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THAT TIME WE DRESSED UP
LIKE VIKINGS
AND INFILTRATED AN
ALIGN PIG SHOP

(NOT REALLY)

SMGRCY

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The Case of That Time We Dressed Up Like Vikings and Infiltrated an Alien Pie Shop (Not Really)

by Smercy (rockinghorse_people@yahoo.com)

Sarah Jane Adventures | PG | gen | 21,000 words

Sometimes, Clyde Langer's life is just like a popsicle; and he ends up being tossed into a dumpster. Of course, in Clyde's life it's a giant bright orange alien that does the throwing.

Thanks to my wonderful zombie cheerleader support team, the mods of the Big Bang challenge, and no thanks to my laptop.

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After the very loud bang, Clyde opened his eyes, found that he was no longer flying through the air, and realized that he was stuck in a dumpster. Actually, he was stuck shoulder-first in the cardboard side of the bin. And then his head started to throb, ears ringing and everything. There was quite a lot of pain, and he didn't want to move, and Rani was chasing off the bright orange alien thing while yelling, "Yeah, you'd better run!"

It wasn't too bad laying with his shoulder all crumpled in the cardboard, not too smelly. Except for the bit where his head hurt really really badly, and the thought of moving made him nauseas, he had bitten his tongue somehow, and his back was all scraped up from the cardboard. Oh, and there was some kind of gross alien bodily fluid that was probably snot covering his arm and dripping wet down his back, and there was a kiwi peel stuck to the side of his neck.

Clyde really hoped that it was actually a kiwi peel. Although, with his luck, it would probably end up to be a freaky alien egg thing that would absorb into his skin and get him improbably pregnant or something. He wasn't up to moving, even though there were probably twenty different places where the box corners kept digging into his ribs. The vibrations from the side of the dumpster kept reverberating in his head.

Through the ringing, he could hear Luke calling, "Clyde, are you alright? Clyde?" But Luke's running was making all sorts of horrible vibrations and the only sound that would come out of Clyde's mouth was a weak little grunt that didn't sound at all like a whimper. "I saw that you briefly lost consciousness as you hit your head on that dumpster," Luke said, bending over and pulling the kiwi peel off. "Does your head hurt?"

"Only a whole lot," Clyde grunted, only remembering after it was too late that when Luke was stressed it was not a good time to use sarcasm. Luke frowned and helped Clyde turn over to his back, where he promptly realized that the sky was entirely too bright.

Rani was somehow magically able to run even louder than Luke. "I scared it off," she gasped, "How's Clyde?" Luke didn't even look at her, he was so busy intently examining for things.

Clyde was about to shout that he was fine, but Luke interrupted him with all kinds of medical talk about dilated pupils and contusions, and then he said, "I'm almost sure that it's a concussion. I'm calling Mum." And Luke wouldn't listen when Clyde explained very clearly and without any slurring that he was fine and there was no need to fuss, and Clyde kind of missed the days when Luke would just blindly follow everything he said. Sometimes having a best mate with free will and a tiny bit of street smarts was really inconvenient.

But he stopped paying attention when Rani began to stroke the unbruised part of his head. He could only hear little snippets of the conversation, Luke's description of the bright orange jellyfish looking thing, Sarah Jane saying that she'd be right there, lots and lots of medical talk, and so on. Rani started helping him up as Luke put the mobile in his pocket and redundantly announced, "Mum wants us to go back to the house so that she can look at Clyde, she'll be there in about 90 minutes."

Rani wrapped her arm under Clyde's shoulder and Luke grabbed the other one. Clyde pretended really hard like his legs weren't painfully weak and that he didn't smell like funky kiwis. "That won't work," Rani sighed, "I need to meet my parents in 20 minutes and I'm not leaving the two of you alone in that house. We'll go to my place and wait."

Clyde tried telling them that it was maybe not the best idea for him to be all headache-y around his headmaster who also did not like him, but they didn't listen. "Fine," he grumbled, squeezing Luke's shoulder, "Don't listen to the guy with the head wound." The walk back to Rani's house was long and horribly bumpy.

By the time they reached the door, Clyde was dizzy and panting and thoroughly shamed. He was pretty sure that they had passed people they knew on the way over, too. Luke patted at his shoulder and waited until they were inside to give him a hug. Clyde almost fell into it, and his whole body was throbbing, like the reverberations never stopped. It was so weird to see Rani's house decorated when he was still expecting it to be Maria's.

Rani put away her purse and guided Clyde over to the couch. She sat down and then had him sit next to her with his head on a pillow on the arm of the couch over her lap and his feet on the other side. It was really nice, actually. Luke stood in front of them, frowned, and twitched like he wanted to pace. "I'm going to call Mum again and tell her the new plan," he said, babbling uncomfortably. "And Gordon won't be in until late tonight, so I'll let Mum call him, and your mum is out for the weekend so after I call Mum I'll call and tell her that you hit your head but not that you likely have a concussion because that would be too worrying."

"Good plan, Luke," Rani smiled, and rested her chin on Clyde's arm. He didn't have the heart to tell her that that was the one that got slimed. "Clyde, you just relax." She used the tone that meant that she meant business, so he closed his eyes and didn't even try to argue.

He didn't fall asleep, though, so it wasn't a surprise when Rani's parents came very loudly through the door, yelling for her. "Rani," her mom shouted, "We brought presents!" Clyde couldn't hold back the little wince, which probably looked really bad to Mr. Chandra, who had just walked in the door and was making a very pinched face.

"Rani," he said, "What is going on?" He was making the frowny disapproving father face.

Luke chose that moment to walk in, smiling innocently like every parent's dream house guest. "Hi, Mr. Chandra. I hope you don't mind that I made popcorn." He popped a few kernels into his mouth, and Clyde tried to ignore the immediate churning in his gut. "Clyde and I need to wait here for my mum to get back. We were playing football and then Clyde was hit in the head really hard so we went to the hospital and they said that he has a concussion. And his mum is on a business trip so she can't be here, and Gordon is out, so my mum is coming back from her journalism thing early and Rani said that we shouldn't be alone just the two of us because something dangerous might happen to Clyde. So if it's fine with you, we'll just stay here until my mum gets back 65-75 minutes from now." Luke's alien excuses just kept improving, and Clyde wished he could feel proud instead of overwhelmingly sick.

And then Rani's mom walked in with some tea, but Mr. Chandra hadn't moved at all from his original position. She put the tea down on the side table and tried to get Clyde to sit up to drink it, but then he started accidentally groaning and she insisted that he be covered in a blanket and that Rani couldn't move away from him. On the upside, that seemed to convince Mr. Chandra that Clyde wasn't a big faker that was faking fake pain to get a really awkward and not even very good view of his daughter's chest in full view of her parents. Also, Rani's mom made sure that they talked really quietly, and everybody but Clyde enjoyed the popcorn that Luke had freakishly managed to make without any unpopped kernels at the bottom and no burnt bits.

So after an hour that felt less like an actual hour and more like a couple of minutes of dull throbbing, Sarah Jane had knocked on the door and was looking seriously at his eyeballs with a mini-flashlight and clicking her tongue. "Hello, Clyde," she smiled. "How dizzy are you feeling? Do answer honestly."

"A lot," he said, and the words were sticky on his tongue. Clyde tried to sit up all the way, but getting upright was so much effort and he ended up making all kinds of undignified sounds and having to bury his face in Sarah Jane's shoulder so he didn't have to see how worried Luke was.

"Alright," Sarah Jane whispered, and her voice was almost not too loud. "We are going to walk over to my house. Since moving up and down seems to hurt you the most, Luke will drive the car over, and Rani will stop by when she can. I've already talked with your mum, and things are fine there. We are going to walk very slowly and steadily out the door, and I have you." She sounded very comforting, and it was almost enough to make Clyde forget about the dried crusty alien goo all over his arm. Well, that and it took all of his concentration to walk and not fall over at the same time. The Chandras house had a weird green tint to it.

If Clyde had raced a slug across the street to Sarah Jane's house, he would've lost. And he did fall over onto a sofa once he reached the house, but that didn't seem to be too horrible, since he usually threw himself on that one anyways. Sarah Jane left the door open, pulled him back upright and started walking him up the stairs. "Can you describe the alien?"

"Umm," Clyde said. "Orange. Looked kind of like a jellyfish, except that it had 3 legs and it was very very tall. And it was slimy." It took him the whole length of the stairs to say that, because he had apparently turned into a wimp.

Sarah Jane walked him to the bathroom slowly enough for Luke to catch up to them. "This looks like a concussion, so I want you to take a quick shower and then get into your pajamas and get some rest." Clyde didn't even try complaining that it wasn't even noon on a Saturday, just took the pajamas and gave Luke a hug before he got in the shower. He had a feeling in his gut like something was terribly wrong, but that was probably just the probable concussion and the way it made the whole bathroom seem blue.

The water was warm and it made him significantly less crusty, so Clyde got out feeling marginally better. At the door, Luke handed him some kind of pill that Clyde swallowed before Luke had finished telling him that it was paracetamol because that was actually quite better than ibuprofen and something about

how he shouldn't have any bleeding of the brain and Mr. Smith would be monitoring that. Luke led him into the attic and Sarah Jane smiled like she wasn't worried at all and said, "We're going to be investigating up here, so we'll keep an eye on you. You just need to rest."

Clyde would've nodded if that didn't trigger the bad pain and dizziness, and he walked slowly over to the sofa, which had never felt softer. He didn't fall asleep right away, even though Mr. Smith was being extra quiet and everything seemed to pleasantly hum. But eventually Clyde closed his eyes and listened to Sarah Jane and Luke's voices, and was asleep before lunchtime.

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Clyde woke up to the smell of freshly baked scones and the realization that it was probably morning, and that meant he had been unconscious for an embarrassingly long time. Also, his muscles were all stiff and the back of his eyeballs ached. The dizziness was gone when he walked downstairs, and Luke was wearing a terribly dorky pair of mismatched striped pajamas. He waved to Sarah Jane and Gordon while popping a scone into his mouth.

He probably should have checked to see if it was cool enough to eat before shoving it in his mouth, but Clyde managed to recover with a minimum of shame. No coughing or anything. Gordon laughed at him a bit, though. And his laugh was so big and booming that on regular days it would hurt his ears, so Clyde just kind of sunk into the chair and rolled his eyes at Luke. Luke decided to be a traitor, though, and rolled his eyes at Gordon instead.

"Special occasion scones for breakfast," Luke grinned. "Because we are really pleased that your head wound was not life threatening."

"You know, Dear," Sarah Jane laughed, "Your special occasion scones might be the real reason I married you." Gordon grinned like he always did when Sarah Jane complimented him, the one that made him look kind of insane with way too many teeth and his head might break open and it made his hair look even curlier.

The scone began to cool down enough so that Clyde could chew it, and it was delicious. "And here I thought it was just for my sparkling teeth," Gordon sighed, resting his chin on the top of her head. It was a good thing that Clyde had already gotten used to the domesticity, otherwise he would've been slightly grossed out. The size difference between enormous Gordon and tiny Sarah Jane on his lap was comical enough, he didn't want to start laughing when there were scones to be had. Laughing with scones often led to an accidental loss of partially chewed goodness, and Clyde just wanted to avoid that travesty.

Clyde ended up devouring 7 in less than 20 minutes, which he figured was alright since he hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast the previous morning. Luke managed 5 in the same amount of time, and Clyde figured that was good for somebody so skinny who was constantly running. Sarah Jane made another comment about the capacity of their stomachs and Gordon laughed like a [foghorn]. Still feeling a little residually throbby, Clyde tuned out Sarah Jane and Gordon, focusing on the glorious food; and by

the time they got to the second batch of scones, Sarah Jane and Luke had somehow managed to change their clothes.

Luke looked slightly guilty, and Clyde popped another scone into his mouth. His record was 3 at once. Sarah Jane adjusted her shoes from Gordon's lap, all business, "So long as your head is feeling better Clyde," And he nodded at that, Sarah Jane smiled, "Luke and I need to go out this morning. He's run out of socks."

It was a terrible excuse. Luke didn't even know what to do with socks that didn't involve feet. Of course they were going out to investigate the alien threat. Luke looked down at his shoelaces and nowhere else, and Sarah Jane's smile was a little too bright. But Clyde's head was still buzzing a little, and he honestly didn't feel up for another chance at being flung headfirst into dumpsters. "I'd ask to go," Clyde sighed, "But my head isn't quite up for new socks. Don't get anything too embarrassing, Luke. Just stick to white."

Luke grinned and hugged everybody before going out the door. Clyde's mouth tasted orange juice gritty, and he could swear that he could very faintly smell kiwi. He and Gordon waited very quietly at the breakfast table until they heard Sarah Jane's car pull out of the driveway. Then, Gordon got out the bacon.

It was really brilliant bacon, and it was really funny to watch Gordon fiddle around with the skillet looking like a mad scientist with his hair horribly uncombed except for a spot in the back where Sarah Jane had tried to pat it down and hadn't quite achieved it. Looked a bit like Einstein, except that his grin was wider and his bacon was better. And that he seemed to glow a little bit under the kitchen light, kind of blueish. That part was the concussion, and the headache got a little worse whenever he thought about it.

"I might have possibly devoured this great bacon a tiny bit too quickly," Clyde admitted, leaning back in his seat.

"Ah, I remember those days," Gordon laughed. "You're a teenage boy and your stomach is bottomless, enjoy it while you can." He looked intensely over at Clyde, frowning a bit. "You look like your head has gotten worse. There's some more paracetamol on the sink, and then I think we should go up and have Mr. Smith run a medical scan."

Clyde nodded, nicking another two scones and stashing them in his pocket. They were pleasantly warm. His balance was still good, so Clyde wasn't too worried. He probably just needed another nap and Mary from History to give him a backrub. Gordon didn't help him up the stairs, walked slowly behind Clyde instead and saved him a whole lot of useless embarrassment. "Once your brain scan is all clear, we can spend all morning lazing about and watching movies," Gordon grinned, squeezing slowly through the doorway.

"Mr. Smith, I need you," Clyde said, because it was still a bit of a pride point with Gordon. Sarah Jane wouldn't budge, even when they had the two separate arguments about how Gordon was technically

the real Mr. Smith, and Mr. Smith the computer had gotten all jealous and refused to do any weather scans for a week and a half. That was a rough week; Sarah Jane had spent the whole thing in a tizzy, there was only takeaway and toast in the kitchen, and Clyde had forgotten his umbrella for the first time all year. A three-way argument between a married couple and their computer sounded like a great premise for a sitcom, but was really inconvenient in practice.

Mr. Smith's fanfare was painfully loud. "How is your concussion, Clyde?" Clyde was feeling a bit unsettled, but Mr. Smith had the same creepy robotic voice as ever.

"At least I'm not stuck in Carbonite," Clyde grinned, and Gordon laughed from the fancy medical wand terminal thing.

"Sarah Jane and I will need a full medical scan of Clyde," Gordon said. "Focus especially on the brain and any potential damage."

So then Clyde got to stand very still in the middle of the room for 13 straight minutes while he was covered in a weird purple light and strangely cold, and Gordon tried unsuccessfully to cover up his vaguely concerned faces. While he was waiting, Clyde was able to blindly text Maria that he had gotten a concussion and was probably fine, or a string of horrible gibberish. Maria was smart, she'd figure it out either way.

"I'm sorry to report that you have a Magnesium deficiency," Mr. Smith called. "You should eat more leafy green vegetables." It was always the leafy green vegetables, and Clyde was frankly getting sick of it.

"Yeah, yeah," Clyde said, rolling his eyes. "But my brain's not going to explode or implode or turn into an alien egg colony or anything, right?"

"Correct," Mr. Smith said, doing the computer equivalent of an eye roll. Clyde grabbed a scone from his pocket, his body heat had done a surprisingly good job of keeping it warm.

Gordon grinned and rubbed his hands manically together. "Well, then it's settled. Blade Runner?"

"Of course," Clyde called, plopping onto the sofa. "But the original theatrical release so that we can mock the voice over!" It would've been better if Luke were there, but they'd make do just fine.

Aside from the headache and the part where his best mates were off investigating aliens without him, Clyde figured that it was a really decent Sunday.

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And Clyde's head wound had turned a really alarming shade of green by the time he was supposed to go to school on Monday. He considered wearing a hat and tried on a few before Rani pointed out that it would be easier to just show everyone. She was a smart girl, that Rani.

Clyde waited until he had large groups assembled and then told the heroic story of the tragically fast football that Luke kicked into a tree and two different goal posts before he dived to save the point and

ended up with a horrifically massive and awful contusion. Luke, to his credit, did not blush. And Clyde sounded quite daring and dashing, so it almost beat the real story of how he had unsuccessfully tried to be the bait for a 2.5 meter high alien with jellyfish tentacles.

And it wasn't an awful day at school. The bruise probably made him look extra tough, so he only had to glare for a few seconds at the usual idiots that tried to give Luke and Rani trouble for sitting together. He had it going pretty well, no disrespect on Luke or Rani for the last few months. His rep was coming along well, too. He talked with a few of his people, probably 6 or 7, but none of them had seen a giant orange jellyfish or so much as heard of one, and the big gossip was that Claudia had gotten wasted on Saturday night and decided that she was going to try to steal her best friend's boyfriend with an impressive display of stuffing golf balls. She had apparently managed 8 in her mouth at once, but that didn't really concern Clyde so he didn't pass it on.

Really, the only time his head ended up hurting was when he tried to think about that time that he, Luke and Maria had gone out for the field trip to a random field in Cardiff and the sheep started exploding. There was something funky going on with his memory, too, because he knew that Gordon had gotten there first, back when he and Sarah Jane were still dating, and one of the sheep had exploded all over him and he had started bellowing about intestines. It was a really great line too, except that Clyde could barely remember it and stood too long in the hall thinking and was nearly late for class and queasy when he got there. The dumpster probably knocked it out of him and gave him a kiwi for his troubles.

But Luke promised to re-teach him all of the biology work when they got back to the house, so Clyde could just tune out and think of more pleasant things, like Batty and Deckard fighting it out on the deck of the Millennium Falcon. In fact, he was so good at thinking about the inevitable Falcon bitchfight that he didn't notice when the teacher announced the time to hand in the homework, so Clyde's stayed in his backpack and then Rani rolled her eyes at him for 2 solid minutes.

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On Saturday, Clyde's head was feeling almost completely back to normal, minus the occasional headaches that felt like a combination of radio static and an icepick and the slight memory loss that would undoubtedly end up fixing itself without the need for fuss within a few more days. So he was able to convince Sarah Jane that he was well enough to go on the unexciting alien-free trip that she was determined to keep secret. Luke and Rani were convinced that it was going to involve bowling, but Clyde was too smart for Gordon's deliberate trickery through cunning use of subtle hints.

They were all piled in Sarah Jane's tiny car, everybody except for Gordon, who was stuck as the token microbial geneticist at a really really boring convention of assorted doctors with really fancy degrees. Gordon had groaned about it all the week before and especially that morning morning until Sarah Jane had gotten frustrated and lightly thwacked him in the face with a bunch of bananas. Clyde had to deliberately not pay much attention after that to keep up the illusion that he had no idea of what they meant when they looked at each other like that. Luke had it so easy sometimes.

It was a fairly long drive, too, and Sarah Jane seemed happy to go but she didn't have her usual alien-fighting duffel stowed in the back of the car. Clyde spent most of the ride listening to tunes on his phone and texting Maria, who was stuck on some horrible historic field trip to somewhere obnoxiously American. When they pulled into the great big automotive dealership lot, Rani was snoring into Luke's knee and it looked like Luke had finished his entire maths workbook.

Once Clyde figured that they were actually turning into their destination, he made sure to pay close attention to the road signs. They were at Benton's Quality Automotive Dealership, which had one of those old signs that was completely without any obnoxious flashing lights. And Sarah Jane drove the car around to what was pretty obviously a secret back lot, saying, "I'm sending the car in for its yearly tune up, a dear old friend owns this place."

Rani tried very hard to hide her yawn in Luke's chest, and Clyde very admirably avoided laughing. Her hair was sticking up in the back, but Luke was always good for reminders with that sort of stuff. Sarah Jane had pulled into what looked like the entrance to a secret underground tunnel, and Rani got into her future journalist mode. "What will we be doing here, Sarah Jane?"

"Visiting with an old friend while we wait for my oil to be changed," Sarah Jane answered, smiling. She had a secret mystery smile.

Rani chewed on her pencil but didn't write anything. "Who is this friend of yours? How do you know him? Is this secret-" Rani coughed and lowered her voice very conspicuously, "ice cream business?" Rani had been trying to get them to replace "alien" with "ice cream", but had not ever been successful in getting it to stick.

Clyde almost hit his head on the top of the car while trying to look cool closing the car door and Luke gave him one of those exasperated looks that was one step away from clicking his tongue. Sarah Jane didn't even look at them, just walked very quickly to what looked like a big stainless steel elevator. "His name is John Benton," Sarah Jane began, ushering them inside. The whole inside was wood paneled and looked really incongruous. "We used to work together at UNIT. So of course he knows what we know, but we're not here to meet about any specific threat."

Luke very nearly started bouncing up and down. "One of your UNIT friends, Mum? This is wonderful! Does he know the Brigadier?"

She nodded, but wasn't able to say anything before the doors opened to what looked like the lobby that was inside of every other car dealership on the planet. Just a perfectly ordinary lobby, maybe a little bit more clean. Clyde wondered how somebody could give up a life of excitement, intrigue and aliens to go sell used cars, but maybe that was Sarah Jane's point in all of this. Usually, it was very hard to tell with one of Sarah Jane's special trips until the end when she very clearly explained her reasoning behind everything.

Clyde scanned the crowd to see if he could find whoever this John Benton person was, probably somebody older than Sarah Jane. He could see a grandpa-looking man in a brown suit turn around and

smile when he saw Sarah Jane, and she was beaming right back. Clyde grabbed Luke to keep them back while Sarah Jane hugged the old UNIT friend. "Sarah Jane," he said, using the same tone that all of her old friends used. "How have you been?"

"Well, John," Sarah Jane smiled, pulling away from his shoulder, "I got married. Just a few months ago, it was a quick elopement, no guests." Well, there hadn't been any guests besides Luke, Clyde, Maria and her dad, but the sentiment was still the same, he figured.

"I had heard that, and congratulations." He took her hand and began to walk towards what was probably the main counter. "It's a good little family you've built for yourself," he murmured, "I'm so glad." Before Sarah Jane could reply, he had made it to the counter. "This is an old dear friend of mine," he told the receptionist. "We'll be in my office while her car gets its yearly tune up. You can find it in my personal spot." Clyde was only a little annoyed that he and Luke and Rani had been completely ignored so far.

Sarah Jane led them to yet another oddly wood paneled elevator, where she ignored them to talk with Benton as they went up another level to his office. It was a nice plush office, full of dark wood and big comfy chairs and matched the elevator really well. "Oh," Sarah Jane said, sinking into the chair closest to the big desk. "I've completely forgotten to introduce you to my son Luke, and his friends Clyde and Rani."

"Hello," Benton said, shaking each of their hands before leaning against the desk instead of sitting. The chairs were surprisingly comfortable, especially since they already looked quite plush. "Just call me Benton, if you please."

He chattered with Sarah Jane for a little bit before getting a call that was apparently about how there was an odd bump in her bumper that they would have to get straightened out and it would add a bit more time to the end of it. And then there were a few jokes about Sarah Jane's penchant for getting into trouble, and some light gossip about Gordon. Somewhere in the middle, when Rani looked like she was about to drop off from boredom and Luke looked just as eager as he always was, they got tea.

Once they had the teacups in their hands, Sarah Jane leaned conspiratorially over to Benton and said, "So, John. Please do talk to us about UNIT." Clyde found himself perking right up, almost against his will. If he was lucky, maybe Benton was a Star Wars fan

"Well," Benton said, clearing his throat dramatically. Clyde braced himself for the great big 'You-should-not-ever-join-UNIT-because-it-is-just-too-cool-and-that-means-danger-and-possibly-weird-a-~~lien-viruses-and-it-might-accidentally-ruin-your-life-and-also-there's-danger!~~' But instead, Benton just said, "UNIT was quite a good place to work back when I was enrolled. It was exciting and we didn't have nearly the same knowledge of alien technology that we do now. A lot less sophisticated."

Luke interrupted, "The Brigadier says that they've installed great big machines that do nothing and entirely too many useless regulations and lost all of the heart." Benton nodded, almost a bit sadly.

"It's a new place now, very modern," Benton replied. "That sounds just like the Brigadier, too. I hear he's doing well." Sarah Jane nodded.

The rest of the talk was surprisingly interesting, since Benton spent the whole time telling about the way that UNIT used to run back in the 70s when life was innocent and awesome except for the whole disco thing. Apparently, the whole red berets thing was new. And the Brigadier got to wear a sweater that his wife hand-knitted as regulation and they just sewed some patches on top. Clyde was able to get over the thing where Benton looked like somebody's grandfather really quickly, too.

Sometime after the third time that Sarah Jane had patted his arm in an almost too friendly way, Clyde started to get suspicious. Sarah Jane might have dated this Benton fellow, and she might have just narrowly escaped being Mrs. Sarah Jane Smith-(Benton) and they possibly had exactly the sort of mythical breakup that left everybody completely good friends with no animosity afterwards. He gave Rani a look, because Luke would be completely useless at that sort of stuff, and she gave him the quirked eyebrow agreement that there was something slightly funky going on. They spent nearly 2 hours talking, until Clyde realized that he'd had 4 cups of tea and needed to use the loo.

Benton was unbelievably polite, and he insisted on walking Clyde out to show the way. Of course, there was nothing interesting or consequential in the hallway. But once they got out from the very clean bathroom, the tasteful hall lights started blinking and Clyde could hear alarms in the distance. He ran to the nearest window to investigate, and found another one of the gigantic orange jellyfish looking things stalking like a tripod through the lot of cars.

"I should've known you'd bring trouble, Sarah Jane," he sighed. It was a bit affectionate, and Sarah Jane grinned as she ran to the nearest stairwell.

"Not my fault," she exclaimed, grabbing Luke's hand. Luke, of course, grabbed Rani's hand, and they started to take the stairwell downstairs.

"Sarah Jane," Benton said, grabbing a keyring from his pocket. "I have some business to finish up, should I meet you downstairs?"

Sarah Jane was already halfway down the stairs. Clyde stood on the balls of his feet, stretching. "I'll go with you," he said, feeling the adrenalin beginning to kick in.

"Alright, see you there," Sarah Jane called, sonic lipstick already out. Of course, Clyde would be a little anxious for alien action if he hadn't seen any in nearly 5 weeks because he was busy canoodling with a new husband. He followed Benton down another, smaller service stairway. When they reached halfway down the stairs, Benton pulled open a panel and turned a few keys.

An automated message began to play from the hidden loudspeakers. "This is a locally recognized emergency, not a drill. Please follow the clearly labeled escape passages to the exit and underground bunkers." John Benton apparently had a secret alien escape plan just kicking around for no reason.

"Preparedness is completely essential, especially nowadays," Benton said, unlocking another locker and grabbing a very large gun, the sort that looked like it could do serious alien damage. Clyde didn't even bother to ask if he could have his own, just focused on curbing the urge to run up and down the stairs until some of the energy was gone.

By the time that Benton and Clyde had made it downstairs via the longer route, 2 of the jellyfish looking things, and Clyde was getting to the point where he was going to name them just so that he could stop referring to them as jellyfish, had tried to pick up one of the Mini Coopers, presumably to throw it through the lobby window. Clyde grabbed his mobile from his pocket, deciding not to send Maria a text about how they had just been invaded by cool looking yet mean and dangerous aliens while she was already miserable in history class. He was able to get Luke within one ring, and they were stuck behind some sort of large counter while 2 more jellyfish looking things were trying to get them, and Sarah Jane's alien decoder watch didn't really have an idea of what they actually were.

And then he got cut off, hopefully not because Luke had been crushed or thrown by one of those evil jellyfish. Benton motioned over to a secret emergency station that he had installed next to the front desk and pressed a complicated looking keypad and there was probably a fingerprint scan of some sort, and then suddenly there were steel shutters closing down all of the windows and the emergency message had switched to tell everyone to get to an underground bunker and stay put. There was a jellyfish thing locked inside with them, though, and Benton was surprisingly calm and good natured through all of it; he didn't even look like he was sweating. "I've learned to expect these things with Sarah Jane," he joked.

"That's why I hang around her," Clyde replied, and then they ran to the nearest other desk. They had to make a complicated duck and weave maneuver while the enraged orange alien blindly threw office supplies around. Clyde couldn't make out a mouth or eyes or anything with it, and it was entirely too creepy. It glowed in the dark a bit too, and it glided really fast. It wasn't that they were in trouble, precisely, just that things seemed to get a bit tense as they were hiding out behind a life-size cardboard cutout of a Mini Cooper with an undersized canoe on top and the alien was stomping around looking for them.

Not even 20 seconds after realizing that he was probably in all kinds of unpleasant trouble, Clyde almost missed Rani's call, since he had been smart and turned the ringer off of his mobile. "Clyde," Rani stage whispered. "Whatever it is, it's afraid of tartare sauce."

Clyde could not stop the surprised, "What?" He could not believe that it was condiments again.

"I was frantically running for my life away from one of them, and it nearly got a hold of my new cardigan. But by that point I had reached the cubicles so I just started throwing whatever was around on the desks, and I found this gross warm fish sandwich and it the jellyfish thing just ran away! But we tested and it's not the bread or the fish." Clyde had to bite back laughter. "I'm using a secret tunnel to run to the grocery store and pick up some more, I should be back in a few minutes. Luke's working on a thing."

"We'll hold down the fort over here," Clyde whispered, really hoping that the giant jellyfish looking thing wasn't about to knock the cardboard car on them. He turned to Benton and said, "They're afraid of tartare sauce," and then they stealthily ran to another Jeep cutout.

Benton holstered his gun and grinned. "I brought my lunch today. Fish and Chips."

"Does it have tartare sauce?"

"Yes," Benton said, tying his shoes. "Upstairs."

Clyde stretched his hamstrings to get ready for the sprint. "Let's go," he said, and bolted.

20 minutes later, they were huddled behind Benton's desk with a demolished pile of lunch in their laps, throwing little bits of tartare sauce covered fish at the alien whenever it got too close. Clyde was just a tiny bit embarrassed, but Benton had started telling a really great story about a time when London had to be evacuated for a dinosaur invasion and Sarah Jane had come back from her first trip with the Doctor and had no idea, and then they had to flee for their lives from dinosaurs and also the police because Sarah Jane got arrested with the Doctor. Benton had promised to show him the mug shots.

Clyde was just starting to have a good time when the alien took one of its gross tentacle arms and knocked out an entire bookshelf of Benton's precious mementos, sending an autographed football flying right into the unhurt side of Clyde's head. It really bloody hurt, too, knocking him out for a few seconds. And Clyde spent the next few minutes dazed and trying not to puke while Benton looked really grave and intense. Clyde tried not to be horribly embarrassed that he was in an alien attack with a UNIT soldier and curled up in a ball on the floor doing nothing.

Thankfully, Sarah Jane came bursting through the door with a homemade sprayer and blasted the alien with a shower of tartare sauce like she was a Ghostbuster. Clyde really had no idea how Luke had managed to get the lumpy sauce to spray so evenly, but that was probably why Luke was the genius that designed everything. Once the alien had thrown itself out of a window and into some weird shimmery hole in mid-air, Luke got to them and started grinning. Clyde could feel the headache mixing with the usual celebratory gladness to be alive. Tartare sauce smelled really nasty.

Sarah Jane didn't let them stay for too long after the head re-injury, but they did manage to get out in the sunshine and get some ice cream. Benton gave surprisingly good hugs, too. Sarah Jane's car was miraculously unharmed and looked extra shiny, even though that was really improbable when they considered the carnage on the lot. While Sarah Jane was checking in with Gordon and his mum, Clyde managed to get Benton his e-mail address, so that they could keep in contact and also send the embarrassing pictures. All in all, Clyde figured, it had been a good Saturday. He climbed into the backseat of the car and spent the rest of the ride napping in Luke's lap, but in a very manly and dashing way.

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Sunday night, everybody had decided that despite Clyde's really horrific headache and the part where he had matching bruises on the side of his head that Rani said made him look like he'd been clanged by very large cymbals, they were going to have the close to the end of the school year celebratory party. This one was Gordon's idea, and he decided that it should be all about different cuisines of the world. Luke offered to make it a "Where in the World is Carmen Sandiago" theme, but that was very politely shot down.

On Sunday morning, Sarah Jane and Gordon had gotten up sort of alarmingly early and entirely too perky, and Clyde wouldn't have normally noticed except that he couldn't sleep well with the headache and accidentally forgot to distract himself. Gordon made pancakes and Sarah Jane just sat in her chair, pretending to read the newspaper while she ordered him around. They seemed very happy with the agreement and Clyde got extra syrup while they waited for Luke.

Everybody knew that Luke was Clyde's best mate, but Luke had horrific morning breath and bedhead to match. Clyde looked at Luke's hair in the morning and was grateful that he didn't have enough hair to do anything stylish with. Of course, he was exactly as grateful whenever Rani got bored and offered to braid Luke's hair. Hair was just a waste of time and effort.

So Sarah Jane decided that she was going to sit back and supervise, and Clyde was pretty sure that he didn't accidentally hear that the deal involved Gordon giving her foot rubs. It was so hard to act like everything was fine when Sarah Jane and Gordon were doing the thing with the eyebrows and Gordon was laughing extra deep and there was no way that it didn't have ulterior meaning and Luke just sat there and was completely oblivious. Clyde tried a great many times, and there is no good or possible way to politely inform your best mate that his parents are very bad at being discrete about all of the sex that they were probably having and that he has just been dense about it. And it was also probably one of those really clearly cut ignorance is bliss things. And also, Clyde doesn't feel like having to spend another month watching soaps with Luke so that they can finish the 'what happens when you fancy girls' lesson.

Clyde didn't want to say that he was ever-suffering, but he ate his pancakes very normally, and then went out grocery shopping with Gordon to get everything for the feast. And it was going to be a feast. They were going to watch old reruns of Monty Python's Flying Circus and Gordon had promised to pause and explain every time Luke had one of his super tricky 'why is comedy funny' questions.

Sarah Jane was providing the house, and Rani was providing that really awesome rice that she always makes that takes about 7 minutes to prepare and almost no stirring from the recipe that she guarded more closely than her life. Luke made about 14 bowls of popcorn, since he was the only person capable of popping every single kernel without burning any of them through the power of his superhuman brain or something.

Clyde spent the day having a really awesome time and ignoring his headache while he made the paella and sushi. Gordon made falafel, dessert lasagna, and burritos. They also had random baguettes set up everywhere, hummus, and bowls of grapes and chips. Sarah Jane had shot down Gordon's suggestion of

Russian vodka, but nobody liked any of the other indigenous cuisine of Russia, so they skipped that and got Thai takeaway instead. It was amazing.

That night, Clyde learned that Luke was incapable of understanding why, and also that he could have 3 servings of sushi, share 4 plates full of chips, 2 servings of paella, 3.5 servings of dessert lasagna, and 6 burritos plus lemonade without puking; and he learned that he could barely remember how Sarah Jane and Gordon met, and that almost all of his memories from then were horribly fuzzy and indistinct and painful to think about. But he ignored that last part until the next morning.

There was just too much fun to be had, he was too busy to care about anything else. Well, maybe he cared about the last piece of rhubarb pie, but that was only if there were no other takers.

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Clyde called Maria when it was a reasonable hour in Washington time, just like he always did. He always spent Sunday mornings talking with her while Alan put on the imported football match, and Clyde was all set at his desk with drawing pencils ready. He just liked hearing the sound of Maria's voice, e-mail wasn't the same. And since Luke had done that super freaky genius thing with their phones, there were no charges for whenever they talked to each other. So naturally, Clyde pestered her a lot.

She didn't seem to mind, and seemed all happy and in a wonderful mood until he mentioned the memory loss thing. Then she was upset. "Clyde," she exclaimed, "You've been bonked on the head by giant aliens the color of traffic cones and now you've got memory loss! This is not a trivial thing!"

"You forgot the tentacles, Maria," Clyde huffed, dropping his pencil dramatically to the table. Unfortunately, she wouldn't be distracted. "And it's not really memory loss, just that my memory gets hazy sometimes."

"Hazy when, Clyde?" Maria growled into the phone, and he could just hear her tapping her foot. She was quite intimidating when she tried, that girl.

Clyde went to grab a granola bar from his desk drawer, considering. Maria would know if she lied. "I dunno, just whenever I think about the time with Gordon and the exploding cow. And Sarah Jane's wedding day, and umm, that time we went on the road trip with the water chestnuts."

Maria sighed, "So good memories then? Do they have anything else in common?" She was probably taking secret notes secretively, getting ready to report to Sarah Jane.

He thought, stroking his chin for a while to make sure that he was really pondering properly. Of course, he was in the middle of swallowing when the answer hit him, and he made this undignified squawking noise as he accidentally coughed up his snack. "Gordon," he said, "It's whenever I think of old memories of Gordon that my head hurts."

"That's really weird," Maria said, but Clyde was too busy freaking out a little bit. He couldn't really remember how he'd met Gordon in the first place, just that it had something to do with rose bushes. "Okay, let's think this through. Is Gordon an alien?"

"Of course not," Clyde laughed, trying to imagine Gordon dressed up like a bright green Martian, but failing and imagining him in an enormous pirate costume instead.

Alan cheered loudly in the background and Clyde could hear Maria roll her eyes. "Well we know he's not," Maria answered, "But let's just be safe."

Thinking about it was making his head throb, but Clyde threw himself onto his bed and got to work. "Well, he's had access to Mr. Smith for months and hasn't used him for anything even remotely illegal and alien-like. He didn't even really believe in aliens before he met Sarah Jane. He's got access to all kinds of powerful and sensitive alien stuff and he just bakes scones instead. He never leaves the house unless it's for Sarah Jane or some kind of scientific conference. Gordon sits around and bakes things and then delivers them to us after we've finished with the alien threats!"

"Yeah, I get it." Maria laughed. "I think he's wonderful too and all that. It could just be that the alien goo latched on to him because he's the newest?"

"No," Clyde said. "Rani's the newest." Maria sometimes forgot that Rani existed, although he really couldn't blame her. It was lonely in America, he knew.

Maria made a long hum and was probably twirling her hair. "Well, then it is obviously a vast alien conspiracy to get you to doubt Gordon so that they can kidnap him and get the recipe for his scones." It sounded really ridiculous when she put it like that. So wildly implausible that Clyde just decided to not bother worrying about it. Maybe he'd keep his eye out, but it wasn't worth mentioning to anybody else.

Maria, on the other hand, had a new love interest that was definitely worth mentioning. He was just too great to mention it to anybody.

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So the next weekend when Clyde's mum was busy on yet another business trip thing, he went over to Sarah Jane and Luke's place like always, except that when he got there the whole house was torn up with cleaning supplies and boxes everywhere. It was like they were cleaning up from another house-destroying alien attack, except that nobody had called to inform him of one and that was exactly the sort of thing that you do when your best mate lives right nearby and also knows about aliens. Clyde had to fight the little bit of panic that was stuck in his chest.

But once he got there, he realized that it was all boxes of Luke's stuff hanging around. Mostly science textbooks and old computer parts and bunches of his 16 different chemistry sets. Gordon's humming was booming loudly down the hallway when he got in. "Clyde," Gordon exclaimed. "How lovely to see you. Not entirely unexpected, however."

"Yeah," Clyde said, nipping a bagel. "My mum is doing that fancy certification course that has all of those peer meetings or whatever and today's another one of them."

"Only a few more weeks and then we'll probably exile you," Gordon said and handed him a banana. "Luke is upstairs, I'll take you." Gordon was slow up the stairs like always. He usually said that it was because he was old and his hips were fragile, but Clyde knew when Gordon was telling a joke for the benefit of his manly pride. And it wasn't even that Gordon was especially fat, just that he was very large and needed careful. There were boxes all up and down the stairs, and Sarah Jane was dressed in a really old t-shirt that probably was supposed to be white back a few decades before Clyde was born.

"Hello, Clyde," Sarah Jane hugged him and she smelled like she'd been eaten by dust bunnies. "We're remodeling Luke's bedroom." That was probably Gordon's idea, since neither of the Smiths were domestic at all.

"I just think that the boy should have a completely personalized space of his own, none of that horrid bee wallpaper," Gordon interrupted.

"I like the bee wallpaper," Luke called from somewhere in his room.

Gordon rolled his eyes and wrapped an arm around Sarah Jane's waist. "But not to use as an expression of who you are as a person and teenage boy." Sarah Jane quickly slid away and began sorting beakers into boxes.

"You're right," Luke said, walking out from his mostly empty bedroom in very small clothes that Clyde could swear were fine at Christmas. "I am going to decorate this room so that it can be an expression of my personality, just like you have decorated your office and your spare bedroom for in case you and Mum get into a fight, even though I am not allowed to lock myself inside and if I have company I will not be allowed to be alone with them in there because I am a teenage boy."

Sarah Jane wiped a smudge of dust off of Luke's cheek and squeezed his shoulder. "That's right. It'll be good fun."

Gordon held up a weird steamer looking thing a bit menacingly. "Clyde, now that you're here, how about you and Luke take Sarah Jane's credit card and go down to the hardware store and Luke can pick out the paint that he wants for his bedroom." He waggled his eyebrows at Sarah Jane. Oh, but Luke was so oblivious.

"Sure," Clyde said. The hardware store wasn't a bad walk and it would keep them away from watching Gordon pinch Sarah Jane's hipbone and grin naughtily. Also, Clyde's head was throbbing again.

"We will take the wallpaper down," ignoring the innuendo, "and we'll see you when you get back." Clyde dashed over to Luke and grabbed his hand almost before he was finished getting Sarah Jane's card and pulled him downstairs before Sarah Jane and Gordon started snogging or something worse.

Luke, of course, was oblivious. He tried to stop for a random beaker on the way down. "I've been looking for that one!" Clyde, on the other hand, did not stop until after they were out of the house with the door firmly shut.

It was probably a 20 minute walk, so Clyde slowed down. He did have a ton of homework, but he figured that Luke would help him exchange for the room-painting. Also, it was a really nice day, all sunny and warm. If Clyde cared to notice that stuff, he would probably see that the flowers were blooming or something equally girly. Luke looked vaguely bewildered in that special Luke way that he had. "I think that your mum and Gordon really wanted us out of the house," Clyde tried to explain.

Luke scrunched up his forehead in the puzzled Luke way. "Because they want to have sexual intercourse?" And when Luke said it, it was a completely innocent question. Clyde still couldn't completely get used to that, it was just too freaky.

Sometimes Clyde just wanted to have the option of answering Luke's question or jumping off of a bridge into a small pool full of puffer fish. "Probably," he choked out. "But we aren't supposed to think about that. Not at all, and in general we don't talk about it because talking about it means thinking about it and we don't want to think about it."

Luke scrunched up his face. "But now that I've started thinking about it, I can't stop! This is terrible!"

"This is why we don't think about it!" Clyde had to think fast. "Time for a distraction! Umm. Now is not the time for Star Wars, because some things should not be accidentally linked to stuff like the destruction of the Death Star." He was drawing a blank. Luke didn't care at all about football scores no matter how hard he tried, and Clyde wasn't so great with the science stuff and they couldn't just go talking about aliens while walking down a busy sidewalk. So in absence of everything else, he picked the most obvious, stupid question. "What color are you planning on painting your room?" The room where nothing at all inappropriate was going on because Sarah Jane was a good mum that didn't want to emotionally scar her son and his friends.

"I'm thinking about a pale yellow," Luke said, obviously relieved.

"Oh no, Mate," Clyde gasped. "You have to paint it blue."

Luke looked a bit hurt. "But I like yellow."

"But your room is already yellow." Clyde poked him in the ribs.

Luke started deliberately walking slower, rolling his eyes, "This would be a pale yellow."

"That's even worse! Pale yellow like a baby's room!" Clyde could not in good conscience let his best mate do that.

"Well, I like yellow," Luke said, sulking a little bit.

"But blue is a way cooler color. We can go and check all of them out. Ooh, or maybe neon orange."

"Clyde," Luke sighed, "I'm not painting my bedroom the color of a clown fish."

They were able to keep up the exchange for the whole walk with no mention of inappropriate parental activities that could be easily denied were going on. So that was good, and the sun was still shining when they made it to the hardware store and the paint aisle, which was ridiculously huge and full of paint samples. And Clyde loved looking at paint, even if it was just wall paint that couldn't really be used for much. "Clyde," Luke gasped, "Look at all of the different gloss finishes." Then, he got out a notebook from his back pocket and started writing what looked to be a complex mathematical formula to help him judge which level of glossiness would be ideal.

Clyde picked up a book of paint swatches and kept an eye out for Luke while absently browsing the green section. He kept that up for a good few minutes until he smelled really familiar perfume and Maria's mum was tapping on his shoulder. "Clyde," she cried and wrapped her arms around his neck.

It was really hard to call her Chrissie. "Chrissie," he replied, probably a little too weakly, but that was just the surprise.

"What in the world are you doing here? I saw Luke talking the ear off of that poor paint salesman and I figured you would be here to. What's been happening?"

"Yeah," Clyde replied, "He's been talking to that one for the past half hour at least. Poor salesman looks like he's going to bolt." He squeezed Chrissie's hand. She smelled like how he remembered Maria. "Luke's repainting his bedroom and we're here to pick out the new color. Luke's just being picky."

"Precise, Clyde," Luke called from the other side of the aisle. "And hello, Chrissie."

She grabbed his arm and pulled him into the section with the paint rollers. They should probably pick up a few extra while they were there, he figured. "Hi, Luke," she cried. "So anyways, Clyde. How's school been? Done anything interesting? I hear you still talk to Maria quite often." She had hopes for the two of them, despite all logic and sense.

"Yeah, Maria and I are tight," he said, smiling. "School's fine and everything, a bit boring. And of course I miss Maria." And then there was a lot of small talk, which was fine because Chrissie was Maria's mum and she inexplicably liked him and it wasn't like he was doing much of anything anyways.

But then Chrissie whispered that way she did, "So Maria told me that your little brother was born a bit premature?"

"Yeah," Clyde said, trying really hard to think of a way to keep answering that didn't involve yelling or crying or inappropriate babbling. But then, like a savior from the sky, a giant orange jellyfish looking alien burst in through the plate glass window. His gut kept clenched until the adrenaline kicked in.

Chrissie yelled, "Is this a genetic thing? Do they just wear a special perfume?" as she ducked for cover behind the purple section. Clyde was more concerned with how Luke was on the other side of the aisle and the jellyfish looking alien was headed right towards him.

"Probably," Clyde called, and brandished a paint roller for backup. Luke managed to run over before Clyde could get it completely untangled.

"Clyde," Luke gasped. "The grocery store across the street."

"What about the grocery store," Chrissie called, an improbably small ball on the floor.

"Tartare sauce scares the alien away," Luke replied. "I have to go get some."

Chrissie crawled over to them, alarmingly close to falling out of her skirt. "Oh, are you kidding me?" Luke very solemnly shook his head, and then they all ducked under the flying lawnmower. Chrissie clucked her tongue. "How much cash do you have?"

"None," Luke said. "Just my mum's card."

"Oh, that's too slow," Chrissie began removing her heels and handing them over to Clyde. "I have cash. We'll run over to the grocery store, buy out all of their tartare sauce and then we will get back here and save the day with condiments."

Luke nodded, crouching into a runner's sprint. "Clyde, you stay here and make sure it doesn't hurt anybody. We'll be back as fast as we can."

And then they were both running dramatically out the door, Chrissie barefoot and avoiding all of the pieces of glass. Clyde took a few moments and considered his options before moving over to the aisle with the shovels. Sometimes it was odd seeing all of the piles of people just crouched and not doing anything. He figured it would take them a few minutes, so he started building a makeshift blockade at the end of the aisle with paint cans, reinforcing it with rakes.

When the alien tried to grab him, Clyde sliced at it with the shovel and it looked like it cut one of the tentacles open and made a horrible screeching beep noise. But he couldn't see any blood, and it looked like it just enraged the jellyfish looking thing even more. Clyde decided right then and there that he was going to name the alien just to have something concrete.

But he couldn't really come up with anything snappy in his head within a reasonable amount of time while also running for his life, so he scrapped that idea. And then, the jellyfish thing started throwing stuff from the shower aisle. Clyde got a shower curtain to the right hip and the right ankle and the left shoulder. But then the jellyfish thing started throwing shower heads, and the one that was shaped like the novelty rubber duck was the one that whacked him hard in the head.

When he regained consciousness, and he really hoped that he hadn't been out for long, he looked up and Chrissie was screaming bloody murder and squeezing tartar sauce all over it. Luke looked both awestruck and slightly scared. "Nobody cuts me in line," she yelled. "And nobody ruins the hardware store where I need to get new curtain rods before I can get out and get my curtain rods!" The whole thing seemed really tacky and unreal.

The jellyfish looking alien ran away in terror, of course.

And from his awesome vantage point with his head in a pile of partially ruined shower curtains, probably flowery, Clyde could see that Chrissie's arms were totally drenched in tartare sauce. And Luke was trying very hard not to giggle. Clyde would be laughing if he wasn't afraid that laughter would make his head explode.

Clyde was almost positive that he was going to have a rubber ducky shaped bruise on his forehead the next day, and he tried to convey this in his normal witty fashion, but all that would come out was, "Ow."

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Sarah Jane started to get concerned after Luke accidentally told her that he could tell when Clyde had a headache because he started biting his upper lip; and then she got really worried when she noticed how often he bit his upper lip. So after a week of headaches that felt like his brain was being shaken up with some steel wool in there, Sarah Jane told him that he was not allowed to go to school on the next Wednesday because she was having a doctor come to examine him.

Clyde imagined for about 5 minutes that it was an excuse for the actual Doctor to come and see how awesome they were, but all secretly and stealthily before he remembered that the Doctor didn't actually know how to practice any medicine. That was a bit of a letdown still.

And he didn't particularly like doctors or medicine or being poked and prodded at. But he trusted Sarah Jane and all of her friends, and also when he told her that he was sure that the headaches were just a byproduct of getting 3 concussions in 2 weeks, she forced him to lay down on the couch with an icepack on his forehead long enough for it to feel like a punishment. Sarah Jane had picked up that mumsy stuff almost too well.

So on Wednesday, Luke gave Rani's dad the note saying that he needed to stay home and Clyde snuck over to Sarah Jane's in the back of Gordon's car so that Rani's mum wouldn't notice anything suspicious and Clyde was able to spend most of his morning watching Aliens with Gordon.

He'd had sort of a problem getting to sleep the night before, so Clyde accidentally fell asleep on the sofa and when he woke up, Sarah Jane's attic was full of shiny medical stuff and the most gorgeous woman that Clyde had ever seen anywhere in his entire life was looking interestedly at Mr. Smith.

Clyde had the strange, desperate urge to ask her if she were an angel. But then he remembered that Anakin said that in the first movie and considering how he was younger than Sarah Jane's doctor friend that would get all creepy. And plus it would be horrible to turn into Darth Vader on her; and before he could even stop it, his brain had accidentally created an entire retelling of Star Wars like he was a horrible horrible geek and Clyde would've blushed with embarrassment but that would've been horrible because she was standing right in front of him and smiling.

"Hi," she said, "I'm Martha." Even her voice was gorgeous. And Dr. Martha was even prettier in close up. Clyde had to use all of his willpower to keep from gawking and staring and never stopping.

"Clyde," he said, shaking her hand. He was upset at the way that his voice got all rough and inconsistent, and the way that his hands were accidentally sweaty and he didn't notice until too late. It was really horrible actually, every single bit that was not gorgeous Dr. Martha, the most beautiful person that he had ever seen in person. "So, are you an alien?" Clyde had no idea why he said that, he always failed when he tried to act witty.

"No," she laughed. Laughing, that was good. "I did travel with one, though." She and Sarah Jane shared a meaningful look. "Why, are you saying that I look inhuman?"

Clyde sat up, and he was pretty sure that she looked even better when he was sitting up. "Yes," he admitted. "Although that may just be my 3 concussions." It was good to get it back on topic. He looked over to Sarah Jane and she was either being really nice or didn't notice that he couldn't stop accidentally being stupid because she was so stunning.

He stopped feeling better when he noticed Gordon in the corner looking pitying and like he was about to laugh at the same time. "So," Dr. Martha said. "Tell me how you got your concussions."

"Well," he said, not looking anywhere in particular, "The first time, I was walking down town with Luke and our friend Rani, and then a gigantic bright orange jellyfish looking alien appeared and we were trying to figure out what it was doing and I guess it got mad, because it used one of its tentacles to pick me up and throw me head first into a dumpster. That one hurt a lot. And then the next Saturday, another gigantic orange jellyfish looking alien, possibly the same one, threw a football into my head and it hit the other side." He paused to get a sip of water and Sarah Jane moved over next to him. "And then on top of that, the next weekend I went out to the hardware store with Luke and another one of the same kind of aliens threw a showerhead shaped like a rubber ducky into my head."

Martha started laughing. "I was wondering why that bruise was shaped like a duck." She made a few notes on a very official looking notepad. "What did you do to that alien anyways?"

"I think it's just very sensitive about its mother," Clyde joked, getting a good chuckle out of Gordon.

"So most of the brain wave examination was done on very expensive top secret equipment while you were asleep," Dr. Martha said. "But I do need to do things like test your pupil reflex, so this will take a little while." And then he was cool, totally collected and generally witty. Not staring or obsessing or wondering where the blue light was coming from. Dr. Martha was really smart and she had amazing stories about traveling with the Doctor. She shared more than Sarah Jane did, and she was gentle and Clyde was completely fine. He was cool. Martha was essentially the perfect woman straight from his dreams, and she was standing there joking with him. Because she thought that he, Clyde Langer, was a quality person. That was more than enough.

Clyde was fine for the drawing blood for the blood test and all the rest, and he was as good as he could possibly be. Towards the end, he was almost completely relaxed. Gordon started telling stories about back when he was trying so hard to get Sarah Jane to go out to dinner with him but she always said that she was too busy and then they kept accidentally running into each other at the grocery store. There

was something about the way Gordon said it that made it funny enough to get him snorting in a horribly unsmooth way.

Dr. Martha was really good at figuring out when the headache kicked in, although that might have been because Sarah Jane clued her in. She did all of the doctorly things like checking to see if he had a fever and that his eyes were working properly. She said that she couldn't see anything seriously wrong.

And then Martha went downstairs to chat over tea with Sarah Jane. He was crushingly disappointed when she left, but then that mixed with overpowering relief that he didn't have to be on his best behavior. Gordon looked over at him afterwards and said, "Oh, I know." And then he started humming and saying, "You've got that Sarah Jane feeling."

"Well, I'm not feeling it for Sarah Jane," Clyde replied, giving an appropriately outraged teenager face. "So let's just not talk about it, okay?"

Gordon just nodded and unpaused the movie. They sat on the couch for a few minutes, being awfully manly while downstairs, Sarah Jane and Martha had tea and were twice as awesome as everybody else. When Gordon paused the movie so that he could go grab his tea from the farthest tabletop without missing anything or breaking priceless alien technology, Clyde remembered how odd it was that Gordon was around on a Wednesday when he was usually out doing retired scientist things. "Hey, thanks for being here, Gordon," he said, not putting too much emphasis on it.

"It's nothing worth thanks," Gordon said, plopping onto the couch.

Clyde hadn't ever had a proper father figure before, and he was pretty determined to make sure that he didn't mess this up. "No, I mean, I know that sometimes you can't even make it to Luke's appointments and Wednesday is your busiest day. And I just wanted to thank you for being here even though your super competent wife had it completely under control."

"Well, I'm very invested in the integrity of your brain," Gordon said, making wiggly Frankenstein fingers.

There wasn't a numerical term that could describe how much better that morning compared to going to school.

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Whenever Clyde wasn't having a headache, which only happened when he was not at school or Sarah Jane's or the library or doing alien business, he would get a weird tugging feeling in his gut that there was something that wasn't quite right. Not something huge, and he could usually convince himself that it was just his body reacting to not having to constantly twinge with pain. But it was deeper than that, like some subconscious part of him was really alarmed.

He had started to get freaked out whenever Gordon entered the room, like all of the hair on his arms decided to stage a revolt at once. And at the same time, Clyde was getting oddly uncomfortable at Sarah Jane's house. He was surprisingly good at not letting it show, and it wasn't like something that actively

bothered him. He was probably just blowing it out of proportion, too. He didn't have the information necessary to figure out the jellyfish looking aliens' plot, so he'd just have to wait and gather it.

Clyde got so pissed at himself, though, for letting the jellyfish looking aliens shake his confidence in Gordon. The same Gordon that had taught Luke microbial genetics and cooked them homemade snacks and accidentally rescued them from that time the evil clown was going to trap them in the creepy clown museum. There wasn't anything creepy about him, and he knew it, and he was so upset that his body wouldn't accept it.

He got so frustrated that one day, halfway through their last Tuesday after school homework party of the school year, Clyde couldn't stand it any more and accidentally acted like an asshole. He excused himself to go to the bathroom and then just climbed out the window like a coward, completely without his homework. But his mum wasn't home, and it was too rainy to hang about outside or play football, so Clyde really had no choice but to go to the library.

So he hung about at the library, without his schoolwork, not interested in reading anything or using the internet, just slumping about on the chair. He didn't even feel up for Star Wars, or video games. He considered finding a dark corner to mope and write angsty poetry in red ink, but then Rani walked in, quietly popping a bubble with her gum.

She spotted him, because Rani had been honing her journalistic spotting people skills for months and had gotten pretty alarmingly good at it. But she was quiet when she sat next to him and didn't push him for anything. She smelled like raspberries, and he wanted to lean into a hug, but it wasn't the right place. His chest felt uncomfortably tight.

Clyde must've sighed or something, because Rani found an opening. "I explained to Luke and he's not upset," she said, resting her head on his shoulder. "You don't have to talk or anything, but I'm here for you. In case you want to talk, just about anything."

"Yeah?" Clyde leaned his head on hers, which smelled even more like raspberries.

He could tell that she was smiling, lightly stroking his arm. "I know what this is about, too, even if we don't talk about it. I'm here for you."

"I'm just sad that school is almost over," Clyde said, completely deadpan.

"No, you're not." Rani poked at his shoulder.

Clyde did a great job of keeping his manliness intact while also being quiet enough for library standards. "Of course I'm going to miss school. It is my true love. I will get on an abandoned door and cling to it, yelling, 'I'll never let go!' That will prove my great devotion to the scholarly pursuits. Only your father rivals my passion."

"Liar," Rani gasped and reached over to tickle his ribs. "You large stinking liar! You're a liar who lies and then tells more outrageous lies to distract from the original ones!" He was able to keep her hands away,

no problem. "But I know what this is about. It is impossible to trick me. I'm Rani the foolproof, remember?"

Earlier that morning, Clyde had been talking to Maria about the time that the crazy Astrology dude had invaded. He got almost all the way through the story and then realized that he hadn't talked about Gordon once. Like Gordon didn't exist, not even like he was busy, even though Clyde could remember the way that Gordon had distracted the guards to let them in the building and had taken care of keeping Rani's parents safe. It made him want to puke, that he could just unconsciously omit something like that. That was the time they got their joke about ice cream noses, right after Gordon had licked the ice cream from Sarah Jane's nose and then accidentally hit her nose with his cone right afterwards.

Clyde was starting to worry that there was something wrong with his head. And he probably waited too long to answer, because Rani stopped smiling and grabbed his hand. "Miles," she said. The library seemed even smaller, because he just didn't know what to do with his brother/cousin. Even though he was already more than a month old, Clyde was still paralyzed with indecision.

"I can't figure out what to call him, still," Clyde admitted. "Brothin doesn't work, but couther is even worse, and giving the whole explanation makes people ask about how that happened."

"Yeah," Rani said. "But I'd be happy to brainstorm for you. And we could just forget about genetics for the night and get ice cream and then not tell anybody and see if we can get Sarah Jane and Gordon to take us for more ice cream for dessert. Just the two of us, an adventure." She didn't make it feel any better; she wasn't Maria, but it was just enough to snap him out of the funk.

They ended up getting chips, and Clyde saved half of his for Luke and they ate them cold with vinegar.

When they got back to Sarah Jane's house, Gordon had just pulled a batch of cookies from the oven. Everything was just about as perfect as it could get, better than he had expected.

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Clyde was secretly terribly excited to go on the surprise trip to the enormous art museum that Sarah Jane and Gordon had planned, but when he was honest with himself he knew that he was really terrible at hiding how happy he was. Rani had already made two separate jokes about how he was glowing.

Gordon had made 7 or 8 different jokes about how he was a cheap date, and Sarah Jane had started getting annoyed at those and smacking her husband's arm whenever he made one. But Sarah Jane was also the one that smiled at him whenever he accidentally squealed while reading the pamphlet.

Luke looked a bit nervous, so Clyde slung an arm around his shoulder and pulled him over. He liked Gordon's car, it was way roomier and also more sleek looking. "This is going to be brilliant, Luke." He said, pointing to probably 30 different amazing pieces that were just in the pamphlet. He loved the pamphlet. Rani had started making jokes about being invited to the wedding of Clyde and the pamphlet. At the same time, it was nice to be able to actually get excited when he was able to go to a bloody enormous brand new art museum and not have to pretend like he was bored the whole time.

"I'm not completely confident in my ability to interpret the artistic merit of the sculptures," Luke whispered, wedging himself closer to Clyde.

Clyde liked being in the middle most times, especially when the windows were open and they were going on an adventure. He couldn't stop smiling. "Remember when we talked about with Star Wars, yeah?"

"But it's really that simple? Technical proficiency and personal taste? I've never gone to museum with you before, and you're so serious about the art." Luke looked unsure, twisting his hands in the way he did when unsure about new social situations.

"It's just like that. Don't worry about it, mate. There's not going to be an interrogation, I promise." The anticipation for the museum twisted up in his gut like manly butterflies.

Luke smiled shakily, handing the pamphlet back to Clyde's loving hands. "Alright," he said, smiling optimistically.

"Art is so awesome," Clyde said. He couldn't help bouncing in his seat a small and unobnoxious amount.

And then they pulled in to the parking lot. It was a big huge building that looked all intimidating and like it contained all sorts of pretentious art pieces inside. And Sarah Jane and Gordon had promised that they could eat in the restaurant inside, and they had all day passes, and Clyde's camera phone was totally blank in anticipation of stealthily taking pictures of sculptures with the flash off for Maria.

Yeah, he could tell that it was going to be a wonderful day.

But then his Clydey-sense wrong, because less than an hour into browsing, a group of 6 of the orange jellyfish looking aliens opened a massive portal in the middle of Sculpture Gallery 3. And just like that, the whole day was ruined. There was chaos and panicking and running and Clyde just wanted to shake all of the fleeing people by the shoulders and tell them to be really really careful not to trample anything. Thankfully, the group was all together and Sarah Jane had her sonic lipstick and everything was under control.

Clyde was kind of scared for his head. He suddenly wished a little bit desperately that he had packed a helmet. But the jellyfish looking aliens started gliding towards Sarah Jane. They were so tall that they had to hunch over to keep from touching the ceiling. They ran into the adjoining portrait gallery, and Gordon started loudly muttering curses.

Luke and Rani looked all determined and ready, but Clyde just kind of wanted to cry. It was an art museum full of priceless pieces of art and his head was already aching in anticipation. Sarah Jane squeezed his hand and whispered, "I won't let anything happen to you." She had a way of making him feel better that always worked. "Move behind Gordon, just in case." Gordon was big enough to absorb most of the shock of anything.

He always felt a bit like a dwarf when he was next to Gordon, like two of him could fit inside of Gordon's bulk. It was intimidating and slightly comforting, and he felt a bit useless while Rani and Luke ran around locking all of the doors. "Mum," Luke called. "I think that they're after us."

"Makes sense," Gordon called, trying to comb his hair with his fingers and making the whole thing revolt to completely out of control. His hair looked like a slightly spiky lamb on his head or something equally puffy.

Luke started taking the portraits down from the wall and turning them to face it. That was a really good idea, so Clyde mostly stopped shaking and helped him. "They always seem to show up where we are, so long as there's more than one of us outside of the house, and they try to run towards us."

Clyde could hear shaking from where they were pounding at the door. Rani started frantically rummaging through her purse, pacing about as she did it. "Aha," she cried, pulling a sandwich bag from the bottom of that thing. "Tartare sauce." Rani had packed the little portable squeeze packets of tartare sauce into her purse, just in case. Clyde bloody loved her. And when she came to Clyde, she gave him a few extra, whispering, "Just in case."

Clyde was wondering whether or not he should squeeze some tartare sauce onto his head when the jellyfish looking aliens burst in. He only had 8 packets, so he knew he had to make them last. He waited until one came within throwing distance, then tore the packet open down all one side with his teeth and threw it at the nearest leg. The alien made a horrible squeal like it was covered in lava or something and turned to a more sickly yellow-orange.

But 3 of the 6 were going straight for Sarah Jane, and she hadn't found a sonic setting to effect them. After 10 minutes of struggle and trying to get the mouthless aliens to say what they wanted, one managed to get ahold of Sarah Jane's wrist. At first she let out a little cry, but then called, "I'm fine. Not electrocuted or poisoned at all that I can tell."

It grabbed Sarah Jane's hand and stared at it like it was mesmerized while 2 more aliens grabbed her by the shoulders and ankles and didn't move her. The rest moved around to make an eerie semi-circle, and Gordon and Luke were trying so hard but they couldn't get to her. Rani looked like she was in pretty rough shape splattered with tartare sauce and stuck in a corner with an alien blocking her only way out.

Clyde stood frozen even though he really didn't want to be and had no reason to stay just stuck, but he couldn't move and even breathing felt like too much. And then the lead alien grabbed Sarah Jane's wedding ring and tried to pluck it from her finger. Rani chose that exact moment to make a tartare sauce assault.

But instead of creating an opening for Sarah Jane to make a dramatic and typically Sarah Jane-esque escape, it just made one of the aliens grab Luke and wrap a tentacle around his throat. The temperature seemed to drop after that, which was ridiculous because art galleries were super expensively temperature controlled to preserve everything. He couldn't stop staring at the way that the tentacle just

wrapped around Luke's throat and it looked like he had just barely enough room to breathe. He'd dealt with this before, he had experience, there was no real reason to panic.

The aliens started making horrible loud clacking sounds mixed with weird beeping like they were maybe part robot or something, and Clyde watched Gordon stiffen out of the corner of his eye. He was too scared to move or breathe properly. And he hated being so freaked out by any aliens, especially one that could be usually peaceful for all they knew. Of course, taking Clyde's best mate and restricting his airflow while holding him hostage was not generally a thing that the peaceful, good aliens did. Gordon just looked so stiff, wincing with his eyebrows furrowed so hard. Sarah Jane was doing a wonderful job of not panicking, though.

Clyde was pretty sure that the aliens wanted Sarah Jane's wedding ring. Possibly they were intergalactic jewel thieves. Clyde's head started to throb. He watched as Sarah Jane pulled off the wedding ring and handed it to the alien grabbing her wrist. It made a chattering whine, probably a happy sound, and then began fall into a circle, letting all of the humans go. "Run," Gordon said. "Run to the next room."

Clyde was very thankful that his legs were completely working, but once he got into Sculpture Gallery 5, which was full of the huge pieces, he looked back and noticed all of the jellyfish looking things holding tentacles in a circle and glowing. One dropped Sarah Jane's ring into the center and some sort of bright green light started shining, and then it expanded and contracted and when the spots were out of his eyes, Clyde saw that it was a portal. A big portal, stuck in the middle of the portrait gallery.

Sarah Jane's ring was probably supposed to not be able to do that. Once the portal had opened, one of the aliens tried to come in through the doorway, it looked like the portal was trying to suck him in. From the corner of his eye, Clyde could see Sarah Jane scrolling through her alien life forms watch as quickly as she could while still hugging Luke. And Gordon was biting his lip so hard that it was probably bleeding in a few places. Clyde's head began to throb in time with the light from the portal.

And Clyde wasn't paying enough attention, so he didn't see the tentacle that reached out like some sort of evil extension cord and grabbed Luke by his neck and dragged him into the portal with it. "A sacrifice," Gordon gasped. But Clyde was too busy noticing that his best friend was screaming and sliding slowly down a bright green portal like it was quicksand.

"Luke," Sarah Jane screamed. Rani tried to run for him, but there was some sort of invisible evil alien force field keeping them from getting to Luke. Clyde probably started to cry right along with Sarah Jane, but he could barely notice. He just hated those evil jellyfish things so badly. "It's a Jootak wormhole," Sarah Jane said, looking up from her watch. "Unless I'm mistaken, and I'm not, it will bring misplaced aliens back to their home planet. It requires a sacrifice to finish, but once it starts it's nearly impossible to stop, since it can act like a black hole without the initial sacrifice to plug it. Something living, something that is either very young or very old."

Clyde just wanted to puke all over his shoes. He banged very hard on the invisible force field instead. He pounded on it until his fists were raw and his hands were tired and he felt incredibly numb and cut up all at once. Rani was all practical and asked, "How long does he have before he's sucked in completely?"

"Probably a half hour," Sarah Jane whispered, crying a little. Gordon wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she leaned into it. But it looked wrong from the corner of his eye, so Clyde looked harder. Gordon looked guilty.

Gordon was very faintly glowing blue. Humans didn't just glow blue.

So he was an alien, then. Clyde wished that was a surprise.

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Clyde waited all of 30 seconds for the whole thing to sink in, the reason why his memories were all fuzzy. He had probably gone in like the Trickster and messed with their whole histories. Maybe he was an agent of the Trickster. But he wasn't bad, he never tried to take over the world or use Mr. Smith for much of anything, but he was glowing blue. And whenever Clyde was around him, he got a headache. And Gordon was Sarah Jane's husband and they loved each other. And Clyde loved him, everybody loved him.

And Luke was stuck in a portal that he couldn't get out of, screaming. He was in agony and he couldn't get out, and it was Luke, who had never hurt anybody and never would.

So Clyde made his decision. He walked over next to Gordon, the side that was away from Sarah Jane. His mouth was sticky and felt almost swollen or something. Gordon was glowing blue, and only Clyde could see it. So he sat down and cleared his throat and said, "Please fix it."

"What?" Gordon turned and his eyes were dark and alien-looking.

Clyde tried to keep his voice quiet. "I know you can fix it. Please, you have to."

"I can't do anything," he said, looking like he was about to cry. His voice was rough, deep enough that Clyde could feel the reverberations in his joints.

"I don't even care about what you did," Clyde insisted, and he probably was crying. "Just fix it."

Sarah Jane turned to look at him, worriedly. "I didn't," Gordon said.

"I can see you," he insisted. "You have to do something. It's Luke!"

"I love Luke," Gordon said.

Sarah Jane turned to them, grabbing both of their hands. "What is going on?" Her voice was tight.

"Please, you have to save him. He's Luke and he's never hurt anybody and he's my best mate and Sarah Jane loves him and you love him and everybody loves him because he's perfect. And he's in there, and he's in pain and he might die and you have to help him." Gordon started to flicker a brighter blue. "I don't even care about any of this," he babbled, "There's probably a really fantastic reason or something, because I know you love Luke and Sarah Jane and you have to save him. Please. It's Luke, he needs help and you're the only one, please." Clyde was scared that he might not ever stop begging.

Gordon was crying, just a little. "I never meant for this to happen," he said. He sounded so sad. "I love Luke."

"Then you have to save him."

"I am so sorry," he said.

Gordon did something with his wedding ring, some kind of grand complicated gesture and then the whole room was full of blue flickering like a strobe light and some kind of energy that was moving their hair and Gordon was just so bright. And an alien, tall and humanoid looking and his skin was a matte blue. His hair was just the same. But he didn't have a face, just an empty spot.

When he talked, his voice sounded just the same. "I did not mean for my deception to cause anyone harm," he said. "I won't let anything else happen to Luke."

Clyde looked at Sarah Jane, and she was completely rigid and slightly quivering. When he looked over to Rani, he saw that she was completely frozen.

"I'm sorry about the shock, but there is not much time left to successfully rescue him," Gordon the blue alien said. "The orange alien are Thootech, and they are neutral, I assume that they just wish to go home. They found a sufficient power source in the jewel in Sarah Jane's wedding ring. I think I may have a way to close the portal and rescue Luke." His voice sounded so mournful.

"Wait," Sarah Jane said tonelessly. "Tell us why you are here. Tell me why you did this."

Gordon stood on the ground and began punching at the forcefield, pausing to talk in between hits. "My real name is impossible to pronounce in English. I'm known as Thor and I am an alien refugee from a small, deserted planet. I decided to stop on Earth where it was quiet, I wished to retire from my profession. I did not intend to stay here for long, but I was investigating all of the major forms of planetary defense when I saw you, Sarah Jane. You were so brave and brilliant and strong, I was fascinated. I just wanted to know you." His voice cracked with every blow, it looked painful. He was blue and he didn't have a face.

Rani was holding on to Sarah Jane, but it didn't seem to do much good to help the shaking. "How did you do this?"

"I am a rich man," he said, "I did not have a family. I spent a part of my fortune on cloaking technology, the best available. And I created records for myself on Earth, bought cultural assimilation aides." He paused. "The more time I spent with the people, the more I realized that you were the only quality person on the planet. I bought a significant amount of memory insertion blocks, altered your memories so that a strong relationship was pre-established." Sarah Jane looked like she was about to vomit.

"How long have you really been here?" Sarah Jane sounded bruised. Clyde just couldn't speak.

"Almost 7 months," he said, the curve of his mouth looked sad. "The happiest months that I can remember having. I learned to love all of you, and Earth, and especially you, Sarah." There was a sound

like glass shattering. Clyde could see little streaks of something silvery at Gordon's fingernails, it was probably blood. He very idly wanted to scream, scream like Luke was screaming, get his voice all hoarse and raw from it.

"I would have loved to be here all of my life, to be a family with you. This process will disrupt the memory implants and I'm sorry about that."

Sarah Jane stood up, shivering and clutching at her elbows. "What are you doing?"

"Saving Luke," he said. "I take his place in the wormhole. My species is stronger, I can survive it. I might even be able to make my way back to you someday. I'd like that. I'll miss you, Sarah Jane."

"Gordon," she whispered. He shoved through the doorway with a deafening crash.

And then he reached into the center of the portal, grabbing Luke by the arm and throwing him through the doorway, there was a sort of horrible suction noise as the wormhole took a full minute to close around him and the floor turned into the floor again. Sarah Jane grabbed at Luke, squeezing him so tightly that her knuckles turned white. He looked mostly unharmed, or maybe Clyde was just hoping that.

Clyde had the feeling that this was all just a horrible nightmare, and that it was completely unreal. Any minute there would be dancing elephants descending from the ceiling.

"Mum, I could hear everything," Luke said, crawling over and grabbing Clyde's hand. Rani walked over too and grabbed one of Luke's legs like he was a doll. Clyde had the same urge, and also the desperate desire to vomit. It didn't seem real, he kept expecting for Gordon to just be behind a sculpture somewhere and not an alien. "Mum," Luke cried, "I don't know what to feel."

"Oh Luke," Sarah Jane said, pulling everybody into a hug that didn't quite reach around. They lay on the ground by crushed expensive sculptures and didn't say anything for a very long time. It didn't feel right to speak. It didn't feel right to cry either. Somebody had to tell Luke what to feel, but nobody seemed to know how to do it.

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Luke was Clyde's best mate, the first friend that he was ever completely positive that he would die for, no questions asked. Clyde clutched at Luke like he were some kind of stuffed bear and didn't want to ever let go. Luke was crying the kind of tears that were completely silent but just wouldn't stop. Clyde couldn't get his pulse to calm down. Luke's shirt was ripped near the spot where his bellybutton should've been, and his shirt was red and Clyde kept thinking that Luke was bleeding. Sarah Jane wasn't crying, but she wouldn't let anybody touch her.

The museum parking lot was almost completely deserted after the evacuation, and UNIT was probably due to show up within the hour, but Clyde stood next to the car and looked out at the empty pavement. He couldn't bring himself to move.

"So, my head," Rani gasped, holding both hands to her temples. "I've got this horrible splitting headache and it just keeps getting worse."

"Me too," Luke said, burying his face in Clyde's shoulder. "I don't think that it's as intense as Rani's."

It was probably the memory blocks disintegrating, Clyde thought, but he didn't say a single thing. He was fairly sure that if he opened his mouth, his heart would fall out. "I've got the same headache," Sarah Jane announced. "Mine is quite powerful. I'm not going to be able to drive." Her voice was trembling, and Luke transferred over from Clyde to her.

They trembled together for a few minutes, and then Clyde realized that his usual headache was actually getting better. That meant that he got to take charge, and Clyde waited for his breathing to calm down and planned. If the memory block was going to break down, that meant that every single one of Sarah Jane's friends that had met Gordon would be effected. He'd need to call them. Clyde began to slowly get things ready, pulling the blanket from the trunk and gathering change from his pockets.

He wasn't going to be able to drive with Sarah Jane passed out in pain in the front seat, so Luke would have to do that. Clyde would have to buy him an energy drink, the caffeine would probably help. And everybody needed to take a dose of paracetamol, and he'd need to get Sarah Jane's cell phone to make the calls.

Clyde set up Sarah Jane in the front seat, and Rani behind her. He grabbed Luke and they walked to the nearest convenience store to pick up snacks and energy drinks. He just had to not think about what happened with Gordon. He wasn't going to think about what happened, Clyde was going to keep everybody safe. Luke drove carefully and obeying all of the speed limits, but Sarah Jane winced with every bump.

Rani was asleep next to him. Clyde had two versions of phone calls to make. The first group was for Chrissie and Rani's parents and any other random neighbors that still denied the existence of aliens. He called them and said, "Hey, this is Clyde. There's been some sort of gas leak and Sarah Jane got really sick, not dangerously, but she's got a horrible headache. You might be getting a headache too, so just be prepared in case." He didn't engage with them, because he didn't trust his voice to hold up.

Then he called Maria, even though it was 5:30 in Washington. That message wasn't so calm. "Maria," he said, trying to keep his voice quiet. "There's been a problem with Gordon. I can't explain now, but it's bad and it's going to be important that you call me back. Everybody that's been around for long periods of time is going to get a bad headache. Watch out for that. Please take care of yourself. I love you."

Then he raided Sarah Jane's cellphone contact list to call everyone that he could remember had spent time with Gordon. The Brigadier, Martha, Benton, some other old UNIT colleagues. He said, "There's

been a problem and as a side effect, it's very likely that you'll be getting a bad headache. It's not lethal. You should call Sarah Jane tomorrow and she'll fill you in on the details."

And then Clyde sat quietly in the car and planned. Sarah Jane should probably go straight to bed. Luke was going to need to go too, and Rani would have to go back to her house. He'd forgotten to call his mom, so he did that. And then he had plans to spend the night.

It felt like hours to get back to Sarah Jane's house, and Bannerman Road seemed unbearably alien when they got to it. Rani's parents were waiting in the driveway, and Clyde ignored them. He wrapped his arms around Sarah Jane's waist and Luke helped him carry her into the house and up the stairs. She was too quiet, eerily silent and cautious. Clyde dropped her off in her bedroom and then realized that the inside of the house just felt painfully overwhelming. He had to do something. It felt like an apocalypse, like maybe the next thing would be zombies.

Clyde set up the couch in the attic with blankets and piles of pillows and settled Luke in the middle. He looked really tiny in there, eyes wide like an owl. And the house seemed to be too big. Clyde could feel panic starting to rise up in his chest, but he had Mr. Smith play *The Empire Strikes Back* and hugged Luke until he fell asleep.

Clyde took a big deep breath, pretending like he couldn't still smell Gordon all over the house, and then he got to work.

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While the house was sleeping, Clyde started cleaning. First, he noticed that the breakfast dishes weren't done, so he did those. And then he put the dishes away. After that, it was time to wipe down all of the counters, then the walls, and then he mopped the floor. He would've reorganized the pantry, but that was Gordon's spot, so he just left it alone.

He just wanted to clean. He vacuumed the downstairs, dusted and polished everything he could find. There was trash to take out, and books to reshelve and he kept busy for a few hours. And then he was walking up the stairs and saw a picture of Gordon just standing at him. Gordon, who wasn't actually a person. He took the picture down, because he just couldn't look at it any more. There were so many pictures of him, Clyde could barely breathe.

He got an empty cardboard box from the attic and started putting the pictures in there. Clyde wanted to do something dramatic, like light them on fire or throw them off of a cliff, but they were Sarah Jane's and so maybe she would want to save them. And then he went around the house, and he kept finding things that were Gordon's, things that didn't belong. He had boxes and boxes full of stuff, overflowing with trinkets and debris and the sight of all of it made him feel sick.

Clyde kept going until Maria called, and then he kind of broke into a few hundred pieces on the stairs. "Gordon was an alien, Maria," he gasped, trying to keep his throat open enough for words. "We were attacked by the jellyfish things at the museum this morning, and they got to Sarah Jane's ring and it opened a portal and they took Luke. And then I saw that Gordon was glowing, he was glowing blue and

he was so upset and they were going to kill Luke. So he took the human part off and he was blue and he didn't have a face and then he rescued Luke and got sucked into a portal. And he had stuck himself into our memories and gave us fake ones and once he left they started to break down in everybody but me and now they're so sick."

"Oh God, Clyde," Maria gasped. "Oh no. But how is that even, how can this be happening?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I knew there was something wrong. There was something wrong and I didn't do anything. I didn't think it was possible, I didn't want to. He was too perfect and I didn't let myself notice."

"Clyde, it's not your fault," Maria said. "There is no way that this is your fault."

Clyde started to cry, big sloppy tears and snot all down his face. "I don't know how to help Sarah Jane and Luke is just so confused and I don't know how to explain it and I just wish you were here. I don't know what to do."

"If I could be there, I would," Maria whispered, crying too. "I love you so much. I miss you so badly."

He sat there, a big slobbering mess, and just cried with Maria on the phone until he couldn't take the sitting any more. "Can you call Luke when he wakes up?"

"Of course," Maria said. "Of course I will. You text me when he wakes up and I'll call him."

"Thanks," Clyde said, and hung up. He felt drained and completely restless. Sarah Jane's stairs probably hadn't ever been dusted, and he knew exactly where the dust rag was.

Luke woke up when Clyde was in the middle of scrubbing the bathroom tiles, or maybe a little bit beforehand and just decided to be quiet and watch the Ewoks. His eyes were red and he was trembling. "I'm going to stay with you, Luke. I promise," Clyde gulped. "For as long as it takes, and I'll answer as many questions as you have. Or if you don't have any, we can just watch some movies or play some video games or whatever you want. We can be totally silent, too."

"Thank you," Luke said. His fingers were shaking, so Clyde handed Luke his half-finished advanced maths textbook and then texted Maria.

When he thought about what Luke was going through, the same Luke that didn't know what to do when Maria moved away, Clyde felt so angry that his hands shook. Luke, who had just gotten a father for the first time, a father that he adored, and it was all a lie and Gordon was a lie and just gone. He had lied to them, he had never existed. Clyde didn't think that he could deal with that, and he was quite emotionally mature for his age and used to father figures skipping out on him.

So Clyde made snacks. He made nachos and beans on toast and cinnamon rolls from a can, and they ate ice cream straight from the carton.

Sometime around midnight, Luke started shaking with tears. "Clyde, is it wrong that I miss him?"

"Of course not," Clyde answered, putting his arm around Luke's shoulder. He hoped it was comforting. "I miss him too."

"And is it alright that I'm grateful that he saved my life? Because I am, even though I don't want to be." Luke sniffled into his shirt.

Clyde was reminded of how it was when his dad left. All of the horrible bits, and the way he still loved his dad against his will. "No, Luke. People might say that it is, but it's not. You can still love somebody even when they were horrible to you. You can love them, and it doesn't mean that what they did was any less terrible."

"I don't know what I would do if I saw him," Luke said. "But I think I want to."

Clyde lay still for a minute, pondering. How many times had he imagined what he would say to his dad if he ever saw him again?"That's fine too. I want to talk to him, I want to know why. It's just a human thing."

"I don't know how I couldn't know." Luke walked over to Mr. Smith and turned *Galaxy Quest* back on.

"We couldn't know, Luke. He messed with our brains. It's not anybody's fault." Clyde's voice was completely steady.

Luke nodded and didn't talk after that. They didn't see Sarah Jane until the next day.

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Sarah Jane had made calls to Martha and to UNIT and probably 10 other covert organizations. Once Rani came over, her eyes looking horribly swollen, Sarah Jane sat them all down on the couch and said, "Officially, Gordon is dead. I've got a death certificate all prepared and all of the paperwork is in line. He was sucked into the portal behind us, we didn't see." Rani snuggled further into Luke, and Clyde nodded. He kept accidentally thinking that Gordon was about to walk in with a pile of sandwiches. "There won't be a funeral," Sarah Jane said, her voice shaking a little bit.

And then they made Sarah Jane's house into a fortress. Clyde called his mom, told her the news about Gordon, and got permission to stay over for as long as he wanted. Then, he watched the tea kettle and prepared tea all day long. Poured cups and cups of tea, and he broke out his most silly knock-knock and chicken jokes.

He set Rani and Luke on the couch with a pile of movies, *The Princess Bride* to start and *King Kong* after that. He called Chrissie and had her pick up groceries for them. He let Martha into the house, made her tea and sent her to Sarah Jane. He scared away the black SUVs that were congregating outside of Sarah Jane's lawn. Clyde was active. He scrubbed until his fingers hurt. He told jokes and poured tea and cooked bacon for breakfast.

Clyde was working very hard to be fine. After the call to Maria, he didn't cry once, holding it together through Rani's panic attack and the grief-stricken look that Sarah Jane had after she saw one of the wedding presents that Clyde had forgotten to put away.

And on the third day, Sarah Jane went downstairs. She had breakfast and hugged Luke and looked horribly sad in an entirely controlled way. Her hair looked perfect. And for some reason, Clyde couldn't look at her without the bottom of his stomach falling out.

When he went outside, it was a perfectly normal day. Not especially cloudy or rainy or sunny, just hideously normal.

The house was clean and all of Gordon's things were collected into boxes and stored in the guest room. He'd stopped Rani and Luke from watching *Finding Nemo*, and he did two loads of laundry and he was full of restless of energy.

And then just as the sun was setting, Sarah Jane pulled him aside. "Clyde," she said, her voice soft and concerned. "Maria just called to ask me if you had slept yet." He knew he'd forgotten something, accidentally on purpose. "And you haven't. Clyde, you need to go to bed. I will not have you make yourself sick."

Sarah Jane held him by the arm and guided him to the couch in the attic, settling him in all of the pillows. Clyde had a hard time breathing through his mouth, and he really didn't want to go to sleep. But she stayed with him until he had relaxed, keeping one hand resting on his head. "It's going to be alright, Clyde," she said. "Everything's going to be fine."

But it wasn't fine. There was no part of it that didn't completely suck, and after Sarah Jane had left, Clyde cried himself to sleep.

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He had dreamed that he was 13 again, and that he found his mom crying on the couch, and then that he just walked away. He walked into his bedroom and there was a blue shadow with snakes for hair. Gordon's voice said, "This is what happens with fathers," and then he exploded into a shower of traffic cones and jellyfish. Clyde didn't wake up screaming, but it was close.

Luke was next to him, talking to Maria. Luke's hair was all in disarray and his shirt was covered in powdered sugar. "Maria wants to talk to you," Luke said, smiling.

"Sorry about ratting you out," Maria said. Clyde watched Luke leave and shut the door behind him.

"No you're not," Clyde said. "But I get why you did it. My stamina is superhuman."

Maria giggled. "Your Clydey-sense is brilliant."

All of the words choked in Clyde's throat. "No, it's not. I should've known about Gordon for sure. I knew there was something wrong and I never ever suspected him. I didn't even bother to tell anybody about it."

"Clyde," Maria said, "That's not your fault. Nobody suspected him." He was a member of the team, though, and he hadn't pulled his weight.

"I should've said something," Clyde said, shame curling in his stomach. "But I should get some breakfast. I'll talk with you later." He felt bad about hanging up, but thinking about made him want to punch someone. He couldn't deal with how much he had failed Sarah Jane and Luke, how badly he'd failed to protect them.

Before he could leave and get back to cleaning, though, Sarah Jane came into the attic with that expression that she had that meant she wanted to talk. It was a really specific way that she held her eyebrows, and the soft way that she walked. Clyde wondered if she had been eating.

If he were in her position, he wouldn't be. Sarah Jane had her memories altered and twisted into loving a stranger that she'd never met, somebody that tailored himself to her specific preferences and knew all of her weaknesses and exploited them. He made himself perfect for her and into a lie, and he betrayed her and didn't treat her with any kind of respect as a person. And he might never come back or he could be there any day and the whole thing just made Clyde want to vomit.

"I'm so sorry," Clyde said. He couldn't keep his voice from trembling. "I knew that there was something wrong, I'd get headaches whenever he was around and my memories of him were all mucked up and I thought that maybe it was an alien conspiracy but I didn't tell you and I don't know why I didn't tell you."

Sarah Jane nodded and held his hand, but Clyde couldn't stop babbling. "And if I had told you maybe this wouldn't have happened and everything would be alright now. And I always mess things up, and I didn't mean to this time and I'm so sorry."

"You did not mess this up," Sarah Jane said. "None of this is your fault."

"I don't mean to do it," Clyde said, because he couldn't stop. "I mean, it's not like I'm known for making good decisions and I still don't know why you let me hang around Luke as much as you do."

"Stop right there," Sarah Jane growled, grabbing his face and turning it towards hers. "The first day that you came to my house I had Mr. Smith do a complete background check on you. I trust you with my son just like I trust you with to work with me investigating alien behavior. I do not pick unworthy people."

Clyde wanted to cry, but he couldn't seem to breathe. "I'm not really the useful one. I'm not the brains like Luke and I can't get things done perfectly like Maria and I'm not a journalist like Rani, I'm just the guy that tells jokes. And I try to do my best but-"

"You are not perfect all of the time. Just like every single other human being on this planet. And I seem to remember a time when your jokes saved Luke's life." Sarah Jane pulled him into a hug, squeezing him tightly. Sarah Jane had this way of hugging that was different than every other hug he'd ever had, because as soon as he was wrapped up in it, he knew that things were going to be better. "Everyone is hurting after this thing with Gordon," Sarah Jane said his name like the word itself was painful, "But we love you and we're not going to leave you, I promise."

Something opened up in his chest at that and Clyde found himself crying so hard that his nose hurt. It was some kind of release of tension and worry that was so intense that he felt lightheaded. And then he started to crave a burrito. And maybe he also wanted a peanut butter and banana sandwich to go with it. "After my dad left, I was horrible to my mom. She was all by herself and of course she was so upset and I didn't do anything but mope and get angry at her. She really needed me, but I didn't do a single thing. And I should have."

Sarah Jane just hugged him, she looked worn out and ragged. "You've been an unbelievable help," she said. "You're invaluable, Clyde." He didn't realize how much he had needed to hear her say that until she did.

And then all he could think to say was, "So how about a peanut butter and banana sandwich? I'm making..."

The day ended up sucking worse than a rotten pudding cup, but the morning was pretty great, all things considered.

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A week after the day at the museum, Clyde was ridiculously sick of hearing people say that things were going to be fine or that everything was going to be alright. Clyde couldn't even decide what to call the day that Gordon disappeared, it needed some kind of fancy and grandiose title to suggest a shift, and he just couldn't find it. And random people off of the street that gossiped about "that weird old bat, Sarah Jane" were coming up to her on the sidewalk and offering her hugs and condolences for a person that they didn't know.

And the worst part was that there was no way to explain that when it came to Gordon's "death", there was nothing remotely fine about it. Not even a speck of anything that wasn't horrible.

Luke didn't know how to deal with the anger. One day after spending hours and hours at the library, one of the librarians turned to Luke and said, "I'm so sorry about your father. Hopefully it will be alright soon."

Luke had turned to him and said, "Clyde I need to get out of here." And when they were on the benches outside, Luke had turned to him and said, "Clyde, I'm so angry that I want to punch something. I can't even deal with it, I just want to punch something really hard."

Well, Clyde was a bit surprised and that threw him off his game a bit. "Yeah, that tends to happen with us guys," he explained.

"Clyde, what can I punch?"

Clyde looked around, but he couldn't see anything punch-worthy and there weren't any pillows around. Luke was looking frantic and kind of scared. "Um, you can hit me!" Luke looked really confused. "We're mates. I won't take it as a signal that we need to fight or anything. If you need to get your anger out, you can use me."

"I will not punch you, Clyde," Luke said, looking horribly scandalized. "You are my best friend. I cannot punch my best friend."

They'd had to run as fast as they could back to Clyde's house, where Luke pulverized Clyde's lumpy pillow. Luke hadn't gotten into fights, and he hadn't hurt anybody else, and he wasn't really acting out at all, so that was a point in his favor.

He started having talks with Sarah Jane, too, almost every day. A few days after the fake wake, he'd walked into the attic to find her looking through an old photo album and placing a few pictures into an unmarked folder for the Gordon boxes. But they were pictures from back in her UNIT days, so Clyde got a bit confused. She didn't look up at him when he came in.

Clyde didn't want to pry or anything, so he just sat next to her and looked at old black and white photos of uniformed men and lots of rock quarries. She didn't pull out very many pictures, just 3, placing them carefully into the envelope. Sarah Jane looked like she was about to cry.

"Gordon looks just like one of my dearest friends. I didn't notice the resemblance until yesterday, but I think that he analyzed my memories and found someone that I cared for and didn't expect to ever see again." Sarah Jane sounded so worn out, like she needed to be sleeping for days.

Anger settled like a sandbag in Clyde's chest, heavy enough to make breathing. "Sarah Jane, I don't even know how to express how wrong that is. It's a whole different universe of wrong, and it won't ever be acceptable. But I don't know what to do about it, how to make it bearable."

"Oh, Clyde," Sarah Jane said, putting the album back into her filing cabinet. "There's no way to make it bearable, you'll just find that one day you're able to do it."

"No epiphanies?"

She smiled. "Absolutely none."

"And it's not delivered on the wings of baby unicorns?"

Sarah Jane didn't even bother to answer that one, but at least he made her smile.

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Some time later, Clyde woke up to a completely ordinary day. There was laundry, dishes and ice cream with Rani and Luke. They had a *Ghostbusters* marathon and Clyde managed to covertly stick 4 pieces of popcorn in Rani's hair. As he was walking back to Luke's house, Clyde remembered the time that Gordon had tripped in the driveway and accidentally spilled an entire pitcher of lemonade down his shirt. After that, Clyde was still fine. His day was not wrecked or altered in any meaningful way.

Clyde would've congratulated himself for it, but he got a call from Sarah Jane saying there was a spaceship that had just crash landed in the middle of Cornwall, and then he was just too busy to dwell.