposed to do with these sorts of skills?"

"He's very flexible," Rose couldn't help but put in.

"Oh, indeed," Winslow grumbled. "He could be Director of the Institute if we happened to have that opening. Which we *don't*. And if we are to believe this ridiculous novel of his, he's got several centuries more experience than anyone on the staff. So where are we supposed to put him?"

Rose hadn't considered that being *over*-qualified might be the problem, and bit her lip. "Sir," she said. "If you don't mind me suggesting—there is an opening on my team."

Winslow looked up at her with a raised eyebrow. "You're referring to the vacancy left by Mr. Smith?"

"Yes, sir," Rose said. "The Doctor and I have worked closely together in the past, remember, and he is sort of already working our case..."

He leaned back in his chair and looked at her. "You suggest that we should reward what you admit to be his reckless interference in your work with an offer of employment?"

Rose stood up a little straighter. "I'm saying we need him," she shot back. "And it's better to have him working with us than at loggerheads."

Winslow sighed again and made a face, but eventually arranged all the pages of the Doctor's CV back in their precipitous stack. "All right," he said. "I suppose it's worth the attempt. Let him know that I'll call him tomorrow morning with a formal offer--"

Before he could finish his sentence, his phone rang. He frowned and made a little *just-a-minute* gesture at Rose, then hit his speakerphone button. Before he could answer, however, the Doctor's voice came over the line, utterly gleeful. "*Thank you, Mr. Winslow, I'm certain you won't be disappointed,*" he said. "*When can I start? How's tomorrow? Is tomorrow good for you?*"

"Dr. Noble?" Winslow asked warily.

"*Yeah, that's me,*" he said. "*Sorry about compromising your internal security, but I just couldn't stand the anticipation. Can I wear suits to work? Is okay to wear suits? Rose only wears suits when she thinks you're going to yell at her.*"

Rose covered her smile at Winslow's dumbfounded expression, and silently mouthed at him, *on our side*. Winslow cleared his throat. "Certainly, Dr. Noble," he said. "You may report at eight o'clock tomorrow morning and I'll arrange for you to get our new-employee orientation."

"*Brilliant!*" he crowed. "*What about the suit?*"

"You can wear the suit, Doctor," Rose said, just because it looked like Winslow was about to cry. "We'll see you tomorrow, sir," she told him.

"*Yeah, tomorrow!*" the Doctor said. Then: "*Wait, do I have to call you 'sir' too?*"

~*~*~*~*~

The celebrated with a night out at a fancy Indian restaurant, and the Doctor was practically bouncing on his cushion. "This is going to be brilliant," he kept saying. "You and me, together again, just like the old days!"

"With Grace and Tosh and Jake," she added.

"Eh, they're like the old days, too," he said with a little wave.

Rose winked at him across the table. "You know, this makes me your supervisor now. Technically I'm fraternizing with a subordinate."

"An underaged subordinate," he added. "Poor little me, I'm just one month old, and innocent of the ways of the world. I don't have to call you *mum* at work, do I?"

The very idea made Rose flinch. "Er. No. But you do have to be nice to Mr. Winslow."

The Doctor quirked an eyebrow at her. "Can I call him 'Winny-the-Pooh' behind his back like Jake does, though?"

Rose almost snorted her lhasie through her nose. "I think it might be the only way for the two of you to make friends."

"Yeah, I don't quite understand what he has against me." The Doctor busied himself with picking poppyseeds off his nan. "I mean, it's not like I made Mickey stay behind or anything."

"Let's not talk about Mickey tonight," Rose said, rather than correct him. "There's more positive things to talk about, yeah?"

"Oh, yeah." He gave her that look again. "For instance, the merits of fraternization with a subordinate."

"That sounds good," she said with a grin.

As worried as she'd been about it, now that the Doctor was finally hired Rose was beginning to think maybe it had been a good idea after all. He was more like himself again, bright and chatty and looking at her with love and wonder in his eyes; she wondered how she hadn't seen before just how much being unemployed had weighed on him. This was the man she'd fallen in love with, back from wherever he'd gone, and as they settled into bed that night she dared to hope that things were finally going to change for the better.

He was up before her in the morning, fussing over his tie and his cufflinks, and she couldn't convince him to eat anything until she pointed out that showing up to work under the influence of just three cups of coffee probably wouldn't be a good first impression. "Are you nervous?" she asked while he picked at his toast.

"Of course not, don't be absurd," he said. "Why would I be nervous? I'm far too old and dignified to be nervous."

"It's the first day," she said, "and you're only one month."

He sniffed at her. "I've always believed I'm as old as I feel, first of all, and secondly, I'm the Doctor. I'm brilliant. I'm the Destroyer of Worlds. I am not afraid of Torchwood." He left half his breakfast on the plate and started fixing another cup of coffee.

"I didn't say you were afraid," Rose said. "You just seem worried."

"I've got nothing to be worried *about*," he said ferociously, and guzzled his coffee black.

At the front desk, Rose had to sign him in, and she left him in Brynn's tender mercies while she went to deliver the good news to her team. Her last look at him was Brynn leading him by the wrist towards Human Resources, while he dragged his feet and stared at just about everything around him. Not nervous at all, right. She preemptively put her phone on silent.

She put off the big announcement until after she'd worked through a few emails and other niggling administrativa, and had her own cup of coffee (only number two on the day; the Doctor had managed four and a half) and rearranged some of the items on her cork board. Then she realized *she* was being nervous and braced herself. She brought up the internal instant messenger.

prenticere: Team meeting in five, everyone, my office

simmondsjw: what, got a confession?

prenticere: just come down here, Jake

hollowaygr: Be a minute, need more coffee

satot: I have some news from T2, be there in a sec.

simmondsjw: why not jus ttell us now?

satot: sec!

simmondsjw: =p

hollowaygr: Real matuer, jake.

simmondsjw: as always

simmondsjw: thought you were getting cofee?

hollowaygr: brb to smack you

Rose smiled at them and made certain to clean off all her guest chairs and the corner of the desk where Jake would probably try to sit. Tosh was the first one in, but as she wasn't smiling one of her pleased, secret smiles Rose figured the news couldn't be too good. "No spoilers?" she asked.

Tosh mimed zipping her lips. "They'll be here in a minute."

Grace wandered in with her coffee, and a concentrated barrage of phone and IM assault eventually got Jake to show up, too. "So what's the fire?" he grumbled, sitting on the corner of the desk. "Unless you've found something really good..."

"The Edinburgh office has been doing materials analysis on the circuits," Tosh said, as if she couldn't keep the news inside any longer. "They're not Cybus standards—they found contaminants that don't match anything recovered during the war."

"What's that mean?" Jake asked.

Tosh shrugged. "Well, maybe nothing. But it could also indicate that the Horatii or their suppliers aren't using the same fabrication process, or they're starting from different raw inputs. If we can figure out what the differences are, we can narrow down our options some more."

"Well, that's something," Grace said, before Jake could be rude about it. "How long's it gonna take to figure out those differences?"

"A while," Tosh admitted. "I've had the remaining samples sent down from Edinburgh; they should arrive this afternoon and I can start analysis."

"But that is not why our fearless leader called us down here, is it?" Jack asked. "Tell me you've got something we can act on now."

"Not exactly," Rose said. "I wanted to say Mr. Winslow's finally hired us another team member."

"Hired?" Grace pounced on that word. "From outside the Institute?"

"And did it take him long enough?" Jake asked. "Who is it, anyway? He or she?"

Rose braced herself. "It's Dr. Noble, actually."

She wasn't sure what she was expecting, but what she got was: Jake slid off the corner of the desk and stared at her for a moment before walking out of the room. Tosh's eyes got impossibly wide, and her hand flew to her mouth. Grace's brows furrowed, and she leaned forward. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes," Rose said, glaring after Jake. "It's not as if someone's died. Mr. Winslow hired him yesterday."

"Well, that's...that's good," Tosh said, and her smile didn't even seem fake. "I've seen how well he knows the technology, he'll be a lot of help on the materials analysis."

"I'm not questioning his abilities," Grace said. "I'm just wondering if it's a good idea to work this closely with your boyfriend."

"It'll be fine," Rose said. "We've done it before."

"And were you his boss at the time?" she asked pointedly.

Jake came back in, looking a little red in the face. "It's fine," he declared. "It's great. I will love him like a brother. Just don't make me talk to him."

"I know plenty of brothers who don't talk to each other," Grace said.

Rose folded her arms over her chest and looked Jake in the eye. "I'm only going to say this once, Jake," she said. "Mickey chose to leave. The Doctor didn't make him go. You're putting the blame in the wrong place."

"That's easy for you to say, innit?" he snapped.

"What are you implying?" Rose demanded.

"Nothing at all," he said, and shoved his hands in his pocket. "Just, nothing. Forget I said anything. Friends?"

"Only if you try acting like one," she said icily, and he made a face and walked out again.

Grace stood up very quickly. "I'll just go talk to him, see if I can create some head-ass separation. Be just a minute."

Which left Rose alone with Tosh, who smiled weakly. "Guess that didn't go over very well, did it?" she said.

Rose sighed. "Actually, I was expecting much worse."

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They met back in the lobby at the end of the day, the Doctor loaded down with packets and handbooks from New Employee Orientation and Rose not having seen Jake for the rest of the day. "So how'd it go?" she asked.

"Tediously," he declared. "I haven't had to sign my name so many times in one day since the time I was mistaken for Jim Morrison. And I kept forgetting what name to sign."

"Well, all the boring stuff's out of the way now," she said, taking his free hand in hers. "Tomorrow starts the fun part."

"Yes indeed," he said with a grin, and didn't even notice when a pamphlet about telepathy slipped out of his stack and fluttered away down the street. "So what do we get to do, eh? Wild car chases? Uncover as sewer workers? Totally unauthorized use of personal data in public databases?"

"Tosh needs your help analyzing those circuits," she said. "She's trying to figure out what's different about the manufacturing process compared to the one the Cybermen use."

The Doctor's grin faltered. "Toshiko, you mean?"

"Yeah, she lets people call her Tosh." Rose glanced at him carefully. "She's pretty eager to work with you, you know. We really were short-handed."

"Oh, yeah, I get that," he said quickly, and added, "What about you?"

"I'm still digging up dirt on our suspects with Jake and Grace," she said. "Well, the four suspects and every other donor to the AE or the Horatii, in hopes of coming up with something incriminating. We still don't know what they mean to do with the circuits or why they're bringing them into Britain."

"Sounds like fun," he said, but added, "Bet materials analysis is more fun, though."

She shrugged. "I've got the security clearance to look at some things not even Jake gets to see. Bank records and stuff. Plus, I can always beg Dad for permission to access things without muddling through the usual paperwork."

He made an exaggerated shocked face. "Rose, that's horribly illegal and unethical and I think I love you a little more for it."

She swatted him on the shoulder. "Anyway, it gets us nothing without your bit. If you and Tosh can sort out what they need and we can figure out what we have, we put the two together and voila—there's our target."

"Detective work," he said, and shook his head. "It's so much easier when you can just sit everyone down in the drawing room and get their stories."

"Very Agatha Christie," Rose said.

"Yeah," he said wistfully. "She was a lovely woman."

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A week later Rose had one of those meetings with Pete, taking the high-speed train to London for lunch at the flat. "It's not a shot in the dark," she protested with rolling a ball at Tony and letting him roll it back. "Well, I mean, it sort of is, but that's all we've got left right now."

"You're telling me you've combed through every single asset under All Earth's umbrella in Great Britain?" he asked.

"Well, of *course* not," she said. "But we don't have time for that. Now that they know they're under surveillance, they're going to be taking more precautions."

Pete snorted over the sandwiches he was fixing. "As I've heard, it wasn't so much surveillance as random assault."

"He was trying to help," Rose said stiffly. Tony knocked the ball under a chair and started crawling after it. "He's been loads of help since he signed on with Torchwood."

"Really?" Pete asked. "I'll be honest, that surprises me somewhat." Rose glared at him. "Don't give me that, I'm just saying...he's a bit erratic, isn't he?"

"You think he's erratic and yet you agreed to be a reference on his CV," Rose said.

"I think he's had a recent change of species and that's enough to unsettle anyone," Pete said stiffly. He carried the tray of sandwiches to the table. "Though of course, you'd know better than me."

That was actually kind of debateable; over the past week Rose had been buried so deep in financial and legal documents that she hadn't seen the Doctor at all from the time they got to work to the time they left. He was happier in the evenings, though, and instead of interrogating her about work (*We get enough of that at work, now, wouldn't you say?* was his stance on the matter) he told stories about his old life and experimented with the contents of an Italian cookbook of unknown providence. At least he didn't incorporate toothpaste into the mix. It made Rose sure she'd done the right thing, even if Jake was still being touchy and quiet around her, because they were both happy now and the work was getting done—or it would be, if they could just get Pete to sign off on the authorization.

"So about the Swiss bank accounts," Rose said after they'd eaten. She'd even volunteered to scrub jam off Tony's face (because jam sandwiches were currently all he would eat, apparently) while Pete did the dishes.

He sighed. "Fine. You win. I will authorize Torchwood to seize the records *if* your formal request checks out. We've not gone mad with power yet, you know."

"That's all I ask," she said airily, and gave Tony a raspberry on the cheek to make him squeal. "You heard from Mum this week?"

"Eh, just a bit," he said. "You know how the phones in China are. At least she's not in the flood zone, thank God for that."

"I'll keep trying to call her, then," Rose said. As she carried Tony back to the nursery, she spotted Pete's tuxedo laying out on the bed. "Oi, where's the party?"

"What?" he called from the kitchen.

"The party!"

"I can't hear you, Rose!"

"Party!" she screamed.

Tony added, "Patty!"

Rose put him in his crib and then went back to the kitchen. "I asked, where's the party at?" she said. "You've got your tux all laid out and everything."

"Oh, that." He shut the water off and dried his hands. "Some charity fundraiser or another. I honestly have no idea, but apparently it's the easiest way to make nice with some Brazillian who owns half the world's sugar cane or some such nonsense."

"And why do you have to make nice with Brazilians in the first place?" Rose said. "Everybody knows they're all scavengers and war profiteers."

"Yes, but they're rich war profiteers and we're the ones who let them profit," Pete said wearily.
"Somebody had to run the global economy while the Cybermen were converting half the developed world, after all."

"So they get to be filthy rich while all over Europe there's unemployed teenagers rioting in the streets," Rose grumbled. "You know, it's almost enough to make me agree with..."

She stopped.

Of course.

"Agree with who?" Pete asked, but Rose was already diving for her purse. "Something wrong?"

"I've just realized where we haven't been looking," Rose said, fumbling with her phone and dialing the second stored number. "Hello, Jake?"

"Oj, Rose, are we on speaking terms again? I hadn't noticed."

"All right, first of all, fuck you," Rose said, which made Pete flinch and point irritably towards the nursery. "Second, have you been looking at AE's overseas donors?"

"Well, yeah, the ones they've got," he said. *"Not a lot of people worried about British politics outside of Britain."*

"I'm not talking about All Earth GB," Rose said. "I'm talking about the parent organization, the multinational. They can pour money into a national party without it showing up as a donation on anyone's balance sheets, right?"

"Rose, d'you have any idea how much time it'll take to find a list of everyone on the planet who's donated to AE?"

"Focus on big donors," she said. "Particularly Brazil. They've got AE in their ruling coalition, haven't they?"

"I begin to see a method in your madness," Jake said, and hung up on her, which was okay.

"If you're going to arrest whoever's throwing the charity ball," Pete said as soon as she put her phone away, "please give me advanced warning. I don't want to put on the tux for nothing."

"It'll be fine," she said. "I've got to go. I still want the Swiss account access!"

"Of course," he said. "You know, I do wonder what I'll talk about with Tony when he's older, considering what our conversations are like."

Rose grinned on her way out the door. "I think if we're really, really lucky, he'll become an accountant."

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By the following morning, they had their man. Or rather, their multinational corporate entity, which was used as a shell by a Brazilian investment bank that bought out three Cybus factories in North America. They'd transferred "undisclosed assets" to another shell firm, one almost certainly under the control of the Horatii—two of the three "board of directors" were public members of the organization and the third was an AE booster.

"It's almost too good to be true," Rose said, just staring at the slim file of documents for the transaction.

"It's like Christmas," Grace said. "Now all I need is for my father to show up drunk and tell me about his sexual needs."

"It's useless unless we've got the physical evidence," Jake pointed out. "The army was supposed to swoop in and clean up all the conversion sites—for all we know, the Horatii got the copper wires from the walls to sell as scrap."

Rose shook her head. "It wouldn't be such a secret if it was scrap. The factories are being redeveloped, not demolished. And even the army makes mistakes, right?"

Grace stood up and popped her back. "I can get on the phone with the military authorities, try to get the documentation from when those sites were secured. There's got to be an original Cybus inventory somewhere to compare it to."

"I need to check in with Tosh anyway," Rose said. "We can ask her about anything that turns out to be missing."

"I'm going to take a nap," Jake announced, and leaned over the table to rest his head on his folded arms. "Just so you know. Don't wait on me or anything."

"Figure out where those undisclosed assets are now," Rose told him. "If they're in Britain, we grab them now."

Tosh's office and the Doctor's were both at the far end of the corridor, around a funny little bend that meant neither of them had any windows. Tosh claimed she didn't mind, though. (The Doctor had never expressed an opinion, but Rose was not stupid enough to put him in Mickey's old office—it sent all the wrong messages, especially to Jake.) Rose knocked once and then poked her head inside, to find Tosh nestled in the middle of a ring of computers and monitors, face-down on a keyboard, fast asleep. "Hey" she called, shutting the door. "Wake up, Sleeping Beauty."

Tosh took a deep breath and then started awake. The impressions of keys were stuck to the side of her face. "Oh! Oh, sorry, Rose, I don't know what happened."

"You all right?" she asked. Tosh could get lost in her work, she knew, but she didn't usually fall asleep with it.

"Fine, fine." Tosh tried to tuck some loose strands of hair back and then, with a little huff, yanked out her clip and started winding it up again. "Just been busy, is all. The materials analysis."

"How's that going?" Rose asked. "Because we might have a lead on some old Cyberman equipment that slipped through the army's fingers."

"That's great," Tosh said. "I, um, that is, we...well..."

Rose's stomach tightened unpleasantly. "You've made some progress, right?"

"Depends on how you define progress," Tosh said. "I mean, I've eliminated some possibilities and established a couple of scenarios, but there's only so much I can do, and when the computers are all running..."

"What about the Doctor?" Rose asked, interrupting. "What's he been doing?"

Tosh bit her lip and looked away. "I haven't actually seen much of John this past week."

"Haven't seen him?" Rose echoed, a funny feeling tightening in her stomach. "You're on the same case! The same project! What's he been doing if he's not helping you?"

As if to answer her, something in the next room over exploded.

It was powerful enough to send books and binders tumbling off Tosh's shelves, and while she dove to protect any delicate hardware in the line of fire, Rose bolted into the hallway. She was just in time catch the Doctor staggering out of his own office, followed by a small cloud of foul-smelling black smoke; he looked like a cartoon character, with a soot-covered face and hair blown back. He coughed on her, which she supposed was as close as he could get to saying *hello*.

Grace, Jack and Ianto came running from the opposite direction, and Rose dragged the Doctor clear of the door. "Somebody call for clean-up and containment," she said. "Doctor, what the hell were you doing in there?"

He coughed one last time, as Jake rushed past with a fire extinguisher. "Just a little project on the side," he croaked.

"Is there anything in there that's hazardous?" Rose asked. "Explosive? Combustible? Psychic?"

He shook his head. "Just a few things from the archives..."

Rose tightened her grip on his arms. "How did you get clearance to be in the archives?"

"Well," he said with an absurd little grin, "there's this nice fellow in security named Franky or Freddy or something who agreed to let me have a look around--"

He started coughing again, and Grace stepped in, saying, "He needs first aid," which may have been the only thing that prevented Rose from slapping him. Instead she tucked her hands under her armpits and alternated between looking into the office, where Jake was smothering everything in sight with pale yellow powder from the fire extinguisher, and at the Doctor, as Grace dabbed at some small oozing cuts

on his face with a wad of cotton wool from her first-aid kit. Tosh came out with an arm full of binders, looked around for a moment, and then retreated back into her office without saying a word.

The containment team arrived within minutes, fully hooded up and waving around sensors for everything from radiation to airborne microflora. One of them tried to ask Rose what had happened, but she just pointed at the Doctor. "I was working on some bibs and bobs from the archives," he rasped, still looking a little dazed. "Nothing special, but obviously the piping I was using as a primary resonator coil wasn't strong enough to withstand the pressure of the sonic waveplex..."

"Can you provide us with reference numbers for the items you used?" one of the containment officers asked.

"Um...maybe?" The Doctor squinted. "You'll have to talk to Freddy."

"What were you making, anyway?" Grace asked, as she shone her penlight up his nose. "No airway injury, by the way, you're lucky."

"Always been a lucky person," he said. "As for what I was building, I...no, you wouldn't remember the sonic screwdriver."

"The what?" Rose blurted, and that was apparently the straw that broke the camel's back; she pushed past a containment officer trying to scan her for microflora and stood over the Doctor. "You're telling me you were trying to re-build the sonic screwdriver?"

"Yes, I was," he said, and he finally seemed able to fully focus his attention. "So we can disable the synthorganic circuits."

"We don't need to disable the circuits," Rose said. "We need to stop them from being put into anything that needs disabling. And if we're going to do that, you need to be helping Tosh, *like I asked*, instead of stealing objects from the archives without authorization and then blowing yourself up with them!"

"It was an accident," he snarled. "I knew exactly what I was doing."

"And I didn't," Rose said. "I am team leader, Doctor, that means I'm in charge here. If you're not going to do what I ask you to do, I don't know why you even took this job!"

The Doctor surged to his feet, not entirely steady, but still towering over Rose, though it didn't cow her. "Are we done here?" he asked, looking at Grace and the containment team, and when nobody moved to actively stop him he stomped down the hallway to Mickey's empty office and slammed the door.

Rose folded her arms tightly, so no one could see how her hands were balled into fists, and turned the other direction. If her eyes got a little watery, she could always blame it on the lingering smoke.

The head containment officer cleared his throat. "So we're basically done here," he said. "Just have to sort out the blast site. You're, uh, free to go."

"Thank you," Rose managed to say, and then made her own hasty retreat—to her office, the one next door, as if the one thin wall was any shield. She shut the door against Grace's raised eyebrow and the containment team's watching and whatever it was that Jake was going to say, because he was Jake and he had to say *something*. She shut it, locked it, and then retreated to her desk chair, where she took deep breaths until she felt she could stop shaking.

~*~*~*~*~

Six o'clock came and crept away from her. She had avoided leaving her office as far as she could, but six o'clock meant going home, and another Later. She wasn't sure she was up to facing this one. She did have to file accident reports, since containment was called in, but she tried to make it sound like the whole stupid thing had been her idea from the start because she couldn't quite bear to get Mr. Winslow involved in her love life.

Maybe Grace had a point about hiring boyfriends after all.

When he'd steeled herself to at least share a civil bus home—or perhaps a taxi, though their last taxi ride had been after his arrest—she emerged from her office and looked into Mickey's. It was already empty but for a faint smell of smoke that lingered. Down the hall, though, the containment tape was partially torn off the Doctor's own door. Apparently he'd been allowed to re-occupy the blast zone. Rose imagined herself walked down to the door, knocking on it, going into another dark, foul-smelling room where the Doctor had almost died (or maybe not almost died, but he'd been hurt, he'd bled, and it was so easy to imagine that things had been worse)...she imagined standing before him and saying...what? *I'm sorry?* Did the words even matter if she wasn't?

Ianto came around a corner with a bucket of cleaning supplies in one hand and a pair of yellow rubber gloves in the other. "Evening, ma'am," he said.

"How's Freddy?" she asked, watching him select an air freshener and give the empty office a spritz.

Ianto kept up an amazing poker face. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, ma'am."

"Your security guard," Rose said. "The one you've been going with for ages. He's not in any trouble, is it?"

That got him to blush a little, just the ears and the back of his neck. "He...it'll be fine, I think." A pause. "Thank you for asking, ma'am."

"Honestly, Ianto, you can call me 'Rose,'" she sighed.

"Of course, ma'am."

She sighed. "Ianto, can I ask your opinion?"

"Of course, ma'am."

"Can you not call me 'ma'am' while I do it?"

He frowned slightly at her. "All right...Ms. Prentice."

"You're hopeless," she said. "Ianto, in your opinion, is there anything that excuses someone from ignoring their boss's orders?"

He thought for a moment. "Are you speaking in general or about a specific scenario?"

"In general."

He shrugged. "I suppose if the consequences of following the order would be worse than the consequences of ignoring it, then yes, it would be ethically acceptable."

"Very pragmatic of you," Rose said. She looked at the door again. "So why do I feel like I owe him an apology?"

He coughed. "I'm afraid I can't say, ma'am."

"What did I tell you?"

"My apologies, Ms. Prentice."

Rose stared at the door some more, wondering what the Doctor was doing in there. Was he still angry at her? Did he regret staying in this world, by her side? It wasn't as if the other Doctor had really given him a choice in the matter. Was he silently cursing her or just drawing up plans for a new sonic screwdriver?

Ianto cleared his throat. "I was in there earlier today to collect the recycling," he said. "Dr. Noble was building something out of toothpicks."

Rose blinked. "Toothpicks?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Where did he get toothpicks?" Ianto actually opened his mouth to answer. "No, never mind. I don't think I want to know. What's he building?"

"I can't actually say," he said. "It reminded me of a cross between a DNA molecule and a Moebius strip." And, after a beat, "He was also speaking to Tosh over speakerphone while he did it."

So he was doing his job. Finally. Rose sighed. "All right. Thanks, Ianto. If Dr. Noble asks where I am..." She thought about leaving some bitchy little stinger, and then decided it wasn't fair to either the Doctor or Ianto. "Just remind him to come home eventually, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Good night."

Chapter 11

The incident (or Incident, in Rose's mind) of the exploding screwdriver changed things. Or maybe just made some of the changes a little more noticeable. Their evenings went quiet, and there were no more

attempts at exotic alien cuisine. If anything, the Doctor found excuses to linger in the office later and later, go in earlier and earlier. They didn't take the same bus anymore, or the same lunch break. Tosh did all the reporting. Ianto reported that he was showing signs of real artistic genius with the toothpicks.

The fact that she had to get intelligence on her own boyfriend from the tea boy was not lost on Rose, but she didn't know what else to do. She could not take back the words said, and the more she thought about it, she didn't want to; she had been right, dammit. But it was cold comfort when she heard the Doctor moving about in the dark of lounge in the small hours of the morning, waiting to see if he would come to bed or confine himself to the couch, allegedly because he didn't want to wake her. She couldn't apologize, he couldn't let it go, and so they settled into careful, non-overlapping orbits.

Nearly another week passed like that before Tosh and Jake called Rose down to the conference room. She found the table covered in a sprawl of marked-up maps and glossy photographs and running computers, and the two of them practically bouncing with glee, which in Jake normally boded nothing but trouble. Neither of them looked very well-rested, and Tosh was clutching what smelled like one of Ianto's "special" coffees with the double espresso shot, but if they had anything worth reporting they'd instantly become the most beautiful people Rose had ever seen; the revelations about the Brazilian bankers had lead to a dead end. Sure, there were discrepancies between Cybus' own inventories and what the military had reclaimed at the end of the war, but tracking down the missing equipment only lead to another haystack of financial and legal documents and at this point Rose's eyes were about to cross.

"For the love of God, tell me you've got something useful," she asked after taking in the scene for a moment.

"We know where they're taking the synthorganic circuits," Jake announced. "That useful?"

Rose looked at the maps. "Explain. Now."

"I was throwing around some ideas with John," Tosh said, and it took Rose a minute to remember she was talking about the Doctor, "and I realized that the problem with tracking the circuits from space wasn't our computing power, it was the sheer number of signals, and the more I could eliminate the more I could refine. And now that we know it's circuits and not photomorphoc cells, I was finally able to do a proper differential analysis of signal strength--"

Jake cut her off. "So blah blah blah, instead of looking for lorries we started looking for warehouses—strong clusters of signals that weren't moving. And once Tosh refined them enough, we were able to get GPS, which gave us an address, which gives us our factory."

"A factory?" Rose asked, and followed Jake's pointing finger to a spread of photographs. They were aerial shots of an industrial compound, all flat-roofed warehouses and pipes on scaffolds. There was nothing for miles around it save a single, narrow access road, and the whole thing was surrounded by a high security fence; the shadows of coiled razor wire along the top were visible in one of the photos.

"Why this place?"

"If I'm right," Tosh said, "this has one of the largest concentrations of circuits in the country. Possibly the largest, period."

"It's owned by the Darrow Group, which comes out to a puppet for the Horatii," Jake said. "It made refrigerator parts before the war, got converted for weapons manufacture, and then dumped onto the market during de-nationalization. One of your Brazilians snapped it up and sold it for a song, and since then Darrow's fitted it up with brand-new equipment for machining their own parts, printing circuit boards, you name it—all without actually registering a business license."

"So what are they doing there?" Rose asked.

"We contacted the same firms that were moving the circuits and asked them about deliveries to this address," Tosh said. "Even assuming that half of them were faked invoices, based on what's going in and out, we suspect that they're building a bomb."

"Bomb-s," Jake stressed. "Because how much ammonia-based fertilizer do you really need to make just one? They're bringing it in by the truckload. Unless they're growing marijuana in the cellar, and frankly I don't think that fits real well with their public image, you know?"

Rose ignored this. "How do we get inside? Access their internal CCTV?"

Tosh shook her head. "They're completely off the grid—computers non-networked, power generated on-sight, they've even got a well."

"We could plant a relay on-sight, though," Jake suggested. "Even if the computers aren't hooked up to the network, they've got the parts, right? If we just get a man inside, maybe with one of those hauling companies, we can force a signal--"

"Wrong," the Doctor declared as he kicked the conference room door open. He had lost his jacket somewhere since that morning and the knot of his tie had plunged halfway to his navel, but the plume of his fringe was sticking up higher than ever, as if in protest. "Very wrong, sorry, try again next time."

Jake glared, and Tosh took a little step to one side as if getting out of any potential line of fire. Rose took a big step for the exact opposite reason. "I'm sorry, you have a different opinion?" she asked.

"I have the *right* opinion," the Doctor said. He tugged at one rolled-up sleeve for a moment before folding his arms and matching Jake's glare with one his own. "Look, what's the purpose of using a synthorganic circuit in the first place? What's the one thing it can do that a microchip a fraction of its size can't do? It can *think*, at least sort of—wire up enough of them together and you get something that starts to reason like a human, or at least like an animal, but make decisions with the speed and accuracy of a computer. That's what made the Cybermen so deadly and that's what you're up against—something that can get suspicious and then act on those suspicions. You're not getting in there by subterfuge."

"That's assuming they've integrated the circuits into their security system," Jake shot back. "We don't know that."

"We don't know they haven't, either," the Doctor shot back. "And won't you look foolish when you try to sneak inside and get a load of drone weapons in your face, eh?"

"Drone weapons?" Rose asked before Jake could respond. "What do you mean, drone weapons?"

"That's what the circuits are for," the Doctor said with a slowness that bordered on patronizing. "That's the only thing they could be for. Why go to the trouble and the risk unless it was the only thing that could get you what you want—a drone weapon, a truly 'smart' bomb in *every* sense of the word, that can carry out a mission semi-independently and adapt its tactics on the fly? The Horatii could turn one of those things loose and legitimately claim they had no idea what it was doing or how to stop it if they're caught—and if they're not, well, such sophisticated technology had to come from somewhere, right?"

It took Tosh less time than Rose to realize what he was hinting at. "You think they're going to fake an alien attack?" she gasped.

"Best way to prove that a threat exists is to manufacture it," he said, with a little, humorless smirk.

"Now that's getting paranoid," Jake snorted.

The Doctor looked down his nose at him. "Do you really want to take the risk that it's not?"

Neither of them seemed likely to look away, but to Rose it was all beginning to make a certain kind of sense. After all, why go to such trouble to build a weapon they weren't planning to use? Why take the risk of sitting on such an illegal arsenal? Could they take that risk? "The Doctor is right," she said, which caused Jake to make a face and the Doctor to smirk in a superior way. "If there's even a chance that they're building drone weapons with these circuits, we need to act quickly. Jake, go through your information on the factory and tell me how we're going to seize it."

"Seize it?" he echoed.

"*Seize* it?" the Doctor said, more incredulously, at nearly the same time.

"You heard me," she said. "If we can't risk subterfuge we'll go straight for overwhelming force. If you're right about what's inside that factory, then it should be more than enough to gut the Horatii's operation."

"And if we're wrong, we're tipping our hand even worse than Edinburgh," Jake pointed out.

"Then get it right," Rose said. "Get Grace involved to start surveillance on the site and do all your homework--" The door slammed, and she realized that the Doctor had stormed out. She sighed. "If you think he's wrong, then prove it," she told Jake. "Otherwise I've got to assume the worst here."

"Yes, ma'am," Jake said sourly, and even tossed off a little salute before he started gathering his things.

"You did good work here," Rose added, and that got her a tight smile from Tosh but no response from Jake. Brilliant bit of management, that.

She left them to straighten up the conference room and headed down the hallway, towards the Doctor's office. *John Noble*, the new faceplate on the door said. He'd finally initiated a conversation—well, in his own way—so that finally gave her an opening. She knocked on the door, and when he didn't answer she tested the handle and found it unlocked. *Better late than never*, she thought.

The office was a cluttered mess, in a way that reminded her of the TARDIS—too many things jammed together in too little space. There were still black marks on the desk and ceiling from the explosion, and one wall was already lined with file cabinets, and arrayed across their tops and spilling out of the drawers were figures made of toothpicks, delicate and profoundly alien. There were also quite a few random maps, and a calendar showing a different puppy for every month, and a coat rack holding a gray woolen greatcoat she hadn't even known he'd purchased. It was only the second week of September, not nearly cold enough for it, though of course he'd never seemed much bothered by that before...and the coat had a new-bought stiffness to it anyway, it didn't even smell like him yet--

"Looking for something?" the Doctor asked over her shoulder, and Rose jumped, guilty and embarrassed to be caught sniffing his coat like some kid of stalker. He had a cup of coffee, which explained where he'd been.

Rose stood up straighter. "I was looking for you, actually."

"So you're talking to me again?" he asked as he shut the door.

"You're the one who's been avoiding me," she pointed out.

"I have no comment on the matter," he said, and lifted another toothpick sculpture off his desk; it was a lumpy arch with angular bits hanging off the sides, but when he propped it up on its two ends, it balanced. He put on a pair of painfully familiar glasses, took out a small brush and a bottle of glue, and started adding some kind of substructure.

Rose decided it was worth it to start the conversation over again. "What is it?" she asked. "All of them, I mean. With the toothpicks."

"Molecules," he said absently. "Once that haven't been invented yet. I figure I can store these in an attic somewhere and confuse people for generations to come."

"That's not very nice," she said.

"I don't believe I ever claimed to be a nice man," he said.

And there it was. Rose folded her arms over her chest. "Is that why you're such an ass to Jake, then?" she asked.

"When have I ever been an ass to Jake?"

"Try five minutes ago!" she said. "I don't know why he's still copping an attitude with you and I certainly don't understand why you feel the need to reciprocate it."

He set aside the glue and took off his glasses. "You know, I've got a question for you, too," he said instead of answering her. "Why are you so eager to send in the army to this place in Leeds they've found?"

"What do you mean, why?" she asked. "'A truly smart bomb that can act independently and adapt on the fly?' Does that ring a bell to you?"

"They haven't deployed them yet," he pointed out.

"They aren't building them as a science fair project!" Rose shot back. "I know you used to work with the UN, Doctor. I know you know that force is sometimes the only option."

He was silent for a while, then looked down at his hands. "You're right," he said, which surprised her. "I just...never mind."

She wasn't used to him giving up this easily and it bothered her. "So if I'm right, why throw such a fuss about it?" she asked.

"I just...you...and the others...I mean *all* the others...but I thought..." he waved a hand. "Never mind. It's stupid. Just...you and...never mind."

Rose tried desperately to parse this. "Me and who? Me and Jake?" A thought rose in her like a bubble. "Are you jealous? Of me and Jake working together?"

He snorted. "Please. Everyone knows he's bent as a hinge, and from what I hear, Pierre would brain you with an omelet pan."

"Good," Rose said, and told herself she wasn't disappointed, not even a little bit. "Because we're a team, here, and you need to cooperate with all of us, even Jake." She watched him nod, still staring into a corner. "Even me," she added.

He looked up. "I do so cooperate with you!" he said. "I mean, I do now! I'm working on it!"

"I'm your supervisor, Doctor," she said; it sounded bizarre even to her. "I *have* to give you instructions and you *have* to follow them and if you don't I...I don't have a choice about things." *Lame, Rose*, she thought to herself. She took a deep breath. "If you don't think you can...agree, with me, like that, then maybe we should see about transferring you to another team."

"No!" he blurted. "No, Rose, I—look, so I've been a bit of a twit lately--"

"A bit?" she asked.

"A very large bit," he said firmly. "I'm just...adjusting. But this is the only place in the world I want to be right now. With you."

She fought not to let the words go to her head. "So that means you'll play nicely with Jake from now on?"

"In my defense if he doesn't play nicely with me I don't--" Rose just looked at him, forcing herself to be impassive, until he visible wilted. She'd never seen that before. "Right. Sorry. Yes, from now on I will do my best not to poke that particular beehive, even when it would be really, really funny."

"Can't you take anything seriously?" she asked, knowing it would likely be the best she could get from him."

"Some things," he said. He looked back at his sculpture. "Want to know what this one is for? I'll give you a hint, it's either a cure of cancer or a revolutionary industrial lubricant."

She smiled. "Sorry. Things to do."

"Right, right, life of a world defender." He put his glasses back on. "I'm, erm, probably going to be late again tonight, just so you know."

"Okay," Rose said, even though it wasn't, and shut the door behind her when she left.

~*~*~*~*~

When Jake's proposal ended up in her electronic inbox a few days later, Rose dropped everything to read it. Then she got the internal instant messenger.

prenticere: fifty people?

simmondsjw: if we're doing this properly

simmondsjw: it's a big area to cover.

prenticere: Winslow's never going to approve so many Torchwood employees in one place.

simmondsjw: who said anything about winny the pooh? Get ol gemini to take care of it.

prenticere: Why does everybody think I have this terribly corrupt influence over him?

simmondsjw: I never said corrupt. but you do get things done. it's actually pretty cool.

prenticere: I tell him when Torchwood is requesting something.

prenticere: and I don't bother to submit anything I know he won't approve

simmondsjw: so tell him we're out saving the world from smart fertilizer and let him decide.

prenticere: You just like seeing the UN combined force in their uniforms. Admit it.

simmondsjw: pierre and I have a very active fantasy life.

simmondsjw: and he looks good in a blue beret

simmondsjw: i will say no more.

She logged off and started the paperwork for requesting UN assistance for the operation; it was one of the worst parts of the job, being tedious, complicated and something only she could do. At least she had Jake's plan laid out in front of her, though, so there was no making things up as she went along this time. More like editing on the fly.

She was in the middle of a set of tick boxes (*The nature of the threat is: Please check all that apply.* Extraterrestrial Extratemporal Extrauniversal Organic Sentient Humanoid...) when her phone signaled her a text message. A moment later, her email pinged. And within thirty seconds of the two, she had the Doctor knocking on her door, which shattered her concentration so completely that she had no choice but to answer him. "Hello," she said, trying not to look angry with him.

He held up a manila folder like a shield. "I've got a proposal for you!"

She took the folder and opened it. There was a slim report inside, titled *Non-Leathal Ways Of Disabling Conventional and Synthorganic Technology by John Noble Aged 48 (days)*. "What is this?" she asked.

"So I've been thinking about, you know, massive use of force and things," he said, shoving his hands in his pockets as he leaned against her door. "And since it's a bit late for conscientious objection and all, I thought, 'What can I do to avoid mayhem?' It's not a question that I frequently ask myself--"

"Doctor," she said warningly, as she flipped through the report. She stopped at a set of diagrams, which appeared to have been drawn by hand, though with painstaking care. She just didn't know what they were for.

"So I came up with this resonance wave," he said. "The math's all in there, if you, uh, like math, but in short it's a sonic way to deactivate both synthorganic technology and conventional electrical systems by remote."

"And you need to build this to generate it?" she asked, pointing at the diagrams.

He nodded. "If I had my screwdriver it'd take five minutes to program, but, um, I don't. So this is the best thing I could come up with that didn't involve another raid on your archives for spare parts of dubious quality."

"Thank you for that bit," she asked. "How long would it take you to build it?"

"Oh, just a few...weeks, possibly," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Possibly less."

She shut the folder and put it on her desk, in the basket marked *Important* (mostly for his benefit).

"Okay. I'll finish reading it in a bit and we'll keep it in mind as an option."

"Option?" he asked, looking slightly offended. "What do you mean, option?"

"Jake and Tosh have already come up with a plan," she said, and even brought it up on her screen. "They were planning on using glitter guns left over from the war to generate an electromagnetic pulse that would do basically the same thing."

"Glitter guns?" he asked. "Are they seriously called that?"

She shrugged. "They've got a long name, but Jake says they vent a bunch of metallic dust when they fire, so...glitter guns. Apparently they worked pretty well against the Cybermen."

He pulled out his glasses again and read a few lines. "An EMP won't disable synthorganic technology, though."

"We don't know for certain they're using synthorganics in the infrastructure," Rose pointed out.

"They've brought in enough spare parts to do up everything twice over in conventional electronics, including a failsafe designed specifically to protect against EMPs."

He nodded. "Right. Got it. Still think mine's better."

She resisted the urge to argue with him. "So work on it," she said. "Because the glitter guns are already on the ground, assuming we can get the loan from the UN combined force, and we may need to move fast to be certain we catch them by surprise."

"Right, right, just like in Edinburgh," he said.

"Because of Edinburgh, too," Rose reminded him. He made a face. "I'll be sure to include your ideas when I talk to Mr. Winslow."

"Okay," he said stiffly. "Erm, thanks. See you tonight."

"I...might be working late tonight," she said, and he made a different face, a wounded one.

"Paperwork," she added with a useless flap of her hands.

"Right," he said. "Then...whenever, I guess."

This isn't all on your terms, she wanted to say. You can't pick and choose when to see me. Try coming home more often and you might catch me there. Instead she said, "I'll pick up something for dinner, okay? Pizza sound good?"

"Sounds fine." He took his glasses off again. "I'm just gonna...get to work, you know, on the resonator."

"Okay," she said, and wondered why, after he left, she still had to resist the urge to scream at him.

~*~*~*~*~

As usual, she called Pete to ask about Tony, and had he heard from Mum recently, and by the way there's a request from Torchwood somewhere somewhere in your department, have a look.

Unusually, two days later, the request was denied.

"I'm not required by law to rubber-stamp everything Torchwood does, you know," he said when she asked him about it.

"I've never asked you to," she said, barely keeping her voice down. "I just want to know why you turned this one down. Give me one reason. Anything."

Instead he said, *"You know, I'm in Cardiff tomorrow—I wasn't going to say anything because it's an in and out sort of thing, but there's time for lunch, if you want it."*

"What d'you mean you're in Cardiff?" she asked. "What about Tony?"

"He's with the Janislowskis for the day," Pete said. *"I really think we should have lunch, Rose."*

The words finally registered with her, and she took a deep breath. "All right. Where at?"

"Somewhere close to you—don't want to pull you away from your work too long." He paused. *"It'll be good to talk to you."*

Which meant he *needed* to talk to her but didn't want to say it, for some reason. She named the first place that came to mind where the UN Secretary for Homeworld Security could eat without causing a riot, and walked home from Roald Dahl Plass through a miserably damp Sunday afternoon.

The Doctor was doing something with her computer when she got home, and looked like he didn't have a care in the world, though she'd seen the curtains twitching as she approached the building. "Where've you been, then?" he asked.

Getting away from you and your silence, Rose thought, but she didn't have energy to say it, so she just said, "Taking a walk," and went to have a nap before dinner.

The next morning, the Doctor was up and gone before she was, but there was an illegible note stuck to the front door. She spent most of the morning reviewing the intel Grace had collected so she didn't have to tell Jake that their request was denied—she wasn't going to truly believe it until Pete said it to her face.

She did, however, stop into the Doctor's office before she went to lunch. He had given up on the toothpicks, it seemed, and was soldering something at his desk. "Is that safe?" she asked.

"Perfectly," he said. "I mean, sure, it's against regulations, but it's not like I'm going to drop anything." He then dropped a piece of wire, but luckily it stayed on the desk instead of tumbling to his lap.

Rose winced, but carried on. "Anyway, I just wanted you to know I won't be available for lunch."

"Oh, me neither, then, so that works out," he said.

"I've got something of a date, actually," she said.

"With Pete, yeah," he murmured.

Rose blinked, feeling a bit stupid. "How did you know about it?"

"Didn't you see the note on the door?" he asked, sounding genuinely confused.

"I couldn't *read* the note on the door."

"Oh," he said. "Er, well, you mum called at about four o'clock this morning—she got mixed up with the time zones or something—and I didn't want to wake you, so I left you the note. But she mentioned about you and Pete, yeah."

"Thanks," she muttered. "I'll be back around one."

~*~*~*~*~

The restaurant turned out to be fairly nice, so it was good that Rose had worn a suit and not her jeans to work. Pete was waiting for her in the lobby, and they were seated together in a corner booth, which was about as private as they could get.

"So what's the problem?" she asked as soon as the waiter was gone.

"Hello, Dad," Pete said quietly. "It's good to see you, too. How was your flight? What are you doing in Cardiff, anyway?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "This isn't a normal lunch and you know it. Why was my request denied?"

He picked up his menu and started perusing it. "Because I knew it would be the only way I'd get your attention at the moment."

"Get my attention?" Rose repeated, because for a minute she wasn't sure she was following the conversation. "You interfered with my case just to get my attention?"

"That's right," he said, "because you're in it so deep now that nothing less will work. Well, possibly if I claimed Tony was in the hospital or your mother was kidnapped by armed insurgents, but I do value honesty."

"You make me sound like some kind of obsessive workaholic," Rose said. "And this case is important, you know."

"I read your request," Pete said. "I don't doubt the case is important, and I'll go back and approve you the personnel when I get back to London, but in the meantime I promised Edward that we'd have a talk. And considering how our last lunch date ended, I wanted security you wouldn't run out before I'd had my say."

"Mr. Winslow asked you to talk to me?" she said incredulously.

"He's concerned about you," Pete said.

"Then he can bloody well tell me to my face," Rose snapped.

"He's also concerned about saying or doing anything on the record," Pete said, and they had to pause while a waiter came over to take their orders. Rose hadn't even cracked the menu, so she pointed at something random with "salad" in the name and asked for a refill on her Coke.

When the waiter had gone, Rose asked, "So what's so important that it needs to be off the record?"

"Jake's filed a formal complaint about your Doctor," Pete said, and Rose tried not to show that this was complete news to her. "He doesn't mention you directly, but that fact by itself looks bad, Rose. Ms. Sato's also registered a complaint, but it's less direct, and considering it arrived within an hour of Jake's it's pretty clear he bullied her into it."

"What exactly are they complaining about?" Rose asked.

Pete shrugged. "That he's rude, unprofessional, insubordinate, reckless...I'm surprised you haven't been copied in on them yet, but it's possible Edward's holding out before he submits them to your HR department."

"Maybe I have been," Rose admitted, toying with her napkin. "I've been in meetings all day."

Pete nodded. "I know those sorts of days, don't think I'm criticizing. You might also like to know that Dr. Noble went straight to Edward with a plan for using some kind of resonator against the current threat to the human race."

"He did *what*?" Rose hissed, and then cringed, because she'd just prove she didn't know about it in advance. "Okay, so this looks bad, doesn't it?"

"Rather," Pete said. "Especially when you take into account how Dr. Noble reacted when Edward reminded him of the proper procedure for these things."

"He came to me," Rose said. "On Friday morning, he asked me about it, and I said we'd consider it. He hadn't already yelled at Mr. Winslow, had he?"

"No, that was Friday after lunch," Pete said. "But you're right, he did yell."

Of course he yelled. He was the Doctor, and yelling was one of the ways he got people to agree with him. "I know the Doctor is...brash," she said, opting for the diplomatic approach. "I probably know better than most people, actually. But I also know he's not so bad once you get used to him—and once he gets used to working on a team. He's just used to being alone."

"He's not been alone for six weeks," Pete said.

"But he was alone before that for *centuries*," Rose pointed out. "You know how brilliant he is, Dad—and the resonator idea is brilliant, it's just not practical right now unless he figures out how to build them faster. And he probably will."

The waiter came with their food, and it turned out Rose had ordered a Caesar salad with chicken. Not her favorite, but she was also in the mood to make everyone put up with her garlic breath for a while.

The waiter probably thought they were spies for the way they clammed up whenever he came round. Once he was gone, Pete said, "I didn't actually ask you here to talk about the Doctor, Rose."

"Then what are we talking about?" Rose said. "Because it sounds like the Doctor is the root of the problem."

"He is," Pete said. "Because what Edward and I are currently wondering is whether you're too close to him to deal with him objectively."

Rose almost choked on her first bite of chicken. "Objective? You don't think I'm objective?"

"Either Jake is sorely exaggerating his account of what the Doctor's been up to since he joined your team, or you're letting him get away with a metaphorical murder," Pete said. "And while I know as well as anyone the Jake can carry on a bit when it suits him, any complaint about you and John Noble looks worse when people know you're living together."

"So who else is he going to work with?" Rose asked. "If the Doctor can't get along with Winslow or Jake, where are they going to put him? He wants to work with me, he told me so—reassigning him in the same as losing him entirely."

"He could be a sort of consultant," Pete suggested.

Rose rolled her eyes again. "Yeah, because that's worked out so well for you, hasn't it? He joined Torchwood because you weren't giving him anything to do and he went stir-crazy."

"Then maybe I need to give him something to do," Pete said mildly. "Bring him to London a few days every week. He'll be free to do more or less as he likes, with his own assistants to liaise with the rest of my department, and a free hand for any personal projects he might want to undertake—provided nothing explodes, after all--"

"No," Rose said, more because of the idea of the Doctor living in London, even-part time, than any rational reason. Pete raised an eyebrow at her vehemence and she frantically back-pedaled. "I mean, for one thing, I'm not the one you need to talk about this with. But I didn't bring the Doctor onto my team just to have him, Dad, we need a fifth man to handle this case."

"Even if he's handling it badly?" Pete asked.

"It's not going to matter if we get our man," she said. "Or men, actually. People. And we're not going to get them without the Doctor, and we're *definitely* not going to get them until you authorize us to use UN troops, which is the actual point of this conversation, yeah?"

He watched her for a while; she shoveled away some salad, even though she wasn't particularly hungry. "So I take it you want to table this until the case is closed?" he said.

"Yes," she said firmly. "I do. After that, we can...I'll talk to him. But we can't let these people slip through our fingers, and I *know* the Doctor can help us with that. After...we'll talk. Later."

"I hope you're right, Rose," Pete said. "And I hope you're doing what's in everyone's best interest."

"I am," she said firmly. Because the Doctor needed Torchwood, right now, and she needed the Doctor. Even if it seemed lately like they were living in separate apartments anyway. She was certain that once the Horatii were taken care of, she could fix things—maybe take that vacation, and maybe they *did* need to have that talk, but whatever it was they'd sort it out. They always had before.

Pete paid for them both, and offered to walk Rose back to the office. They didn't talk much until they got into the lobby, and on the outside of the security gates, Pete paused. "I know you're busy, but I hope you think hard about this," he said.

"Don't you think I have been?" Rose asked.

"I don't think you've accepted what the problem really is," he said.

Rose crossed her arms over her chest. "And what's that, eh?"

"That the man we know as John Noble—while he very well might be a good man—is not the same man you feel in love with," he said. "He's not the Doctor, and you ought to remember that."

"He *is* the Doctor," Rose replied. "He's the same in every way that really counts. Perhaps *you* ought to remember that—especially since he saved this universe and mine, more than once." She spun around to go--

--and her eyes immediately fell on the Doctor, standing on the far side of the security gate. Brynn was in front of him, babbling away as one of the guards searched her purse, and maybe she expected him to reply, but he was clearly watching Rose and Pete, and looked vaguely like he'd been punched in the stomach. Rose, knowing exactly how long it usually took to search Brynn's purse (which was large enough to fit a medium-sized corgi, assuming it had its tail docked) rushed through the next gate over, leaving Pete standing in the lobby by himself.

"Hey," she said, while her own purse was searched. "What are you doing down here?"

"Lunch," he said blankly, after a bit of a pause. "I, er, I can't order me take-out anymore, he says I leave soy sauce in the recycling bin."

He was looking at her blankly, totally unreadable, and Rose cleared her throat as she took her purse back. "I just, er, got back from lunch," she said lamely. When she glanced back, Pete had gone.

"Yeah," he said. "Good?"

"The food was good," she said.

Brynn finally got through the gate, and the Doctor fumbled for his employee ID. "Well, I'll just...I need lunch," he stammered. "I, er, I'll see you tonight, then."

"Tonight, sure," Rose said, and watched him leave the building, head down, shoulders hunched.

He didn't come home that night. Rose cooked, for once, and only burned part of it, but after a few hours of fidgeting around the flat she put it all in fridge anyway. She surfed the television and compulsively checked her email, and finally, pulled out her phone and texted.

Where are you? Everything ok?

She waited for his answer, for another string of annoying, inane comments, anything. Nothing. She tried calling him, but he wasn't answering his mobile or his office phone, and so she sat up waiting until her eyes were too heavy to hold open, and when she woke up obscenely early there was no sign that he'd been home.

She tried his phone again, and again, as she dressed and headed into work. In the building, she immediately asked Brynn, "Have you seen the Doctor at all yet today?"

"Which one?" she asked.

"Doctor Noble," Rose said. "Have you seen him?"

She shook her head. "He was still at work when I left last night, poor dear. Didn't he make it home?"

Rose ignored this and headed up to her floor, thinking that Ianto, surely, would know where the Doctor was. Actually, the Doctor was at Ianto's desk, stirring his coffee with one hand while stared fixedly at the bamboo plant. "Doctor," Rose said, suddenly unsure whether to be relieved or infuriated.

He started, and spilled some coffee on the bamboo. "Rose! What are you doing here?" he said.

"I work here," she snapped. "What about you?"

"Isn't it...I...oh." He looked at his watch and then shook his head. "Sorry, I...long night. Not a lot of sleep. Sorry."

"Why did you sleep here?" Rose said. "You know that's not allowed."

He shook his head. "No, no, me and Freddy have this thing...only I got locked in, sort of, and anyway I wanted to work on the resonator some more...I think I've nearly cracked it..."

Rose looked at him, bleary and wrinkled in yesterday's clothes, and realized the argument wasn't worth the energy. "You could've answered your phone," she said. "I was worried about you."

"Sorry," he mumbled, and then Ianto came back and had a few incisively polite words to say regarding coffee and bamboo, and Rose headed to her own office, wondering why Pete couldn't have just kept his mouth shut.

Chapter 12

Two days later, Grace burst into Rose's office with a single sheet of paper. "We're in trouble," she said.

"How much and what kind?" Rose asked listlessly, because she hadn't slept well or seen the Doctor for days and Grace did this sort of thing at least once a month.

"Two-thirds of my contacts went silent overnight," she said, and Rose sat up so quickly she almost knocked over her coffee cup. "That includes the observer in Leeds and the phone in Humphrey's office. The Horatii know they're being watched."

"I'll inform Mr. Winslow and call Mr. Tyler," Rose said. "Go tell the others to get packed. We're leaving for Leeds immediately."

She called Pete on her way to see Winslow, and the Doctor found her on her way back "We're going? Now? I mean, we're really going?" he asked, catching her arm to slow her down.

"Yeah, we are," she said. "Want me to run home and pack for you?"

"But what about the resonators?" he asked, ignoring her question. "I really, I just, it's only going to take another day, tops, I swear--"

"Doctor," Rose snapped, "we haven't the time. They could already be clearing the facility. We'll go in with the glitter guns, according to Jake's plan."

He stood up very straight and looked down at her for a moment without speaking, and she couldn't decide if he looked angry or just disappointed. "Fine," he finally declared, "I'll just, yeah. When do we leave?"

"When will you be packed?" she asked.

He glanced at his office and grimaced. "Can you, er, can you actually run home and help me with that...?"

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This time, they flew, and Torchwood's airship got them to Leeds within an hour. Two officers from the UN combined forces met them at the airfield. "Ms. Prentice, ma'am," the taller one said with a crisp salute. "My name is Lieutenant Druitt, and this is Lieutenant Watson. Lieutenant Magnus is securing our center of operations. Shall we take you there?"

"Please," she said. "These are Mr. Simmonds, Ms. Sato, Dr. Holloway and Dr. Noble, and there's no need for the 'ma'am.' We'd like to get started as soon as possible."

The center of operations turned out to be a few cramped back rooms in a police station; while disgruntled coppers watched the soldiers warily, Watson, Druitt and Magnus laid out the maps they'd prepared of the area. "The road was blocked off late this morning, allegedly for construction, but we've had people on foot scouting the area," Druitt explained. "There's no sign of activity within in the factory grounds, so we're not expecting organized resistance from inside. Level terrain, except for this ridge here, without much vegetation for cover, but tomorrow is a new moon, which ought to help."

Rose just turned the whole show over to Jake, who seized the largest map and started issuing orders. "That ridge is where we'll put the glitter guns," he said. "Who's the artillery officer?" Magnus raised her hand. "Right. How fast can you recharge them after the initial blast?"

"Thirty minutes," she said.

"Can you make it faster? It looked like they've installed power failsafes, and the manufacturer says they'll kick in after ten," he said.

She shook her head. "We've got the Mark 4s, sir, they're a bit touchy. If the vents aren't cleaned after every volley there's a danger of misfiring. But they've got a larger coverage zone than the Mark 3s, so we could give you a staggered volley."

Jake appeared to consider it. "Can you promise two guns will completely disable the factory?"

"I can promise they will get 90% coverage of the target zone."

"That's not good enough," he said. "Give me three at a time and see if you can shave a few minutes off your drill, okay?" He looked at the other two officers. "This is our timeline: the moment the lights go out, we need demo teams to blow the fences in these locations." He grabbed a pen and marked them on the map. "Five teams need to move in: one and two will head straight to the computer centers here and here, try to break into the system and prevent the failsafes from kicking in, while three goes to the main office, four to the factory floor and five to this building here, which where we think they've got the magguffins. Shoot only in self-defense, because we need people alive to question." He looked up at the three officers, then back at his team. "Tosh here is with team number one, main office also. Noble will be with team two, security center. Ms. Prentice will be with three, I'll be with five, and Dr. Holloway will stay with Magnus's unit to run the communications board."

"We won't be able to use hyperwaves because of the glitter guns," Rose added. "We'll be on conventional radios, which will have limited reception inside the complex, so listen closely and don't hesitate to ask for clarification of an order."

"Question," Watson asked. "Any hazardous materials inside the complex?"

"Potentially, they've got explosive materials, which we think are limited to these two warehouses," Jake said, pointing. "This building here is the generator, but the glitter guns should neutralize it—just don't put any holes in it."

"What do we do with prisoners?" Druitt asked.

"Parking lot," Jake said. "We'll need the sixth team running the perimeter, but the nice thing is that the fence will keep people in as well as out, so it won't take much manpower to plug the gaps."

"I've got a sniper team assigned to my unit as well, in case of runners," Magnus said.

"What are they firing?" Rose asked. "Because we can't be certain who's in there and I don't want any unnecessary deaths."

"We've got a case of sleeper rounds," Magnus said with a little frown. "Those aren't very accurate, though."

"The factory's in the arse end of nowhere, Lieutenant," Jake said. "Runners aren't going to get very far."

They spent the afternoon haggling about approaches to the factory, or at least, Jake and Rose did; Grace went off with a staff sergeant to familiarize herself with the communications van, Tosh disappeared to collect more satellite data, and the Doctor just...disappeared, taking his suitcase and a small satchel with him. The three lieutenants were very good at their jobs, asking all the right questions and making helpful suggestions, but they had a military pragmatism that meant they were always on the verge of asking *why don't you just drop a bomb on it?* "We need evidence," Rose said about four times. "That means living witnesses, but also documents, computers, anything on the factory floor and anything—anything at all—that looks synthorganic."

"If you ever saw it fall out of a tin man, we want it contained," Jake said. "Which means no *touching*. That bit's not rocket science, I don't think."

"We're not asking anyone to compromise their safety," Rose added, because that was how they always tried to argue. "But preserving the crime scene should be balanced against clearing the battlefield, okay?" No wonder, she thought, that Grace couldn't work with these people. She wondered how Pete managed sometimes.

There was a knock at the door, and a PC stuck his head inside. "Ms. Prentice? Chief Stratham would like to have a word with you."

Rose sighed. "Yeah, be right with him." She looked at the others. "Go over the back-up plans once more, would you? Including evacuation routes."

"We better not need any bloody evacuation routes," Jake muttered.

"That's what they said about the Titanic," Rose reminded him.

The chief of police for Leeds was named Stratham, and he was tall and thin and sharp like a knife. "Ms. Prentice, thank you for seeing me," he said. "I can see you're busy."

"It's not a problem, Chief Stratham," she said. "I haven't yet thanked you for the use of your resources here."

"Anything for Torchwood, of course," he said. "I spoke to a Dr. Holloway over the phone earlier today, but she told me you'd want the information as well, is that correct?"

"Right, right." Rose fumbled through her purse for a notepad. "There's a man in the city we've been monitoring, serving as a contact for our target today. Mike O'Connell. Have you found him?"

Stratham shook his head. "I sent people round to his flat and his office, and both were empty. It looks like he fled town early this morning—no signs of foul play, though. Last sighting of him was last night, he said he had gotten an urgent phone call from a relative."

"Interesting," Rose said. If they were perhaps *insanely* lucky, the Horatii hadn't realized the factory was the real target, and wouldn't take any measures beyond removing O'Connell from the city. "Have you searched the premises yet?"

Stratham shook his head. "Only a cursory look. We were waiting for advice from Torchwood on what exactly we're looking for."

"All right," Rose said. "I'll send someone over to you to--"

A thud and a shouted curse from the room behind her made them both jump. Rose murmured a quick "Sorry!" to Stratham before going to look, just in case Jake had given in to the urge to punch a soldier in the teeth. Instead she found him massaging his knuckles by himself in the corner, while Magnus had a hushed conversation with a younger soldier. "Problem?" Rose asked.

Magnus looked flustered. "Ma'am. Apparently two of the glitter guns were damaged in transit. My people are working on them now."

"How damaged?" Rose asked. "Can they be repaired tonight?"

"Not likely," Magnus admitted. "One's cracked a coolant tube and the other has some kind of hardware fault. But replacement units can be brought up from London in--"

She looked to the soldier, who squeaked slightly when he said, "Twelve hours, ma'am."

"You can't get them from any closer than London?" Jake asked.

"The six we had were the only ones available from Edinburgh, sir," Magnus said. "The only other armory with equivalent units is in Dublin, and we'd have to commission an airship for them."

Jake muttered a few choice words about airships, and Rose couldn't decide if she was pleased to have the extra day to prepare or terrified at the lost time. "If we have to wait, we'll wait." she concluded reluctantly, because the whole plan rested on those guns. "Establish a perimeter of observation. Anybody or anything leaves that factory, I want to know. Search any lorries that try to make deliveries to the address. We'll maintain satellite observation."

They saluted and headed out the doors. "Figures," Jake murmured after the officers were out of earshot. "As soon as we get the military involved, they start cocking things up."

"Weren't you technically like a major-general of something by the end of the war?" Rose asked.

"Lieutenant colonel," Jake said. "And that doesn't count because one, they were handing out rank pins like condoms by the end of everything and two, I didn't *keep* it." He sighed. "I'm gonna go tell the girls to cool it. You want to find John?"

"Yeah, just let me notify everybody watching first."

She actually had to talk to Winslow, Pete, and Chief Stratham again, and then the mayor of Leeds, who wanted to know why the UN were running around his city at all. By the time she had a free minute to call the Doctor, she was bone tired, and sort of hated herself for thinking that it might be nicer to just leave him wherever he'd gone until they actually needed him.

While she was staring despondently at the phone, it rang. *The Doctor calling.* "Hello?"

"So what would you say," the Doctor asked, "if I told you I'd booked us all rooms at a nice little pension here, with a complementary breakfast, and I bought sandwiches?"

"I would say it's almost too good to be true," Rose said, and didn't care if that came out wrong or not.

"You make sure to put this on my quarterly performance review," he said. "I'll call the ladies if you call Jake away from all the shiny things that go 'boom.'"

"Will do," Rose said.

It was only later, in the pension (which was nice, and affordable, if a bit frowsty in a maiden-great-aunt-with-four-cats way) that Rose thought to ask, "Doctor, how did you know we'd need to spend the night?"

"Hmm?" He looked up from his sandwich with raised eyebrows and a full mouth. "Ha ah ga a a?"

"How did you know the operation was delayed?" she asked. "You weren't in the room and I didn't call you."

"I didn't know," he said. "Not until Jake and Grace got here. I just thought, you know, we've got a couple hours until the main event, and we'll all be dead tired when we finish the running-chasing-shooting people part of the night's festivities, somebody ought to find us a place to sleep that is not a Leeds PC's desk."

"Oh," Rose said. "Good thinking."

"I have my moments," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, my brain is fried. It's probably a good thing we're not doing the raid tonight or I'd shoot myself in the foot."

He looked at her oddly. "You carry a gun on this sort of thing?"

"Well, yeah," Rose said, and her feeling of awkwardness doubled when she remembered who she was talking to. "Torchwood requires all employees to qualify in a firearms course, didn't they tell you that?"

"I knew that," he said. "I just...didn't think, I guess."

He looked unhappy, and Rose groaned inwardly as she sat up straighter. "Are we going to have this conversation again, and if so, are you planning to use complete sentences this time?" she asked.

"What? No," he said. "I mean yes. I mean it's not even a conversation."

"Then why are you looking so pissy?" she demanded.

"I don't like thinking that I've turned you all into soldiers, all right?" he blurted.

It took her a moment to get it, but Davros' words came back to her and if she'd been well-rested and not about to raid a domestic terrorist organization, she might've been sympathetic and reassuring. Instead, she rolled her eyes at him. "You didn't turn me into anything, Doctor. I chose this."

"I put you in a position to make that choice," he said.

"Oh, get over yourself," Rose said, and she meant it to be playful but it came out wrong, always wrong, and the Doctor didn't respond as he finished his sandwich and then left the room.

It would be a while before Rose realized he'd booked five rooms, not four, from the very beginning.

~*~*~*~*~

They got up early and checked and re-checked all their plans. Tosh and the Doctor personally went over the glitter guns, though Rose sort of suspected the Doctor just wanted to see how they worked; he'd skipped the free breakfast on the pretense of going for a jog, and went back to the pension as soon as the work was done, saying something vague about studying up.

They re-re-checked their plans and talked to some of the soldiers, getting to know their team assignments. Jake was with Watson, but Rose, Tosh and the Doctor were technically leading their own teams, and she had to reassure the soldiers that Torchwood made a policy of deferring to military authority except when it threatened mission objectives. (She'd have to make sure to remind the Doctor that bit, though, just in case.) They even practiced their call signs, as if "Lancer Insert Number Here" was going to be hard to remember. They treated all the police in the station to lunch as a way to make up for taking over their work spaces.

They re-re-checked the plans, and then Grace proposed going to see a film to kill the time, but Tosh wanted to keep monitoring everything by satellite and Jake wanted to go over Mike O'Connell's flat with the Leeds police and the Doctor was still back at the pension. Rose ended up sitting in the back of the police station, drinking sparkling water instead of coffee and studying the maps until her eyes crossed. They had aerial photos of the factory grounds, they had old blueprints and photographs from its previous incarnations, but so much of the plan was really just guesswork, just estimations of what they were going to find on the inside, and she wanted to be ready for anything and everything.

In late afternoon, she ordered everybody to take a nap. That included shouting through the Doctor's door, though she wasn't sure if he was already asleep or not. Jake suggested a beer to help everyone

sleep, but Rose wasn't going to let alcohol or caffeine addle her brains, not when stress was doing an adequate job. She drew her curtains, changed into pajamas, and didn't really get any rest.

In the evening, they finally started getting ready. The sky was stained red with the sunset as they walked to the police station. "Red sky at night is a sailor's delight," Grace said. "Think it's a good sign?"

"I don't believe in signs," Jake said. "They only show you what you want to see."

"Or what you're afraid to see," Tosh said. "My mother certainly finds enough reasons to warn me I'm going to die childless and alone."

"I don't think there's any harm in wishful thinking, though," Rose said. "What do you think, Doctor?"

"Hmm?" He looked up from the small satchel he was carrying over one elbow and had been fiddling with. "What was the question?"

"Signs and omens," Jake said. "Do you believe in them?"

"Depends on what they are," he said. "Specific mirrors shouldn't be broken, it's always wise to mind your ladders, and I'll never trust a black cat in a wimple, but usually...nothing specific really comes to mind."

"You're stepping all over pavement cracks, you know," Rose said, before remembering that he was angry with her. Another fight, another Later. She thought about saying something before they began the raid, but she didn't want to risk making things worse before they got better. They both had to concentrate for this.

The Doctor disappeared almost as soon as they got to the police station, while Rose got corralled by the three lieutenants. "We need to be moving into position soon," Druitt said. "Any last-minute orders?"

"Tosh is pulling down the most recent satellite images right now," she said. "We'll see if there needs to be any last-minute changes. Nothing in or out since we left?"

"Perimeter team says everything's quiet inside," Watson said. "People moving around the grounds, but they look like employees, probably taking a meal break."

"Remember, we're not here to kill anyone unless it's necessary," Rose said. "Those workers might not even know what they're building."

"Or maybe they do," Druitt said, and pointed at a rack of weapons. "I didn't notice you brought any protection with you, so feel free to sign out whatever you need."

Jake looked Rose, and she thought for a minute and then shrugged. "Everybody gets kevlar," she said. "Even Grace, just in case. Up to you all whether you want to carry a weapon or not."

"Brought my own, actually," Jake said. "But I'll let the others know."

Rose saw Grace off, as the artillery unit was setting up early behind the cover of the ridge. Predictably, she wasn't armed, and looked pissed about the kevlar. "I've got satellite straight to Torchwood, Homeworld Security and local emergency services if things go south," she assured Rose. "And my first aid kit, in case they go really south."

"God, I hope it doesn't come to that," Rose said, because she knew how big Grace's *first aid kit* was. "Druitt says there's medics down there if we need triage."

"Do no harm and refuse no need," Grace said. "I take those oaths very seriously. And there's a nice little corporal named Foss ready to take over for me if I'm needed."

Then Rose had to review the jeep assignments with Druitt, so nobody got left behind in the city and everyone could find their own unit. And then she had to discuss the potential application of flash grenades with Watson, mostly to say *no, you twit, they'll damage the crime scene* but in less rude ways. And she had to reassure the police chief that their back-up plans were adequate and no, they probably wouldn't need riot police and water cannons for anything. And then, only then, did she have time to go look for the Doctor—not because it was Later, but because, she was pretty sure, they had a new problem.

She signed out two sidearms and holsters from the young soldier in the supply van, and put on one of them with the extra magazines stored in the inner pocket of her jacket. She found the Doctor in what was probably some kind of locker room, with long benches and rows of lockers along one wall. He was fiddling with that satchel again. "Hey," she said.

He looked up, startled, and quickly closed the satchel. "Hi," he said shortly. "Are we leaving now?"

"In a minute. Tosh is still printing the last pictures." Rose took a step inside and braced herself. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about before we go."

She watched his eyes take her in, and watched them settle on the gun at her hip and the extra holster in her hand. "No," he said. "No way."

"They're for your own protection," she said.

"Protection?" he asked, and thumped the heavy kevlar vest on the bench next to him. "This is protection, Rose. That's destruction looking for somewhere to happen."

"The people inside that factory aren't going to care about your principles," Rose said. "They're going to see you as a target if you're not armed."

"I thought that was why I got a half-dozen strapping young men with assault rifles to help me out?" he asked.

"Please," Rose said, and had enough mental space to marvel that the man who wiped out the Daleks with one button was so upset about a few nine-millimeter bullets. "Everyone else is carrying one."

"Oh, come on," he grumbled. "Toshiko's scared of the *word* 'gun.'"

"Actually, she's won a couple of awards in target shooting," Rose said. "Handgun and rifle. Because she knows that there are times when it's a necessary evil."

"That's a very nice phrase, *necessary evil*," he said. "It covers up all sorts of things very neatly."

Rose nearly stamped her foot in frustration. "Please, Doctor," she said again, and decided to risk the last card in her deck. "For me. So I know you're as safe as you can be."

For a minute she was terrified, at a base level, that it wasn't going to work. But the Doctor's eyes softened incrementally, and his shoulders slightly slumped. "Fine," he said, and took the holster from her hands. "But I'm not using it. I was under the impression our objective wasn't to kill anybody."

"That is the objective, but nobody's told them that," Rose said, relief mixing with disgust that it came to this, that he would force it to this, that she'd actually done it. "So if you have to..."

"Yeah, only if I have to." He fumbled to fasten the belt over his trousers; even on the last notch it threatened to slip down his hips. "Hmm. Doesn't seem to like me, can I get a refund?"

Rose huffed and knelt down to secure the leg strap, which would support the gun's weight. "After this I'm taking you round to Dad's house again and making you eat for a week," she said, but it didn't sound as playful as she wanted it to. Her hands smoothed over his thigh, up the tickly wool and then down the inseam to flatten a crease, and from above he made an irritated noise; she tightened the strap, this time to the last notch but one, just short of making the fabric around it pucker. "That all right?"

"Yeah," he said, in a distracted way; she glanced up and realized he was looking at his satchel. "Yeah, that's good..."

There was a gasping yelp in the hallway.

Rose leaped to her feet as the Doctor went for the bloody satchel; she found Tosh in the hallway, scarlet in the face and pop-eyed. "Everything all right?" Rose asked.

"I'm so sorry," Tosh stammered, clutching a manila folder to her chest. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything, I can just go--"

"Interrupt what?" Rose asked. "Come on, are those the new photos?"

Tosh blinked at her. "You mean...you weren't..."

The Doctor pushed past them on his way out of the room. "Assembling in fifteen!" Rose called at his back, and got a distracted little wave in response. She fought down a scowl, because that was just petty, and looked back to Tosh. "I was fixing his holster," she said. "He...doesn't like guns."

"Oh," Tosh said, then gave a wheezing giggle. "Oh, Rose, I'm so sorry, I just...jumping to conclusions, I suppose. Thank god. Um. Pictures?"

Rose took the folder, but her hands froze in place when she realized just what conclusions Tosh had jumped to. She wanted to add some pithy reassurance—*Not at work, saving it for later, bad luck before this kind of mission*—but it all seemed suddenly ashy in her mouth. Because when was the last time they'd slept in the same bed—the same building? It was so far off the mark it was in another time zone.

And no doubt Tosh could see that written all over Rose's face.

So she buried it—the feelings, in some corner of her mind, and the face, in the folder. There didn't seem to be anything unexpected in or around the site, certainly nothing that would impact their plan. "Looks good," she said. "Show these to Druitt. I'll be along as soon as I'm geared up."

Chapter 13

They rode in stark military jeeps most of the way to the factory, veering off-road at the road block and bouncing over the tall, dry grass and hidden hummocks fast enough for the cool air to become a chilly breeze. Rose clung to the edge of her seat as Staff Sergeant Singh made a wide circle around the factory, approaching it from around the other side. The three jeeps of their party rolled to a stop when the GPS told them to, with the lights of the factory grounds just over the horizon.

Rose checked on Tosh while the troops prepared their weapons. "Ready for this?"

"As I ever am," she said, and while her voice might've been a bit shaky her hands were steady as she checked the magazine and the safety on her sidearm. She was always good with machines. If the Doctor thought Tosh was a coward, he really didn't know her at all.

They walked in single file towards the soft glow of the factory grounds, and then bent double, and then crawled on their stomachs the last few yards, until they were close enough to see a few people moving around within the fences—not security guards, their posture wasn't purposeful enough for that, just employees of some kind taking a walk.

"*This is your final radio check,*" Grace's voice said in Rose's ear. "*All teams, report.*"

"*Lancer One is in position.*"

"*Lancer Two is in position.*"

"Lancer Three is in position," Singh said.

"*Lancer Four is in position.*"

"*Lancer Five is in position.*"

"*Demo One is in position.*"

"*Eagle One and Two are in position and locked.*" That was Magnus, meaning the glitter guns were ready to fire.

Singh looked at Rose, and Rose watched the small figures against the fences, willing them to leave. They didn't. *I'm so sorry*, she thought to them. "All units, this is Prentice. Shut down at the end of this message. Eagle One, give us a ten-count and then proceed."

She shut off her radio, to protect the delicate electronics from the electromagnetic pulse, and kept her eyes on the factory as she counted to ten. There was a dim flash from the ridge, which was on the other side of the factory complex; she thought she could even make out the cloud of sparkling dust that accompanied the discharge. There was no explosion, no sound at all; the orange-tinted flood lights around the factory grounds simply shut off, leaving them in a profound darkness. She thought she could head confused cries from those people inside the fences, though perhaps she was imagining that.

She switched her radio back just in time to hear Druitt barking "--into position! Move, move, move!" In the darkness she could barely see the figures of the demo teams sprinting up to the gates, but then they called out "*Fire in the hole!*" and Rose barely had time to cover her eyes before the charges went off with a deafening bang.

Phosphorous flares gave them just enough light to see by as they all struggled to their feet and raced forward. It was hard work, keeping up with the soldiers while wearing the heavy vest, but Rose managed not to fall behind as they scrambled through the twisted gap in the fence and into the factory grounds. And she'd spend enough time staring at maps and schematics that she could head to the main administrative building by dead reckoning, ignoring both the wash of noise on her radio and the shouting as the factory workers—whoever they were—came up against this surprise assault.

It was an ugly little building, not big, and only two floors. Pre-war blueprints suggested there was a large server for the whole factory in the cellar, and Rose caught a glimpse of Tosh following her team down a flight of stairs, but she was focusing on clearing the upper floors first. She picked a soldier, one she didn't know by name, and shadowed him down the dark first-floor hallway and into a large room, one marked as an office on the old blueprints.

The door was locked. "Open up, UNCF!" the soldier bellowed, but gave whoever might be inside no chance to unlock before forcing the door with two powerful kicks. Rose swept at his side, torch and weapon at the ready, to find an office strewn with loose paper and pieces of CDs, with a small fire smoldering in the recycling bin, as if someone had run away and hadn't had time to start a proper blaze. A computer monitor lay on the ground with a nice dusty shoeprint on it, but the cord that should've connected it to a hard drive was missing.

"Lancer Three, all teams report," Singh said. "*Where did we lose these people?*"

"They had no time to slip out any back exits," Rose said, and looked out into the hall, where the soldier were already moving on to their next targets.

"*Should we be looking for a panic room?*" somebody asked.

"*We weren't briefed on any panic rooms,*" Singh growled.

"That's because there aren't suppose to be any," Rose said.

"Lancer Three, this is Lancer One," somebody said. *"We've got a bolt hole in the cellar."*

"Fuck!"

All thoughts of procedure fled Rose's mind as she raced for the stairs, taking them two at a time. She stumbled at the bottom and narrowly avoided turning her ankle, but then she was around the corner and found Tosh trying to set up her own laptop in the midst of a desk as wrecked as the first one upstairs. Two soldiers were standing by a door, a plain door with no distinguishing features, except for how it was set into what the blueprints said was a foundation wall. Beyond it, though, was a cinder block tunnel that was most definitely not on any blueprints they'd been able to dig up. Who'd built this tunnel? How had they managed to keep it covered up for so long? And most importantly, what the fuck were they supposed to do now?

"Ma'am," said the sergeant in command of Lancer One. "We caught two men leaving through this tunnel. I sent me in pursuit while the rest of them finish sweeping this level."

"To hell with to this level," Rose said, and switched her radio channel. "Grace, I need all available people in the cellar of the admin building. The Horatii have a bolt hole and they've fled with evidence."

"Copy that," Grace said. *"Be careful down there, Rose."*

"Keep trying to break into the computers," Rose told Tosh. "And if you find anything about this--"

"Yeah, yeah, got it," Tosh said. "This is some dense encryption and if I'm not excruciatingly careful about what I'm doing I'll trip something prematurely. I'll let you know when I'm in."

Rose nodded, and raced into the bolt hole.

The tunnel was lit by small white LED lights, probably battery-powered, which were spaced out a little too widely and placed a little too high in the walls to be really efficient; the shadows they cast were stark and deep. The proper lights were hanging from the ceiling, where bundles of cables snaked along, parallel to a rusty pipe. The first tunnel ended in a T-junction, and the lights seemed marginally brighter to the right, so Rose went the same direction...only to come to a four-way intersection a moment later.

She tabbed her radio. "Lancer One, I'm in the tunnels with you, what's your position?"

"...cer One, come ag...n't copy," a voice replied. Somewhere in the distance, Rose heard gunshots, echoing oddly.

"Lancer One, this is Prentice, what's your location?" she asked. Static coughed in her ear. She switched channels. "Grace, do you copy me?"

"I...ting y...are...ound?"

Shit. Of course. They were surrounded by earth on all sides; it was going to interfere with the radio signals. She switched back to Lancer One's channel. "Lancer One, are you copying anything? Which way did you go?"

More static, then: *"Wen...side. Com...outh. Can...fu...here."*

"Say again, I didn't copy."

"Went to...side. Compass...ing south. Can't find...we came."

"Look, fall back," Rose said. "Do you copy that? Fall back to the tunnel mouth."

"...find the d...outh!"

Dammit! Rose chose a direction randomly, and another, following the earlier sound of gunshots. The tunnel walls switched from cinder blocks to lumpy concrete arches, but otherwise there was no way to tell which way she'd come or gone. "Lancer One, do you copy me? This is Prentice, do you copy?"

Nothing but static again. Oh, what was the point?

Running footsteps from straight ahead made her raise her gun, but she came face-to-face with Druitt, looking furious. "Prentice? That you?" he barked.

"Yeah," she said. "How'd you get down here?"

"Found another bolt hole in the factory manager's office," he said. "You came all the way from the admin building?"

"This entire facility could be built on Swiss cheese," she said, stomach sinking. "How many of your people came down with you?"

"Most of them," Druitt said. "Left just enough up top to mind the prisoners."

Rose looked back the way she'd come, where none of Lancer One or Three seemed to have followed her. She made one more go at the radios. "Lancer units, this is Prentice. If you can hear me at all, please respond."

"..ear you somewhat," somebody said—not the same one as before. *"Really da...ere, ma'am, and the radios aren't wor..."*

"I know that," she said. "Look, you're going to have to relay these orders like Chinese whispers: everyone fall back, out of the tunnels. Cancel pursuit and repeat these orders, do you understand me?"

"Rog...at. Cancel pursuit and fa...unnls. Repeat these orders."

"We'll regroup in the parking lot," Rose said, thinking of how far off plan they'd already gone. She looked at Druitt, who was trying the same trick with his own radio. "Did you copy all of that?"

"...arking lot. Co..."

"Fuck it," Druitt said. "It's no use, I can't pick anyone up..."

"So we split up," Rose said. "Try to cover more ground. Take three minutes and then fall back to the surface."

"Do we have three minutes left?" he asked.

Rose checked her watch. "The second volley of glitter guns should go in two minutes. That gives Tosh and the Doctor twelve to get control of the computers."

"It'll have to do," he murmured, and sketched a little salute at her before taking off down the tunnel to Rose's left. That left her to turn to her right, and kept testing her radio. They hadn't prepared for anything like this, so there was no fluorescent paint or anything to make a path with, and the more turns she herself made the more worried Rose got that she wasn't going to find her way out again, either. Who builds a warren of subterranean tunnels full of mysterious wires and cables without hanging signs?

Then she spotted an arched tunnel that met onto one with straight sides, and her flashlight showed her a cinder block wall at the end. Had she made one big loop back to the admin building? She hoped so. She sprinted forward under the flickering lights, reaching for her radio to have another go at contacting Grace--

Wait. Flickering?

She paused and looked down another curved tunnel to her left. There it went again; for a just a split second, two of the LED lights flickered. Which could mean that their batteries were running down, since by now the failsafes should've normally kicked in and restored main power. (Eight minutes of blackout remaining, if the glitter guns had fired when she thought they would.) Or it could mean something else. She raised her torch and her gun again, and slowly made her way towards the two flickering light. There was another intersection there, and a dim stain of light on the wall, and faint noises of someone breathing that echoed far more than they had any right to. Rose gave herself a count of three and then turned down the hallway, weapon ready--

To find the Doctor crouched on the floor. He had pulled a bunch of cables down from the ceiling, and had his satchel open at his feet as he fiddled with some wires; inside the satchel, Rose saw something metallic and covered in small blinking lights that looked an awful lot like a certain hand-drawn diagram in the *Important* box on her desk.

The light in his eyes made him cringe back, and he held up one hand and made unintelligible noises at her. "What the hell are you doing?" she blurted, lowering her torch.

He looked up, and spat out the screwdriver in his mouth to give a forced grin. "Just a second, I have everything under control."

There was a time when that would've comforted her enormously; now she shoved her gun in its holster and strode down the narrow tunnel at him. "You are supposed to be in the security office, disabling the system--"

"Already cut off its access to the backups," he said, and threaded a long cord into a hole in the resonator. It had obviously been knocked together in his office out of her sight, all exposed wiring and electrical tape, and appeared to have a casing made from a toaster and a cheese grater. "This will short out the synthorganic components and neutralize the whole thing, just as soon as I get it wired into the public address system."

"We fried that with the EMP," Rose reminded him, and the next thing she should've said was *I am ordering you to get back upstairs* or at least *to put away that ridiculous contraption*, but it suddenly seemed that everything had gone so spectacularly wrong that there was no point in it, in anything but the usual hanging on to the Doctor's coattails and trying to survive the ride. It was easier, perhaps, because her radio wasn't even coughing up static now. For these few seconds it really was just the two of them again.

"And I," the Doctor said, "have constructed an elaborate work-around just to show old Winslow how we do these things in style." He pulled a wire from a box on the wall and touched it to a wire from the bundle, and there was a momentary spark--

And suddenly all the lights in the corridor snapped on.

"No," the Doctor whispered, eye widening.

There were no whooping sirens, no slow countdowns, no blinking lights; just a low thrumming that Rose could feel in her bones. The Doctor prodded the resonator and started frantically tugging at the dangling wires. "Doctor?" Rose asked, shoving her torch in a pocket.

"No, no, no," the Doctor said, but he was addressing the resonator that now rattled on the shivering floor. "You're not supposed to do this! It wasn't supposed to trip anything!"

"Doctor!" she snapped, and he still didn't look up. She snatched his hand in hers to get his attention. "Run."

He looked up at her, and his face was a mask of too many emotions to count. But he stumbled to his feet, kicking the resonator aside. And they ran.

She lead the way to the cinder block tunnel, which didn't empty into the admin building, but another one entirely—the security station, she realized, because that's where the Doctor must've come from. They took the stairs two at a time as she bellowed into her radio "Get away from the building! Everyone, get out, now! There's a booby trap under the facility!" She tried every channel, but they were all coming up as static, and they'd gone over this, right, they'd reminded everyone where to fall back in the worst case scenario? Hadn't they?

Outside the station the sodium lamps were working again, showing people running about chaotically, soldiers trying to corral people with boiler suits and East Asian features, pushing them through the gaps in the fences. The Doctor nearly outstripped her across the parking lot, but he stopped, he actually stopped and waited for her to catch up while she screamed *"Run! Run!"* with all the breath she could muster. They squeezed through the fence and kept running, as hard and as fast as they could, and Rose had one moment to see the grass in front of her turn to gold and their shadows surge out ahead of them; then she hit the ground, the Doctor pressing her down and curling and arm around her head, while the shockwave of the explosion rattled her teeth.

It took several minutes before he rolled off her and allowed her to sit up. Rose sat up and looked back at the remains of the factory; the power plant and one of the warehouses were gone, simply gone, and most of the other buildings were aflame. Burning debris littered the grass around them, little smoky spots that made the countryside look like a pastoral bit of Hell. She didn't see anyone moving around them.

"All teams, report," Rose said shakily into her radio. Silence, but no static. "This is Prentice with Noble. All teams--"

"I'm here," Tosh said suddenly, shaky but clear. *"We got out, we're okay."*

"Lancer Two is all clear," came Druitt's voice.

Singh, breathing hard: *"Lancer Three is clear."*

An anonymous soldier: *"Lancer Four is clear."*

A long beat of dead air.

"Lancer Five," Jake said, and then coughed into the microphone, and Rose fisted her hands in the dead grass. *"Lancer Five is fucked. We need immediate medical evacuation, north side of the complex."*

"Roger that, Jake," Grace said, while Rose's heart was breaking. *"Ambulances on the way and I'm coming down. How many casualties?"*

"Three for the ambulance," Jake said bitterly. *"The rest we're going to have to dig out with shovels."*



Rose tore the radio from her ear and threw it as far as she could. The burning buildings were so bright they would've blotted out the stars, even without the rafts of oily smoke going up, and she could see all too clearly how the Doctor watched the flames. His mouth was parted, his brows knit together over wide eyes, and a piece of grass was caught in his fringe. She wondered, suddenly, if this was how he looked when he watched his planet burn.

"Come on," she said, looking away, because somehow looking at him and talking to him at the same time were just too much to handle at the moment. "We need to get back to the others."

He stood, stiffly, every movement nine hundred years old. "Yeah. Okay."

Rose walked towards the ridge, and didn't look back to see if he was following.

~*~*~*~*~

They ended up back at the police station in the middle of the night, drinking strong coffee and looking at the maps instead of each other. Well, Rose did, along with Tosh and the Doctor; Grace had ridden to the hospital with Jake and the other casualties.

Casualties. There weren't supposed to be any casualties.

"I got locked out," Tosh blurted after a moment. She was still wearing her sidearm, but her grip on her mug looked fragile. "I was maybe a minute away from getting into the system and it locked me out when the shaking started."

"Poison pill," Rose said. "I didn't think they were crazy enough to booby-trap their own facility to explode." Though of course, according to Druitt, the factory floor had been empty on first pass; no circuits, no bombs, no bomb-making materials to be seen. Just two hundred illegal immigrants from Japan and Korea who lived on site and had no idea what was going on.

Some of them had been casualties, too.

The Doctor very carefully set his mug on the table, in the middle of a map, and then just as carefully slide to the floor, arms folding up behind his knees. "It's my fault," he said quickly. "I thought...I needed to bring up the PA system and I thought I had the matching backups isolated. I thought if I could just plug in the resonator it wouldn't matter if we had the glitter guns or not. I thought I had it under control." His chin tipped down to his chest. "I thought I had it under control."

"It was a brilliant system," Tosh said quietly. "Parallel processing. It had to have involved synthorganics."

"Well, we're never going to know for certain now," Rose said heavily. She slugged back her coffee, which had been gritty when she poured it and was now cold to boot. There were grass stains on her knees and elbows. Maybe Lena knew a way to get those out. Rose didn't.

Casualties. *Fuck.*

A loud, hoarse shout from the hallway was the only warning they had before Jake barged into the room. He looked bad—raw blisters on his face, and bandages on his hands that wound up his arms and vanished into the sleeves of his filthy t-shirt. He still smelled of smoke and blood and he stopped to stand over the Doctor, snarling like an animal. "You."

The Doctor bounced to his feet, glaring at Jake. "Go on, say it," he said, practically snarling. "Whatever you're thinking, say it right to my face."

"Watson's dead," Jake announced; Grace appeared behind him, wearing hospital scrubs under her jacket. "So are three soldiers and fuck knows how many of those illegals. Some of them died in the

ambulances. Some of them might die in the fucking hospitals. Some them might not be able to walk again, or got their fucking faces burnt off, and you want to know why?"

"Say it," the Doctor said, eyes wide and bloodshot.

"Because of your fucking ego!" Jake shouted. He made like he was going to leap forward, but Grace stopped him, seizing his shoulders with a hissed *Jake!* "Your fucking prima-donna nancing about, showing off for your fucking girlfriend instead of following a simple fucking plan!"

"I thought I had it in hand," the Doctor said, now red in the face.

Jake snorted. "Oh, yeah, always thinking, aren't you, Doctor? Such a smart one! You ever think about the fucking consequences? You think about how many people were depending on you to do one simple fucking thing? Or did you think the whole thing was already such a fucking mess you couldn't make it worse? Jesus fucking Christ--"

"Jake," Rose said, before he could go any further, though she didn't have the first idea what to say next.

Jake shook off Grace and turned his back on the Doctor, walking a step or two and clutching one arm to his chest like it was hurt worse worse than the other. "I'll say this, Mickey might not've had any fancy degree, but he had more brains in his head than this bastard, and I'd trade back in a fucking heartbeat."

He looked to Rose; they both did, Jake with a narrow scowl and the Doctor with clenched teeth and wounded eyes. Rose knew that she could step in here, take the blame, since she was the field commander. She could emphasize how much had gone wrong that was out of their control, how little they might've accomplished anyway since they hadn't accounted for the tunnels or the booby-trap. She could point out that Mickey had nothing to do with anything.

What she said was, "We're all too tired and too stressed to get anything more done tonight. Jake, get back to the hospital before you pass out--"

"You know what happened here, Rose," he snarled.

"We are not talking about this now," she said. "*You* are not talking about this until you get eight hours' sleep and a shot of morphine. Is that clear?"

Jake nodded, once, tightly, and let Grace steer him to the door with a frowning backwards glance at Rose. Tosh started to gather up her things into her bag. Rose stood aside and let them go, staring at her shoes. It was just her and the Doctor now, and she couldn't say anything more or worse than Jake had said, she just couldn't even if she had to; he had to know, though, she had to say something, and then she could take off her damn supervisor's hat and say the things he'd rather hear instead. And then he'd transfer out of her team like Pete had said and maybe they could try to be normal with each other again. She just had to find the words--

A shoulder bumped hers. She looked up with a snap just as the Doctor cleared the doorway. He walked with his shoulders hunched, like he'd been hit in the stomach, but he was walking as fast as his long legs could carry him, walking away from her.

~*~*~*~*~

She ended up crashing for a few hours at the pension, sleeping too heavily to dream. When she woke up in the morning she found the housekeeper cleaning out the Doctor's empty room. Fine. Maybe it was better this way. They could wait to have one hell of a Later.

The local fire department had come and gone, leaving the factory site a black and sodden mess. Druitt already had a unit on the scene, searching for bodies, and he gave Rose an underwhelmed look when she, Grace and Tosh arrived on the scene. "I've restricted the entire east side of the complex," he announced. "The heat's destabilized the tunnels and there's already been a cave-in."

"How many did you lose?" Rose asked, to get it out of the way now.

"Four," he said. "One died overnight in the hospital. Three others won't be able to return to service. We've confirmed twelve dead workers and who knows how many missing at this point."

"Tosh can help you, if you need another translator," Rose said. "Grace and I are going to inspect the admin building for anything that survived the fire."

"Where's the other fellow?" Druitt asked. "Noble?"

"He's returned to Cardiff," Rose said smoothly. After all, it wasn't like he had many other places *to* go.

The admin building was a loss, though; anything they might've once been able to recover from traces of documents and debris was gone, burned to ash or melted into the carpet or drenched and impossible to peel apart. "We've got document recovery people in Edinburgh," Grace said, looking dubiously at a stack of papers that had started to fuse together. "Maybe they can come up with something useful?"

"Maybe," Rose said. "Not sure it's worth the effort."

"Well, we won't know if we don't try," Grace said. Then she paused. "Did John really go back to Cardiff?"

"I can't deal with the Doctor right now," Rose said brusquely.

"He's your subordinate," Grace said. "You don't get a choice. Look, Jake wasn't in his right mind last night--"

"He was thinking clearer than I was," Rose said. "He has been all along. The Doctor screwed up here, Grace, and I let him, and now I have to figure out what to do about that, just...not now, okay? Give me a little time."

"Okay," Grace said quietly. She looked out one shattered window. "You know, if we got a ground radar unit, we could map the tunnels and figure out where the go. And where the hell they came from."

"Too late to catch the suspects, though," Rose said. "The trail will be stone cold by the time we trace the tunnel exit."

"It's worth trying," Grace said. "See what Mr. Winslow thinks."

Rose's phone started to ring, and when the screen said *Winslow calling* she snorted. "Speak of the devil." She took a step towards the window, crunching shards of glass, to improve her reception.

"Prentice here."

"Good morning, Ms. Prentice," Winslow said with a deadly blandness. *"Did you sleep well?"*

"Not particularly, sir," Rose said, wincing.

"I can't imagine why," he said. *"Unless it has something to do with the four-story-tall fireball visible outside Leeds last night, which is currently a lead story on the BBC and follows only the new climate legislation on CNN World News, France 24 and Channel One World."*

"I wasn't aware the news had already spread so widely, sir," Rose said.

"Obviously not." There was a rustle of paper audible over the phone. *"Nor, I presume, would you know anything about Dr. Noble's letter of resignation from Torchwood, which I am currently looking at."*

For a moment, Rose's mouth went dry, and she shut her eyes. "Sir," she stammered, "as you've already guessed, the operation has failed. Mr. Simmonds is currently hospitalized in Leeds with burns on twenty percent of his body, but is expected to make a full recovery. Dr. Holloway, Ms. Sato and I are overseeing the closure of operations. Dr. Noble...has taken responsibility for the incident upon himself, and returned to Cardiff with my permission."

"I see," Winslow said. *"How long will it take you to wrap up what you're doing there?"*

"Two days," Rose answered, hardly thinking about it. "Follow-up can be delegated to Torchwood Two in cooperation with local police. The UNCF detachment needs to be processed back to their base, but Mr. Simmonds can be moved in..." She glanced at Grace, who mouths *a day* at her. "Can be moved by tomorrow, with Dr. Holloway's permission."

"All right," Winslow said. *"I expect you back in Cardiff bright and early on Monday morning to explain this. You personally, Ms. Prentice."*

"Of course, sir," Rose said. "I'll be there."

She left Grace to pick through the ruins and returned to the city to tell Stratham about his new responsibilities—not to mention the two hundred odd illegal immigrants he would get to cope with when the interrogations were done. He gifted her with everything from Mike O'Connell's flat and office, a mess of documents she passed along to Grace because she didn't have the concentration to deal with it herself. Same with the disk of statements from workers that Druiitt handed over when she arrived to sign off on the four KIA statements.

There was no Torchwood airship this time for transportation: she took the train, just like any other traveler, and had to settle for one departing late afternoon with a ridiculously long layover in Manchester. She had only one change of clothes that didn't smell like smoke and death, so she curled up in her seat and tried to think about how she was going to explain all this to Mr. Winslow.

The flat was dark when she got home. That barely registered as she walked up from the street, but when she walked inside to find it dark and faintly chilly something prickled in the back of her neck. "Doctor?" she called, setting her bags down by the door. She reached for the light switch and found a note stuck to it; it was the Doctor's handwriting, but meticulously clear, as if he he wanted to make certain she could read this one with perfect clarity.

Rose--

You know how sometimes you get that great idea about something in the shower and then you're hopping around in a towel with shampoo in your eyes trying to write it down, or else you wait to get out and you've forgotten it all and you curse yourself?

I do my best thinking between one place and the next. I'm anywhere but here. I'll be back when I've got the answer.

-D

She read it twice before it really started to sink in; heart sinking, she fumbled for her phone and hit the Doctor's number. A tinny electronic voice told her that his phone was switched off.

Rose dropped onto the nearest chair and took deep breaths, but there was nothing and no one to stop her crying.

ACT 4: the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

*here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than the soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart*

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

--e e cummings, "i carry your heart with me"

Chapter 14

Rose's official debriefing began at nine o'clock sharp on Wednesday. It was called a "debriefing" because, apparently, "crucifixion" had already been taken. Mr. Winslow's mouth was so twisted up it practically disappeared under his mustache, but this time he wasn't the only one she had to address; he was joined by Mr. Goldman, a beefy man with no hair on his head at all, and Mrs. Harter, who made Rose think of a sword, with her long thin nose and pointed chin and a boxy blazer that should've gone out of style in any universe before 1987. They sat in a row at a table; Rose stood in front of them, and they were just three rifles short of a firing squad.

"Ms. Prentice, your report states that you were unaware of the steam tunnels beneath the factory ground and the modifications made thereto," Goldman was saying gravely.

"That's correct," Rose said.

"Did you not do you due diligence in researching the site?" Harter asked.

"We studied blueprints of the site dating from 2005 onwards," Rose said. "The tunnels had been sealed in 1998 and were not included on those prints."

"Yet the current factory owners had clearly opened them again," Goldman said. "You found no sign of underground workings during surveillance?"

"Our surveillance only lasted a matter of days on this particular site," Rose pointed out. "And no, sir, we did not see any evidence of underground activity, because we weren't looking for any."

"Yet Dr. Sato tells us there is now a high likelihood that materials were removed from the factory grounds through the tunnels," Harter said. "She produced satellite images to support her argument."

And Rose had to order her to turn them over to Mr. Winslow, damning though they were, because Tosh had been willing to sit on them in order to cover the team's collective arse. "Hindsight is, as they say, twenty-twenty, ma'am," she said. "I repeat: we didn't know there were any underground tunnels, and so we didn't look for anything of that nature."

Winslow harumphed and fiddled with his laptop. "Let the record show that the exit point of the tunnels was eventually located more than five miles away."

"Along with absolutely no physical evidence about the suspects," Harter said.

"These are sophisticated people," Winslow said. "And the weather hasn't exactly been on our side the past few days."

Goldman cleared his throat. "Ms. Prentice, you indicate that on the eleventh of September Dr. Noble proposed the use of a...a 'resonance wave' weapon to neutralize the synthorganic technology, is that correct?"

"That is correct."

"And you permitted him to pursue this idea?"

Rose swallowed. "I asked him to search for a way to make it feasible, sir."

"Because it wasn't feasible in the first place?" Harter asked.

"It required too much time to construct the resonators in sufficient quantity," Rose said. "I told him I'd consider the idea if he could simplify the design. When it was clear that he had no results to speak of at the onset of the operation, I told him to abandon the project."

"Except he clearly did have results," Harter said. "Your own reports indicates he brought a prototype with him to Leeds."

"That's correct, but—"

"Did you know he had completed the resonator prototype?"

"No, ma'am—"

"Did you know he was planning to use it?"

"I did not--"

Harter's voice rose. "You're telling us you *live* with this man and you weren't aware of what he was planning?"

"Agatha, please," Winslow said sharply, and Harter looked at him sharply but subsided.

"What about the explosion?" Goldman asked. "It was caused by the on-site generator, correct?"

"That's what we've determined, yes, sir," Rose said, avoiding Harter's eyes. "The factory occupants had written a script that shut down the generator's coolant pumps when their computer detected an attack on the system. It overheard and ignited a secondary explosion in the adjacent warehouse, which appears to have been stocked with ammonium nitrate fertilizer and plastic explosives."

"Did you know that the generator would explode if the computers were tampered with?" Goldman asked.

"No, sir," she said.

"Had you prepared for the possibility of booby traps within the factory?"

"We prepared a withdrawal plan, sir," Rose said. "But booby traps were not specifically discussed."

"And was this withdrawal plan followed?" Harter asked.

Rose let her eyes fall to the floor. "No," she said. "The withdrawal plan was not followed."

"Why was that, Ms. Prentice?"

"Because personnel had moved into the tunnels and become disorganized."

"During the failed pursuit of your fleeing suspects, is that right?" Harter asked, but didn't wait for Rose to respond. "And whose fault was that?"

"We're not here to assign guilt," Winslow said quickly, but Rose interrupted him:

"It was my fault, ma'am." She took a deep breath. "It was my decision to order pursuit into the tunnels. I failed to call off pursuit quickly enough once I realized the radios weren't functioning properly. I..." She swallowed. "I failed to recognize Dr. Noble's intentions beforehand and I failed to stop him before the explosive device was tripped. I take sole responsibility for the operation, sir."

Mr. Goldman nodded. "We appreciate your honesty, Ms. Prentice."

"Although," Mr. Winslow spoke up, "I do wonder about Dr. Noble's behavior. He is a bit...erratic, isn't he? Difficult for any of us to know he was planning to undermine the operation."

Rose stiffened; Mrs. Harter narrowed her eyes and said, "We've already established that Ms. Prentice *cohabitates* with Noble, Edward. If anyone should have known his plans--"

"I'm merely saying he's a difficult man to read," Mr. Winslow blustered. "And last I checked, Torchwood did not require unit leaders to read minds. A certain amount of responsibility must fall upon the insubordinate agent--"

"With respect, sir," Rose blurted, drawing three raised eyebrows. "I had prior warning that Dr. Noble was not...integrated into the leadership structure." She swallowed again. "My family and I vouched for him. I live with him. I chose him for my team. I--" Her throat closed up, and she clenched her jaw, because she'd already done enough crying in the bathroom at home, and she was not, absolutely was *not* going to do it in front of her superiors.

Winslow nodded firmly. "I think you've answered all of our questions, Ms. Prentice. You may go."

"I hardly think--" Harter started to say.

"You may go," Winslow repeated firmly, and gave Harter a significant look. "I think the three of us have matters to discuss amongst ourselves."

Rose didn't speak to anyone on her way back to her office, not even Ianto, who hadn't asked any questions about what happened in Leeds but was keeping her topped up on the really good coffee anyway. She collapsed into her chair and looked at the message on her computer screen: the Doctor had used his credit card again, at a restaurant in Bangalore. She was, strictly speaking, not supposed to use this program without a warrant or at least official approval, and she certainly wasn't supposed to use it to cyberstalk her boyfriend (if she could still call him that) but if he wasn't going to turn on his mobile she needed to keep an eye on him somehow. Just to know he was okay. Or if not okay, *alive*, at least. It was probably deeply unhealthy but she found she didn't care.

A knock on her door made her jump. "Come in?" she called.

Grace stuck her head inside. "Hi," she said. "How're you doing?"

Rose sighed. "Ask me again in a few hours. Everything wrapped up in Leeds?"

Grace nodded. "I got back late last night and checked in on Jake this morning. Doesn't look like he'll need a skin graft on that hand after all, but it's gonna leave one hell of a scar."

"I bet he's pleased," she said. "He's always wanted a really interesting scar."

"I'm just worried about him losing range of motion in his fingers," Grace said. She slipped inside and leaned against the wall. "But they've already got him talking to a physical therapist, and I think Pierre was taking notes."

Rose managed to chuckle a bit. "Then that's all taken care of. And who knows, he might come back to a promotion, too."

"Don't talk like that," Grace said sternly. "The document recovery team in Edinburgh is working on everything we're recovered, and Tosh with them running some tests on debris for traces of synthorganic molecules that might've survived the fire. And we have that whole box of Mike O'Connell's stuff, he's practically spelled out the real delivery schedules."

"And the authorities in North America and Brazil are pursuing that missing equipment from the Cybus factories," Rose added wearily. "But none of that changes the fact that we're back to playing catch-up while the Horatii have time to cover their tracks. I'll be shocked if anything remains in the Commonwealth by the end of the month, and that takes the case out of Torchwood's hands."

"So we give up the case," Grace said. "That doesn't mean they're going to fire you."

"Maybe they should," Rose said.

Before Grace could react to that statement (and judging by the way she puffed up, a solid reaction seemed to be in the offing) Rose's phone rang. It was Winslow. "*Ms. Prentice, I'd like to see you in my office, if you could. As soon as possible.*"

"Of course, sir," Rose said, and shrugged at Grace. "It's been good working with you, if it comes to that."

"It won't," Grace said furiously. "You and I are going to *talk*, okay? And there will be *chocolate*."

That made Rose smile a bit as she left. "Whatever you say."

Winslow was alone in his office when she got there, squinting at his computer—she sometimes wondered if his obsession with paper had anything to do with a vision problem he didn't want to own up to. "Ms. Prentice, please take a seat," he said.

She sat down and asked, "What has the committee decided, sir?"

He shut down the computer, folded it away, and steepled his fingers on his desk. "The committee. Yes. We had some...words, the three of us."

"And?" she asked, because there was no point in dragging this out.

Winslow studied her over the rims of his glasses. "When was the last time you took any leave, Rose?" he asked.

The non sequitur, and her first name, threw Rose for a loop. "Er...July? Right after I returned from the other universe?"

"I mean a proper holiday," Winslow said. "You've been under a great deal of stress these past few months, and a few days' respite in the middle of the whirlwind can't possibly have been sufficient. I can ask the security department how many weekends you've worked, you know."

"You ask us to work weekends," Rose said. "And I haven't been working any harder or longer than--"

"Rose," Winslow said again. "Your record with Torchwood over the past two years has been exemplary. I would hate to see it blemished by a few stress-induced mistakes on your part."

She felt a bit foolish when she realized what he was saying, and then anger took over. "Mr. Winslow, people died on my watch," she said. "I fumbled a serious counter terrorism investigation. You can't just sweep that under some rug because you *like* me."

"Whether I like you or not has nothing to do with the facts of the case," Winslow said. "And those facts clearly show that Dr. Noble shoulders the largest part of the blame for what happened this week. Your own failures in judgment would not have had the same ramifications if not for his reckless behavior."

"He *is* my failure in judgment," Rose said.

"Then it's quite convenient that he's already resigned, isn't it?" Winslow asked. "Taking full responsibility upon himself in the process, I should add."

It was an elegant and awful solution. "That's not fair," Rose said bitterly. "You're making him a scapegoat."

"I'm well aware of that," Mr. Winslow said. "But Torchwood needs you, Rose. You are the single best agent we have, and that record is what has earned you this second chance. I suggest you think very carefully about how to use it."

She weighed her next words carefully. "And if I don't want a second chance with Torchwood?"

Winslow looked genuinely sad. "We would regret the loss of a fine agent," he said. "And I will recommend you for any other position with nothing but praise."

"Even if I don't deserve it?" she challenged.

He shut his eyes for a moment. "Rose, it is a terrible thing to bear the burden of another's death," he said quietly. "I was an RAF man myself in my day, I know how it is. I want you to take some time off, get out of Cardiff for a few days, and think about things. Don't make a hasty decision that you're going to regret later on."

"No," she agreed. "No, there's been too much of that already, I think." She stood up. "Will the case be transferred?"

"Honestly, Ms. Prentice, your team at 60% is better than some others at 100%," Winslow said, and the surname brought back a measure of normalcy, of distance. "I think they can be trusted to continue the case in your absence, and I'll begin the search for Dr. Noble's replacement with renewed vigor."

"I don't know if he can be replaced," Rose said, but she wasn't sure she was only talking about Torchwood. "Thank you, Mr. Winslow."

"Think nothing of it, Ms. Prentice," he said with agonizing gentleness. "Enjoy your holiday."

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She locked up her office, told Ianto to forward her calls, and went home; within fifteen minutes she had reserved a train ticket for London. It was one thing to come home and pass out in bed while preparing for her debriefing, but the thought of having a large block of free time here, with some of the Doctor's clothes still in the bureau and his deodorant in the bathroom and his ridiculously expensive cookware in the cabinets, it was just too much. She could monitor his credit card transactions via computer but she couldn't bear to sit on the couch, where the cushions still clung to his scent.

So she packed a bag, called the Janislowskis, and took a train to London. The Doctor wasn't the only one who needed to be anywhere but here.

Lena met her at the train station, though Rose hadn't asked her to. "It's nothing," she insisted. "I come to the city every Wednesday for shopping. Rosichka, do you ever *eat* in that place?"

"I eat fine," Rose said. "And I know for a fact you do your shopping on Mondays."

"It rained on Monday," Lena said. "Besides, Oleg never lets me drive the car, I had fun."

"Did you leave him with Tony?" Rose asked, vaguely remembering that Pete had a thing in Brussels all this week. She climbed into the passenger seat and failed to point out the total lack of shopping bags in sight.

"I hadn't any choice, yes?" Lena threw the car into gear and accelerated sharply. "So let's be certain they haven't burnt down the house, okay?"

They hadn't; Oleg gave her a hug and a kiss and Tony reached out his arms, crying "Ose! Ose!" and nobody asked about the pile of sweet wrappers on the kitchen table. "Do you want some lunch, Rosichka?" Lena asked. "Maybe a snack?"

Rose let Tony pull on her hair for a bit, then passed him off to Lena. "I'm actually a bit tired," she said. "Think I'm going to take a nap."

"Of course, of course," Lena said. "I'll wake you in time for dinner."

Rose headed up to her room, for all it could be hers when she barely used it; Lena had cleaned up since last July, possibly a dozen times, but Rose remembered what a mess they'd made back then, when she'd joked around with the Doctor in here just before they left. She was too worn out to cry again, but the memory still burned uncomfortably somewhere in her stomach, and as she lay on the bed she wondered if there was any point in ever getting up again.

~*~*~*~*~

She did get up, of course, when Lena called her dinner, and even ate most of it; she let them talk about the garden and the one drippy sink and Tony and their own kids back home, who were utterly failing to produce them grandchildren according to schedule. They could've been talking in Polish for all Rose minded them. And when dinner was over and Lena had refused to let her help with the washing-up, Rose wandered into the lounge and watched the first stupid thing to come up on the television until late into the night.

Mrs. Winslow suggested that Rose use this time think. And she was thinking, honest. But if it just so happened she did her best thinking in her pajamas, watching soap operas and reality shows while munching on every permutation of blini Lena could think of...well. It wasn't like she was *wallowing*. She just needed the time to decompress.

It was remotely possibly that Pete had had a point about her working too hard, after all.

"Look, Tony, do you see him? With the beard? He's going to get voted off this week," she announced while she and Tony rolled the ball back and forth across the floor. "At least he won't get executed, though. We've got a couple thousand years before that's a problem. And yet somehow we're going to have the same six programs still running over and over. I don't know what that says about the BBC."

Tony picked up the ball and lobbed it at her. It deflected off her shoulder and rolled under a chair. He started to whine.

"Nope, you threw it, you've got to go get it." She changed the channel, but it was all weather. Tony fussed louder. "I refuse. It's time you took some responsibility around here, young man."

He set into a wail that could shatter crystal.

"Fine, fine, lazy little fiend." Rose dragged herself off her cushion and rooted around under the chair until she found the soft rubber ball. "Times like this I wish you were old enough to swear at, you know. Or at least appreciate a complete sentence."

She rolled the ball back to him. Once again, he bounced it off her head. "Brat!" she cried. "*Lena!*"

It wasn't that she meant to be lazy so much as the hours slipped away from her, streaming by in a blur of commercial breaks and the shifting angle of the sun. She kept promising herself just one more program, just one more round with the ball, just a few minutes more of relaxing, and her best-intended plans to, say, help Lena in the kitchen, or maybe take a walk around the grounds, ended up melting away into television and entertaining Tony. Since Tony was more entertained by the Wiggles than conversation, it was a nice vacation for her higher brain functions. Probably not so nice for her waistline, but Lena always nagged Rose to eat and was probably having the time of her life.

And Rose wasn't wallowing in anything. Really.

Saturday morning found her laying in bed again—she wasn't sure it could be properly called a lie-in when she was sleeping such odd hours lately, naps in the afternoon and nights broken up by restless, burning dreams now that she wasn't working herself to exhaustion. She lay awake but still drowsy, thinking vague thoughts about maybe going into the city today, or not, or maybe calling somebody, though she didn't know who. She could watch the clock on the bedside table click over to nine, to ten, nearly to eleven, and know there was nothing better she ought to be doing, no responsibilities weighing on her, nobody waiting for her input and nothing she urgently needed to read. For the time being, the world was looking after itself.

She fiddled with her phone without getting out of bed; an email alerted her that the Doctor had used his credit card at a hostel in Samarkand. Enjoying Turkestan without her, then. She buried her head under a pillow again.

And then she heard a car pull up the drive, when she knew that both Oleg and Lena were still in the house. It was followed shortly by her mother's voice, too blurred by walls and distance to make out the

words. Rose seized her phone again and checked the date. Yep, back from China today, she'd even made a note of it. *Bugger*.

Rose leaped out of bed and managed to brush her teeth and smear on some deodorant before Jackie made it upstairs. "Rose, dear, what are you doing here?" she asked, swooping into Rose's room like Rose was twelve again and personal space was something that happened to other people. "Lena said you're on holiday but I know that place never gives you any time off, and I heard about the big thing in Leeds all the way in China but I couldn't call—you know how the phones are—that was you, wasn't it? It's usually you when something big explodes." She flopped down on the bed and threw her arm around Rose's shoulders. "What's the matter? You haven't been sacked, have you?"

"No, Mum," Rose said. "That's actually part of the problem."

Jackie blinked—she must've been terribly jet-lagged, even if she didn't show it—and pulled Rose close. "Come on, then. Tell me about it."

Rose did. She started with the Horatii, and veered onto the Doctor, and at some point they became two sides of the same problem and she didn't know if she was making any sense because—big surprise—she started crying again. Jackie held her close and let her sob it out, and that was something Rose had missed, having a literal shoulder to cry on. Mickey used to do that for her. Mickey was long gone.

"Oh, Rose," Jackie said once the worst of the sobbing had subsided into snotty hiccups. "You're a mess, you. My poor little girl."

"M not a little girl," Rose mumbled into her shoulder. "I save the world."

"Yes, you do," Jackie said, like she was talking to Tony. "And you forget that sometimes somebody has to save you."

Rose pulled away and felt around the bed for a tissue to blow her nose with. "I don't need saving," she said. "Winslow and them, they think they're doing me a favor and they're really not."

"What do you mean?" Jackie said. "Rose, people *died*. They're giving you time to deal with that."

"Grace and Tosh get to stay at work," Rose pointed out. "Jake gets to come back as soon as his physical therapist says. And anyway, it's not even about the work, it's about blame, it's about—they ought to have sacked me for this, Mum."

"And they didn't," Jackie said. "So how are you going to use your second chance?"

That was too much like Mr. Winslow's line for her. Rose got up and went into the en-suite to blow her nose some more and wash her face and give her hair a proper brushing. When she came out again, Jackie was making the bed. "Oi, I was using that," Rose said weakly

"Not now, you aren't," Jackie said. "Now, I am just going to drop if I don't get some sleep soon—there was a layover in bloody Astana, I don't ever want to see another plush camel—but this afternoon we're

going out and doing something positive. If you need to take your mind off things, laying in bed isn't the way to do it."

"I don't know if I want to go out today, Mum," Rose said.

Jackie just smiled at her. "It'll do you good, I promise."

"Sleep does me good, too."

"Rose," Jackie said firmly. She finished smoothing the duvet and then turned around to take Rose's face in her hands. "You need to leave this house or Lena will feed you to death. You know she's worried about you?"

"What?" Rose said. "What's she worried about? I'm eating!"

"That's *why* she's worried," Jackie said. "She told me just now that it was getting too easy."

Rose rolled her eyes and squirmed away from Jackie again. "All right," she said. "But I get to nap at least as long as you are."

"Why?" Jackie asked. "Aren't you sleeping well?"

"I'm still catching up from last weekend," Rose said. Probably it wasn't even a lie.

Jackie studied her sharply, then nodded. "All right. Two hour nap and then we're off. If you're going to have a holiday for once, we might as well try to enjoy it!"

Chapter 15

In hindsight, Rose should've thought more carefully about what Jackie would consider "positive" and "constructive" before agreeing, but once the words were spoken there was no getting out of it. Jackie took her shopping in the city and insisted on paying for just about anything Rose said she liked, even when Rose insisted she could pay for herself or didn't really want it. "You wear the same three things all the time these days," Jackie said by way of justification.

"I do not," Rose protested. "Besides, I don't need new clothes right now."

"I know you don't *need* them," Jackie said, hefting the bags with the grace of long practice. "But that doesn't mean you can't have them anyway."

"You're implying that I want them," Rose pointed out.

Jackie rolled her eyes. "Rose, dear, sometimes I think you've forgotten the difference between needing and wanting."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rose asked, stung and a little bit confused. She wondered what her mum had been reading over there in China.

"Just that bloody Torchwood's done a bit of a mind job on you, is all," Jackie said. "Oh, look there, half-off sale—I need a new pair of pumps for the benefit on Tuesday and so do you."

"Benefit?" Rose made have squeaked that bit. "What benefit?"

"The benefit tea for my foundation," Jackie said, as if it should've been obvious. "Don't tell me you won't be coming, either, because you're here and you're free and it'll be fun and you'll get to talk to five people who aren't relatives or coworkers for once."

"Oleg and Lena aren't relatives or co-workers," Rose pointed out, because she was feeling contrary.

"Oh, you know what I mean." Jackie took her by the wrist and hauled her into the shoe shop. "Now come on and please tell me we're still the same size."

The thing was, Rose knew that a few years ago she would've enjoyed the hell out of a weekend like this. She did manage to get into the spirit of things a bit on Sunday, when Jackie scheduled them both for the hairdresser's and a full-service spa thing, even though she couldn't stop pointing out that she really didn't need a manicure, couldn't take care of it properly in her line of work. "I forbid you to mention that word again," Jackie had declared. "That's not what a holiday is for." But any time Rose's mind drifted from whatever was at hand, she found her mind back on work, on Torchwood, on Leeds, on the Doctor. She was so used to snatching an evening here, a weekend there that she wasn't used to shifting her focus away, even if she could've dropped all the nagging questions in the back of her mind, the weight of memory.

Perhaps Pete was right about the workaholic thing after all. Perhaps Rose needed a holiday more than she thought.

The benefit tea was indeed nice, in one of the few big hotels left in the city center, which had been eager to donate space and food and decorations and anything else Jackie Tyler desired. It was an excuse to dress up more than Rose normally did (though she couldn't help but think of how, the last time she dressed up this much, she'd been celebrating with the Doctor—more than a month ago, and everything had seemed to be going so well at the time). She also got to see Jackie at *her* work, really in her element, and it struck her yet again that her mum was really made for this sort of thing—just chatting with people and being friendly and remembering job titles and birthdays and spouse's names, and telling stories about China that somehow elicited thousands of pounds in donations without ever having to openly ask. These were the skills that, back in their own world, had made Jackie Tyler a champion gossip and an agony aunt to half the middle-aged women in the Powell Estates. Here it made her a celebrity and bought schoolbooks for a thousand Chinese orphans.

In her own world, before the Doctor, Rose worked in a shop. Now she gave orders that got people killed. Sometimes it was hard to see how she'd gotten from there to here.

"And you're Rose Prentice, isn't that right?" A woman who had undergone far too much plastic surgery for one lifetime swooped into Rose's personal space. "Jackie's niece? I'm Alice Price-Looper, I've been a major donor to the foundation."

"Charmed," Rose said, and juggled her plate of sandwiches to shake hands. Alice Price-Looper went one better, and at the last minute dove in to leave air kisses on either side of Rose's face.

"Now, I wanted to ask you something," Alice Price-Looper said. "I know you work for Torchwood, and there's all those rumors about the accident in Leeds flying around..."

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to discuss that," Rose said, trying to keep it cordial, because growling or bursting into tears at this woman wouldn't earn her mum any donations.

"Oh, of course, of course," Alice Price-Looper said. "But you see, I work for an immigration advocacy group—I speak fluent Mandarin, you know—and the police in Leeds tell us there's a large group of immigrants facing deportation, and you know that's not the way to solve the problem—the war took such a toll on all those industrial cities in the Far East, it's not as if they have many alternatives--"

"Alice, darling," Jackie said, coming to Rose's rescue and taking her elbow. "You're not on about your legal problems again, are you?"

"Oh, Jackie, dear, no." More air kisses all around. "I was just asking your niece if she could help us get a foot in the door with Leeds. They're hiding a whole *flock* of deportees and we can't *help* them if we're not allowed to *see* them..."

"I'll see what I can do," Rose said, before Jackie could demure on her behalf. It was the least she could do, after all, and it wouldn't require more than a quick email sent from her phone. "Most of them are being held as witnesses, not suspects, so they're eligible for legal representation. Do you have a business card or something?"

Alice Price-Looper had a card; so did half the people there, and by the time Rose escaped her handbag was full of them and she had resorted to writing little notes on the backs like *tall thin lady with glass eye* or *blond bloke with ugly cufflinks* or *green coat person* just to remember who all these people actually were. She had also had her fill of petits fours and cucumber sandwiches and Darjeeling for the next month or so, and felt a little drained, while Jackie was practically bouncing all the way back to the mansion.

"I think that went really well, don't you?" Jackie asked about four times without giving Rose an opportunity to respond. "Of course the official video won't be ready until the end of the week, some kind of audio problems, so I couldn't really show them anything, but I'm to address the General Assembly in November and I really think it'll go over well. We've got that, oh, what's his name, the nice black American man who sells the insurance, he's doing the narration, did you know? The one with the voice?"

"Don't know who you mean," Rose said, when she realized that Jackie was actually waiting for an answer that time.

Jackie frowned at her. "Are you all right, dear? You look a bit peaky."

"I'm fine," Rose promised her. "Just not used to that many people at once." The last time she'd been in such a big group just to socialize had been her welcome-back party in...good god, in July. It was almost October now. *What could possibly go wrong in two months?* she had asked back then. Looking back, she had to smother a little laugh, or her mum might get the wrong idea entirely.

Jackie's frown didn't entirely fade. "Well, you'll get a day to recuperate tomorrow—I have meetings with the trustees all day long. But I'll be checking in to make certain you're dressed and eating properly, so don't get any ideas..."

Rose didn't. She got up to eat breakfast at the same time Jackie did, and took Tony on a walk around the grounds, after she'd secretly stripped off about half the layers Lena insisted they dress in. It was chilly for the end of September, but not that chilly, and the sun was bright enough to keep them plenty warm as long as they didn't linger in the shade. And minding an overcurious toddler kept her thoughts plenty occupied, along with the scenes of autumn trees that she'd managed to miss entirely back in Cardiff.

She ended up carrying Tony back to the house, though, and then whiled away the afternoon following Oleg and Lena alternately in search of something constructive to do. Now that she'd overcome the inertia keeping her pinned in front of the telly, she couldn't seem to lose a certain restless energy, and arguing with Oleg about whether or not girls could use hammers was as good a way to spend it as any.

When they'd both about had it with her, she went into Pete's office and switched on the computer. She got as far as typing *I hereby resign my position as leader of field operations with the Torchwood Institute* and then just stared at the words, as if daring them to unwrite themselves. They didn't, but she didn't finish the sentence, either. Part of her thought it was the right thing to do, but who was it who'd said people were lucky not to get exactly what they deserve?

She changed into trackies and went for a run.

When Jackie got home, she was loaded down with shopping bags—again—and she forbid Rose to look in them. "It's a surprise," she said.

"For who?" Rose asked.

"Well, obviously, for you, or I'd let you look at it," Jackie said, stripping off her windbreaker.

"You don't let me look at surprises for Dad, either," Rose pointed out.

Jackie rolled her eyes. "That's because the two of you tell each other everything. You're gossips, you are. Now wait for me in the lounge, I need to ask Lena something."

They had a long, whispered conversation, probably because they both knew perfectly well that Rose was hiding just past the door and trying to eavesdrop. When Jackie raised her voice to declare, "And I'll just go tell her right now!" Rose scampered into the lounge and dragged Tony into her lap in order to look casual.

Jackie was not, of course, fooled. "Mmm-hmm. Aren't you the picture of innocence?" she said, hands on hips.

"I dunno," Rose said, brushing Tony's fine hair. "I've always thought he'd look good with horns and a pitchfork. Did you know he throws things at me?"

Jackie rolled her eyes. "Well, Lena and Oleg are taking him the rest of the night. Starting right now, this is girl's night in."

"Night in?" Rose echoed. "Thought you wanted to see a play or something tonight."

"Changed my mind," she said, and scooped up Tony for a cuddle. "Or, rather, you changed it."

Rose drew her knees up to her chest. "Come on, don't go changing your plans on my account."

"Who else should I change them for?" she shot back. "I have to spend too much time away from my kids as it is, but for once I'm here when you need me—and you're obviously not having much fun going out, so tonight we're staying in."

It was a beautiful piece of Jackie-logic, and Rose couldn't help but smile. "Thanks, Mum. You're ace."

"Of course I am," Jackie said. "Now stay here while I get the supplies."

Supplies turned out to be a pitcher of sangria that had probably been thrown together just minutes before; take-away Chinese food, including extra crab rangoon; several large cartons of ice cream; and a stack of all the silly romantic movies Jackie had been able to get from the kiosk in Tesco's before it ran out of discs. "D'you want to start with *Bridget Jones Goes to Mars* or *Sliding Doors*?" Jackie asked, studying the labels. "Pretty certain neither of them got made in our universe."

"I know the first one wasn't," Rose said. She set her ice cream aside to peruse the rest of the discs.

"What about *The Lake House*?"

"Oh, no, that's depressing, I've seen it," she said. "And it's got that Keanu Reeves, I can't bear him."

"This version says it's somebody named Nathan Fillion," Rose said. "Maybe it's better in this universe?"

Jackie shrugged. "It's your night, dear, we'll watch whatever."

So she put the film on, and they ate the ice cream first and drank the sangria a little too fast. And it *was* depressing, especially when the time travel bits started. "That's not how it works," she pointed out when a tree planted two years earlier just materialized out of the blue. "It doesn't, the tree should've always been there if it was going to be there, it shouldn't just *become--*"

"Hush, I'm trying to listen," Jackie said. (Apparently she found Nathan Fillion infinitely superior to Keanu Reeves.)

"I'm just saying, they're doing it wrong," Rose said, and took another long swallow of sangria. "There's rules about changing the past. There's such a thing as destiny."

"All right, dear, now *hush*."

But then the man made a date and didn't keep it, and the woman told him to get out of her life, and the man asked *Can't we wait? I'll wait for you, we'll make it work*. Rose didn't even hear what the woman said back because her heart was suddenly pounding in her ears and the screen went fuzzy. She jumped up, spilling fried rice and sangria everywhere, and made it into the toilet before she started to cry.

After a few minutes, Jackie came in and sat on the floor with her. "*Mum*," Rose protested, trying to cover her blotchy red face.

"Oh, don't bother," Jackie said, leaning warmly into her shoulder. "I've seen you look a lot worse than this, lady."

"I could've been having a pee," she said weakly.

"You say these things," Jackie answered, "like I didn't see you do them every day until you were four."

"Not four anymore," Rose mumbled.

"Still. Mother's prerogative." Jackie handed her a wad of tissues and Rose blew her nose messily over all of them.

They sat like that in comfortable silence for a while, until Rose's hiccups were under enough control for her to talk. That took long enough that she'd even figured out what to say. "I don't know what to do next, Mum," she declared.

"Next with what?" Jackie asked. "With the Doctor?"

"With anything," she said. "I don't know if I can go back to work and pretend everything's okay when I've made the biggest mistake it's possible to make. But if I resign...if I quit Torchwood...I mean, what else is there for me to do?"

"Lots of things," Jackie said. "You're a smart girl, Rose, and you've got a reputation. People will be throwing down jobs at your feet the moment it gets out that you're on the market. You know the UN has about a million openings for you, or if you wanted to stay in Britain--"

"I'm not just talking about a job, Mum!" Rose said. "Torchwood's been my whole life since I got here, I don't—even if I get another job, what do I do? What's the *point*?"

Jackie's lips got very thin, and she straightened up a bit. "It's that man," she said. "The Doctor. Or whatever he's calling himself. I knew he wasn't as good as the real one the moment I laid eyes on him."

"He's exactly the same as the real one," Rose reminded her wearily.

Jackie asked with a little sniff, "Would the proper Doctor ever hurt you like this?"

Rose thought of a man who stood on a beach and wouldn't answer a simple question, and her heart seemed to squeeze itself into nothingness. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah, he would."

"Oh, Rose--" Jackie threw her arm around Rose's shoulders and hugged her close. "I always said he'd bring you trouble."

"Not always," Rose said. "You rather liked him after he regenerated."

"Well, then, I was hoodwinked," she declared. "He might save the world now and again, but to you he's brought nothing but heartache and worry."

Rose shook her head. "No, Mum, you'd got it all wrong, he's brilliant, I just..." She took a deep breath. "I spent two years at Torchwood looking for a way back to him. And now I've lost him all over again, and it's like...it's like losing everything. Even if I hadn't screwed up the case, I don't know if I could go back to work now. It's like there'd be no point to it."

"Rose," Jackie said. "You need to let go of him. You know why it didn't work out? Because he's not worth you! He doesn't deserve you! And knowing him, he's going to keep turning up over and over like a bad penny, but that doesn't mean you have to take him in. You have get shut of him."

"I *can't*," Rose reminded her. "Even if I wanted to—the other Doctor, the original, he asked me to take care of this one, remember?" She sniffled. "I made a promise."

"And he's in another universe where he'll never know he was too much of a git for you to keep it," Jackie said. "I keep telling you, you can't spend your whole life chasing after one Doctor or another!"

"I dunno, I'm so good at it," Rose said, sniffing again. "What else is there for me to do?"

"Rose, Rose, Rose." Jackie pulled her into a hug and stroked her hair, like she was a little girl again. "You survived the end of the universe, love. I think you can survive this."

Rose wondered if mere survival would be enough.

Eventually she was certain that the hiccups were gone, even if she now felt a little ill from too much ice cream and alcohol. "D'you wanna finish the movie?" she asked.

"Oh, sod the movie," Jackie said. "I told you it's depressing."

"How's it end?" she asked. "Do Kate and Alex ever meet each other?"

Jackie hesitated. "To tell you the truth, dear, I fell asleep before it ended. She told him off and hooked up with her old boyfriend and he went all mopey, and then I think somebody died."

Rose winced. "Definitely don't want to finish it, then," she declared.

Jackie nodded. "All right. Want to watch another one or call it a night?"

They ended up watching *Bridget Jones Goes to Mars*, though afterwards Rose couldn't have described a single frame.

~*~*~*~*~*~

She felt odd the next day, off somehow, like all those words had a physical weight and getting them out into the open had changed her balance, out of kilter. Pete got back to London and took one look at Rose and didn't say anything, didn't have to—she shoved off and sniffled in her bedroom a bit more, and when she came out he hugged her and said "I'm sorry."

"I should've listened to you," she said. "I should've listened to everybody."

"Under the bridge," Pete said. "Have you decided what you're doing next, then?" She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. "Understandable. I think Edward's willing to give you all your accumulated vacation and then some if that's what you want."

"I don't know why he's so eager to have me back," she grumbled.

"Because he cares for you, in his own bossy way," Pete declared. Rose pulled away, surprised by the statement. "And because he cares for you, he forgives you," Pete added. "He's just hoping you can forgive yourself."

"He told you that?" she asked dubiously.

"Well, I'm extrapolating a bit," Pete admitted, and Rose smacked him lightly on the chest. "But seriously, Rose," he added. "None of us like seeing you hold on to this."

"It's not just Leeds, Dad," she said, stepping away and folding her arms around her middle. "It's...a lot of things."

"The Doctor?" he asked.

Rose frowned at him. "Did Mum tell you...?"

"I rather figured it out when I got word he'd used a diplomatic passport to enter China at Druzhba," Pete said.

"Are you spying on him?" Rose asked.

"What, aren't you?" he shot back, and Rose protested mightily despite the email on her phone that said the Doctor had used his credit card to take a room in Beijing.

That evening, Pete insisted on taking the whole family out to dinner and a movie, and something inside Rose balked. "I've still got a lot to think about," she said. "I'd be bad company. Rain check?"

"We'll hold you to that," Jackie said playfully, but she and Pete both had little lines between their eyebrows. Tony just threw his ball at Rose's head again, though, so she knew she could at least fool a toddler. Or maybe he just didn't care.

So they all left, and Oleg and Lena retired to the little caretaker's house in the back of the garden after checking about six times that Rose didn't need anything. Rose had wanted more time to think, but she found herself wandering aimlessly through the mansion, thinking of all memories it held—two years of birthdays and Christmases and parties and picnics, two years of worry and illnesses and fights with her parents, the start of the Cyberwar, the last time she'd seen Mickey before she used the dimensional cannon.

Mickey. Hell. Maybe he'd had his reasons for leaving her behind after all. Maybe Jake was transferring resentment to the Doctor from *her*. For two years, Mickey had been by her side, her second in command, calm and brave in a way he'd never been in their own world; he wasn't brilliant at any one thing like Tosh or Jake or Grace, but he'd had a knack for putting the pieces together, for hunches that panned out perfectly. And he'd been a friend, one she'd desperately needed, and never once had he asked for anything more than that...

No, that wasn't right. Once, he'd asked.

They had been at the mansion, sitting by the very same fireplace where she stood now, and passing a bottle of wine back and forth and talking about anything and everything. The bottle hadn't been full to start with, so neither of them were exactly drunk—just warm and loose. And Rose didn't remember exactly what either of them said, but somehow the subject of the Doctor had come up, and Rose had started to cry, and Mickey had put the empty bottle aside and climbed up off the rug to put an arm around her and say, "Hey. Hey, what's this?"

"I can cry if I want to," Rose had said, because this was Mickey and she could be a brat around him in a way that Jake or Grace or even her mum wouldn't let her get away with.

He had wiped at a trail of tears and mascara with his thumb. "C'mon, you think the Doctor would want you crying over him?"

"It doesn't matter, does it?" she'd grumbled. "Since I'm never going to see him again."

"Doesn't mean you have to go moping about it," he'd replied, maybe trying to be playful, or maybe he'd been serious and she'd mistaken his tone.

"I just..." She'd sniffled, wiped at her own streaming make-up. "I still love him, Mickey. All this time and I still love him just as much as the day he said good-bye and it still *hurts*."

"Don't reckon it'll ever stop," he'd said.

She'd stared into the fire then for a bit, taking comfort in Mickey's warm and familiar presence. "What's the point, anyway?" she'd said. "Loving someone I can't ever have. All it does it make me a sappy mess."

"Hey, I think you're beautiful when you're a sappy mess," he'd said. (She wondered now, again, whether he'd been more earnest than he'd let on—oh, hindsight, you bitch.)

She'd swatted his arm at the time. "Flatterer. I mean...why do I even do this? What's the point?"

He hadn't asked for clarification; he hadn't needed it. Instead he shifted a little, drawing her just a bit closer, but looking anywhere else in the room. "Maybe love is the point," he said. "It...changes people, you know? You love someone, and you want to be worthy of them. You find out things about yourself you never knew, and even if you never get to be with them again...you're different for it. Better. You become the person you'd want them to be with."

Rose had looked at his profile, all warm tones in the firelight. "Do you think this is better?" she'd asked, because she knew full well she was different for having met the Doctor.

Mickey had looked at her with a tense expression, hard to read, and said, "I think you're amazing," in a soft, heavy voice. And then he'd leaned in and kissed her, warm and gentle and tasting of wine.

It had taken a beat before Rose pulled away and said, "Mickey, I can't." And he had apologized, and they'd sat on the couch together anyway until they nearly fell asleep there, Rose curled against Mickey's body but her thoughts a million miles away.

That had been months ago, before the dimensional cannon project, long before the stars started going out. She wondered now, knowing everything that had happened since, what would have been different if she'd kissed him back that night. What would've happened if he'd gone home right away instead of staying the night. What would happen if he was here right now, instead of a Void away.

She packed her bag up again that night, leaving behind most of the things her mum had bought her. Most, but not all. When they got back late in the evening, she gave Tony a kiss on his sleepy forehead and announced, "I'm going back to Cardiff for a while."

"Are you sure?" Jackie asked, frowning. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine," she said. "I promise. I just...if I'm looking for answers, I don't think I'm not going to find them here, you know?"

"Well, it's your decision," Pete said. "Though you know we're always here if you need us."

"I know, Dad." She made herself smile at them both. "Thanks for putting up with me this week, too."

Jackie snorted. "We don't *put up* with you, Rose, we're family."

"Which means we're legally required to put up with you," Pete said with a small wink. Rose snorted at him, but as Jackie climbed the stairs to put Tony to bed he stopped her. "Rose, I know it's your decision, but do think about what I said earlier, okay?"

"Of course I will," she promised him, and he let her go. "After I'm done thinking about the eleven thousand other things on my list."

"Cheeky," he said, but they shared a grin as they both climbed the stairs to the bedrooms.

Chapter 16

She took an early train this time round, catching a ride to the station with Pete, and made it back to her flat by mid-morning. There was a moment at the bottom of the stairs when she could almost convince herself she could hear the Doctor's voice in the echoes of the traffic outside, hear his footstep in a buzzing light fixture, and her nerves failed; but her email had informed her that he was still in Beijing, and he no longer had a TARDIS to bring him straight to her door.

So she gathered a pile of mail from her box and climbed the stairs, one at a time, like any other day in her life, and he wasn't waiting for her in the flat by any magical means, and that was fine. Rose did find something else waiting for her, though—a large bag of whole coffee beans on the table, weighting down a note and a flash drive. She didn't recognize the brand, but she definitely recognized the smell, which meant the contents of the note weren't terribly surprising.

Welcome home

Call ~~us~~ when you get back

Us means Grace

Jake! —△

See you soon. :-)

That made her smile. A little further investigation revealed that her pantry had been restocked, her fridge cleared of anything too perishable, and most importantly, the Doctor's remaining things had been packed away into a cardboard box at the bottom of the wardrobe. Rose didn't let herself linger over those for too long. Instead, she blew the dust off her French press and made herself one hell of a cup of coffee, now that she knew the secret of Ianto's special recipes. Then she started her computer and inserted the flash drive.

While it was loading, she called Jake. "Well, look who's finally come home," he said when he picked up. "I thought I told you to call Grace?"

"How's your hand?" she asked.

"Eh, it moves," he said. "Physical therapy is a bitch. Literally. Her name is Maureen and she doesn't approve of my lifestyle. Pierre keeps snogging me in front of her just to make her turn purple."

"Oh, that's Pierre's doing, is it?"

"Well, I'm not exactly complaining..."

Rose sipped her coffee and blinked at her computer screen, which just opened a window full of encrypted Torchwood files. "So I noticed some friendly little elves have been in my flat while I've been gone."

"*Dunno what you mean,*" he said airily.

"Elves with access to the Torchwood mainframe?" she prompted.

"*Hey, even elves have job descriptions,*" he said. "*Which includes making regular reports to the boss.*"

"Even when the boss is meant to be on vacation?" she asked.

"*Like you wouldn't be here if you could,*" he said, with such confidence that a lump rose in Rose's throat.

"*Got to do you homework to stay on top of your game, Prentice.*"

"Thanks, Jake," she said. "For everything, not just the updates."

"*Even though I've no clue what you mean, I will pass that along to the others.*" There was a clattering sound the background, and some dire words in French; Jake must be working from home today.

"*Speaking of which, you know that Italian place near the office? The one Grace won't shut up about?*"

"What about it?" Rose asked warily.

"*Well, there's a reservation for four tonight that could very easily be increased to five,*" Jake said. "*Seeing as Grace won't shut up about it and has no life outside of work and all.*"

Dinner with her team and...wait a minute. "Four?" she echoed. "Is Pierre coming?"

"*Nah, she insisted on bringing the teaboy,*" Jake said. "*Something about a favor. Anyway, are you in?*"

Grace, Jake, Tosh, and Ianto. For a moment she almost said no, and then felt immediately guilty about it, because it wasn't like she didn't want to see them...and anyway, what was she going to do otherwise, sit around and mope some more? That wouldn't help her answer any questions. "All right," she said. "What time?"

Something in her voice must've seemed unenthusiased, because Jake said quickly, "*You know, I was just asking, you don't have to come...*"

"No, no, I want to," Rose said firmly, because if they were still speaking to her she'd be a fool to turn them down. "What time? And what's the dress code?"

"*Seven,*" he said. "*Everyone else is coming from the office, so, you know, whatever. Being an invalid, I will of course be wearing my pajamas.*"

"Great idea," she said. "See you then."

The elves must've visited recently, because the reports on the drive were only about two days old; she found the second flash drive with her encryption key on it and spent most of the afternoon browsing.

Traces of synthorganic molecules found at the Leeds site were being used to pursue legal action against the Darrow Group, which had a few key Horatii pinned down, but for the most part they'd gone to ground. People like Moira Hearns had suddenly found excuses to leave for Europe or South America, while Lawrence Hadley had canceled several public speaking engagements for right-wing causes on a tenuous plea of "exhaustion." And most of the shell corporations and bank accounts that they had spent two months so painstakingly mapping out were now closed, transferred or simply off the books.

Tosh still had active radiation traces, though, suggesting that some synthorganic technology was still in Britain. They were just back to square one with trying to sort out *where*.

Rose started making notes on the pad by her laptop, and got as far as writing down *lorry routes* before reminding herself that she was still on leave. She didn't have to do this. It was so easy to slide back into the routine of the investigation and the adventure to fill up her time, but in a lot of ways that was no different than watching pointless hours of telly with Tony or going to eight million shops with her mum. It filled the time, and gave her a reason not to think when the whole point of her current hiatus was that she had things to think *about*.

She went to the shops instead, to restock on things like milk and bread, and see if she could figure out where Ianto bought his coffee now that she knew the brand name. That gave her just enough time to freshen up her make-up and throw on a heavier jacket, and just after seven she was jogging up to the restaurant, ready to apologize.

Inside, though, she found Jake to be the only one waiting for her. He looked loads better than the last time she'd seen him, just before she left Leeds—the burns on his face were still shiny and pink in places, and while his left hand was still bandaged he didn't carry the arm like it hurt that much anymore.

"Thought I was running late," she said by way of greeting.

"Remember who you're talking about," he said, and surprisingly, gave her a small hug. "They're not late for another two hours, and only if it's not because of an alien invasion."

"You're looking better," she added. "When are you allowed back on the job?"

"Starting back on Monday," he said, and wiggled his bandaged fingers. "Be a while before these come off, though, and the cream stuff they gave me smells awful."

"Hey, at least you don't need a skin graft," Rose said.

"Least I'm alive," he said with a small snort. Rose felt herself go stiff, and Jake flinched. "Sorry. Christ. I'm sorry, Rose, I...reckon I haven't been on my best lately."

"Neither have I," she admitted.

"I don't blame you," he announced. "If that's what you're worried about. Not for any of it."

She looked down at the tiled floor and scuffed it with her foot a bit. "Maybe you should. Blame me, I mean."

He sighed. "Only as far as I blame myself, you know?"

Before she could figure out what that meant—or, indeed, whether they were talking about Mickey or Leeds—Grace blew in with her long coat billowing melodramatically behind her. "I hate," she said, "Swiss banks. Welcome home, Rose."

Which cued the next round of embracing, which did more to reassure Rose that she was forgiven than any awkward conversation. "Where's Ianto and Tosh?" Rose asked. "They're not buried in paperwork, are they?"

"No, they're wrapping up something in Tosh's office—she's half-kidnapped him all this week trying to work on the satellite thing." Grace examined her hair in a little decorative mirror and then sighed explosively. "And I declare that is the last thing any of us says about work for the rest the night."

Jake rolled his eyes. "What are we supposed to talk about, then? The cricket?"

Neither Tosh nor Ianto hugged Rose (she thought Ianto's blush might become permanent if he tried) but they were clearly just as glad to see her, and after a bit of confusion at the coat check and a tiff at the table over whether Jake was allowed to have a beer on his medication, they settled down and ordered.

"We're nearly ready to push the next set of updates--" Tosh started to say as the waiter left.

"A ha ha!" Grace said, cutting her off. "No shop talk. That's why we left the office, remember?"

"We're talking cricket instead," Jake added.

"Don't make me strike a patient," Grace warned him. "I just want to talk about anything but work."

The table was swallowed in silence for a moment. Then, as if cued, they all broke up in laughter—even Ianto, who had barely ever smiled in Rose's presence before now. "Oh, we are damaged people," Tosh declared.

"That's what it takes to be the best of the best," Jake said.

"So we'll have to think of something," Grace said doggedly. "Um. Hmm. If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?"

"A tree?" Jake said. "Grace, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard of."

"Yew," Ianto said quietly.

Jake turned to him. "What about me?"

"Not you, yew," Ianto said, over-pronouncing the *eeeew* part. "As in, if I were a tree, I think I'd like to be a yew."

"You've thought about this?" Jake asked incredulously. Ianto shrugged. "I hate yew," Jake added with a raised eyebrow.

"Perhaps you're prefer to be a cactus, then?" Ianto asked.

"That's not a tree," Tosh pointed out. "Maybe bristlecone pine."

"Can we count poison oak?" Grace asked.

Jake gave them all an exaggerated scowl and waved his bandaged hand in the air. "Oi, what is this, mock the cripple?"

"You invited it," Ianto said blandly.

"Yeah," Grace said, "I mean, if you hate yew so much..."

"Roose," Jake wailed. "Make them stop. This is inhumane."

"You did leave yourself wide-open," Rose said, but her heart wasn't really in it; she realized she'd absently torn a bread stick into inch-long segments while listening to the others. "I, er, I suppose I'd be a birch. I like birches."

Nobody picked up on the diversion. "Is everything okay?" Grace asked. "Nothing happened in London, did it?"

"I'm fine," Rose said quickly. "I'm...not fine, but I'm okay. I'm *dealing*." She sighed. "I've just been thinking a lot about different things."

"Anything that won't invoke the Wrath of Grace?" Jake asked.

She pushed her pile of bread stick segments around the plate. "I'm been thinking of resigning from Torchwood."

Four faces all at once turned shocked and dismayed to different degrees, and they all blurted out some variation of *No* or *why* or *you can't!* Grace, with her brows deeply knit, added, "If this is about the current case...I mean, we all made mistakes, Rose, nobody's asking you to fall on your sword here."

"It's not that," she said, feeling suddenly defensive. "Well, not all that. I just...I'm not sure why I'm here anymore, you know, and if I can't answer that question I don't know how much longer I can keep it up."

"Oh, is that all it is?" Jake asked. "And here I thought it was something serious."

Grace swatted him with her napkin. "Don't joke about this Jake."

"Well, somebody's got to, or she might actually think she needs to leave!" He sipped his beer. "Talking about reasons—your career isn't your life, Rose. You don't need a reason for it."

"You've worked at Torchwood how long and you can say that?" Grace asked.

"Maybe it's not your life," Rose said, suddenly feeling a surge of jealousy at Jake and Pierre. "But it's mine. It's all I've done since—" *since I got here*, she almost said, but only Jake knew that. "Since the war. I don't have any hobbies, I don't have any friends..."

"Oi," Jake said. "And what are we, then?"

"She means friends outside of work," Tosh said. "Not that there's any difference."

"I dunno, I always kind of thought that making friends at work was kind of cheating," Grace said. "Not that I don't consider any of you friends, of course, but it doesn't exactly take effort, does it?"

"I was under the impression we were required by our contracts to like everyone," Ianto said in such a perfect deadpan that Rose didn't know whether to believe him or not.

"We do stuff outside of work, though, yeah?" Jake said, ignoring Ianto entirely. "It totally counts if we do stuff together that's not work. *This counts.*"

Rose considered the faces around the table. Tosh was absolutely in love with her computer, but she took the occasional holiday to see her family and she and Ianto were friendly—not in a romantic way, but they went to films with subtitles together and ate things with tentacles still attached and Rose had once seen Tosh handing off a slightly battered The Smiths CD with a guilty expression. She even let Grace drag her on ill-advised double-blind dates from times to time. Jake had Pierre, of course, who regularly dragged him back to Paris for family visits, and he and Mickey had used to play football on what passed for their weekends. Grace had season tickets to the opera and the orchestra and took anyone who dared express even a passing interest, which had included Ianto and Brynn in the past, as well as Mr. Winslow and most of the regular medical staff. Mr. Winslow had a wife and an allotment and some antique car. Ianto had Tosh and Grace and his security guard and his desk bamboo.

Rose had Torchwood, and parents who were more often than not in different time zones, and a nonverbal brother, and the Doctor. Only not anymore.

"I'm going to need some more to drink," she declared, and ordered a bottle of wine as soon as she could flag down a waiter.

By the time their entrées had arrived, Rose had gotten pleasantly muzzy in the brain, or perhaps a little more than pleasantly muzzy considering the concern with which everyone watched her when she went to the toilet. She wasn't drunk, though—she hadn't truly been drunk in a long time, not when at any moment she could be called up to save the planet. Maybe that was something else she could do while she was on vacation—get drunk, and have a manicure, and wear impractical shoes, and look at the stars without wondering where the next monster was coming from. Or whether one of them held the way back to the Doctor's side. She could stop looking for him down every back alley and in the mouth of every other singularity, and instead she could look for...instead...

She stared at herself in the mirror over the sink. "What am I looking for?" she asked.

Someone knocked on the door, and Jake's voice called through, "Hopefully not your knickers!"

She found him waiting for her in the nook concealing the toilets. "Are you following me?" she asked, suddenly annoyed.

"Course not," he said. "Can't I take a piss, too?"

Of course. She shouldn't be so paranoid. "Of course you can, sorry, I'm just a bit...out of sorts."

"Can see that." He didn't seem in a particular hurry to get into the gent's. "What with you talking shit about leaving Torchwood."

"I'm not talking shit," Rose protested. "I've been thinking about it."

"Yeah?" He shoved his hands in his pockets, hunching his shoulders a little. "You're really gonna do it?"

"I...dunno," she said. "I've got a lot of things I need to sort out in my head first, before I decide. That's sort of what the vacation is for."

"I thought the vacation was so the higher-ups didn't use you for target practice," Jake said.

Rose shrugged. "Maybe that, too. But this is my time, I might as well use it."

He wagged his eyebrows teasingly at her. "And for what purpose might you be using it?"

She looked away, just starting to feel bashful, when her eyes landed on a fellow talking into a mobile phone in the lobby. He was just paying his bill, it looked like, and he was tall and thin but dark and olive-skinned, and his jacket did not cover the firm swell of his arse.

And Rose thought about how she'd waited and waited for the Doctor, searched for him, looked for him, even when it was absurd to think he'd actually come; and how long it had been since she'd even looked at a man, any other man, and really let herself enjoy it. It felt like a kind of freedom. This was her time, time to get drunk and get manicured and wear beautiful shoes, and look at men again, and maybe more than look...

Jake followed her eyes. "Oh," he said. "Oh no. That's not what I—I wasn't serious, Rose!"

"Maybe I am," she said, watching Tall, Dark and Skinny pocket his phone and head to the bar.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Going from Epic Love Story to picking up blokes in restaurant bars in like two weeks?"

"You think I'm off my game?" she asked.

"Okay, one, I don't think you've actually got a game," he said, "and two, it's not a question of whether you're on it as whether you should be on it, yeah? You think this is a good idea?"

"I think it's my mistake to make." She fished two twenties out of her purse and pressed them into Jake's non-injured hand. "This is for my share. If I don't come back, tell the others I'm sorry, okay?"

"Just...don't do anything I wouldn't do, okay?" he said. "And that includes swallowing on the first date."

Rose swatted him on the arm with a smile and then walked up to Tall, Dark and Skinny, who was toying with a bowl of nuts and not actually eating anything. She stood back a while, considering how to approach him (because Jake might've been a *little* right about her lack of any game to speak of) until he looked up at her.



"Looking for something?" he asked. Not a local accent, she decided right away, but that wasn't unusual with so many people moving out of the London area the past two years.

"Maybe," she said, coming closer. "Are you waiting for somebody?"

He looked her up and down, and she hadn't really dressed to flirt—a sweater and jeans and boots with a modest heel—but she thought he liked what he saw. "Maybe," he allowed. "Why do you ask?"

"You looked lonely," she said. "Thought you could use some company, maybe."

"Do you come sit with every lonely man you see?" he asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Well," she shrugged and flicked her hair back with one hand. "Only the ones who seem worth the effort."

"And I'm worth the effort, am I?" He had a really nice smile. Point in his favor.

Rose nodded and perched on a stool. "So are you waiting or aren't you?"

"Not anymore, it looks like," he said, leaning closer to her, and Rose decided this was definitely a better way to spend her night.

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Wakefulness didn't come on slowly, by soft degrees that let her get used to the sunlight and the ache in her head; that would've been too kind. She came awake in a lurch, and later she wouldn't be sure whether to blame it on her stomach or some noise from the street or the sudden awareness of unfamiliar breathing on the other side of the bed. There was an insane moment when she wondered if the Doctor was back, if maybe he'd never left—but when she mustered the strength to look over her shoulder, it was Tall, Dark and Skinny sprawled on the other side of the bed with some really impressive hickeys on his collarbone.

How had she gotten back here? When had they gotten back here? She remembered picking him up in the restaurant bar—god, she was astonished that even worked, really. She remembered walking out with him, and a glimpse of her team at their table watching her with surprise. She remembered he'd had

a really nice car, but the conversation they'd had inside was patchy, and the night club was a total blur. He'd bought her drinks, she recalled. Many drinks. Every single one she'd asked for.

When had they left the club, though? Oh *god*, had they used a condom? She sat up a little more and scanned the room. The box of condoms from the nightstand lay against the far wall, and she remembered it suddenly, like a scene in a film rather than something she'd actually done—she'd reached for the box, but for some reason it had made her angry, angry beyond words, and so she'd thrown it and then jumped on him anyway.

She really needed to figure out his name.

He was still dead to the world, so she figured it was safe to slip into the toilet, and there was the used condom—she never thought she'd be so happy to see one of those. She made herself drink water, a lot of it, and brush her teeth, and thought about jumping into the shower when she heard signs of life from the bedroom. Oh *god*. *Just pretend it's a Dalek*, she told herself as she shrugged into her robe, and then boggled at what her life had turned into.

He was sitting up, rubbing his face. In the stone-sober daylight he didn't look quite as handsome as she remembered—he had no chin to speak of, and kind of a hairy chest, and his nose was crooked.

"Morning," she said, because she wasn't quite sure how to handle this. The last time anything like this had happened she'd had to sneak the boy out before her mum woke up.

"Hi," he said with a smile. It was still a nice smile, even without a chin. "How's the head?"

"Not good," she said. "Erm, yours?"

"Been better." He looked around the bedroom. "Nice flat. Didn't get a good look at it in the dark."

"Thanks." Was she supposed to offer him a tour? What the hell? "So do you want to, er, use the shower, or...?"

Or what? She had no clue what. But thank God, he seemed just as awkward now as she was. Maybe because she was. "I actually have, er, a puppy," he said, and then made a face like the words had spoken themselves.

"A puppy?" Rose echoed.

"Yeah, a little puppy," he said, "It's a present for my—sister, but I really shouldn't leave it alone too long or it'll get neurotic and have abandonment issues, so I should just...go."

"Yeah," she said, "I mean I understand that. That you need to go."

"Sorry," he muttered. "Maybe I could...call you sometime?"

He said the words like he was facing an execution, and when Rose said, "I don't think that'd be such a good idea, actually," he actually sagged with relief. "Your y-fronts are over by the wardrobe, by the way."

"Thanks," he said with a little wince.

Rose waited in the kitchen area while he got dressed—name, she was certain she'd known his name at some point—and put on a pot of coffee that her stomach was too roiled to let her drink. She let him out with a few more hideously embarrassing niceties and gave herself a few minutes to wallow in self-loathing. Then she found a bottle of Tylenol, ate about four, and climbed back into her bed, dirty sheets and all. Her phone was still in the pocket of her jeans, which had migrated partway under the bed. The number she wanted was fifth on her speed dial.

It rang twice. "*Holloway*," said the tinny voice on the other end of the line.

"Grace," Rose moaned, and pressed the side of her face not holding the phone into the pillow. "Tell me I haven't got the clap."

"*Oh, honey*," Grace said warmly, and without a trace of the schadenfreude she so richly deserved. "*That bad?*"

"Bad enough." Rose nuzzled her bare feet under the sheets. "Would it violate your ethics to just give me some Retcon for the whole mess?"

"*I don't think there's a dose big enough.*"

"Not for a weekend?"

"*You're only talking about the weekend?*"

Ouch. Rose supposed she deserved that one. "I can't believe I was that stupid."

"*You were hitting in the wine bottle awfully hard,,,.*"

"Why didn't anybody stop me?" she said, and then, "I know, I know, I'm a big girl who can make my own mistakes."

"*And this one sounds like a doozy.*"

There was sunlight seeping in through the blinds; Rose rolled over and switched the phone to her other ear. "I just...I guess I wanted to prove I don't need him. The Doctor."

"*You mean John?*"

"Whoever he is."

"*Rose, if you don't know who he is, I don't think the rest of us can help you.*"

She sighed into the phone. "It's just...it's really complicated. John Noble isn't his real name. He didn't used to be human. He's from a parallel universe."

"I got that, actually." Rose heard somebody speaking in the background, thin and incomprehensible, but Grace must've waved them off. *"He mentioned it when we met, remember? That he'd met some other me?"*

"Oh, yeah..." Rose chuckled. "He said you'd killed him."

"I didn't do anything of the sort," Grace said. *"I remember every patient I've ever lost, and I'd certainly never seen John before, whatever name he was going by. Unless he was a shape-shifter at the time?"*

"Something like that, yeah," Rose muttered.

"Well, still," and Rose heard a door close and a sudden drop in the background noise. *"Sorry, hiding in the paper closet, Winslow's giving a tour or something—look, Rose, I don't know how you got mixed up with a man from a parallel universe, but that doesn't make him the person you knew in this one. If you can't decide which one he is—and which one you want—then picking up random guys in Italian restaurants isn't going to do anything but give you the clap. He didn't actually have the clap, did he?"*

"How am I supposed to know, I didn't ask him," Rose said. "And that's one of the complicated parts—he is the same man. Mostly."

"Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades," Grace said ominously. And then: *"Shit, Winslow's looking for me, gotta go. Just, I'll write you a referral for a pelvic if you really have got the clap, and in the meantime you really should think about what it is you're chasing after."*

"Yeah, all right," Rose said glumly.

"And Rose--" Grace must've stepped into the hallway, because the background noise suddenly spiked, but not enough to muffle her words. *"For what it's worth, I think of you as a friend."*

That was oddly touching. Rose blamed the hangover, partly. "Thanks, Grace," she said, and switched her phone off. After a few minutes, she managed to drag herself into the shower.

What was it she was chasing after? The Doctor, of course, but what did that even *mean*? She didn't care about the TARDIS and all that, never had; she'd been drawn to the Doctor because he was strange and lonely and about as far from Henrik's and the Powell Estate as she could get. And she'd stayed with him because he was magnificent and bizarre, brave and funny, because he'd showed her a universe that was astonishing and terrifying and heart-breaking and he loved it, every bit of it, even if he didn't always accept it. And when she was with him she felt brave and strong, too, felt like more than what she was—because the Doctor didn't care about her school records or employment history or how she talked and dressed and took her tea. He didn't care that she was nineteen.

He'd made her better than she was—she'd made herself better just to keep up. And she'd loved him for it, for every time he looked at her and saw that she was good enough.

So maybe that's what she was after, not just the Doctor but that feeling he gave her of hope and joy and wonder. God knew Torchwood was good for wringing the wonder out of anything that came within a

hundred yards. Though she did like the work, usually—and she certainly got enough praise for it. Winslow was protecting her because she was more than good enough, everyone was asking her to stay...but the Doctor had gone, and somehow that was the only thing that mattered.

She got out of the shower and combed out her hair, then wandered around the flat in her pajamas for a bit; she couldn't really bear to get back in bed until she'd changed the sheets, and she couldn't bear to change the sheets just now either. Why did it all come back to the bloody Doctor, anyway? How had her life come to this? It was one thing when they were flying through time and space and he was giving her the stars...but she'd had him here, earth-bound, and he'd still filled her whole world, she'd still needed him...she needed him, plain and simple, and she hated herself a little bit for that.

It had all seemed so simple in Norway. No, that last time in the TARDIS. She'd had him—both of him—and it was like everything she'd ever dreamed, like all the things she'd been waiting for were finally going to happen—she'd have the Doctor back by her side, he'd take her to every amazing place he knew, things would all go back to the way they'd been. She'd told herself so many stories about that part, while she searched this universe for a way to the other one, but it had never ended with her back on that beach and him saying goodbye.

Sure, he'd also *stayed* with her—her Doctor, the part of him that brave enough to say *I love you* when he felt it. The bit that the other one couldn't stand to keep around. So none of the stories she'd told herself in two long years of waiting had involved clones, but that was okay, since they were the same man, right? Except one had stayed. One had wiped out the Daleks. One said he loved her.

Had she been telling everyone they were the same to convince them or herself?

She went and poured herself that cup of coffee, which by this point was slightly burnt. "So what?" she asked it, and oh, god, she was really going mad. "So what if they're not the same? So what if I have to settle? Maybe I don't have to settle, maybe I can find him again, maybe--"

Maybe he'd leave her on some beach again. Maybe he'd blame her for not keeping busy with his other self. Maybe he'd walk away.

"Why do I even like this bastard, anyway?" she growled, and drank her coffee.

She liked him because he made her feel strong and clever and brave. She liked the wonderful things he showed her. She wanted him for his smile and his hands and his absurd plume of hair, but she liked—she loved—how he made her feel.

Maybe it wasn't the Doctor she'd been chasing all this time. Maybe it was the idea of the Doctor, of all the good things they could do and be, of all she'd become because of him, for him. She'd loved him and missed him and so she'd made him over, bit by bit, in her head, into someone waiting just as patiently for her to find a way home. She should've known the moment she saw Martha Jones that she'd been deadly wrong.

"I haven't been chasing a dream, though," she told herself. The Doctor was real, or he had been once; they really had done and seen amazing things. What she'd been chasing all this time was a memory, like the memories her Doctor shared with the other one, beautiful and clear and out of reach.

She hadn't gotten her wish because she'd wished for something impossible, and that, not even the Doctor could do.

Rose cried into her coffee a bit after that, and lay on the couch with a sweater wrapped around her shoulders. Surely such a profound revelation should've been cathartic, freeing, but she wasn't feeling catharsis just then; it was more like grief, like Canary Wharf and Bad Wolf Bay and Donna's parallel world all in one. It was a bit silly, since she hadn't really lost anything but a man who'd never been. But she'd been able to mourn her father before she ever met him; this wasn't much more of a stretch.

But eventually, she stopped crying; she didn't even hiccup. Eventually she pulled herself off the couch, and got properly dressed, and changed the sheets. Eventually she sat down at her computer, because she might not have a Doctor but she did still have a life, such as it was, and it would be a shame to go and waste it.

Dear Mr. Winslow, she wrote, knowing he'd check his work emails even on a weekend. I am writing to inform you that, effective 5th October, I am returning to my position with the Torchwood Institute...

Chapter 17

All told, Rose's first day back at work was something of an anticlimax; she got up more or less as always, checked the news while she ate her toast, brushed her teeth in the kitchen and put on her makeup while riding the bus. It was an old routine, from before the Doctor, though she didn't recognize it until she was walking into Torchwood's lobby and realized she wasn't scanning the security lines for him anymore, that she didn't *need* to.

She swiped her badge at the gate, let them search her purse, and waved to Brynn at the big desk. "Hello, Rose!" she called out, grinning. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes? People were saying you'd been sacked, you know!"

"Nah, they can just try to keep me away," Rose said, projecting a better mood than she was feeling. The hallways and corridors were familiar, the same, but at the same time everything seemed new and unsettled. This was her life, but it seemed like she had only just started to live in it.

Mr. Winslow had written back that he wanted to see her first thing, so she took the lift up to his office and waited for the secretary to wave her in. Winslow was Winslow, from his walrus mustache to his paper-strewn desk, but he smiled a bit when Rose came in. "Welcome back, Ms. Prentice," he said. "I admit I'm surprised to see you again so soon."

"It's been a week and a half, sir," Rose pointed out.

"Yes, well, you've got accumulated vacation through February, if you'd wanted to take it..." He harumphed and stabbed at a few keys on his computer before taking off his glasses. "Have you given any thought to our previous conversation?"

"I've not done much but think, sir," Rose said.

"And have you reached any conclusions?" he asked.

She hesitated for a moment, choosing her words. "Sir, I wouldn't be back here if I hadn't."

That drew a real smile out of him, a rare and wondrous sight. "I thought as much. You should know that in the absence of both you and Mr. Simmonds, Dr. Holloway has petitioned heavily for your team to remain assigned to the Horatii case."

She imagined Grace and Tosh up to their necks in the work of five agent and winced a little, even as she admired their dedication. "I think we'd all like to finish what we've started, sir," she said. "I understand Mr. Simmonds returns to active duty today?"

"That's right." He examined one of his papers. "And the search for Dr. Noble's replacement continues at the predictable pace. You should make time in your schedule to interview possible candidates...or to nominate them, if you have any preferences."

"That didn't go so well last time, sir," Rose said, and swallowed a small lump in her throat.

"Be that as it may, you're the unit leader and you deserve input." He glanced up at her. "Forgive a bit of irrelevant curiosity, and feel free to ignore the question—where has Dr. Noble gone now?"

"I really don't know," Rose said, because she'd canceled all the traces on his credit cards and passports and erased them from the system. "He left Cardiff after he resigned and we...haven't been in touch."

"I see. I'm sorry." Winslow gathered some of his papers into a stack and shuffled them, as if just looking for something to do with his hands. "You may go, Ms. Prentice. And once again, welcome back."

So back down the lift to the field division's floor, and the corridor where her team were housed. She wasn't quite sure how to face them after her shameful performance at the restaurant, but she also figured she sort of deserved any embarrassment they could throw at her, and so she walked past Ianto's empty desk with her head held high, past the silence of Jake's office and the one that had been Mickey's, and unlocked her own door--

--to find everyone crowded in her office, around her desk. Eating cake. "Surprise!" Grace shouted, with enough gusto that Rose thought the rest of them were meant to be doing it, too, but weren't. (This was confirmed when Grace glared at them all.) The cake was a plain yellow sheet cake, probably from a supermarket, though no supermarket Rose knew would decorate a cake quite like this one; one side, the one already cut, said -LCOME BACK JAKE with a bloody bandage underneath in garish red gelatin icing, while the other said CONGRATULATIONS ROSE! YOU DON'T HAVE THE CLAP! with something that looked for all the world like a smiling cartoon condom.

"You people," Rose said, but couldn't help the smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Oh, bollocks, so you are staying, then?" Jake asked, but he was smiling. "I was about to go through your desk for staples and Sellotape."

"I was going to take the whole office," Tosh added. "It'd be nice, you know, having a window."

"Don't worry, Rose," Grace added. "I intended to defend your office. After I finished my cake."

"Yeah, about the cake," Rose said. "What gives?"

"It's friendship cake," Jake said, sounding vaguely offended by the thought. "Not that I thought we needed it, but it made Tosh get all teary-eyed and I'm never opposed to free cake, so, here we are."

Tosh said, "Liar," but she was also very interested in her cake.

"We figured, with both of you coming back from the disabled list on the same day, it was worth celebrating," Grace said. "You can have a slice, but only if you promise not to run off in the middle to ravish lanto."

lanto choked on his cake, and Rose laughed. "I promise, no more running off from me," she said.

"Besides, no offense, lanto, but you're not my type."

"At least he's more attractive than that manorexic you pulled," Jake said.

"Stop it, sir, you'll make me blush," lanto deadpanned, even if he was still pink in the face, and Grace cut Rose the piece of cake with the condom on it. If that didn't mean all was forgiven, then Rose didn't know what did.

Eventually, of course, lanto went off to make coffee and the rest of them ended up talking about the Horatii case. "They've changed their routes, but they're still shipping with the same firms," Tosh said. "I've been trying to narrow down where they're shipping to, but it's hard going."

"What about the people signing those contracts?" Rose said. "I know they're using aliases, but can't we do handwriting analysis? Something?"

"Comparing it to who?" Jake asked. "We haven't got baseline samples for even a fraction of the possible suspects, never mind the odds it's someone we don't know."

"We could try fingerprints," Grace said. "Seize the invoices and do an analysis."

"I feel like we're missing something," Rose said, tapping her fork against the empty plate. "We're got the trucks in our sights—we know exactly where they are."

"Where they were," Tosh corrected. "I still can't track them in real time with any accuracy."

"So we ditch the idea of tracking them entirely," Rose said. "Ferret things out the old-fashioned way. Where is everything being delivered?"

Grace reached over Rose to bring something up on her computer. "Warehouses, mostly. Dockside properties in Liverpool, London and Dover, an industrial park in York, an empty paper mill in Bristol..."

"The last two are close to airports," Jake pointed out. "Because they're moving things out of the country, which we already knew. Should be just about done, shouldn't they?"

Tosh nodded, reluctantly. "Highway traffic is down. They must be nearly finished."

"But we've got no way to tie the contents of the warehouses back to the Horatii at this point," Grace said. "Thousands of synthorganic God-knows-whatits sitting around and the paperwork leads back to ghosts in every direction. They're even paying the transportation companies in cash."

It took a moment for Rose to realize why that sentence bothered her, and when she did she sat up so quickly she nearly put her elbow in the remains of the cake. "Tosh, you can estimate how many circuits are in one location by the signal strength, right?"

"I think I can," she said. "It's a ballpark figure, but--"

"I know, just—is it more or less than the number of photomorphic cells that would give off the same signal?"

Tosh frowned for a moment, but Jake seemed to follow Rose's train of thought; he started writing something down right on his frosting-smearred paper plate. "More," Tosh said. "I mean, loads more—Grace is right, we're looking at hundred, if not thousands of circuits in each location."

"Then all we need is one traceable shipment," Rose said. "One shipment that traces back to the Horatii at any level."

"And where are we going to get that?" Grace asked. "If there's no paper trail to the warehouses?"

"They're not staying in the warehouses, though," Jake said. "They've got to be loaded onto ships eventually—the air and water varieties both."

"And somebody has to be hiring those ships," Rose said. "And if they don't know we know they're bringing in materials from offshore, they might not be as careful with the ships as they are with the lorries."

"Might not," Jake said. "Not the same as definitely not."

"Still, it's our first lead in a while." Grace starting gathering up the plates and forks and napkins. "Tosh, help me move this to Ianto's fridge, will you? We've got work to do."

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The plan they worked out was brilliant, by Rose's own modest estimation. It was elegant, it was simple, and it didn't require any large detachments of police or military, no overwhelming force.

The trick would be getting Mr. Winslow to agree to it.

Rose stood before his desk, watching him read the proposal over again—because surely he'd already read to the bottom once?—and waiting for his opinion. She didn't squirm, but it was a very near thing. It seemed an age before he looked up, one eyebrow quirked skeptically, and asked, "Are you quite certain this is going to work, Ms. Prentice?"

"I have absolute confidence in my team, sir," she said. "Dr. Holloway and Mr. Simmonds are already in Dover, scouting the location, and Dr. Sato has arranged round-the-clock surveillance on Arthur Dale."

"I find it hard to believe that the personal assistant of an member of Parliament would be personally involved in an illegal smuggling operation," Winslow said.

"We managed to pull a CCTV image, sir, and the computer puts his face at a 98% match," Rose pointed out. "MP Hadley ran an import-export business before the war and has plenty of ties in the shipping and transportation community; Dale's using his own name to contract the boats and supplying a different set of fraudulent invoices for the bombs."

"I did read the report," Winslow said dryly. "Are you quite certain you don't require any back-up on this? Police or military?"

"We're already involving the local police, as part of our contingency planning, but as I said, I have absolute confidence in my team," Rose repeated.

"Your team which is still short one person," Winslow pointed out.

Rose stood straight as she could and looked him in the eye. "Sir, too many people have died already," she said. "I assure you I'm not about to add any more. We can *do* this, and we can do it without firing a shot."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Lofty claims, Ms. Prentice. I look forward to seeing if you can back them up."

"Is that an approval, sir?" Rose asked.

"It is," he said. "Tell your team I wish you good luck."

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She arrived in Dover on a Saturday afternoon, with Tosh and Ianto trailing after her. Ianto had nearly dropped his coffee when she asked him to be involved in the operation. "Me, ma'am?" he'd asked.

"Why me?"

"Because you're calm, reliable, and you've got a driving license," Rose had said. "And not only do we need a fifth man to make this operation work, it has to be somebody with your unique skills."

"What unique skills?" he'd asked, looking honestly confused.

"You'll see," she'd assured him. "Unless, of course, you'd rather stick to the coffee machine..."

He hadn't; and so they arrived in Dover, and met with Jake, Grace and the chief of police behind closed doors. "Everything's set," Jake said. "The ship leaves tomorrow night, and they won't be loading the macguffins until the last minute—don't want to be caught with Dale's name on anything."

"And I've made all the arrangements on my end," Grace added. "They were pretty eager to cooperate when I made it clear what the consequences were."

"Dale himself just arrived in town," Tosh added. "I've got his hotel, the license plate of his car and the GPS of his phone. I can pinpoint his location in real time."

"And is all the equipment set up?" Rose asked.

"Ianto and I are doing the final test run on that this afternoon," Tosh said. (Ianto was being fairly quiet; perhaps he was just unused to being the one served the coffee.)

"My men will be in position as well," Chief Reed promised. "I'm diverting all available units, and they'll have riot gear and K-9 units available if the situation gets out of hand."

"I sincerely hope that won't be necessary, sir, but thank you," Rose said. She tried to imagine how this could possibly get that out of hand, but those thoughts led back to Leeds, and she couldn't keep refigting that battle in her head any longer.

They spent the next day tracking Arthur Dale's every movement, until about tea time, when they all broke up to attend their separate tasks. Rose walked along the harbor for a while, with one eye on the sky—it was a waning moon tonight that wouldn't rise until nearly midnight, she'd checked—but as the sun fell to the horizon she headed back to the rooftop office building where Jake had already set up the laptops, along with a small space heater and a couple of camp chairs.

"Dale is having dinner at a fancy restaurant right now," he announced as Rose cleared the ladder. "Everyone's in position waiting on him. I'm a little bit tempted to give him a call and ask him to skip dessert, you know?"

"Don't you dare," Rose declared, more forcefully than she meant to.

He raised his hands in defense. "Hey, ease up, it was just a joke."

Rose took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Sorry," she said. "Just a bit tense."

"Everybody is," Jake said. "But unless Dale's got a hidden crate of Cybermen up his sleeve, I think this time 'round we've got everything under control."

"Don't even joke about Cybermen," Rose said wearily. "I mean, these are the same people with hidden underground tunnels who rigged a whole factory to *self-destruct*. That's the sort of stuff James bloody Bond is supposed to put up with, not us."

Which lead them to discussing the next Bond film, of course, and the rumor that the villain would be a Cyberman (Rose was intrigued; Jake thought it was too soon) which somehow lead into their favorite television shows from childhood and how they differed from one universe to the next. It was fully dark by the time Tosh got on the radio to say, "*Dale is moving towards the docks. I'm already in position.*"

Rose thumbed her microphone on. "Copy that, Tosh. All units, report."

"*I'm right where I have been, waiting for Dale,*" Grace said. "*Tosh, wave—I can see you!*"

"*I'm ready, ma'am,*" Ianto said.

"Don't call me 'ma'am,'" Rose reminded him. "Chief Reed, are your men in position?"

"*Waiting for your signal, Ms. Prentice,*" Reed said. "*I've copied them in on this frequency. Detective Inspector Craig is in charge.*"

"*Waiting and ready, ma'am,*" someone, presumably Craig, added.

Rose took a deep breath and shut off her microphone. "All right, here goes nothing..."

"*Rose, he's using his phone,*" Tosh said suddenly. "*Copying you in on the call.*"

Rose quickly switched from the radio to the laptop feed, as one of Tosh's clever little programs came to life. A man's voice, presumably Dale's, was already speaking. "*--ley, please? It's urgent business.*"

"*Mr. Hadley is in a meeting with the Prime Minister,*" answered a very familiar voice in reply. "*I'm afraid he can't be reached. Shall I pass along a message?*"

"*No, that's—wait, yes, do. Let him know I'm taking care of the last of the post, will you? I'll back in London by morning.*"

"*Very well, sir. May I ask who is calling?*"

"*It's Arthur, just tell him it's Arthur, he'll know who it is.*"

"*All right, sir. I'll be certain to pass that along immediately.*"

"*Thanks.*"

The call ended abruptly. Jake snorted. "The *post*? What kind of a code word is that, *the post*?"

"Good enough, and we've got him giving his own name," Rose said. "Tosh, did you record all that?"

"*Yeah—I'm recording everything, just to be safe.*" There was a vague thump on her end. "*Ah! Oh my! Okay, sorry, somebody just dropped something—never mind.*"

"Don't get hurt down there," Jake said, brows knitting. "Can't have two walking wounded on the team, Grace won't know who to mother."

"Ha, ha, Jake," Grace said. "Remind me of that next time you need a prescription refilled."

"ETA ten minutes," Tosh reminded them. "I'll leave the equipment running, I've got to get into costume."

Jake switched off his microphone and looked at Rose. "You know, one of us could've been down there, helping her out."

Rose shook her head. "I'm too well-known and you're not supposed to do any heavy lifting," she reminded him. "Besides, she can take care of herself."

"I'm just saying, it's not so hard to run one of those fancy Geiger counters she's got," Jake said. "You could've had Grace do it and put me where she is."

"Grace is good at what she does," Rose said. "And I want you with me."

Jake frowned. "What for?"

"Because you keep me from doing stupid shit, when I bother to listen," Rose said bluntly.

His eyebrows rose sharply. "Do I, then?"

"Well, when you're not encouraging me," Rose added. "But next time you and Grace agree on something, remind me to pay attention, okay?"

"Okay," Jake said. After a moment, he added, with a small smile, "Apology accepted." Rose smiled back before turning her attention to fiddling with the binoculars.

From their rooftop, they spotted Dale's car pulling up, and Dale getting out. He was an unremarkable man, perhaps a little short and a little pudgy, but in bland ways that somehow made him even harder to pick out of a crowd. At least, to human eyes; the computers had had no trouble with him once they'd gotten a clear CCTV image. It was probably an asset, being that forgettable, when you were a politician's assistant. He pulled out his phone again, and Rose switched her earpiece to the laptop feed again in anticipation.

"Hello?"

"Captain Poole, this is Arthur Dale. Have you started loading the cargo yet?"

"Of course not," Poole said; on the second laptop, Rose suddenly got a CCTV camera image of the ship's bridge, with Poole pacing irritably back and forth. "You gave us specific instructions not to touch anything until you got here."

"Well, I'm here, so start touching," Dale said irritably. "I haven't got all night."

"Here we go," Rose murmured.

With binoculars, they could watch Dale strut about the deck of the ship, shouting at people; with the CCTV feeds they were now getting from aboard the ship, they could follow him belowdecks as he

watched the shipping containers settle into place and shouted at other, different people, and even shoved some of them. "Very bad behavior for a public figure," she murmured to Jake.

He nodded. "Bloke needs an anger management course, in my opinion."

"And coming from you, that's saying something."

Jake did not attempt deny it. "Look at him, he's standing under a crate. Who gave him this job?"

Eventually, all the containers were loaded, and Dale brought out his phone again. "*Hello, Mr. Hadley's office,*" answered that familiar voice again.

"*It's Arthur,*" Dale said. "*Tell Mr. Hadley the post is in the mail.*"

"*Arthur, Mr. Hadley asked me to deliver a message to you,*" the receptionist said smoothly. "*He said there's another letter to be posted yet. It's on its way by courier now.*"

"*Another!*" On the deck, Dale waved one arm in a great loop. "*Does Mr. Hadley know when the deadline is?*"

"*I said, it's on its way to you now,*" the receptionist repeated. "*You're to stay where you are and wait for it. Shall I wake Mr. Hadley and ask him to repeat it himself?*"

"*No, no, oh, Christ, no.*" Dale raked his fingers through his hair. "*Look, I've got an angry contractor ready to cast off, I haven't slept in thirty-four hours and some Chinese kid keeps bumping me. How long am I meant to wait here without a cigarette or a shooting spree before your bloody courier arrives?*"

"*Thirty minutes, sir,*" the receptionist answered. "*I can contact her and let her know you're in a hurry, if you like.*"

"*I bloody well like!*" Dale hung up and started stomping around the deck, glaring at the surly crew, who were unimpressed by him.

"That's our cue," Rose announced, pulling off her headphones. "Wait here and tell DI Craig to move in if anybody starts shooting, all right?"

"I'm a cripple, not an idiot," Jake said grumpily, and snatched up the binoculars. "Have fun and don't get shot."

"Thanks," Rose said. "Love you too."

She shimmied down the ladder to ground level, and slowly approached the ship, in case Dale had left behind any security that she didn't know about. He hadn't; miraculously, the one thing that absolutely had to go right had gone perfectly: he'd been so confident in his safety that he'd come alone. She swung around to where some of the police were waiting and gave them a thumbs-up to signify that she was going in; then, quietly, she climbed a ladder onto the deck of the cargo ship.

Dale was standing with his hands jammed into the pockets of his greatcoat, glaring intermittantly at different crew members or shuffling his feet. Rose approached him from behind. "Mr. Dale?"

He didn't turn around. "Who's asking?"

"Mr. Arthur Dale?" she pressed.

"Yes," he growled. "Yes, it's me, you'd better bloody well have the—" He turned around and froze, bloodshot eyes going wide and glassy when he saw who was behind him. "Oh, fuck me."

"No, thank you," Rose said. "Mr. Dale, in the name of the Office of Homeworld Security and as an authorized agent of the Torchwood Institute, I place you under—hey!"

Because before she got done with the little speech, Dale was off and running, across the deck. And not, quietly, either; he was screaming like a little girl, bellowing "Help me!" and "Stop her!" and "Cast off, you fucking idiots, cast off!" The crew came boiling out onto the deck like ants, coalescing into a wall of bodies that caught Dale. He spun around and started pointing at Rose. "Her! Get her! She's with the police, she'll get us all arrested!"

Captain Poole came out of the deck and stared across the deck at Rose. "Police, you say?"

Dale nodded. "Torchwood. UN. They'll arrest us all, they'll throw us all in some jail to rot, *do something!*" But the crew weren't moving; they were, in fact, edging close around Dale, hemming him in, so Rose could approach at a languid walk without fear of him running off again. "What are you doing? Why aren't you doing anything?" Dale fumed. "You think you're going to testify against me? Fuck you! That money you've been taking is dirty as shit, I'll tell them all you were taking a cut, you hear? I'll take you fuckers down with me, ever many of you!"

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Dale," Poole said. "I suppose it's a good thing we've already made our arrangements."

"W-what?" Dale stammered.

Grace, with the perfect timing that comes from watching too many operas, stepped out from behind Poole. "Let's start this over again. In the name of the Office of Homeworld Security and as an authorized agent of the Torchwood Institute, I place you under arrest for crimes against the people of Earth."

Dale jibbered, while two of the crew seized him by the shoulders. He looked between Rose and Grace, and then at Poole. "You...you..."

"Knew he'd need the protection once we revealed to him what you've had him hauling," Rose said. "Dr. Holloway's been watching your every move from the ship's internal CCTV and recording it. Tosh, are you up here?"

A slight figure in baggy coveralls and a cap came forward; when she whipped off the hat to let her hair down, Dale whimpered. ""I've collected swabs from your skin and clothing that test positive for

synthorganic residue," she said. "And tagged the shipping containers that are emitting a radiation trace consistent with your smart bombs, so the police can search them. Also, I'm not Chinese."

"This is impossible," Dale stammered. "This isn't fucking real. I...I called him early today..."

"From the restaurant?" Tosh asked. "Would you like to try calling him again?"

"I've got it," Rose said, since Dale's arms were pinned. She patted him down, finding his phone in the process, and set it to speakerphone before dialing the number for Hadley's office in Dale's full view. "Hello, Mr. Hadley's office," the same receptionist answered.

"Hello," Rose said. "Can you tell me to whom I'm speaking?"

"Ianto Jones, Torchwood."

Dale made a squeaky noise.

"Thanks, Ianto, you were brilliant. Get down here to help us clean up." Rose shut the phone off and tucked it back in Dale's pocket. "See, Torchwood's got control of the old Cybus satellite network. The one that runs most of the mobile phones in Great Britain. Just one short step from recording your calls to redirecting them all to a dummy number of our choosing."

Dale didn't even make a noise at that; his mouth moved, but nothing came out. A few moments later, the Dover police swarmed up onto the deck, a man in a kevlar vest leading the way. "DI Craig, ma'am," he said, flashing a badge. "Need any assistance here?"

"Yeah," Rose said. "First, don't call me 'ma'am.' Second, I need you to go down in the hold with Ms. Sato here and start searching cargo containers for synthorganic technology—be very, very careful, because there could be live explosives involved. Third, take Mr. Dale here to a cell for safekeeping."

While DI Craig started directing traffic, Rose took a few steps back to look at the black water, and the half-moon just now rising on the horizon. She waved in the general direction of Jake's rooftop, and got a few flickers of a torch back. After a little while, Grace followed her. "Captain Poole's sending his crew home," she said. "He's going to stick around in case the police need him. We should call the army for a containment unit."

"Yeah," Rose said. "I'll get on that in a bit."

Grace stood by her for a moment. "So we've got Dale, which almost certainly gives us Hadley, and through them we've got a knife in the guts of the whole combined organization of All Earth and the Horatii."

"Unless they refuse to talk," Rose said. "Or the rest of the group decide to throw these two out to hang. And we're still no closer to finding the rest of the bombs that are out there."

"Well, still," Grace said. "We've got our man without firing a shot. Well played, Ms. Prentice."

"Yeah," Rose said, and let herself exhale. "This time, everybody lives."

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What with securing the scene, calling in the UN and signing off on preliminary paperwork, they didn't get back to their hotel until the small hours of the night, when it was already well into Monday morning. Rose collapsed on her bed for a moment, trying to will herself to set an alarm on her phone so she didn't just sleep through the next day, because there would be more paperwork and the actual removal of the bombs and bomb components they'd found, and the all-important questioning of Dale, and possibly testifying to get a warrant for Hadley as well. She'd already called Mr. Winslow in spite of the hour to report a complete success, since this time round he wasn't going to hear it from the BBC.

They'd done good, her team. Won this round. Everybody lived.

She was staring blankly at her phone, caught on the edge of action, when it startled the hell out of her by starting to ring. It was an unknown number with an unfamiliar country code. "Hello?" she answered warily.

"This is Miss Rose Tyler?" a voice with a lilting accent asked.

"Yeah, I mean, my name is Prentice, but that's me, Rose Tyler Prentice," she stammered. "Who is this?"

"I'm calling from the Central Municipal Hospital in Mexico City," the voice said. *"You know a Mister John Noble?"*

Rose's heart skipped a beat. "Doctor," she corrected. "It's Doctor Noble, yeah. What's wrong?"

"Mister Noble, he is in intensive care," the voice said, and Rose's stomach locked up on itself. *"There was a fire, you see, and he was badly injured. He had you listed with his hotel as an emergency contact. Where are you right now?"*

"England," she answered numbly. "I'm in Britain, look, what d'you mean, hurt? Is he going to be all right?"

There was a pause. *"How soon can you get to Mexico, Miss Tyler?"*

"Prentice," she said. "I can, um, it's going to take a few hours. Is he going to be all right?"

"He is in serious condition," the other voice said reluctantly. *"I can put you on with his surgeon, if you like."*

"No, no, that's fine," Rose said. "I'm, I'll be on my way as soon as I can be, just, it's the middle of the night here, it's going to take a while."

"We will be waiting for you," the receptionist said. *"And call you if there is any change."*

"You'd better call me!" Rose said, and then hung up, so she could start placing some other calls.

An hour later, she was on her way to Mexico City.

ACT 5 Home Is Where

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?

It all depends on what you mean by home.

Of course he's nothing to us, any more

Than was the hound that came a stranger to us

Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in."

"I should have called it

Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Chapter 18

First things first, she called British Airways. "I need a flight to Mexico City, immediately."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I'm afraid all our seats on the next such flight are booked--"

"This is Torchwood agent 65930, authorization ninety-nine," Rose said. "Can you get me a seat or not?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. *"I think something can be arranged, ma'am. Your name?"*

Then she called her parents from the car (which she'd borrowed from a Dover PC), leaving a voice mail in the middle of the night. "Mum, Dad, listen—I'm going to Mexico City, it's the Doctor, I'm sorry, he's in hospital and I need to find out what's going on. I'll call you when I get there."

The last person she called was Mr. Winslow. She meant to leave him a voice mail, too, but he woke up on the second ring. *"Prentice? Is that you?"*

"Yes, sir," she said. "I'm leaving Dover now, sir. There's a...a family emergency, and I need to take some of the vacation I've got saved up."

"Of course," Winslow said. "Of course, I understand completely—it's not your uncle, is it?"

For a minute Rose forgot who he was talking about. "No, sir, Mr. Tyler's just fine. It's...complicated. I'll let you know later how long I'll be."

"Of course, Ms. Prentice," he said. "My prayers are with you."

"Thank you, sir," Rose said, and ended the call before she could get too soppy about it.

Dawn was breaking by the time she'd got to the airport, got her tickets from a clerk who was helpful bordering on obsequious, and got aboard the airship. One thing she was learning to love about this world's blimps over planes—you could use your mobile during the flight. After she'd stowed her bag, she collapsed in the seat and decided it was safe to call Jake and Grace personally about this one.

Jake answered on the first ring. *"Rose? What the hell's going on?"* he asked, though he sounded more worried than actually angry. *"I thought we agreed, no more running off?"*

"Is Grace with you?" Rose asked, looking out the window at the sparkling lights of Heathrow. "I don't want to explain this twice."

There was some background noise and beeping, and then Grace said, *"I'm here, what's the problem?"* in tinny, echoing tones. Jake must've put on the speakerphone.

"The Doctor—Dr. Noble, I mean—is in hospital in Mexico City," she said. "He's in serious condition, but I haven't gotten any more information on him. I'm listed as his next of kin in all his papers, so I need to leave for a while—I'm already on the blimp."

Jake swore faintly, somewhere. Grace asked, *"Do you know what happened to him?"*

"No," Rose said. "I just, I need to go. I'll phone you when I know more. I'm sorry to leave you like this, but--"

"Go," Jake said. *"Go on. You do what you need to, we'll hold it down from here."*

She couldn't tell if he was angry again or not. "I don't know how long I'll be," she said.

"Long as you need to be," Jake said. *"Just call and let us know he's not dead, okay? He's a git but I don't wish him dead."*

Rose exhaled. "Thanks, I think. I'll let you know—yeah, you know."

"We'll be in touch," Grace promised. *"And if you know what hospital he's in, I can try to get his chart emailed to me, to get more information."*

"That would be brilliant," Rose sighed. "It's Central Municipal Hospital in Mexico City."

And then, as the lights of London dwindled below her, she tried calling the hospital back for her own update. Unfortunately, by then it was the middle of the night in Mexico City, and she couldn't even get a receptionist that spoke English, and her grasp of Spanish began and ended with *si*.

The little screen in the arm of her seat informed her it was a thirteen-hour flight. There wasn't much to do but slip on her little eyeshade and give in to sleep.

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Despite the uncomfortable chair and the teenagers kicking the back of it, Rose did manage to get a few good hours of sleep in; when she gave up on getting any more they were still over the Atlantic and a flight attendant was bringing around boxed lunches. Rose ate, walked up and down the aisle a bit to stretch her legs, and then checked her phone for messages or missed calls, even though they were in a dead zone with no signal. There was a single email from Pete with a full dossier on the Doctor, or rather, his cover story—including things like his passport number and insurance information, thank goodness. Rose hadn't even thought to ask for that. She composed a quick thanks, even if she couldn't send it yet, and then settled down to read the dossier. It wouldn't do for her to mix up any details of his cover story when she was meant to be his next of kin, after all.

John Noble, human being. Born in Kent, April 23, 1971, no siblings, both parents deceased—not too unusual these days. Two degrees in physics from Oxford, very nice. Previous jobs in engineering firms and research laboratories, still technically employed by the UN despite faffing off with no warning and no forwarding address, so that Rose had to illegally stalk his credit cards, and then turning up in bloody Mexico with his head caved in or his elbows broken or that one fragile heart pierced by a bullet and Rose had to run and save him, or just run to him, and maybe even watch him die--

She put down her phone and tried to breathe deeply.

It was just her luck that she'd finally started to—not forget him, exactly, because she'd never be able to do that. Get beyond him, maybe. Discover what her life could be like when she wasn't chasing after him, or the ghost of what she wanted him to be. And now he'd gone and dragged her back in again, maybe for the last time. It had begun to feel like they were always saying goodbye, one way or another, and she wasn't sure how much more of that she could bear.

She checked the time in Mexico City and realized it was finally a reasonable hour; thirty minutes more and she had a signal again. She called the hospital again, and just kept asking *Hablos Anglais?* until she found somebody who did. "I'm calling about a patient, an Englishman, named John Noble..."

"Oh, our big hero!" the voice on the other end said. *"He is in serious condition, very serious, but stable now."*

"What the hell happened to him?" she demanded.

"You didn't hear?" the voice asked. *"A burning building fell on him. He saved like twelve kids!"*

A burning building fell on him. Of course. Didn't that sort of thing happen to everyone? "So he's in serious condition," she said. "What's that mean? Is he conscious?"

"He...uh...I will find you the surgeon, okay?" the voice said, and before Rose could protest, they put her on hold. *Stable now*, okay, that was a relief. He was stable. Stable and maybe in a coma or something awful, but stable. For now. She hung up on the hospital and started paging through the in-flight magazine, but didn't managed to read a single word.

When they finally arrived, Rose had to use her Torchwood ID to get through customs since she hadn't brought her passport; it took a stupidly long amount of time to get everything sorted (and send a quick message to Jake asking him or Grace to find her passport and mail it to her). It was early afternoon in Mexico City, and Rose was sweltering in her jacket and sweater as soon as she stepped out of the climate-controlled airport. She grabbed a taxi to the hospital (the first one she could find that spoke English) and on the way used her phone to look up Fun and Functional Spanish Phrases—god, why couldn't a building have fallen on the Doctor in Quebec or something? Rose could at least muddle about in French, instead of having to rely on everyone else to know English.

By the time she got to the hospital admissions desk, she had composed a little speech and reeled it off. Either she was surprisingly clear or completely incomprehensible, but the nurse made a call and pointed her to a chair. A few minutes later, a young man in green scrubs came in and looked around. "Rose Tyler Prentice?" he asked, in an accent that sounded more American than anything else.

"Yeah, that's me," she said. "I'm here about Dr. Noble."

He smiled at her. "My name's Eduardo Ramirez, you can call me Eddie. I'm John's nurse and I can take you up to see him."

"What's his condition?" she asked as Eddie lead the way through the hospital corridors.

"Same as it has been for everybody calling about him—serious and stable," Eddie said. "The surgeon, Dr. Vasquez, she can explain--"

"I don't want to talk to the surgeon," Rose said firmly. "Everyone keeps trying to kick me over to the surgeon. I want answers now."

"Okay, okay, I get that," Eddie said. "So there was this fire downtown—nice apartments, not those shacks on the lakefront they threw up during the war, nobody knows what happened—anyway, the firefighters weren't there yet, so John went running into to help evacuate everybody."

Rose snorted, and Eddie raised an eyebrow at him. "No, sorry, just—that's just like him, running towards the burning building when normal people are running away."

"Well, everyone here thinks it's pretty special," Eddie said. "I mean, not just a regular guy, but a tourist, even, and he saved these two little kids—got his picture in the papers about it, too. But when he went back inside he got pinned by some debris, and he was unconscious when the firemen brought him out."

"Is he awake now?"

Eddie shook his head. "We put a tube in his throat to help him breathe, and that's pretty uncomfortable, so Dr. Vasquez had him sedated. He's gonna need surgery for a pretty nasty break in one thighbone and he's got some bad burns, too, but his vitals are all okay and there's no sign of an infection or internal bleeding."

Rose exhaled. "Thank you. I mean it, I've been trying to get a straight answer out of somebody for hours and hours and—thanks."

"Don't mention it," Eddie said. "Probably they don't know all the technical terms in English. Me, my mom's a citizen of California, I grew up on both sides of the border and went to nursing school in Los Angeles, so I can talk shop both ways."

"I read French in school," Rose said miserably. "So if you need to order a cheese omelet, I'm your woman."

They exited an elevator into the silence of the intensive care ward, and Eddie made a few quick comments to another nurse before taking Rose to a particular room. "He's looking kinda scary right now," he said softly. "Don't let it upset you, okay?"

"I've seen worse things, trust me," Rose told him.

But the Doctor in intensive care, even by her standards, was pretty bad. He was still as the grave, and the tape that held the breathing tube in place seemed to cover half his face. One arm was packed in the same gelatinous bandages that Jake had been treated with, only there were more of them, and his bare right leg was in traction, skinny and pale where it wasn't red and blistered. A heart monitor beeped out the slow, steady rhythm of a single heart, and the pump attached to the tube whispered every few minutes with an artificial exhale.

Eddie pushed a chair in her direction, a boxy little armchair with some faint stains in the upholstery. Rose sat in it. "There's some paperwork for you to do, but that can wait a little while more. I'm gonna go find Dr. Vasquez for you. She'll be able to give you the full report, okay?"

Rose nodded, because now that she was here she didn't mind so much waiting on the mysterious Dr. Vasquez. "Thanks again," she said.

"Hey, I'm a nurse, this is part of what I do," he said as he walked out the door.

She couldn't seem to tear her eyes away from the bed. He looked frail, there, with the tubes down his throat and the tubes and wires curling around him; frail, fragile, mortal. No larger than life or death. "You stupid bastard," she said, without any feeling in it, because he'd been saving children from a fire, how stupid was that? "Idiot," she added anyway, just because it always wound him up, and if there was any chance he could hear her under all the drugs she wanted him to know she was there. "I've come all this way for you, are you happy? Or were you trying to keep away from me?" Tears pricked her eyes, and she had to sniffle a little in spite of herself. "Why am I even talking to you when you're unconscious, anyway?"

Her phone rang, making her jump. *Grace Holloway calling.* "Grace, hello, sorry," Rose answered. "I just got to the hospital."

"That's about what I figured," Grace said. "While you were in transit, I managed to get through to the hospital and convince them that John's still a Torchwood employee so they'd talk to me about him. How's he look?"

"Bad," Rose admitted.

"Well, he's not gonna walk it off, that's for sure," she said. "Is he still intubated?"

"Yeah..."

"Probably just a precaution," Grace assured her. "There's always a chance for airway injury with smoke inhalation. But I'm looking at his preliminary results and I pretty much agree with the local doctor's diagnosis."

"Which is?" Rose asked. "I haven't seen her yet."

"Right, sorry," Grace said. "He'll need surgery to put his femur back together, and most likely a skin graft to cover some of those burns—I don't know how you end up with burns like that on your front, incidentally, because normal people would bend forward when fiery debris is falling around them."

"This is the Doctor, remember," Rose said.

Grace snorted. *"Right, my bad. Anyway, it's going to be a couple weeks before he's up and moving around, and probably a couple of months of physical therapy—and it'll be way worse than what Jake's whining about, at least in the beginning—but unless he suddenly comes up with a airway injury or a massive infection, I think he's out of the woods at this point."*

Rose let out her breath, the breath she felt she'd been holding since she got the phone call in Dover.

"Thanks, Grace," she said. "Anybody gone after my passport yet?"

"Jake has the spare key, so I made him do it," she said. "He also said something about stealing your perishable foods, if this turns out to be like the last time you ran off on us."

Rose winced. "I don't know. It...it's gonna depend on what the Doctor wants to do when he wakes up."

"Well, if you come home and the cupboards are bare, you know who to beat up," Grace said. "What time is it there, anyway? Two? Three?"

"I...have no idea." There'd been a big clock in the customs office but she'd been so focused on getting out she hadn't noticed it.

"Did you sleep at all on the flight?"

"Little bit," Rose admitted.

"Well, don't run yourself ragged, okay?" Grace made a noise that was not quite a yawn. "Sorry. Long day. I'm still in Dover, with Tosh, cleaning up the loose ends before we foist all this off on the UN."

"You get some rest to," Rose said. "We did good yesterday."

"Hell yeah, we did."

Rose hung up and leaned back in the chair to watch the Doctor, watch his chest rise and fall as the machine breathed for him. He was going to be all right, though. Eventually. And for the moment, he needed her just as much as she'd once needed him.

She didn't even notice she was tired before she fell asleep.

~*~*~*~*~

Rose woke to someone gently shaking her shoulder and murmuring in Spanish. "Sorry, erm, I don't," she started to protest, but she realized the woman nudging her was wearing a blue smock and carrying a push mop. She waved it gently, in case Rose didn't notice it the first time. "Yeah, got it, I'll just...I'll just step outside."

She took one last look at the Doctor—still sleeping, still frail—and then got out of the janitor's way. There was no sign of Nurse Eddie or the paperwork that he was meant to be bringing her, and she had to walk around the ward a bit to even find a clock. Seven o'clock local time, which meant it was one AM in Britain. God, she hated blimp lag.

Though she hated to leave the Doctor for long, her stomach was rumbling—she'd last eaten during her flight. So she carefully studied all the signs in the halls until she found her way to a small public cafeteria, where there was hot coffee and semi-familiar food. She got a second coffee and carried it back upstairs with her, just in time to find a woman in scrubs coming out of the Doctor's room. She was tall and thin, with a wedge of graying hair and plenty of laugh lines, and she was giving instructions to a female nurse as Rose approached. "Excuse me," she said, fully aware that she was interrupting. "Are you Dr. Vasquez?"

She smiled. "Yes, yes—Gabiella Vazquez. You are Miss Prentice? Eddie told me about you."

Her English wasn't quiet as fluent as Eddie's, her accent a little more marked, but Rose was finally started to appreciate the skill of a second language. "What's going on now?" she asked. "Has anything changed?"

"No, no—we removed the tube, is all, because there is no airway injury." Vasquez said quickly. "Your husband is improving well."

Rose didn't flinch, but it was a near thing. "He's not my husband," she said. "We're just...we're together, but not married."

"Oh!" Vasquez covered her mouth for a moment. "So sorry, I—I assumed--"

"It's all right," Rose said. After all, she'd been assuming an awful lot until recently, too.

They finally brought her all that paperwork to do, but of course it was all Spanish, so another nurse had to help with most of it. There were some things, like payment information, that would have to wait until the Doctor was able to sign off, but Rose muddled through the worst of it, and when she was done Vasquez came back. "We've lowered his medication, but we don't know when he'll wake up," she said. "There's a good hotel not far from here—I can have someone book you a room, if you like."

"Can I wait here?" Rose asked. "I don't want him to wake up alone."

Vasquez smiled again. "Of course. I will tell the night staff not to bother you."

Grace would never forgive her—much less her back—but Rose settled back in the same old chair again to wait. She sort of wished she'd had time to grab a book or something during the flight—maybe a crossword puzzle, something. She fiddled with her phone some more, but at this hour she couldn't justify sending anything but email messages—*I'm here, I'm okay, the Doctor will live*—and then playing the stupid little mini mobile games that she'd never bothered playing before. It turned out she was really, really bad at Sudoku.

Just when she was starting to think that maybe that hotel would've been a good idea, the Doctor made a small noise and tried to turn his head. Though they'd taken the tube out—there were still red patches where they'd pulled the tape away—they'd put one of those little oxygen tubes under his nose, and it started to pull when he moved. A small line appeared between his eyebrows, and he tried to turn his head the other way.

"Don't," Rose told him, and leaned forward to take his uninjured hand. "You'll knock something out of place and I don't know how to call for a nurse in Spanish."

But that just made him turn the other way again, towards her, and eventually he dragged his eyes open. "Rose," he sighed, and smiled, and looked at her like she was wonderful. At least for a moment. Then he seemed to remember they weren't speaking to each other and his expression clouded over. "Er. Hello."

"Hello yourself," she said. "How do you feel?"

"I think," he said slowly, voice raspy from the tube, "that I am on some very interesting medication." He raised his head slightly to get a good look at his lower body. "Oh my."

"Look on the bright side," Rose said. "You've got your picture in the paper for it."

He let his head fall back and shut his eyes, for long enough that Rose thought he'd fallen asleep again. Then he sighed and said, "You found me."

"I didn't know I was supposed to be looking," she said. She wanted to point out that she'd not only found him, she'd come to him, waited for him, and that was more than he'd done for her. But his grimace either indicated he knew that already or he was in quite a lot of pain, and either way she decided it wasn't worth scoring the petty points. "The hospital called me. Said I was your emergency contact with your hotel and with the embassy."

"Yeah," he said. "Didn't know who else to put, so..." He tried to shrug with his bandaged arm and winced.

"Well, thank you for that," Rose said. "Otherwise I might never have known you'd gotten yourself killed."

"Wait, am I dead?" he asked. "I didn't think it would hurt this much."

"You nearly were," she said. "You've got a broken legs and some ridiculous percentage of burned body area and, oh yeah, a *building fell on you.*"

"Only parts of it," he muttered.

Rose sighed, because she was too tired and her sleep cycle was too addled to maintain real anger. "It's like you keep forgetting you can't regenerate anymore."

"This had nothing to do with regenerating," he said, surprisingly sharp in spite of the drugs. "People needed help and it was the right thing to do."

"So you don't care you could've been killed?" she asked.

He sighed and tried to turn away from her. "Well, it wasn't like I'd have left anyone behind."

Tears picked at corners of Rose's eyes. And here she thought she was done crying over this man. "Idiot," she snapped, to get his attention. "Stupid, selfish bastard."

He shut his eyes again. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. For everything."

"You're about three weeks late on that one," she informed him.

He flinched. "I didn't think you wanted me around anymore," he said meekly. "Not after...not after I failed you like that. I failed everybody."

"*Idiot,*" she said again. "We all made mistakes that night. Not all of us got to run away from them."

He shut his eyes and said again, "Sorry. I can't...I can't think clearly anymore." He paused. "Or, well, not as clearly as I used to...things get muddled. I'm muddled. I'm not used to muddling. I'm so sorry."

"We've both been a bit muddled," Rose admitted with a sigh. "Probably still are."

"Does that mean you forgive me?" he asked, opening one eye a sliver in a ridiculously boyish look.

"I'm working on that," Rose said, and watched his face fall. She steeled herself to carry on. "I need to know, soon, what you want to do. If you want to stay here in Mexico for treatment or go...somewhere else."

He didn't miss her hesitation. "Where else would I go?" he asked.

Rose shrugged. "Cardiff. London. Anywhere but here." She didn't mean to use the same phrase from the note he'd left her, but she didn't try to take it back, either, even when he made a miserable face. "You're a hero, you know. They say you were in the papers and everything."

"Lovely," he said dully. "Do you want me to go back to Cardiff?"

"I don't see how that has to do with anything," she said, folding her arms.

"Well," he said, "before I take the trouble to get transferred there in my delicate condition, I'd like to know if anybody's waiting for me there. If I'm welcome."

He had dark shadows under his eyes and small blisters on his face, and he watched her with dark and desperate eyes. "It still depends," Rose said slowly, forcing herself to meet his gaze, "on where it is you want to be."

He nodded like he understood, looking ten times more exhausted all of a sudden. "Take me home, Rose," he said softly. "Wherever that is. Please."

"All right," she said, and took his hand. "I'll just talk to the doctors and find out when you can leave." But she didn't go talk to anyone; she stayed where she was, holding his hand, until he fell asleep again.

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Rose ended up staying in Mexico City for two more days. Most of the time she was in the hospital, just staying by the Doctor's side, listening to anything he might be too sleepy or drugged to follow. Vasquez talked to Grace twice before agreeing to do the surgery on the Doctor's thigh in Mexico but the skin graft in Cardiff. "We have to put pins, you see? Here, here, and here. Steel pins, so the pieces stay together and heal strong."

The Doctor seemed more fascinated by the jagged break on the x-ray film than what Vasquez was saying, so Rose asked, "How soon until he can walk on it, then?"

"That will depend more on the skin graft," Vasquez said. "He will be on bed rest for some weeks after that, so the graft will heal correctly. Dr. Holloway will decide whether to put a cast on the thigh, and when, but after that he should be able to walk with a, oh, what's it called, cane? Crunch?"

"Crutch," Rose supplied.

"Sounds like I'm going to get plenty of rest," the Doctor said glumly.

"At least I'll know where you are," Rose shot back.

When she wasn't at the hospital, she had to go to the British Embassy to pick up her passport, and then to the Doctor's hotel to gather his things. It was a little grim, packing up his toothbrush and pajamas for him, a little too much like he had died, and she tried not to look too closely at the familiar shirts and trousers and ties as she stuffed it into a suitcase and toted it back to her own hotel. There was also a side trip to a shopping mall, necessary because even for two days, Mexico City in October was more like

Britain in July, and she needed a change of clothes that wouldn't make her sweat to death when she wasn't in an air-conditioned room.

Pete was willing to help make the arrangements, when she did managed to catch him at a reasonable hour. *"He's still technically my employee, remember,"* he said. *"I can arrange a private airship for the two of you, direct to Cardiff."*

"What about a hospital?" Rose asked. "Grace has staff privileges at UHW."

"And she's already lined up a burn specialist there to admit him when he arrives," Pete said. *"We've been in touch."*

For a moment it was a little surreal, thinking of Pete and Grace speaking to each other—like something in Rose's world had twisted around on itself to let two separate pieces touch. "Thanks," she said. "Sorry. I'm a little stressed out here."

"That's perfectly understandable," Pete said. *"Have you decided what you're doing next when you get back?"*

"What do you mean, what am I doing next?" she asked.

"About the Doctor," he said.

Rose sighed. "No. I haven't decided anything."

"Not something you should leave to the last minute."

His surgery was on Wednesday, and Rose watched him chat with Vasquez and the orthopedic surgeon, a small round man with a perfectly hairless head. The Doctor, it seemed, spoke fluent Spanish—some leftover echo of his life as a Time Lord, and which Rose found patently unfair. They gave him the first round of anesthetics and then left so Rose could have a word before the drugs kicked in. "We'll leave first thing in the morning," she reminded him. "The hospital will provide an ambulance to the airport for you."

"Will you be there?" he asked. "In the ambulance, I mean."

Rose hesitated. "Sure," she said, wondering if it was the right decision. "I'll ask if I can bring our luggage."

"Good," the Doctor said. His eyes were already looking a bit glassy. "Tired of traveling alone. 'S boring. Kept wishing you were with me."

Rose's throat started to feel a bit tight again. "Well, now I am," she said, for lack of anything else.

"Yeah." His mouth stretched into a slow, sleepy smile. "Missed you. Haven't told you that yet, I don't think."

"You hadn't," Rose said.

"I did." He yawned. "And I think I'm on a lot of drugs now, aren't I?"

"Just a few.

He shut his eyes and leaned back in the pillows. "Doesn't make it not true. *In chemo, veritas*, as they say."

"Who's ever said that?" Rose asked.

"Well, there's me....and...no, wait, that was me again..." He put his good finger to his lips as if thinking. "I think...no, he was quoting me..."

And Rose laughed, for the first time in what felt like forever. "You're impossible."

"Not really," he said, smiling at her. "Just highly improbable."

On impulse, Rose bent down and kissed his temple. He gaped at her, mouth moving soundlessly, like a fish, which made her blush terribly. "I'll try to be here when you wake up, okay?" she said. "But I've got some thing to get done before we leave."

"Okay," he said, blinking. The drugs were probably starting to kick in. Rose sort of wished she had that excuse.

She found Nurse Eddie and pulled him away from his other patients to help her finalize the ambulance arrangements, and then she ate lunch, and then wandered. She'd been so busy getting things under control, taking care of everything that needed managing, that she'd barely had time to appreciate that she was in one of the most beautiful cities of the post-war boom. She found herself on the waterfront, overlooking the artificial lake that had made the city an island again after however many centuries; it had been a crucial defense during the Cyberwar, and there was already a bronze statue of a man with binoculars in the middle of the stony beach to commemorate the failed siege. Children played there without much fuss, throwing rocks at each other or running up to the edge of the wind-whipped water and then retreating from the little waves with shrieks and cries. Rose found a bench a little further on, standing alone on the strand with nothing around it but rocks and mud; maybe there'd been a bus shelter here once, or a park, and only this remained.

She looked out over the water and wondered what had possessed her to kiss the Doctor back there, why he'd looked so shocked. She'd been honest when she said she still hadn't completely forgiven him for running away, no matter how often he apologized. She still wasn't objective around him, just like Pete had warned her, and she needed some time to get back on her feet after the wringer she'd just been through. She needed some time to clear her head. She needed some time to decided, like Grace had asked, what she was really chasing after.

She didn't *need* the Doctor anymore, and she'd proven that.

But, the more she thought about his silly smile, the more she realized a part of her still *wanted* him.

Did that even make a difference?

"You don't know what you want," she said to herself softly. "You barely even know him, really." And she couldn't let herself get distracted by how much he said he loved her. He'd said he loved her and he still walked away. She had to be objective about this. And there were still so many things to sort out, like their baggage and the surgery and the flight back home...maybe they could talk it out, though, talk things over. On the flight, if he was awake enough. After he'd gotten settled in Cardiff, certainly.

Somehow, it was always *later* when it came to him.

She walked back to the avenue, withdrew some more pesos from the first cashpoint she could find, and then hailed a taxi. She had to hit up her hotel and arrange an early check-out before she went back to the hospital, and she didn't want the Doctor to wake up alone. That wasn't loss of objectivity, that was kindness; she just had to be careful that that was all it was.

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Apparently having pins surgically inserted into a bone was more painful than Rose could've imagined, because the Doctor was on the really, really good drugs. He slept through the ambulance ride and drifted in and out during the whole long flight. Rose was glad she'd found some English-language newspapers in the airport to keep her occupied, even if they were all from America. The front page of the *New York Times* was the head of the American branch of All Earth denying involvement with the British branch of the party or any sort of smuggling operation. There was more about Lawrence Hadley's arrest in the international pages. *Mr. Hadley had no official comment, but a spokesman for his family said they are "saddened by this turn of events" and "confident that Lawrence's name will be cleared."* *The Office of Homeworld Security refused to comment on speculation that Hadley's personal assistant, Arthur Dale, had agreed to testify against his former boss in exchange for a reduced sentence. Dale was arrested on October 11th in the port city of Dover by agents of the British Torchwood Institute after a three-month investigation....*

"Rose?"

She dropped the paper to look at the Doctor's half-open eyes. "Yeah? You okay?"

He licked his lips a few times. "Get 'em?"

"Get who?" Rose asked. She found a bucket of ice chips and fed one to him with a plastic spoon.

"Hrmp." He took a deep breath. "Bad guys. Get them?"

"Yeah," she said. "We caught the bad guys. Mostly."

"Brilliant." He gave her a soft grin and then fell asleep some more.

They arrived in Cardiff in the small hours of the morning, and Rose rode in a second ambulance to University of Wales Hospital to see the Doctor safely checked in. Grace wasn't there, but a doctor named Stuart was. "I've been in touch with Dr. Holloway, and I'll be handling Dr. Noble's case personally," he said as he introduced himself. "The skin graft won't happen for a few days, until he's had some time to bounce back from the surgery. We've got all his records and files from Mexico City and from Torchwood...yeah, think that's it." He smiled at her. "Would you like to hang around until he wakes up?"

Rose thought about it, about how he said he'd missed her, about the kindness of making sure he didn't wake up alone in an unfamiliar place. Then she checked her watch. "No, thanks," she said. "I've got work in a few hours. I'll come by during my lunch."

"All right," Stuart said. "We'll be certain to call you if his condition changes."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

She went home, changed into work clothes, and then slept for three solid hours face-down on her bed without even turning down the sheets. As soon as her alarm went off, she drank a quick cup of coffee, wolfed down a slice of toast and spent her bus ride trying not to nod off. Just another day in her life.

Chapter 19

On Friday, Rose started work on her Dover report and demanded restitution from Jake for her missing milk and lettuce. "You didn't say when you were getting back!" he protested. "I was doing you a favor!"

"What, did you think I'd spend two months in Mexico until he could walk again?" Rose asked.

"Thought you'd be taking *some* time off," he muttered, hunching his shoulders.

Rose rolled her eyes. "And do what? Camp out at his bedside? I've got work to do, and he's in good hands at the hospital, *and* he's so drugged up he barely knows what century it is."

"Just," Jake scratched the back of his neck. "S'what I'd do for Pierre, you know?"

Ouch. Rose sighed. "Jake, either you like the Doctor or you don't like him, please make up your mind."

"I...will dislike him less if and when he actually apologizes for what he did in Leeds," Jake concluded.

"But I do like you, and I know you love him."

"Do I?" Rose asked.

"Of course you do," Jake said. "Otherwise you wouldn't have been acting like such a moron since he came."

"Well, I'm glad you're so sure of it," Rose said.

Jake raised his eyebrows at her. "Rose, you had to be halfway drunk to pick up your manorexic friend and you despised yourself the next morning, or so Grace has let slip. You're pathetically in love with him. Not that there's anything wrong with that—and now that he's not, you know, fucking up in my face once a week, I'm going to try to respect it."

"So maybe I'm still in love with him," Rose said. "That...might not be a good thing, you know."

He blinked at her. "You pick *now* to waver in your eternal devotion?"

"Shut up," Rose said.

"Right, sorry, that was bitchy." Jake leaned closer to her. "Still. Maybe I'm not the one who needs to be making up my mind in a hurry, eh?"

"He's between major surgeries," she said. "I think I've got a bit of time."

Saturday they met about the skin graft, and Rose finally got a good look at how extensive the burns were on the Doctor's right side; no wonder he was on so much medication, because the pain had to be terrible. "We've got a patch of donor skin that we'll graft on to cover this area," Stuart explained, sketching out an area that went from the Doctor's waist to his armpit on the photograph he held, "and the bit we've taken off your left arm, we'll graft on the right one, just here at the elbow. That should help preserve mobility of the joint, though of course you're not moving for a long time after we're done—can't take the risk of the grafts pulling free."

"How long is a long time?" the Doctor asked, scratching at a half-healed blister on his jaw.

"Two weeks, minimum," Stuart said. "Probably three, to make sure there's adequate blood flow to the grafted skin before we start stretching it. Between that and the cast, you'll be in PT for a while."

He grimaced, but said, "Well, better than death, eh? Don't like death at all. Much prefer agony over death, all things considered."

"Should've thought of that before you let a building fall on you," Rose said.

"I told you, it was part of a building," the Doctor said. "Not even a large part. A bit. A *bit* of a burning building fell on me, and you go about exaggerating everything."

"Well, it sounds so much more heroic that way," Rose said.

The Doctor straightened up a little, to the extent he was able, eyebrows rising. "Really? Heroic? You think so?"

"Just a bit," she said. "Don't want it to go to your head."

They smiled at each other. That was a start.

Sunday was the actual surgery, and after telling herself that he didn't need a babysitter Rose showed up halfway through with her laptop, and worked on her report until they moved him to the recovery ward. He was bundled up in what looked for all the world like giant water wings, which apparently had something to do with growing new blood vessels into the grafts; Rose watched him sleep for a while, but went home before he woke up.

Later, as usual. The hardest part could always keep until later.

By Tuesday, during her lunch visit, he was already frustrated with bed rest. "Give me something to do," he begged. "Anything. Crosswords, books, jigsaw puzzles. I've been playing this game with the hospital radio station, trying to count every word I hear that's not spelled with an *E*, that's how desperate I am."

"I could bring you some felt-tipped pens," Rose suggested. "Then you could decorate your cast."

The Doctor glared down the bed at his cast, a monstrosity that went from his heel to his hip, like something in a cartoon—apparently the only way they could guarantee to keep the fracture immobilized. "I couldn't reach it anyway," he said grumpily. "Not allowed to bend myself, remember? Otherwise my new zombie skin will peel off."

"Don't call it 'zombie skin,'" Rose said. "That's weird."

"What? It was a cadaver donation, they told me so. It's zombie skin." He shrugged with his left side only. "Don't get me wrong, it's better than some of the alternative approaches I've seen over the years, but that doesn't negate my right to find it *creepy*."

"Well, calling it zombie skin makes it worse," Rose said.

"*And* they're starting physical therapy already," he added. "I'm not allowed to get out of bed, but a man named Hans comes in every afternoon to bend the rest of me. Something about muscle atrophy. I haven't had a man's hands on my like that since Jack Harkness first tried Delurian ale, only I can't put Hans in the cellar until he sobers up."

Rose laughed. "You promised to show me pictures of that one, remember?"

"That's right, you were out like a light after the first shot, you lightweight." He sighed. "Ah, well. Least I've still got the memories."

"Mostly good ones, right?" Rose asked.

"Yeah," he said, with a little smile at her that broke her heart. "Mostly brilliant."

Later, a voice in her head said, *now is later*. But she couldn't bring herself to wipe that smile away. She made a show of checking her watch. "I've got to go," she said. "I'll bring you something, though—maybe one of those little DVD players."

"Want to sign the cast before you go?" he asked, pointing at it with his good arm.

There was a packet of markers on the bedside table, so she chose a blue one and wrote near his knee, where he'd be able to see it, *Stop complaining! It could've been both arms!* Then she signed with a flourish. "There. Now I don't have to be around to say it to you."

"You know, technically it *is* both arms," he said, showing her the bandage on his left where the skin graft had been removed. "It's just I'm still allowed to use this one."

"Then it's not *really* both arms," Rose said. "Same time tomorrow, okay?"

"Course," he said. "It's a date."

Weirdest date ever, Rose thought, then remembered who she was talking about. *Okay, not so much.* "Better not stand me up," she said, rising.

"That," he pointed out, "would require that I could stand up at all."

Of course, she ended up agonizing at Grace about it later. "It's like I can't help myself," she moaned as they walked to the bus stop together. "He just, he's *him*, and I start to remember why I loved him in the first place...or the original him, I mean. And this one's close enough that I could love him, too."

"You know," Grace said, "I'm starting to think you should be paying me for this."

Rose rolled her eyes. "Fine, go ahead, mock my pain."

"Life is pain, Princess, and anyone who tries to tell you different is selling you something," Grace said, with a horrible fake accent that meant she was quoting something Rose didn't recognize.

"You're the one who told me to figure out what I want," Rose said. "And I sort of have done. But I don't want him to run out on me again."

"Which is perfectly reasonable," Grace said. "Have you told him this?"

"Oh, yeah, 'cause we're so brilliant at talking things out," Rose said.

"It's the only thing that ever works, hon," Grace said. "And since you've got a captive audience, there's no time like the present."

Rose sighed as the bus approached. "When he's feeling better, maybe. He's still a little bit stoned, or when he's not, he's grumpy."

"Sounds about usual, from what I've seen of him," Grace said.

"I'm going to tell him you said that!"

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She came back the next day armed to the teeth: she'd raided a couple of shops and had crayons, markers, coloring books, glow-in-the-dark star stickers (for the cast) as well as all the puzzle books she

could carry, and the collected works of Agatha Christie and Isaac Asimov—since he liked one and liked to make fun of the other in roughly equal measure. She'd thought about the DVD player, but it wouldn't fit in the bag and she was afraid of dropping it, so she saved it for a second trip.

She had to let a nurse search the bag, to make sure she wasn't bringing in any "contraband" (a phrase that made her want to try, just to see if she could—though what the Doctor would want with vodka and fireworks in the burn ward was a mystery to her). Then she headed inside, towards the Doctor's bed, but within fifty paces she could tell there was already somebody there—a nurse, maybe? An orderly bringing round the lunch trays? It was a vaguely familiar voice, and a woman's, but Rose didn't think the burn center had any female doctors on staff and surely a nurse wouldn't be talking a mile a minute--

But Donna Noble surely would.

Rose stopped dead in her tracks when she recognized her, and for a moment couldn't do anything but stare. She was wearing a charcoal-grey suit and a purple turtleneck, red hair pinned up with chopsticks, and talking—well, like Donna Noble, though Rose hadn't been around her much when there wasn't a horrible tragedy going on, so perhaps she didn't have the widest experience. The Doctor was looking at her raptly, though, like she was something wonderful, and Rose's stomach clamped down hard.



"...said I didn't have the brains for it, you know, but it's really not that hard, it's basically matchmaking, and my friends before the war always said I was ace at that, so I thought, you know, 'Why not? What've you got to lose?' And they all said I should try Edinburgh, you know, that was the place to be, but it's so cold and so bloody *Scottish* up there and I thought to myself--" Donna's torrent of words broke off, and she looked up as if she'd felt Rose staring at her. "Hello? Can I help you?"

She was looking at Rose with a politely blank expression, which answered the first question that had sluggishly drifted into her mind: this was not the other universe's Donna, the one with the Time Lord's mind. (*The one who got to stay*, an evil bit of her mind added.) This was the Donna of this universe, who'd never met Rose, never defeated the Daleks, never traveled with the Doctor...or at least, Rose didn't know of it. Her mouth started working again, albeit sluggishly. "Yeah...yeah, I'm here to see, um..."

"Rose!" the Doctor crowed, waving to her. "What are you just standing there for, eh? Come on, here—look who I found!" He was grinning from ear to ear. "Rose Prentice, this is Donna Noble, my oldest new friend. Donna, this is Rose Prentice, my...er...pretty much my everything."

"Oh!" Donna offered Rose a hand. "You didn't say—well, I didn't ask you, here I was prattling on about myself and not letting you get a word in, bad habit—so nice to meet you!"

Rose transferred the bag to her other hand so she could shake; Donna had a grip that could crush walnuts. "Nice to meet you, too," she muttered. "How, er, how did you--"

"—Meet John?" Donna finished before Rose could finish talking. "Oh, funny you should ask, really. I was down here chasing after one the specialists who hasn't been returning my calls, and I noticed there was a patient with the same name as me, and, well, I just got curious, and then John said hello and I guess we just sort of clicked!" She glanced at her watch and grimaced. "Oh, bollocks, and now I've wasted all that time—well, not wasted, it's been lovely—I do have to find this fellow and make him turn in his paperwork, and if he asks for another blank copy this time I'll shove it up his nose. Nice to meet you both!"

Donna grinned at them before darting away, heels click-clacking on the floor. Rose watched her go, then looked back at the Doctor, who was still grinning faintly. "That was..." Rose started to say, and realized she couldn't complete the sentence without saying something upsetting.

"Yeah," the Doctor said, and he was staring after Donna almost sadly. "She's brilliant, isn't she?"

"I guess," Rose said. "I mean, I don't—didn't know her very well."

"She is," he said firmly.

Rose set the bag down on the chair, but found herself feeling too agitated to sit. "Why're you talking to her, anyway?" she asked. "I mean, it's not like she's the same one you left behind."

He gave his one-sided shrug again. "Just...old time's sake, I guess." Then he looked pointedly at the bag. "Is all this for me, then?"

"Yeah," Rose said. "I got all sorts of stuff, look—"

That was when she noticed his cast. Right above where she'd signed it, Donna had signed, in purple gel pen. *Get well soon!!!* with a flurry of hearts and smiles. Her signature was bigger than Rose's, actually. Her stomach roiled again.

"Looking," the Doctor said tentatively, because Rose had frozen with her hand in the bag.

"It's just books and stuff," she said, tossing a couple of Agatha Christies into his lap. "Nothing special. I, ah, actually have to go—working through lunch today—sorry."

"Wait, what?" the Doctor said. "Are you standing me up?"

"Sort of," she said. "See you tomorrow."

She spent the rest of the afternoon not finishing her Dover report, because she couldn't decide who, if anyone, she was supposed to be angry with here. After all, she and the Doctor weren't really together anymore, even if they weren't apart—just because he called her his *pretty much everything* didn't mean they were being exclusive anymore. She'd had her one-night stand with what's his name, the bloke she wasn't going to start calling *the Manorex* because that would give Jake too much satisfaction. Unless she was willing to make a proper claim on him, she shouldn't begrudge the Doctor this.

Except what did he mean by *old time's sake*? Why would he go seek out Donna and not Martha or Sarah Jane or somebody? Well, he hadn't exactly sought her out, apparently, she'd just passed him by, but why call out to her? She wasn't the same person he knew before. (*Neither was Mickey's gran*, she reminded herself, and then groaned aloud.) This Donna might be completely different, might be, well, a person that works in a hospital, apparently, but not a doctor, and she might have a husband, or children, or the clap, or...or...

This is so going to get me sacked, she thought, but it was the work of a few minutes to run an ethically-dubious search on Donna in this universe through various government computers. Donna Noble, born November 12, 1968 in Chiswick. No living relatives—both parents listed as "missing," which probably meant they'd been converted by Cybermen and never identified, and a grandfather who'd died of natural causes during the war. Currently living in Cardiff, working for University of Wales Hospital in the human resources department; she never went to university but apparently had been taking night classes through a professional school to improve her qualifications. Bully for her and all that. *Single, no children*, the screen said.

"And so is he," Rose told herself grumpily. "You're just being catty now."

But then again, she was also his pretty much everything, so maybe she had the right? Or maybe not, unless she was ready to take up the official banner of Girlfriend again. And she'd been so busy wibbling about whether she should or shouldn't that she hadn't even stopped to think that maybe the Doctor didn't want her to.

She logged into the internal instant messenger.

prenticere: GRACE

prenticere: HELP

hollowaygr: Only if you promise to let me tell you about the new opera that opens next week.

prenticere: HATE YOU

prenticere: A LOT

She spun away from the computer and put her head on the desk. It didn't really accomplish anything.

~*~*~*~*~

She kept visiting, because it seemed a bit strange to drag the Doctor all the way back to Britain and then not visit; also, because Donna was there, and while Rose went through phases of resigned acceptance that the Doctor was moving on and so should she, they alternated with the determination not to give him up without a bloody fight. Donna, being staff, seemed able to come and go from the ward as she pleased regardless of visiting hours, and Rose got used to arriving and seeing her at the Doctor's bedside, maybe with a cup of tea, chattering away.

Sometimes the Doctor was smiling. Sometimes he wasn't. Sometimes he looked like he was a thousand miles away. Rose didn't know what it meant, didn't know at this point what she wanted it to mean. But she took heart that every time she came Donna immediately, politely excused herself and left without any fuss. Which meant something? Maybe?

The Doctor knew there was something on her mind; he couldn't not know, because the visits were getting more and more awkward. They were going to have to talk about it eventually. *Later* was eventually going to become *now*.

The fact that it took more than a week for *Later* to arrive was a testament to just how stubborn—or possibly stupid—they both were, though. Rose tried venting to just about everybody she knew short of Mr. Winslow on the subject, and kept getting the same advice Grace had given her, but what actually pushed them past the breaking point was a newspaper article about Dale's plea deal and who he might've named. Donna was picking it over when Rose showed up, lecturing on this person or that while the Doctor did a crossword; neither of them seemed particularly bothered by the other. "Oi, Rose!" Donna said. "Did you see this? John said you worked for Torchwood, got any inside information?"

"Can't comment on open cases," Rose said stiffly. Which wasn't fair, because she had liked Donna rather a lot in that parallel world, and this Donna was more like that one than that one was now—and the fact she could think that sentence would never cease to amaze her. Moreover, this Donna had never been anything but polite and friendly, and seemed pretty much oblivious to Rose's moods, to the point where Rose would almost label it *willful ignorance*.

Like now, when she shrugged and folded the paper back up. "Yeah, I know how it is, but I thought it was worth asking, you know? John, d'you want to read it yourself?"

"Mmm?" He looked up. "Nah, it's fine, take it. Hello, Rose."

"Doctor," she said.

"And here's me, saying goodbye." Donna tucked the paper in her oversized handbag and smiled at them both. "No rest for the wicked, am I right? See you both tomorrow."

Rose mumbled something and sat down in the visitor's chair. The Doctor put away his crossword. "So it sounds like congratulations are in order for you lot. You didn't mention it before."

"I said something about it on the blimp from Mexico," Rose said. "You were stoned at the time."

"Hmm. Well." He looked down at his lap, where his good hand was drumming the back of his bad one in a restless little rhythm. "I'm just saying, it's nice to know I didn't ruin everything."

There was a little bit of stress on *everything* that made Rose sit up straighter, though she couldn't say if she felt more pity or anger. "You didn't ask about it before now, except back then on the blimp," she pointed out. "It's been, what, over a month?"

"I didn't think you wanted to talk about it," he muttered.

"What about Jake?" she said. "D'you think he wants to talk about it? He's fine, by the way, but he's still pretty angry and he'd like to hear you apologize. I think everybody would."

"I said I was sorry," he protested.

"To me," Rose said. "And you never said what you were sorry for."

His face clouded over. "What, d'you want a formal letter? 'Cause I already wrote one, if you don't remember."

"That wasn't apologizing, that was quitting," Rose snapped.

"I didn't think I was wanted anymore," he said.

"You didn't wait long enough to find out!"

He looked like he was going to say something, but then shut his mouth; perhaps he'd realized at the same moment she did that they were doing it again, the same old hurtful dance. Only this time she had no intention of backing down, and he clearly wasn't up to driving forward. He dropped his head against the pillows again. "I did what I thought was right," he said tightly. "And I'm not sorry for that. But I am sorry that I didn't listen to you. That I hid things from you. That I wasn't good enough...yeah."

Rose took a deep breath and let it out. There was the easiest hard part, done. "Maybe it's for the best that you resigned," she said. The Doctor's head came up again. "For us, I mean. We made pretty awful team members."

"We used to be a great team," he said, almost accusingly.

"It wasn't our job, back then," Rose said.

"You were the reason I made it my job," the Doctor said. "Our job. I took the job with Torchwood for you."

"Hey, I took the job for you *first*," she snapped. "I took the job so I could find my way back to you. And now I've found you, and you're here, and...and I still have a job to do."

"Well, I don't," the Doctor said. "So where does that leave us?"

"I don't know," Rose confessed.

They say in silence for a few minutes, and Rose waited for him to speak up because if she had to start she'd say something like *I like my job* or *I had a one-night stand with a manorexic* or maybe *we shouldn't need a job to be together*.

"This isn't really about Torchwood at all, is it?" is what he finally, quietly, said.

Rose shook her head. "No. I don't think it's ever been, really."

"So where does *that* leave us?" he asked, and Rose still didn't know, so she got up and left the hospital.

~*~*~*~*~

Rose pushed it out of her mind for the afternoon—reviewing resumes, because their team still needed a fifth member—but it ate at her nonetheless. She came home to an empty apartment and ate leftover pizza for dinner, replaying the conversation in her head and wondering if she could've said something more or less or different. She hadn't said anything untrue, though, and there was no getting around that—she was putting her foot down, finally, and it was up to the Doctor to decide whether he could live with that. She didn't need him, no matter how much she wanted him; if he decided to go off with Donna or someone else entirely, she had no right to interfere.

She really wanted to hear somebody else tell her that, though, so she picked up her phone.

Grace wasn't answering, and Rose got indignant about that until she remembered it was opening night of the new opera and nothing short of an invasion would pull Grace away from that. Jackie wasn't answering, but Rose couldn't get too indignant about that because it was a Friday night and she and Pete were in the same city for it and the odds were even they'd gone out to do something special, possibly the Tony-free sort of special. Jake definitely wasn't going to answer, as he was almost healed and had a weekend with no official assignment to eat up his time, and anyway he was a good advice-giver but a crap shoulder-to-cry on.

That really narrowed her options down, didn't it?

"Hello?" Tosh answered after a couple things. "Everything okay?"

"Mostly," Rose said. "I need somebody to tell me I'm being an idiot."

Tosh paused. "Is there a specific reason why, or are you an idiot in general?"

Rose sighed. "Some stuff happened with the Doctor today. John, I mean. I know I did the right thing but I could use the validation."

"No offense, Rose," she said uneasily, "but I knew anything about relationships I wouldn't be the only single Japanese woman in the Northern hemisphere."

"You are not," Rose said. "Besides, what's it matter if you're not married? You're only, what, thirty?"

Tosh chuckled. "Just for that, Rose, I'm not going to lecture you about Japanese culture. But if my mother is any source to go by, yes, I'm the only one and I'll never find a man unless I stop talking about computers and start letting them win at chess."

"Oh, to hell with that," Rose said. "You're perfect just the way you are."

"Mmm, now if only we were both gay this would be the point when I hang up and race over to your flat with violins playing in the background." That made Rose laugh. "Though it would spoil the symmetry of the team now—three straight women and two gay men, no gynophiles allowed."

"And Grace might feel the odd one out if she were the only one who wasn't a bit queer," Rose added. Then she caught what Tosh said. "Wait, are you counting Ianto in that?"

"Shouldn't I be?" Tosh asked. "I already co-opt him for a lot of the drudge work and he did help in Dover. At the very least, he's an honorary team member."

"Jake might not like that," Rose said. "Territorial and all. Maybe Ianto can be the mascot?"

"Would he have to wear a gorilla suit or something?" Tosh asked.

"I was thinking a tennis skirt, actually," Rose said, warming to the distraction. "And pom-poms. Mustn't forget those."

"Sparkly ones," Tosh agreed. "Though I'm not sure he's got the legs for a tennis skirt."

"Well, have either of us ever seen his legs?" There was a knock on Rose's door, startling her a bit. Who'd be knocking at this hour? "Oi, hold on, I need to get that..."

She opened the door and found Donna standing on the other side, cheeks pink from the cold. "Hi," she said. "Thank god, this is the right address, I was afraid I'd be knocking on stranger's doors all night long."

"Can I help you?" Rose asked, reminding herself that she really did like Donna, it was the Doctor that made things weird.

"John asked me to give you something, actually," Donna said, and presented Rose with a bundle of...something...wrapped in a slightly grimy plastic grocery sack. There was no store logo on it, just a smiley face and the words *Have a nice day!* "Dunno what it is," Donna added before Rose could ask her. "He had me dig it out of that suitcase under his bed and he stuffed some things in there and asked me to drop it off here after work, and since it's not really that far out of my way I said I would and...I did." She shrugged a little.

Rose examined the bundle without unwrapping it yet; it was heavy and felt like a stack of loose papers. She vaguely remembered stuffing it into his suitcase back in Mexico, but at the time she'd been so preoccupied she hadn't stopped to wonder what it was. Apparently it was for her. "Thanks," she said. "It's good of you to help him out."

"Well, you know, a friend in need," Donna said with an awkward, forced little laugh..

"Yeah," Rose said, still examining the bag.

"I know it's none of my business," Donna blurted, fiddling with the little fob on the zipper of her purse. "So feel free to just, you know, shut the door in my face now, but...is everything...okay, with you and him?"

"What do you mean?" Rose asked, suppressing the urge to indeed shut the door, because it wasn't really Donna she had a problem with, and because Donna did look genuinely worried.

"It's just," Donna said, frowning a bit, "You don't ever call him by his name, it's always 'Doctor.' And John—when he talks about you—he always seems so sad."

That's how he talks about you, too, Rose almost said, but no, this Donna didn't know anything about parallel worlds or metacrisis or a woman with her face and the Doctor's brain. Just the man with the Doctor's face and her surname who talked about Rose like someone he'd already lost. "We're going through some adjustments," Rose said. "Thanks for bringing the package by."

"Oh, not trouble at all," Donna said with a smile. "Like I said, friend in need. Have a good evening."

"You too." Rose shut the door, and barely remembered her phone. "Hey, Tosh, I'm gonna have to call you back."

"Everything all right?" Tosh asked. *"Who was that?"*

"Friend of John's," Rose said. "I'll see you at work on Monday, okay?"

"All right...see you then..."

Rose hung up and regarded the package. The smiley face and its message could actually be seen as a bit sinister, in a way. She set it on the kitchen table and slowly peeled away the plastic, revealing that it was indeed a stack of papers, loosely bound with a bit of string wrapped round the sides. The top sheet was bright pink, and said only, *The 100-Day Diary* in large block letters; when Rose turned it over, it turned out to be a flier from the hospital, reminding staff members about infection protocols. The rest of the stack was just as random: postcards, scraps of hotel stationery, old fliers, faded receipts, and nearest to the bottom, several pages that were apparently torn out of an Isaac Asimov novel, with random words underlined. And a plain piece of notebook paper written closely front and back.

She returned to the top of the stack. The first piece was a postcard of Cardiff itself, specifically the castle. What looked like poetry was written into the address space: *"Home is where, when you have to go there / they have to take you in." "I should have called it / something you somehow haven't to deserve."* In the space for the message, he'd just drawn a large heart, carefully cross-hatched to give it the illusion of depth.

A few layers deeper in the stack was a postcard of the Taj Mahal; Rose flipped it over and found it was addressed to her. In the space for a message, in the Doctor's scrawling, jagged handwriting, was a single sentence: *Personally, I wouldn't be able to keep still long enough.*

Next she pulled out a piece of stationery from a hotel in Bangalore with a single paragraph: *Time used to be different for me. I could feel the ticking of the clock and the spinning of the earth and the slow decay of the uranium atom, and sometimes it was louder than the hearts and minds of other people. And now it's all sound and fury and I'm less than I was and it's the biggest puzzle I've ever had to solve. I remember how to navigate the heart of a star but I don't know how to be human, not like this.*

Rose paged through more postcards and stationary, scraps of notebook paper and graph paper and a napkin with her face drawn in the center. She found a Sudoku puzzle torn out of a newspaper, but instead of numbers he'd penciled in the words LOSE and FIND in endless jumbled permutations. There was another letter written on the back of a menu card from a restaurant in Beijing: *He's got my life, Rose. The TARDIS. The universe. But he doesn't have you. I think it's a fair trade off myself. I think I have to think that or else I'm going to go slightly mad and*

She put the card down. She looked at the stack, and wondered if he'd been writing these the whole time he'd been gone, maybe even before that. She wondered why he'd sent them to her, why now, of all times, when she'd just gotten used to the idea that *she* didn't need *him*. Was it always going to be like this, a tug of war between the part of her that wanted the Doctor and everything else?

Only if I let it, she thought.

Very carefully, she shuffled the stack and put it in some kind of order, though the pieces were all too mismatched to ever be neat. She put it back in the dirty old sack and folded everything up neatly, so the battered yellow smiley was on top. Then she put the whole thing in an empty drawer in the bedroom, and told herself she didn't feel guilty for slamming it shut.

Chapter 20

She stopped visiting the Doctor in hospital after that. She went to London for the weekend instead, had dinner with her parents and minded Tony for them, and avoided talking about the Doctor as much as she could. When she got back on Sunday night, she looked at the drawer with the 100 Day Diary in it, but still didn't open it, because that was not her bloody responsibility. Suddenly being his *pretty much everything* didn't feel like such a good thing.

Monday was eaten up with interviews for her new team member—a mixed group of ex-military, technical specialists, and Torchwood agents from other departments—and so she dressed up and sat in a very small room with Mr. Winslow and asked people about their qualifications and their goals and what was their worst quality. She was sort of tempted to start rating people by how much they amused her, which was the biggest sign that none of them were really qualified—and the ones who came closest were so deadly serious about everything she didn't think they'd fit in. Winslow didn't seem pleased with her lukewarm assessments, but he was also determined not to assign them a new case until the position was filled, so Rose had plenty of time to be picky.

(She called the hospital and confirmed with the ward nurse that Donna visited the Doctor that day, and on Sunday as well. So it wasn't like she'd left him alone.)

Midway through her second day of interviews, however, she got cornered by Grace outside the ladies'. "So what's happened now?" she asked bluntly.

"With who?" Rose asked.

Grace sighed. "You haven't tried to bend my ear about your troubles with John for two weeks, and loathe though I am to admit it, I'm in withdrawal. I also have it on the authority of a little bird in the burn unit that you haven't been in to visit him for a couple of days."

"You're right, I haven't," Rose said. "And you were at the opera the last time I had a crisis, so I talked to Tosh about it."

"Tosh?" Grace echoed. "You're replacing me with Tosh? Rose, I'm wounded. And you didn't answer my first question."

Rose sighed and leaned against the wall between the toilet door and the water fountain. "It turns out that the Doctor might need me more than I need him," she said slowly. "And I obviously can't handle being responsible for his happiness. So I had to get some...some distance, I guess."

"You need distance," Grace said. "Rose, of course he needs you, he's from a parallel universe—you're the only person he knows here, right?"

"He's got Donna," Rose said.

"Donna who?"

"Donna, just, this person Donna from the hospital," because Rose wasn't even going to try to explain that one. "They have the same last name and they're like sisters or something now. She visits him all the time."

Grace studied her face a bit. "You know, I never noticed your eyes turn green before," she said.

"I'm not jealous of her," Rose said, because she wasn't, anymore.

"Then why are you avoiding John?" Grace said. "Because I don't really believe this 'needing distance' thing. Seeing him once a day, that was distance. Avoiding him altogether is *avoidance*. What are you afraid of?"

That I love him too much to let him go and he needs me too much for me to stay. Rose sighed. "That I won't get my happily ever after."

Grace looked at her sadly. "Oh, honey, there's no such thing."

"Figuring that one out, actually," Rose sighed.

Grace leaned against the wall next to her, casually bumping elbows. "You know, I forget how young you are, sometimes."

"I'm twenty-two," Rose protested.

"And I could be your *mother*," Grace pointed out. Then she evidently thought about that, and shuddered. "God, I could, couldn't I? Not that I hold it against you, but it doesn't do much for my ego here."

Rose straightened up. "So are you satisfied that I'm not abusing the Doctor, Mum? 'Cause I really do have to pee."

"Call me that again and I'll get my revenge at your next physical," Grace said. "And...Rose, I know you have to do what's best for you, but try not to hurt him too much in the process, okay?"

"Might be a bit late for that," Rose said under her breath, but Grace was already walking away and probably didn't hear her.

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Eventually the interviews reached and breached Rose's tolerance for absolute dullness, and she tried to search for a way to protest that wouldn't have her whining like a child. She settled for, "Are you sure these people are best candidates, sir?"

"Their resumes are exceptional," Winslow huffed. "They came highly recommended."

"They're not...very impressive, though, are they, sir?" Rose tried hesitantly.

Winslow seemed to deflate a little bit. "I will admit I was expecting a bit more from them, yes."

"Maybe we've been looking at the wrong criteria," Rose suggested, though really at this point she was just thinking out loud. "I mean, they've all got loads of experience in their fields...some of them are already Torchwood employees...personality-wise, they're about as dull as doorknobs..."

"Of course, this isn't the best format to judge a person's character," Winslow pointed out. "We can't predict ahead of time how well they'll integrate into the team."

"I just feel like there's something else we should be looking for," she sighed.

"I'm certain there is," Winslow said conclusively. "But as we are running swiftly to the end our list of candidates, there's not a great deal of time to decide what that is—unless of course you have someone already in mind..."

"Of course, sir, I don't--" Wait a minute. Rose thought it over. Experienced, already employed, dull until you get to know them, and able to work well with the team she already had...for certain values of *well*, of course...

Winslow frowned at her. "Care to share your thoughts, Ms. Prentice?"

"No, sir," Rose said, then quickly amended, "I mean, I may have an idea, sir, but I'd like to ask him, first—if you don't mind, that is."

He studied her for a moment, then gestured to the door. "I await your revelation with bated breath, Ms. Prentice."

Rose took the lift down to her floor and caught Ianto at his desk, watering his bamboo plant. "Ianto. Walk with me."

He frowned at her. "Ma'am?"

"Don't call me that, just come here." She snagged his cuff and pulled him gently away from the desk, into the conference room. She shut the door and locked it, though it still did a pretty poor job of muffling the sound from the corridor; she supposed it served a symbolic function, though.

Ianto looked about stiffly, like he was waiting for someone to jump out shouting at him. "Is there some sort of a problem?" he asked, when she turned around to face him.

And she asked, "How would you like a transfer to the field division?"

He blinked. "I—a—me? What do you mean?"

"I've seen your file, remember?" Rose said. "You were an analyst with the old flagship office before the war, you already help Tosh with our technical support, you got great marks in school when you actually bothered to work, you've got just enough of a criminal record to make you interesting and you can tolerate Jake for long periods of time in enclosed spaces. And we do have the vacancy."

"I see," Ianto said, blinking rapidly.

"It's your choice," Rose said quickly, so he wouldn't feel like he was under attack. "I wanted to ask you before I brought it up with Mr. Winslow. If you're, you know, happy with...er...what is your actual job title?"

"Administrative assistant," he said. "Though I also answer to 'tea boy.'"

"So if you're happy being the tea boy I won't push you," Rose continued. "But I thought I'd give you a chance with this, if you wanted to take it."

Ianto's eyebrows were pushed together, making deep lines in his face. "You really...I mean, I've no field experience to speak of."

"You came to Dover with us," Rose pointed out.

"I stayed in the hotel almost the entire time," he pointed out.

"Everybody started somewhere," Rose declared. "And you'd have six months to get your fitness certification and a whole year to do the firearms course, and since you already have the driving license you just need to do the obstacle course."

His eyes widened slightly. "There's an obstacle course?"

"A short one," Rose said. "Not hard at all."

He dropped his head, thinking about it, and Rose tried to give him space to answer at his own pace.

"Well," he eventually said, "I'm hardly fit to replace Dr. Noble..."

"This isn't about replacing him," Rose said. "This isn't about replacing anybody. Nobody's going to judge you against Mickey or the Doctor." She paused. "Well, maybe against the Doctor, but so long as you don't blow up a crime scene, you can only improve on him."

"Ma'am?" Ianto asked dubiously. "I mean, er, Rose?"

"Sorry," she said, sighing. "Bad joke."

"Ah," he said. "I, ah, wasn't entirely certain."

"Don't worry about it," she said, leaning against the wall beside the door. "I know he made mistakes, and I know it's for the best that he left. If I'm not allowed to joke about it, who is?"

"There've been rumors," Ianto said, which was news to her. "That, er, that he might be coming back."

She snorted. "Oh, no, believe me. There's no danger of that."

"Wouldn't you like him back?" Ianto asked, and then grimaced, like he'd just realized he'd stepped over a line. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I shouldn't--"

"No, it's okay," Rose said, and chose her next words carefully. "I...would possibly like him back in a different capacity, let's say. Things clearly weren't working out as they were, but if we could come to a more equitable working relationship, with some pretty clear boundaries...then yeah. If that's possible, I'd gladly have him back."

Ianto stared at her a moment, then cleared his throat. "You, ah, you aren't actually talking about Torchwood, are you?"

"No," Rose said, "because Tosh is listening on the other side of the door."

There was a muffled thump, and a bit of practical Japanese that Rose would have to file away for future reference. Ianto raised an eyebrow.

"I heard her double back and stop," Rose explained. "She's got new shoes on."

"Ah."

"So are you in or not?"

He squirmed a little. "I don't suppose I'm allowed to go home and sleep on it?"

"Sure you can," Rose said. "Sleep on it. Talk to Freddy. Do whatever it is you have to do. But we will need an answer sooner rather than later."

"All right. Thank you." He started to unlock the door, then paused. "Just for reference, if I do join your team, wouldn't it be technically correct for me to address you as 'ma'am'?"

"Don't push your luck," Rose said, and was rewarded with a small, cheeky smile as he slipped out the door. Tosh had made herself scarce again, and so now all she had to do was convince Mr. Winslow that promoting the tea boy was a worthwhile personnel move.

~*~*~*~*~

The youth of Cardiff did not seem to understand the *eve* component of *Bonfire Eve*, as there were firecrackers going off in the alley before Rose's alarm in spite of the cold and rain. Of course, not that long ago she'd been one the kids running round at all hours for the whole first week of November, getting a bit drunk with Mickey and messing about with sparklers and roman candles back on the estate...it seemed like she'd lived an entire lifetime between then and now, sometimes. Lost so much, and gained so much in the balance.

"You're being maudlin and it's not even lunchtime," she told the bathroom mirror. "Stop it this instant."

She got through her morning without even looking at the Doctor's diary in its hiding place, and found no sign of the offending merry-makers when she splashed downstairs to meet her bus. At the office, the desk in the middle of the corridor was empty and clean of even the bamboo plant, but there was coffee on, which meant Ianto couldn't have gotten far. As soon as she'd dried out and warmed up somewhat, Rose logged into the instant messenger.

prenticere: Team meeting, my office, this means everyone

simmondsjw: but its eeeeearly

prenticere: Whinger

hollowaygr: Be a minute, haven't had coffee yet

hollowaygr: is ianto even here today?

satot: I saw him in the lobby

simmondsjw: somebody stole his bamboo

simmondsjw: the bastards

simmondsjw: we must avenge it

prenticere: No vengence until after the meeting

She made certain to clean off all her guest chairs and the corner of the desk where Jake would inevitably sit, before sending a few quick text messages. Her team filtered in, clutching their coffee like the lifeline it was, and settled themselves. "So what's the news?" Grace asked. "Do we have a new case?"

"New lab equipment?" Tosh guessed.

Jake perched on the desk. "Raises?"

"Wrong, wrong, and wrong," Rose said. "The real reason is, Mr. Winslow's finally found us another team member."

"Found?" Grace said with a raised eyebrow. "Internally? Anyone we'd know?"

"And did it take you two long enough?" Jake asked.

Rose smiled herself. "It's an internal hire, yeah, and if you'd volunteered to help, Jake, it might've gone faster."

"Nah, I don't like traumatizing the new people," Jake said. "So who's the latest victim?"

"Someone I think we all already know and value," Rose said. She raised her voice, so she'd be audible through the door. "You can come in now."

Ianto stepped inside and shut the door behind him. He appeared to have purchased a new suit just for the occasion. "Ma'am," he said.

"Watch it," she shot back.

It took a moment—it was really rather early in the morning—but Rose knew Jake had cottoned on when he nearly snorted coffee out his nose. "Him?" he protested. "You promoted the tea boy?"

"Which, by definition, makes him not the tea boy anymore," Grace said.

Tosh grinned. "Congratulations, Ianto."

"Just as long as you keep fixing the coffee," Grace said. "Or at least teach the new person your secrets. Are we getting a new person?"

"We'd better get a new person," Jake said darkly. "I save the world for a living, I'm not making my own coffee."

"Mr. Winslow says a new case should be coming down the pipe in a day or two," Rose said. "And whether we get a new administrative assistant is not his department. So remember, Ianto, there's still time to change your mind and flee."

"I'll take that under advisement," he said.

The rest of the day she spent working on paperwork in a desultory fashion, except for when everyone was co-opted into an elaborate office swap, as Grace took over Mickey's old space, Tosh moved into Grace's, Ianto took Tosh's and all the bits and bobs nobody wanted ended up in the Doctor's old office, which still had a smoke stain on the ceiling. But mostly there was paperwork. She could hear the others talking in the halls on and off, but she assumed they were negotiating over office supplies or sorting out mixed-up computer cables or something like that. She was just considering whether she could take off early for the day when Jake stuck his head into her office. "Oi, looks like the great migration's settled down," he said. "You maybe wanna do drinks tonight? Remember the fifth of November and all that?"

Rose thought about it, but the strange melancholy from that morning had stuck with her, and so she shook her head. "No thanks, not in this weather. Think I'll stay in tonight."

"You sure?" he asked. "Pierre's working late on some thing with people."

"Maybe another time," she said.

As she walked home, hunched under her umbrella, she tried to sort out why she was feeling so grim. Was it just the weather? Was it finally, permanently (she hoped) filling that last slot on her team? Was it that she'd gone nearly a week without seeing the Doctor, and except for that bag of papers he'd labeled a diary, hadn't heard from him, either? She was waiting for him to make the next move, only apparently the Diary *was* his next move, so what was she meant to do with it? Give it back with a sticker that said *Return to Sender?*

She fixed dinner and watched some television. She had a glass of wine.

What the hell was her next move?

Someone knocked on the door.

Rose had changed into her pajamas, and for a few minutes strongly considered ignoring the knock even though it'd be obvious from the lights that she was home. The knock got louder, and more insistent. She still hesitated, because she was in a bad mood and getting pranked by some kids in Guy Fawkes masks wasn't going to do anything to help that.

Her phone beeped at her. *Message from Grace*, the screen said.

Answer your damn door, was the message.

Rose ran into the bedroom to pull on a sweater, to look at least a little more put together than she was, and opened the door, wondering why Grace wouldn't just call ahead, or maybe shout through the door instead of using a text message, and what was Grace doing here tonight anyway--

On the other side of the door stood the Doctor. "Hi," he said, looking pink in the face. "Can I come in now?"

Rose knew she was gaping like a fish and couldn't help it. He was standing there, really physically there, leaning on crutches; his hair was a little damp despite the coat thrown over his shoulders, and under the coat he was wearing a blue flannel robe that had the UWH logo sewn on the breast. He didn't even have proper shoes, just a slipper over his good foot and a sock stretched partway over his cast; bulky bandages still protruded from his right sleeve, and he seemed to have trouble gripping his crutch on that side.

The old blisters on his face had basically healed, though, and he'd shaved recently, and he was on her doorstep asking to come in.

"Pretty please?" he added. "It's cold out here."

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asked as he hobbled inside. "You're supposed to be on bed rest! That means not moving!"

"I needed to talk to you," he said. "And Grace said it was okay."

"Grace—" Rose looked stupidly at her phone again, and then made to open the door and find that woman and ask her what part of the Hippocratic Oath covered this sort of situation. The Doctor, unable to maneuver quickly, nevertheless did his best to stop her by whacking her in the shin with his left crutch. "Ouch! Don't do that!"

"You really need to listen to me," he said, "because I came all this way to talk to you and Grace said it was okay and it wasn't even her idea, it was Donna's, and also I have been bedridden for like three weeks and I don't know how much longer I can stay on my feet here."

That last bit is what stopped Rose, finally. She studied him, met the intensity of his stare and folded her arms across her chest. "All right," she said. "I'm listening."

"Listening. All right. Good. This is...progress." He took a deep breath. "I didn't actually think I'd get this far, so, you know, I don't have any prepared remarks--"

"D'you want to sit down?" Rose asked, because this seemed like it was going to take a while.

"No, I do *not*," he said firmly, and inhaled deeply again. And again. Any more and he'd be technically hyperventillating. "So I," he finally began, "have come to realize that I may not have been entirely clear with you about things, and that we need to talk, and that we are pretty fantastically *bad* at talking, and...yes."

"So you came here to talk," Rose said.

"I did," he said. "Because I think that saying *I'm sorry* is starting to lose its efficacy."

Rose snorted; should couldn't help it. "Lose its efficacy, yeah. Lost it a couple of fights ago."

"Even though it's true," he said ruefully. "I've been hurting you and I never intended to do that."

"I know you didn't mean to do it. Don't you see that just makes it worse?" she asked. "You promised back in Norway that you'd follow me wherever I wanted to go. How long did that last?"

"I didn't know—did you get the Diary?" he asked. "I gave Donna, I gave her this thing to give to you, she said you got it--"

"I got it," she said. "I didn't read it, though."

He blinked. "Why not? Everybody reads diaries! That's what you do when you find someone's diary, you read it and find out what they really think of you!"

"So what do you really think of me, Doctor?" Rose asked. "What's in there that you can't say to my face?"

"*Everything*," he said. "Rose, this whole mess—I had to go all the way around the world to figure out where I wanted to be. *Who* I wanted to be. And it's all in the Diary, everything I decided, and I wrote you a letter, did you read the letter?"

"When were you planning to come back?" she asked, instead of reiterating that she hadn't read it, hadn't read any of it. "I didn't find any tickets in your hotel room in Mexico. If you figured all this stuff out, when were you planning to come back and tell me?"

"I'm telling you now," he said. "I ran into this little problem where I almost died, see, and but then I woke up and you were *there* and that was when I knew, see, when I knew I didn't want to go another day without seeing you again—because I did that, Rose, back in the other world, I did everything in my power to stop loving you and I thought it worked right up to the moment I saw you again," he said, and took another deep breath, and swallowed.

Rose searched for something to say to that, something that wasn't going to make her cry. "So you decided you loved me," she said, "and your first move was to start hitting on Donna?"

"*What?*" he blurted.

"You're always talking to her!" she said. "She's the one you—he--other you took away with him! Were you in love with her, too, back in the other world?"

"No!" he said, aghast. "And quite frankly, I'm getting bloody *sick* of having to tell everybody in *two bloody universes* that we're not together!"

"Then why start talking to her?" Rose asked. "Why *keep* talking to her? Every day now she's by your bed, even when I'm not."

"That," the Doctor said, "is a gross misuse of your powers of surveillance."

"*Doctor.*"

He looked down at his slippers, which were blue flannel like the robe; Rose had seen him save the world in slippers and a robe, but now they just emphasized his bandages and burns and the cast on his leg. "I run," he said, apropos of nothing. "Ever since I was a child, I've run away from things that scared me. Things I didn't want. There's no consequences if I'm a moving target, and I...I mean, I even ran away from you."

"Because you don't want me?" Rose asked.

"Because I'm *scared*," he said, looking up with big wounded eyes. "The other me...why d'you think he left me here? Because he...we...I..." He shuddered like something pained him, and started again. "I don't know who or what I am anymore, with a Time Lord's brain in a human body. But there's a bit of Donna in here, too, and I *need* that right now—I need her courage, I need her passion, I need her bloody stubbornness to be a part of me, too. Because I love you and I want you and it scares the hell out of me. It scares me enough that the other me, the real one, he ran away again, because I think he knew that if anybody in the universe could finally make him stop, it would be you."

"But you still ran," Rose said, holding onto a handful of anger. "You ran halfway around the world and nearly got yourself killed."

"I ran away because I thought I wasn't welcome," he said. "Because I'm different to the man you fell in love with, and even I'm just starting to figure out how, and if I don't even know who I am..." He snorted softly, looking off to one side. "It took nine hundred years, but I've run so far and so fast that I've finally outrun myself."

"You're not the only one who's different, Doctor," Rose said.

"I know," he said with a miserable sigh. "I know, Rose, and it's brilliant, *you* are brilliant, you...are everything you could never be with me."

A lump rose in her throat, and she took a step towards him. "Not with you. With *him*. That other skinny bloke, the one who couldn't even tell me what he felt when he knew he'll never see me again."

The Doctor looked wary now, but he was watching her every movement with stiff anticipation. "We're not that different, him and me," he said.

"You're different enough," she said. "And the same, enough."

"I hope so," he said. "I really, really hope so."

"Hope's not good enough," she said.

He shut his eyes, nostrils flaring. "I will be," he said. "Rose, I don't every want to hurt you again, and I will be the man that's worthy of you...which apparently means learning how to let someone else lead." He opened his eyes again. "If you still want me, I mean. It's always been up to you."

Rose took a deep breath of her own, because he'd promised her that once before and let her down, because she knew how love could change people, because from the beginning this had been the very definition of a second chance. She looked him in the eye and extended her hand. "I don't think we've been properly introduced yet," she said, trying to keep her voice from cracking. "I'm Rose Prentice, Torchwood."

He looked at her warily for a few moments, and she fought the urge to drop her hand, until he finally took it in his; the old burns were oddly smooth under her fingers, and the bulky bandages came up past his wrist. "Dr. John Noble," he said huskily, like he was still testing the sound of it after all these months. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Prentice."

"The feeling is mutual," Rose said. She looked into his eyes—John's eyes—and saw the same sort of giddy terror that was bubbling up inside her; she let out a giggle, and he started to look mildly panicked, and so for the first time in far too long she stretched up on her toes and properly kissed him. He let out a little squeal and wobbled on his crutches; Rose clutched at his robe to help him keep balanced; then let one crutch clatter to the floor so he could wrap an arm around the small of her back and kiss her properly. It was warm and familiar in all the right ways, all the ways she had wanted, but when they broke for air in perfect synch the look on John's face was wondering and terrified and totally new.

"There is," he said after a moment, "a high probability that this will end very badly."

"That's usually part of the fun, isn't it?" Rose asked.

"Only if we survive it," John said, brows furrowing.

Rose laid her head on his chest, drawing him close. "I've only just met you," she said. "I'm not going to let you get away that easily."

"Mmm," he said. "What if I told you I was about to fall over right here on the floor?"

Rose looked up sharply. "Are you about to fall over on the floor?"

"Well, I did just get out of hospital," he said. "Not, technically speaking, with permission, either."

"I thought Grace said it was okay," Rose protested.

"Grace isn't my doctor," he pointed out.

"Ah. Right," Rose said, and found her hands fiddling with the lapel of his robe. "I suppose we don't want Grace and Donna to get into any trouble on our account."

"I'm supposed to be released soon, though," he said. "Except for outpatient therapy with good old Hans."

"Good old Hans," Rose echoed. "I'll have to start chaperoning those sessions so he doesn't get any ideas. After I welcome you home properly."

"I'll still have my cast another month," he pointed out.

She shrugged. "I can work with casts."

Eventually, of course, she did let him go, and noticed that he was looking rather more pale than she was used to. She fetched him his crutch, which he leaned on ever more heavily, and helped him back to the door. He looked down at her, and suddenly blurted, "Thank you. For everything. I mean it, Rose, I--"

"Shush," she said. "Just promise you're going to keep coming back."

He smiled a bit. "Well, I had such grand plans for the curtains in here--"

Rose snorted and unlocked the door; on the other side, Donna and Grace were waiting, and Donna at least wasn't even pretending she hadn't been listening at the keyhole. "Thank you, too," Rose said. "Both of you."

"Oh, it's nothing," Donna said, tossing her hair. "I'm just a sucker for an old-fashioned love story. After all, somebody has to be getting some around here, even if it's not me..."

John snorted and winked at Rose, as if to say, *see why I like her?* Grace, however, took him by the elbow. "And now is the time for all good little boys to get back in their assigned beds," she said firmly.

"And what makes you think I'm a good little boy, Dr. Holloway?" John asked.

"Be nice," Rose said. "They could just leave you here and say you'd run away."

"All right, all right," he grumbled.

They walked downstairs together, where Grace's rarely-seen car was illegally parked in the alley; getting John in the back seat took a little creativity, but eventually he was sprawled out sideways, leaning on the locked door while his cast propped against the opposite window. "This is so not safe," Rose pointed out.

"Don't worry," Grace said. "If he wasn't healing right on schedule, I wouldn't have let him out. And I drive slowly."

"See you tomorrow?" John asked, lolling his head out of the open rear window.

Rose smiled and kissed him again. "Tomorrow."

"G'night, Rose," he said.

"Night, John." That made him grin even wider.

"Are you kids done?" Grace asked. "I'm not entirely convinced nobody's going to steal my hubcaps tonight."

"Go on, then," Rose said. "This is why you're still single, Grace. You're grumpy."

Donna looked at Grace as she slowly started backing out of the alley, and Rose caught a few words before the Doctor rolled up his window all the way. "You too, eh? I know how that is, believe me. Hey, have you ever been to that Italian place by the Plass? I hear they do a singles night--"

Rose laughed, and stood in the cold and damp, watching until they drove out of sight.

EPILOGUE: To Sail Beyond

*Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

--Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses"

Rose was in a meeting when her phone rang. *Message from John*, the screen said, and she slipped it into her pocket with a grimace. "Sorry," she said. "Carry on."

Ianto continued like there had been no interruption. "Anyway, I've requested another wiretap on Johnson's business line, and Grace is pulling up background checks on all the employees."

"Great," Rose said. "I'll get Tosh to start satellite surveillance of the site, just in case." In her pocket the phone beeped again.

"Sounds like you want to answer that," Ianto said, and excused himself.

Rose pulled her phone out and checked it. (2) *Messages from John*, of course. She opened the first one:

So what time are you going to be home? J

And the second.

No, correction—you WILL be home at four, I have SURPRISES for you. J

Rose took a minute to consider just what he'd consider a surprise and the potential risks of not being on the scene in time. *Is it going to explode if I'm not there?* She sent back.

No, but I shall be very unhappy. J

I think you'll live.

Go say hi to Brynn for me, will you? J

Rose had no idea where that came from, and was a little afraid to ask; but she'd been cooped up inside all day, doing the legal and financial background work, and it was an excuse to stretch her legs. She put up a note on her screen that said *back in 5* and headed down to the lobby.

Brynn was experimenting with new, even more low-cut tops this week on account of an early, tentative heat wave; even judging by the changed climate of recent years, it was far too beautiful for April and they would probably have a miserably cold, wet May to make up for it. That meant everyone was trying

to enjoy the weather while it lasted, in their own way, including Brynn. "Hello, Rose!" she said as Rose sidled up to the desk. "How's your day going?"

"Fine, boring, the usual," Rose said. "What about you?"

"Oh, nothing special." Brynn took an emery board to her nails. "I saw Dr. N today, did you know that?"

The little alarm in Rose's head that had started beeping fitfully when John called suddenly redoubled itself. "You did? Where?"

"Well, here," Brynn said. "He said his boss needed him to look for something in the archives. Had the letters and everything. I called an archivist down to help him out."

Okay. If it was authorized, it couldn't be that bad. Then again, John had access to a computer, a printer, and a wide variety of stamps when he went to London. What could he possibly want to show her out of the vaults? "He didn't tell me he was coming by," Rose murmured.

"Well, he seemed like he was in a bit of a hurry," Brynn said. "Went running out with something in a suitcase, wouldn't let the security boys see it, not even Freddy. Used a ninety-nine on us."

This was getting better and better. "Right. I, um, I need to make a phone call, nice talking with you."

She waited until she was in the lift to call him. "*So are you coming?*" is how he answered.

"What did you take from the vaults?" she asked.

"That's the surprise part," he said. *"Come and have a look."*

"I'm at work!"

"Well, so was I, but this is important, you can take a few hours off..."

She sighed and checked her watch. "Give me half an hour to touch base with Jake and then I'll come."

"Brilliant! That gives me time to get it all set up. Love you."

"Love you, too."

It took her longer than half an hour, though, because the bus she needed was running late and while it was unseasonably warm, it wasn't so warm that she wanted to walk to the next stop if she could help it. John didn't call back, though, so obviously he'd either discovered patience (not likely, when he had something to show her) or he was busy setting up whatever he was setting up. The fact that it needed setting up was worrisome all by itself.

When she did get back, she saw John's car parked illegally in the alley, so she knew he was home. After all his going on about what a cool car it would be, he'd bought himself some kind of antique roadster and had it painted an awful bright yellow. He'd even named the damn thing. Rose gave it a pat on the hood anyway as she passed it, and trotted up the steps, already making contingency plans.

"Aha! There you are!" he crowed as she came in; he was doing something on the table by the television that she couldn't see clearly. "Right on time, because it took a little longer to set up that I thought it would, but I read the instructions this time, and I think I've just about...ack! Stay over there!"

He flailed his arms at her, so she just got a glimpse of something that she hoped wasn't actually a fish tank. "You know, one of these days you're going to get a parking ticket if you keep leaving your car in the alley," she informed him.

"No, I'm not," he said.

"You so are."

"I'm not," he said, waving a hand at her over his shoulder, "because I installed a stealth device while you were off on the Isle of Man. When it's engaged, you can't see the car unless you already know it's there. I wouldn't leave Bessie Junior in danger like that."

"Why do you call her Bessie Junior, anyway?" Rose asked. She eyed the pile of debris around the rubbish bin: a sticker for an aquarium (oh god,) packaging for an ultraviolet lamp, a bottle of bath salt, a box for baby monitors...wait a minute, baby monitors?

"John?" she asked warily.

"Almost got it," he said. "Just....yeah!" He stood up, keeping his body between Rose and whatever was in the aquarium, which was now harshly lit. "Okay, you've got to close your eyes."

Rose took a deep breath and closed them. A moment later, she felt him walk past her, stand close behind, and cover her eyes with one hand. The other hand settled on her shoulder and urged her forward, gently, while he followed behind; she noticed he was limping a little on the right side, which probably meant the end of the good weather was at hand. She took one step forward, and another, and--"Ow!"

"Er, right, sorry," he said, steering her to one side. "Chair. You're almost there...and, stop." He took his hand away. "Surprise!"

She looked down into the aquarium. There was about an inch of murky water in the bottom, and a chunk of something—volcanic rock, or maybe some kind of coral-- in the middle of it. The heat lamp was affixed to one side of the tank, spotlighting the rock, and a contraption of wires and electrical tape that might've once been one if not two baby monitors was attached to the other side, emitting a whine so soft and high it was barely audible. "What...er...I mean, it's nice," she stammered.

"You don't know what it is, do you?" he asked, but he sounded playful, not annoyed.

"Not a clue," she said.

He came around the other side of the table and reached into the tank, gently stroking a ridge of the rock. Rose thought she saw a faint golden sparkle somewhere deep inside it. "It's a TARDIS," he said.

"Are you serious?" she asked, bending down for a closer look. It sort of looked like some bits and bobs she'd seen inside in the TARDIS on occasion, and of course she had no idea what they looked like when they weren't being police boxes...but still...

"Well, it's just a little one," John said. "Part of a pseudopod, barely viable—it must've broken off a parent and fallen through the Rift. Torchwood wouldn't have been able to get anything off it but radiation, so they crated it up in the archives."

Rose looked at him, staring raptly at the rock—or the TARDIS, apparently. He'd always had a special connection to that ship. "How'd you know it was down there?" she asked.

"I didn't," he confessed. "Pete sent me to look for something else, it's a thing, they'll brief you about it later—couldn't find what I went in for, incidentally, but while we were leaving I took a wrong turn and spotted the poor thing half-dead in a box of volcanic specimens."

"So it's alive?" she asked, even though all the production of the aquarium would've been moot if it weren't.

"Oh, yeah," he said, adjusting something about the lamp. "Weak, but alive. Give it a little love and some time I think it'll grow up nicely."

"How much time?" Rose asked. For a moment she wasn't sure if she were excited or nervous about what the answer would be.

"A lot of time," John said. "Maybe a century before we can even start the carving, and after that...well...let's just say it's the absolute definition of a long-term investment." And he smirked at her.

"So we're doing long-term investments then, yeah?" Rose asked, touching the edge of the aquarium.

"Oh, absolutely," John said, and stopped fiddling with the lamp finally. He stood up. "Plus, you know, this makes a great starter for me, I think."

She knew she'd regret it, but she asked anyway. "Starter for what?"

"Babies," he said, and then broke into giggles at the look on her face. "No, see, look, it's the first step, yeah? It's basically a pet rock. I'm pretty certain I can't abandon or traumatize a *rock*. Next step would be something like a hermit crab, and then maybe, I don't know, a budgie..."

"And then a baby?"

"Well, I was thinking there'd be a couple of more mammalian steps in between, but eventually...yeah." He suddenly looked away, scratching at the back of his head. "If, you know, you're interested. 'Cause if you're not I reckon I can go in halvesies with Donna and sort of, you know, it'd be a rental..."

"Oh, no," Rose said, seizing him by the belt and pulling him in. "You're not reproducing with Donna. That's like...she's like your sister, isn't she?"



"That's a minor technicality of which she isn't actually aware," John said. "Also, the Hapsburgs did it."

Rose ran a finger up the button band of his shirt. "I'm terrified enough by the idea of you and Donna having children without bringing the Hapsburgs into it."

John pretended to think a moment. "We do both have some fairly alarming heritable traits," he admitted.

"Besides," Rose said. "I want you all to myself."

"Mmm...that can be arranged." He bent down and kissed her, slow and sloppy, hauling her partway up as she pulled him partway down. "Especially if you want to do some rehearsal for the eventual hypothetical babies."

"Practice makes perfect," Rose said, and John grinned and started pulling her into the bedroom; but she hung back for a minute, to look at the coral-rock-thingy under its lamp. Her and her Doctor and their TARDIS; some things were just meant to be.



SUNSET

*I could have followed him across the universe,
and it still wouldn't have been anything but following.*



BY MAD MAUDLIN