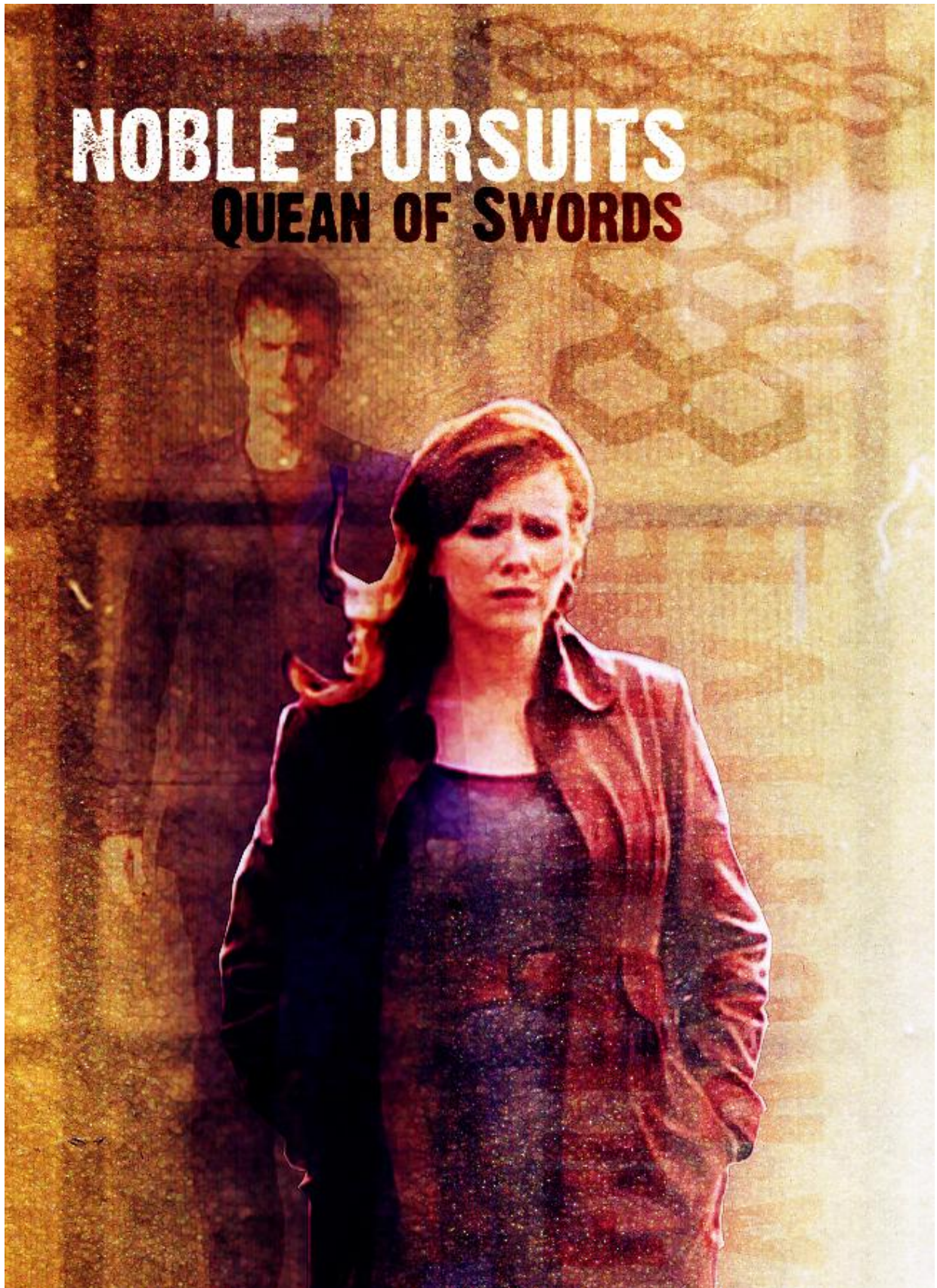


NOBLE PURSUITS

QUEAN OF SWORDS



Visit the TARDIS Big Bang website (<http://tardisbigbang.com>) to see the art full-sized and to leave feedback for the writer and artists.

Noble Pursuits

by quean_of_swords (queanofswords@gmail.com)

New Who, Torchwood | PG-13 | Action/Adventure, Drama, Romance, TenII/Rose | 52,000 words

In an alternate universe, alternate Donna Noble is a PA at H.C. Clements. Then, one day, her boss tries to feed her to his alien insect offspring. Lucky for her, she is rescued by Rose Tyler of the Insanely Rich Tylers and a mysterious man who calls himself 'the Doctor'... two people who seem to be a bit more familiar with her than they should be. The Doctor, Rose, and the team at Torchwood Alpha (a.k.a. The Warehouse) have to stop an insidious alien invasion before they've even had a chance to settle into their new lives. Will Donna have to chose between helping them or protecting her ailing grandfather?

Betaed by: Human Tales and paintedpprglass

Warnings: some smoking, some swearing, suggestions of sexuality

Spoilers: Through "Journey's End", occasional very vague completely un-spoilery references to S5

Notes: Nothing, really, except expressing my excitement over participating in this awesome event, and incredible gratitude for the Mods, and the artists, and my betas/cheerleaders. Seriously, this is one of the best times I've had writing a fic, ever. ^_^

Art by Attempt_unique (creativescreenname@gmail.com)

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1.....	1
CHAPTER 2.....	14
CHAPTER 3.....	29
CHAPTER 4.....	39
CHAPTER 5.....	50
CHAPTER 6.....	60
CHAPTER 7.....	74
CHAPTER 8.....	87
CHAPTER 9.....	104
CHAPTER 10.....	123





It was Monday morning and the coffee pot in the break room was empty. The last hour and a half had been spent on the phone, shifting Mr. Holiday's appointment calendar, and arguing with people over conference room times. And now, the coffee was gone. There was tea, but Donna didn't want any bloody tea. She held the carafe and glared at the coffee-stained glass bottom.

What she wouldn't do for a smoke.

She put the carafe down and went out into the sea of cubicles. "Who finished the pot and didn't refill it?" she demanded. "Come on, who was it?"

"There's decaf," said a young, weedy man who was very new.

Donna turned on him. "Why, tell me, would I want *decaf*? Are you thick? Who drinks blinking *decaf*?"

The man opened his mouth, and then closed it. Oh, he wasn't going to last long.

Donna found the coffee bag; it was disappointingly light. There was less than a teaspoon of grounds left, not even enough for one cup. Maybe if she just chewed on it? She gagged silently at the thought and unconsciously reached in her pocket for the packet of fags that was not there.

She'd promised Gramps.

She left a large note on the empty coffee pot that said, "Woe betide the bastard who lets this happen again."

Unsatisfied and twitchy, Donna returned to her desk.

She sat in Mr. Holiday's office while he was on a conference call, taking notes in shorthand. Mr. Holiday shouted a lot, and when he shouted, he let fly bits of spittle and his face turned red all the way up to his retreating, sickly yellow hairline. Donna wondered why Mrs. Holiday didn't explain to her husband about men who bleached their hair. Then again, she'd met Mrs. Holiday at the company Christmas Party last year: Mrs. Holiday was platinum, permed, pushed-up, and powdered within an inch of her life. A trophy, Donna supposed, and a very expensive one.

At 11:15, Donna was outside, holding a cigarette that she'd begged off of Doreen. She hadn't lit it, but it felt good to hold it, even if it was *murder* seeing everyone else with his or her lovely fags and smelling the smoke and *almost* tasting it.

1:30: she was back at her desk after a small salad and a skim milk cappuccino. The phone wouldn't stop ringing, but at least that meant she was too busy to spend time feeling guilty for lighting the blinking fag. She'd enjoyed it. It had been better than sex-not that she'd been having any lately-but it was the last one. For real this time.

Four last ones later, Donna was getting ready to head home. She sprayed herself with vanilla and jasmine body spray and put two sticks of gum in her mouth. Then she wished that she'd taken the Tylenol for her headache first. She debated with herself over whether or not to take the gum out of her mouth and damn anyone who saw her or just try to keep the wad of spearmint in her cheek and lose half the flavour to water.

She was holding her gum delicately between finger and thumb when her phone rang. She threw away her empty paper cup and picked up the receiver.

"H.C. Clements, Mr. Holiday's office."

There was a strange buzzing noise, but no voice. Donna held the phone away from her face and stared at it.

"Hello?"

Still the buzz. Donna rolled her eyes and put her gum back in her mouth before hanging up.

The spearmint had been a mistake, she decided. Too sweet. She spit it into the bin and then she poked her head into Mr. Holiday's office.

"Anything you need before I go?" she asked.

Mr. Holiday's chair was turned towards the windows.

Donna stepped inside. "Mr. Holiday?" she ventured cautiously. He didn't like being interrupted when he worked.

It was a pretty good view out that window. You could see Big Ben if you went to the far edge of the room. If Donna had had a real office like this, she'd spend all her time looking out of the window.

"Mr. Holiday?" Donna noted the half-cup of tea-the same one she'd brought in at four o'clock. He hadn't finished the chocolate biscuits, either.

"Are you feeling all right?" She touched the corner of his chair and jumped when it spun to face her.

"What is it, Miss Noble?" Mr. Holiday snapped. His eyes were bloodshot and there was a patina of sweat on his rubbery face.

Donna forced a grimace into a girdle to make it a smile. "Just wanted to see if there was anything you needed before I went home, sir."

"No," he said shortly. "Nothing."

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?" she asked tentatively.

"Of course I am!" he shouted.

"Only it's freezing in here, and you're sweating like a—" She stopped short of saying pig. It was a bad idea to compare her boss to swine. That was how she'd lost the job at Vitex four years ago. "Like you have a fever," she said instead. "I can call Mrs. Holiday for you, if you like?"

Mr. Holiday got out of his chair and stood by the window. "How long have you worked for me, Donna?"

Oh *flipping* fantastic. It was going to be one of those conversations, was it? This was what she got for sticking her nose in. Had he asked her for anything? No. He hadn't.

"A little less than a year, sir," she said.

"Do you like your job?"

"Of course, sir," she said. How could she not love fetching photocopies and fighting with printers and wrestling with conference lines? But it paid the bills (mostly) and kept her and Gramps off the street.

Mr. Holiday turned and looked at her. She blinked a few times. Her eyes itched. He needed drops, or something.

She felt a cold shiver run down her spine when she caught the predatory glint in his eyes. When his gaze lingered too long on her throat, and then her chest, her hackles rose.

Oh no, he didn't. She wasn't in for any of that *quid pro quo* crap.

He took a halting step towards her. Donna backed away and put the desk in between them. She wished she hadn't left her purse out on her desk. She'd just bought a new can of pepper spray. Sometimes she couldn't get home before dark, and Chiswick wasn't exactly a nice area, was it?

"If you'd like to stay, have a chat..." Mr. Holiday said. His voice sounded strange, kind of buzzy, like he was on the other end of a bad line. "I'd love to get to know you better."

"No, thank you," she said, using her most polite telephone voice. "I've got to get home."

"Donna, Donna..." Mr. Holiday licked his lips. What a pervert! He rounded the desk. Donna went for the door, but his sweaty hand covered hers on the handle.

"Oi!" she shouted, glaring at him in an attempt to hide the sick terror that was rising up her gorge.

"This is harassment!"

Mr. Holiday's face broke into a slovenly grin. "Oh, Donna." His red eyes looked into her and she felt the blood drain from her face. He tsked. "Be nice!"

Donna raised her other hand and slapped him across the face as hard as she could.

When he turned his face back towards her, his eyes weren't just bloodshot anymore. The whites were completely red, like a blood vessel had burst. His pupils had grown so large as to crowd out his irises completely. He hummed, no *buzzed*, at her and then he opened his mouth.

When the long black proboscis where his tongue should have been snaked out of his mouth towards her neck, Donna screamed.

Someone pounded on the door.

"We know you're in there! Come out with your hands up!"

Donna yanked on the door handle with all her might, pulling it into the side of Mr. Holiday's head. He buzzed angrily and grabbed her by the hair.

"Stay back!" Holiday buzzed warningly. Donna tried to pry his chubby fingers open and to blink away the tears of pain from her eyes.

"Let her go!" said a man's voice, bristling with anger. "Right now."

"But I need food for my young! Growing family, you understand. She'll feed them for a week!"

"Oi!" Donna bellowed. "Are you calling me *fat*?"

"He said let her go." This voice was a woman's, and Cockney by the sound of it. Donna heard a click that sounded like a gun. She hoped it wasn't building security; they were rubbish. When someone had broken into the 4th floor offices last month and threatened to blow the place to kingdom come, they'd just sat around with their thumbs up their arses.

"Are you going to shoot me?" Holiday laughed. Donna tried to master herself and focus her eyes. She couldn't raise her head, so she could only see the ground, her hair, Holiday's shoes, a pair of burgundy Converse trainers, and some black leather women's boots that looked terribly expensive. Were they police? What kind of copper wore trainers?

Focusing on Holiday's shiny black shoes, she raised her foot and slammed her heel onto his toes as hard as she could.

Holiday swore and loosened his grip enough that Donna was able to pull away. Lucky thing she kept her head low, because she heard two shots ring out.

There was a wet thud and then silence.

Donna stood up straight and looked at the still form of Edwin Holiday. Well, it wasn't him, was it? She'd known plenty of insect-like men, but never quite so... literally.

"Nice shot, Rose," said the stranger. Donna looked at him. He was a skinny thing, with a beaky sort of nose and sideburns and hair that stuck straight up in the air. He was grinning like a maniac at a bottle-blonde woman with a wide mouth and dark eyebrows. She looked eerily familiar.

"Come out with your hands up?" the blonde wondered, incredulous.

"I've always wanted to say that," he replied with a grin.

"Oi," Donna breathed. "What just happened?"

"Insectoid biomorph," said the man, almost bubbling over with energy. "We've been tracking her for a few days now. Caught her bio-signal while we were..." He stopped talking and stared at her.

Donna looked back at him. "Insectoid what?" she repeated. "What are you on about? That was my boss!" She glanced at the body on the carpet. "And you *shot* him."

"Tranquillizer gun," said the blonde, holding up a handgun. "She'll be fine." She went over to Holiday and prodded his arm with her boot. "She'll have a headache, but no permanent damage done."

"She *was* going to eat you," the man said. He was still looking at her. Just her face, though, she noted. Good. She wasn't in the mood for any of that.

"He was not," Donna said.

"I'm afraid she was," he said. He had dark brown eyes that made the rest of his face look a bit more handsome. Not her type, though. Bones like his, she'd bruise her hips. And what was with the blue suit and burgundy trainers? Was he blind, or something?

"Why do you keep saying 'she'?" Donna demanded. "He's a ma- Well, he's not a she, at any rate!"

"Biomorphs can change their shape, within reason," said the man. "Helps them get into nests to find suitable prey." He was still looking at her.

"Oi, do you mind?" she snapped.

He blinked. "Mind what?"

"*Stop staring at me.*"

He looked away, and affected nonchalance. He took a deep breath through his nose and grinned at the blonde as she stooped over Mr. Holiday.

"Well, now that that's done with," he said. "I say we call in the cleanup crew and go back to our dinner."

The blonde stood straight. She had better fashion sense than her partner, at least. Donna wasn't entirely sure about the dark indigo colour of the leather jacket, but the style was very hip. And those boots were to die for.

"Everyone's already out on call," the blonde said wearily.

He looked put out. "Oh, *no*."

"We can put her in the back seat of the SUV."

"We're going to miss the film," he complained.

"Yes, we are. There'll be another show."

Donna looked between them. "I'm sorry," she cried, "am I the only person who cares that a man turned into a bug and was going to eat me?"

The woman looked at her with the smallest of smiles. "We're used to it," she said apologetically. She extended a hand. "M' name's Rose. Rose Tyler."

Donna gaped. "Oh. My. God." She shook the woman's hand vigorously. "You're Rose Tyler? Your dad owns this company!" Rose looked down at their hands and Donna stopped shaking and let go. "Right. Sorry. Still. Oh my God! You're practically a celebrity!"

Rose's smile waned. "Yeah, right. Thanks, I think."

"Who are you, then?" Donna asked the man.

"I'm the Doctor," he said. He shook her hand more enthusiastically than she'd shaken Rose's.

"Doctor who?"

He looked nonplussed. "Er... Just the Doctor."

He's mad, this one. "Donna Noble," she said.

His smile widened again. "Yes," he said happily. "Yes, you are. Brilliant!"

A little while later, Donna was sitting at the table in the break room with her coat on. Miss Tyler had said they'd get her a car home, but there was some delay because they had to run some kind of test. The man who wouldn't give his proper name and Miss Tyler were joined by a couple of people in black leather jackets. From the looks of it Miss Tyler was definitely the one in charge. The Doctor seemed to be more of a scientist than a secret agent. That was what they had to be, after all. Like most people, Donna had heard the rumours of an underground organization that dealt with weird things like aliens and such. (Though it was mostly on the Net.) The bioform-morph-thing had to be an alien. Had to be.

A young man in a well-tailored black suit brought her a cup of coffee from an upscale shop and said, in a lilting Welsh accent, that he was her ride.

He had a tight little smile and a pleasant demeanour. Donna pegged him for a butler or something, except she caught a glimpse of the gun on his hip when he reached over to open the car door for her.

He had a wired headset hooked into his phone; dreadfully old-fashioned, but it made Donna feel safer. She didn't understand people who could still wear wireless earpods and the like.

She wondered if he'd lost anyone that day.

Donna poked her head between the front seats. "What's your name?"

"Ianto Jones," he replied, lips twitching a tiny smile.

"Donna Noble," she said.

"Yes, I know. Donna Noble of Chiswick, daughter of Geoff and Sylvia Noble."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "How do you know that?"

He met her eyes briefly through the rear-view mirror, and then looked back at the road. "Cybus Industries, 2007."

She nodded and said nothing. He had lost someone, then. If he seen those names on the list... There was only one reason anyone looked at those lists. She looked out the tinted car window in silence for the rest of the drive. He wasn't chatty, thank heavens.

Mr. Jones opened the car door for her and insisted on walking her all the way up to her front door.

"I'm fine," she insisted. She held up her pepper spray. "See? Always prepared."

"Very good, ma'am," he said, but he kept in step with her all the way just the same. She unlocked the door and stepped inside.

"Do you want some tea?" she asked him from the threshold, even though she was still holding the nearly empty coffee he'd brought her. "I always put a kettle on for Gramps."

"No thank you, ma'am," Mr. Jones said, inclining his head.

"Well, you take care, then. Thanks for the lift." He nodded curtly and went back to the sleek black car. Donna watched through the little window in the door until he drove off.

"Donna? S'that you, sweetheart?" Gramps came into the little hall. He was in his plaid dressing gown and fuzzy slippers.

"What did I tell you?" she cried. "You're not supposed to be up!"

"I heard voices! Was that a man?" He smiled hopefully at her. "Did you have a date?"

Donna took her grandfather gently but firmly by the arm and directed him back to his favourite chair in front of the telly. "No, Gramps," she said wearily.

"You should get out more," he said while she adjusted a pillow and placed it behind his back.

"And leave you alone? You and your wild parties, you'll burn the house down," she teased.

Gramps took her hand, stopping her from completing her tidying sweep of the room. "I mean it, Donna. You've got better things to do than takin' care of your ol' Gramps."

Donna's heart shuddered in her chest. She squeezed his hand. "No, I haven't," she said for the millionth time. "Now, you stay put, and I'll bring your tea and you can watch telly while I make supper." She kissed his forehead.

In the kitchen, she put on the kettle. She could hear the news from the next room. She half-listened to the glorified gossip about some charity event that was set for the weekend, and who was going to be there, and some piece about the latest Net craze before taking Gramps his tea.

She cut her thumb while she was doing the potatoes. It wasn't deep, but it hurt like hell, and she was unable to stop the tears. She rinsed the cut and put a plaster on it. While the food was in the oven, she snuck outside with her last hidden pack of cigarettes and smoked three of them, one after the other.

It had been six years since Cybus Industries had tried to destroy them all. She was okay now, she was. And she didn't mind taking care of Gramps. After all, he'd taken care of her all her life. But in the last few months, his health had been getting worse, and it was all she could do to keep that smile on, even for him.

That wasn't what was bothering her, she realised as she pulled a fourth fag from the packet. (Only two left now. Maybe she should just finish them off.)

If she felt like she was going to crawl out of her skin, it was because of Mr. Holiday. Had that creature been him the whole time? Or was he in Spain, and the biomorph thing had just decided to pose as him while the real Mr. Holiday was away? And what were Miss Tyler and that Doctor bloke going to do with the biomorph thing? If they were going to kill it, they would have done it already. Right?

Donna lit the fifth fag and wondered if she still had a job. She wished that she could talk to Gramps about it. She used to tell him every stupid thing that happened at work. Especially the stupid things. But this was different. This was big, she could feel it. She couldn't lay something like this on him.

She looked guiltily at the last cigarette in the packet. She'd promised him she'd quit, and here she was, sneaking around like a teenager. She could remember the first time she'd smoked. She'd hated it, hated the taste, the smell... But the second one hadn't been so bad, the third was better, and by the time she'd finished the fourth, she'd wondered why she'd never tried them before. Not far from there to wondering how she'd gotten by without them.

She soaked the last fag in a glass of water and then tossed it down the garbage disposal.

Every morning, Donna listened to Etta James. She usually skipped "At Last" because she didn't need to hear romantic drivel first thing in the morning. What she needed was something with attitude and sass and energy. Something sexy and bluesy. She had whole playlists of old jazz songs, collected and arranged to help her wake up and keep her alert on the drive to the office.

However, her car was still where she'd parked it yesterday morning. Muttering to herself about parking tickets, Donna pulled an old pair of headphones from the clutter drawer in her bedside table and fixed her iPod to her lapel. (It was old and it only held ten gigabytes, but it was the only thing she had that still took wired earphones.) Etta James didn't energize her the way she normally did-though perhaps it was because she'd gotten only three hours of sleep. Caffeine that late in the evening, plus the spidery nightmares, them crawling on her back and over her shoulders... She switched to Peggy Lee. That helped a little bit.

She was about ten, fifteen minutes late to work. It wasn't until she sat at her desk and looked over at the open door to Mr. Holiday's office that she realised that it probably didn't matter. She could have stayed home.

What good would that do? she asked herself. Besides, the computer at home was almost five years old and she didn't have access to the H.C. Clements database there.

She started her search with Edwin Holiday. There wasn't anything on the news feed, neither disappearance nor death. There was a tiny article in the gossip column about Mrs. Holiday's annual feline leukaemia drive, which Donna could not resist reading. She'd never much liked cats, but it was a pleasant surprise to find out that Mrs. Holiday cared about something. She felt a pang of guilt. The Holidays had a son at university. What was going to be done if Mr. Holiday was really dead? Who was going to tell his wife and son? Did the police know? *Was* he dead?

She turned her search to Rose Tyler. She found the first articles that related the tale of Pete Tyler, Vitex millionaire, and the miracle reunion with his wife, Jackie, thought to have died in the Cybus Industries "incident" of 2007.

Then there was the added miracle of Rose-the daughter that the Tylers had long thought lost, stolen as a baby (which Donna found rather melodramatic), and found by happy accident by the Torchwood Institute. Despite the fact that it was widely known that the Tylers had no children, genetic testing had proven Rose to be, without doubt, the daughter of the millionaire and his wife. Under the harsh spotlight of the sudden media attention, the Tylers had said they'd never made the sad story of their lost child public for the sake of privacy. Rose had been born before Mr. Tyler had made his fortune. Twenty-seventh of April, 1987. That made her twenty-six years old.

At the time of the 'miracle', Donna had thought it was all very romantic and wonderful. Everyone had, especially given that Jackie had been thought to have been killed by the Cybermen. It had given people hope and more than a few of them renewed searches for lost loved ones.

Donna had ended up hating the false hope of it all. Of course the Tylers were lucky. They were rich. Tyler had worked for Lumic, the madman, so Lumic had spared his wife. No one else was going to get that kind of treatment.

Of course, there were the articles expounding upon the events before the recovery of Jackie in 2010. After losing his wife, Pete Tyler had shown a public about-face, denouncing Lumic, and donating piles of money in the effort to hunt down the remaining Cybermen. Which was good. Least he could do to make up for being a patsy to that devil was to lose a few million pounds.

Donna searched for people called "the Doctor." She got millions of hits; not one of them relevant. She tried "the Doctor" and "alien" and still nothing.

As it stood, Donna saw two real options: sit on her arse and wait for something to happen, or alternatively, she could do some proper sleuthing.

She did not feel like waiting. So, sleuth it was, then. She'd always liked Poirot and Miss Marple and Campion and all that. Time to work ze leetle grey cells.

She started with Vitex, Cybus and H.C. Clements. They all had Pete Tyler in common, and thus Rose Tyler. If she could figure out who Rose worked for (or at least whose payroll she'd been slipped into), then she'd have a clue where to start looking for more information on what had been done with Mr. Holiday. Or rather, the bug-thing. Biomorph. Whatever.

Lunch hour sprang upon her in the form of Elouise from Accounts.

"Donna?"

Elouise was a thin, pinch-faced creature with over-processed tawny hair. She was habitually dressed in one of five pastel pantsuits with a matching scarf around her neck. And pearls. She always wore pearls. Today, her suit was pale spring green, and her pearls were in the form of a long double-strand half-hidden in the gossamer of her scarf.

She looked owlshly at Donna through pale green reading glasses.

"Yes?" Donna looked back at her computer screen. No Rose Tyler in H.C. Clements, either. Damn.

"I need to see Mr. Holiday," Elouise said.

Donna looked up again. "He's not in," she said carefully.

Elouise blinked at her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," she replied, "that he is currently elsewhere."

"Is he out to lunch?"

Donna eyed the thin woman with irritation. Elouise was not known as a time-waster. This was the woman who had told off the entire Accounting department for talking in non-designated break areas.

"He's in a meeting," Donna said. Personal assistants' code for, 'he's bugged off.'

"Until when?"

"All day," she answered shortly. "And probably tomorrow. What's this about, anyway?"

"I'd prefer to speak directly to Mr. Holiday," Elouise said primly.

Donna forced herself not to say what she was thinking, since it was uncalled for and made a lot of reference to a nature programme she'd seen a few weeks ago about termites feeding their young. Larvae. Whatever.

"Yes, well, if you tell me the gist of it, I can relate it to him and we'll see what happens."

Elouise hesitated. Donna watched in fascination as the pastel woman looked around her as if she thought they were being spied upon. She enjoyed a short, hilarious fantasy about Elouise Morris, Secret Agent, in pale pink and pearls and a big pair of shades, speaking in a faux Russian accent.

"I found something in my office," Elouise whispered.

"What sort of something?" Donna demanded. If it was somebody's mouldy lunch...

"I would rather discuss it with Mr. Holiday," Elouise sniffed.

"Look," Donna snapped, losing what little patience she possessed. "He's not here. He's not likely to *be* here for the foreseeable future. So, why don't you just tell me what stupid little note somebody stuck to your computer or the name of the prat who put tacks on your chair, and I'll see it sorted, all right?"

Elouise's grey eyes went wide and her lip trembled for a moment. Inside her head, Donna was kicking herself. It was bad enough that people laughed at Elouise behind her back. Letting on that she knew about it was just stupid and mean.

The accountant drew herself up to her full height and said, "I want him to talk to the building manager. There's an infestation in Accounting."

How can you tell with all the accountants? Donna thought nastily.

"We put down mouse traps," she said.

"Not mice," Elouise hissed. She glanced over her shoulder again. Then, in a stage whisper, "Insects."

Suddenly, Donna was all ears. "Show me," she commanded.

Accounting was on the 17th floor. Everyone else was at lunch, so the offices were empty. Elouise led Donna to the very last cubicle on the right.

"Where did you see them?" Donna asked. "What sort of bug was it?"

"It was an insect," Elouise said. "It looked like a big mosquito. I told Mr. Holiday that there was lasting damage from the pipe that burst last summer." She shuddered. "There's probably a pool of water in the walls breeding all sorts of unimaginable things."

Donna thought this unlikely, but she did not say so.

"How big was it?"

"At least two centimetres!"

"It's probably flown away by now," she said.

"It didn't have wings," Elouise said.

Donna frowned. "A mosquito without wings? Since wh-?"

Elouise's mouth opened for a soundless scream. Donna turned and saw a big, many-legged thing sitting on top of a keyboard. The only resemblance it had to a mosquito was a long black proboscis. The rest of it was more like if an insect tried to be a puppy. Too many legs (more than six, *not* an insect) held up a round black body a few inches off of the desk. It was covered in millions of brush-like bristles.

It turned red, segmented eyes on them. The eyes glittered under the fluorescent lights and Donna heard a noise that sounded something like a guinea pig's grunt.

Elouise found her voice and screamed like a 50s movie heroine. The bug buzzed and backed off the keyboard and into the cubicle wall behind it, stumbling as if it had been startled.

"Be quiet!" Donna told her. The bug's legs were trembling. For a surreal moment, Donna imagined that it was frightened. So was she, honestly, but Elouise was hiding behind her and screeching her head off, so the terror department was covered. Donna put out her arms out as a shield.

"Stop that noise, you silly cow!" she shouted.

"What is that thing?" the accountant cried shrilly in Donna's ear. "Oh, kill it! Kill it!"

The bug buzzed angrily.

It couldn't have understood that, could it?"

There wasn't time to think about it, because it jumped at them. Donna grabbed the nearest thing to hand—a telephone—and held the receiver up like a club. Elouise wailed and ran off, letting the door slam behind her.

The bug landed on Donna's arms. She yelled and tried to shake it off. It gripped her jumper with its hooked, crab-like feet. The buzzing was almost a roar in her ears. It jabbed at her neck with its barbed proboscis.

Letting out a noise that she (later) hoped sounded more like a battle cry and less like a girly squeal of revulsion, Donna took hold of the bug with her free hand and pulled it off. She threw it to the ground as hard as she could. Its legs beat pathetically against the air for a few moments, and then it rolled and righted itself and vibrated angrily.

Donna wished she had one of those tranquillizer guns. She picked the rest of the phone off the desk and hurled it at the bug. It sidestepped. The buzzing got louder. Donna's mouth fell open. There were two more of the bugs crawling on the desk. Where the hell were they coming from?

"Right."

Donna turned and ran. They were following her, she knew it. She got to the door and slammed it shut behind her. Something crunched and something else screeched. Wincing, she glanced down.

There was part of a black, spiny insectoid leg caught in the door. Donna's stomach turned. She yelped when another leg poked from under the door and caught her heel. She stomped and missed.

After she'd got a safer distance from the door, she pulled her mobile from her pocket and dialed security.

"Hello? This is Donna Noble."

"Who?"

"Donna. Noble. I'm Edwin Holiday's PA. Look, that's not important! I'm calling to tell you that we have an infestation in Accounts. The 17th floor. You have to close it off. Don't let anyone back in there."

"Building manager put down traps last week," said the guard irritably.

"Not mice!" Donna snapped. "Insects! Bloody huge insects the size of small dogs!"

There was a heavy sigh. "Pull the other one. It's got bells on."

"Are you trying to be *funny*?" she asked scornfully. "Because if you are, I want you to know, I can see you sacked, you useless lump! Close off floor 17!"

"Am I supposed to call the building manager?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to *sprain* something," Donna snapped. The legs were still flicking out under the edge of the door. She ended the call with a jab of her thumb.

The building manager was an idiot, she thought, and exterminators would probably turn and run with their tails between their legs if they saw these things. She needed to get someone better.

She needed Rose Tyler.



"Miss Tyler?"

She didn't look up from the computer screen, though she wasn't really working. She was thinking about chips. Not the ones they usually had from the place down the street that did the fish. Proper chips that actually had a bit of potato in them instead of being the thin shoestring things that were always over-done and dark. With all the money at their disposal, you'd think they'd be able to find decent, proper chips.

"Miss Tyler?"

Rose closed the file; she'd stopped actually working on it twenty minutes ago.

"How long have we known each other? I'm not answering until you address me properly," she said.

"Apologies." Ianto Jones stood behind her workstation still as a lamppost.

Rose looked at him. "Well?"

"Argus has raised a flag, ma'am."

Rose decided not to fight the name battle today. He'd learn to drop the formality eventually. Even if she had to employ a shock collar.

"What is it?"

Ianto inclined his head a bit. She took this as a cue to follow, so she did so.

Sometimes she wished people would just *say* what was happening instead of "you'd better come and see, ma'am"-ing her, but that was the price of leadership, she supposed.

Argus was the name of the Torchwood computer. It was mostly terrestrial technology, though the system had been amplified by alien tech over the years. (But that was Torchwood's motto: If It's Alien, It's Ours. Which was better than what it had been when Rose had arrived: For the Greater Good. That phrase had given her unpleasant, squirmy feelings.)

On top of the massive Torchwood Archive and all the government databases, Argus had complete access to all of the major data networks. Mobile phones, the Net, land line telephones, television, cable and satellite... Rose hated it in principle, but this world had different ideas on privacy when it came to electronic mediums.

What annoyed her the most about Argus was how bloody *good* it was. If she wanted to, she could find out what the King of Lithuania had had for breakfast, or how many fleas were on Paris Hilton's dog. If it was on the Net, in a text, or if someone had said it into a microphone, it was theirs.

Ianto touched the swirling blue screen and brought up a mobile tracker.

A loud woman's voice sounded through the office.

"Yes *that* Rose Tyler!"

"I cannot release a private citizen's information, ma'am. That would be a breach of-"

"It's a bloody emergency," the woman said, anger in her voice combining with derision. "I'm not just some nutter looking to rub elbows with toffs! I have a giant alien bug infestation in my office and- oh, *bloody* hell-!"

The voice cut off. Rose stared at the screen. "Is that it?" she cried. That was Donna. That was a voice you didn't forget.

"The call ended there," Ianto said. He brought up a map. "The call was placed at the main H.C. Clements building by D-"

"Donna Noble," Rose finished. She tried to swallow the bundle of nervous queasiness creeping up her throat.

Ianto looked slightly put out. He hated being interrupted mid-flow, especially when he was giving information. He liked to show off.

"Yes," he said.

"How long ago was that?" she asked.

"Call was placed at a quarter after twelve," he replied, checking his fob watch. "Ten minutes."

"Where's the Doctor?"

"Last I saw him, the Doctor was in the Archives." Again, added Ianto's thin-lipped expression.

Rose wondered if it was even worth it to dig him out. The Doctor had spent most of the last three days down in the Archives. Dinner last night was *supposed* to have been a clever plan to get him *out*. And then the biomorph detector in his pocket had gone 'ding' and that had been the end of the evening.

She'd have to get him, though. Meeting this world's version of Donna had obviously affected him. He hadn't spoken much on the way back to the Tyler mansion last night, and in the morning he'd avoided the subject entirely and gone on about some article in the *Times* about experimental aeroplanes. He'd told Dad an anecdote about Kitty Hawk and the Wright Brothers from the other universe and given

several theories as to what the brothers of this world had gotten wrong. Some things would never change. Rose took comfort in that.

"I'll get him," she said. "Get the car ready. We're leaving in five minutes. Tranks and nets."

"Yes, ma'am."

The Doctor was sitting at the microfilm projector. Pages scrolled by at impossible speed. She'd never understood how he could take in everything, but she'd tested him long ago. Some things were just the same.

"Doctor?"

The projector ground to a halt. He turned and smiled at her. "Lunch already? I'm *starved*." He spun off the chair and bounced on his heels. "I'm craving chips. It's odd. I don't think I've ever had a craving."

She wanted to smile back, but couldn't quite manage it. "Ianto just picked up a call," she said. "It's the H.C. Clements building again."

His smile disappeared, replaced by that closed-off, cold expression that made her heart hurt. It was one of those familiar things, yeah, but still.

"We're going," he said.

"Right now," she agreed.

He nodded and they walked upstairs in silence. On the ground floor, the sound of the SUV's engines filled the empty warehouse. Ianto disengaged his headset as he put the tranquillizer case into the back.

The siren and flashing lights got them through the traffic quickly. Rose tried to think of the plan of action and not the Doctor sitting in the back seat with Ianto in dark silence.

Rose glanced at Lalit Mehra in the driver's seat. He was young-younger than her, even-with short black hair and a proud nose. He'd transferred to the Warehouse a couple of weeks before the final dimension cannon mission. She barely knew him, but she liked him based on those very few conversations they'd had between her trips. He'd grown up on the Powell Estate. He liked pop music and when he wasn't wearing black for Torchwood, he found nothing more comfortable than a hoodie and a handful of chips. Details like that, similarities and commonalities, had always made Rose feel a little bit better about being in this world. In the three years she'd been here, they'd given her something to latch onto.

But Lalit driving and the Doctor in the back seat in silence felt so... wrong. Some things were completely different. Rose tried not to think about it. She would later, when she could do something about it.

They gained access to the H.C. Clements complex with one word. It was easy to find out which floor the disturbance was on.

lanto stayed behind to deal with the building manager and security. Rose, Lalit and the Doctor headed up to the 17th floor. Rose loaded the tranqs into her handgun while Lalit pulled out the nets.

"I don't know how much room we've got in the cells," he said.

"We'll deal with it," Rose said, clicking the last cartridge into place. She cocked the gun and looked at the Doctor. He was watching her with one eyebrow rising. She flashed him a smile and bit down on the thrill in her stomach when he winked back at her.

The lift doors opened onto 17. Rose took point. Lalit held a net with both hands.

"Tell me it's the little ones," he said hopefully.

"If they've been eating, they'll grow fast," the Doctor said. He had the biomorph detector out. It was dinging insistently. He hesitated, looking at the little silver box with the dish spinning and grinding on top. He adjusted something and grimaced.

"Just as long as Mum's really out of the way," Lalit said.

"Mum's in the holding cells," Rose said. "Keep your eyes open for any humans. Security said they cleared the floor. If the biomorphs have grown enough, they'll be able to change."

"I hate the Bug People," Lalit grumbled.

"Insectoid biomorphs," the Doctor corrected, making a face at the young man.

Lalit shrugged. "Whatever."

"This way," the Doctor said, nodding to their right. He went through the door first, holding the dish in front of him like a dousing rod.

They had to run to keep up with him. Rose tried to remember that they were working, that this wasn't some romp on an alien world; they were in London.

But then he looked back at her and he had that look on his face just like the one she remembered. Her smile was so wide that it hurt her face.

Something moved in her peripheral vision. She spun, holding the gun in both hands and aiming.

A black shape the size of an Alsatian leapt at her, knocking her onto the ground. The buzz filled her ears until they hurt. It aimed for her neck and jabbed savagely. She turned her head and hit it with the butt of her gun. The bug grazed her under the ear.

"Rose!" The Doctor's voice was thunderous.

Rose struck again, trying to knock the biomorph off of her. Its weight was crushing down on her chest, making it hard to breathe.

Something heavy and red swung overhead and the bug was suddenly gone. Rose gasped for breath and took the hand offered to her. Back on her feet again, she tried to focus her eyes. When she touched her neck, her fingers came away bloody.

"Rose, are you all right?" The Doctor touched her hand and looked at the blood. "Damn," he said vehemently.

She looked down and saw that he was holding what looked like a fire extinguisher. She squinted. She was pretty sure. He put it down.

"Lalit, did you bring the antidote?"

"There isn't much of it," Lalit said. He was holding her gun. When had she dropped it? Rose turned her head to see where the biomorph was. There was something dog-sized on the carpet.

"Give it here," the Doctor ordered. Lalit handed him a small vial. "Rose, here, drink this. Quickly."

Rose shook her head and tried to clear her vision by force of will. "No," she said. "'M all right. Jus' need a second to..." She wobbled and the Doctor caught her. He put the vial to her lips.

"Drink it," he said. His voice was gentle, but insistent. "Come on, Rose."

She tipped the vial back and swallowed the sour yellow antidote. After a few moments of coughing and gagging, her vision started to return to normal and she was able to stand up straight again.

The Doctor hugged her briefly. "That's better," he said.

"We're out of luck if they jab either of us, you know that, right?" Lalit said. "That was all the antidote we had left."

"We'll be fine," the Doctor said, not taking his eyes off of her.

She squeezed his arm reassuringly. "That's one done, then?" she said lightly.

The Doctor looked grimly at the fallen biomorph. "They've been eating."

"How many more are there?" Lalit asked.

The Doctor pulled his detector out of a pocket. "Judging by the mass of that one, calculating average rate of growth, taking into account a constant atmospheric temperature of about 72 degrees Fahrenheit..." He looked at the unconscious alien. "Too many."

Rose gave him a look. "Could you be a bit more specific?"

"Far too many," he said, *almost* smiling.

"I thought you were supposed to be a hot shot alien expert," Lalit complained.

"I am!" the Doctor cried brightly. "The hottest of shots!"

Lalit rolled his eyes and gave Rose a sidelong glance. "Brilliant."

The biomorph detector dinged again.

"Ah, there were go! Nets at the ready, Lalit! One's coming this way!"

Lalit handed Rose her gun. "Are you sure it's one?" Lalit asked the Doctor. "Maybe you're reading that thing wrong. Could be saying 'some'."

The Doctor grinned. "Just one. A *big* one."

"Yeah, well, thanks for the warning this time," Rose said mildly.

He winced.

The biomorph charged through a heavy door like a bull. Rose fired twice into it.

The Doctor dodged a swinging claw as the biomorph lashed out at them. "*Come* on!" he cried, daring it to strike again. Luckily, the tranquilizer was already working.

Lalit's net spread over the biomorph. It stumbled and collapsed onto the carpet.

The Doctor was flushed and still grinning. "Oh, that was too easy!" he cried.

"He's even bigger than the last one," Lalit grumbled. "You think two shots will keep it out long enough?"

Rose put one more dart into the biomorph's thorax. It had taken them a week to get a dart that would puncture their exoskeletons without causing too much damage. These were perfect. Small holes that could heal, but still doled out enough tranquilizer to floor them.

"That better?"

Lalit nodded. "Much."

"Two down, how many to go?" Rose turned to the Doctor. He was engrossed in the detector again.

"Doctor?"

"Oh no nono..."

"What's wrong?"

They heard a scream. Rose spun around, looking for another biomorph.

"Donna!" The Doctor was off like a shot.

"Who?" Lalit wondered.

Rose was already running. She shouted into her wrist comm. "Ianto! We could use some back up. Get Owen and Faye here. And tell them to bring more tranqs and antidote!"

"Yes, ma'am!" replied Ianto in her earpiece.

Rose caught up with the Doctor in the middle of a labyrinth of cubicles.

Donna Noble stood in an intersection, staring at them as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Oh my *God*," she cried, looking from the Doctor to Rose. "What the hell are these things?!"

"Are you all right?" the Doctor asked. "Did any of them bite you?"

Donna shook her head and came closer. "No, I'm fine. Thank you. I was afraid you'd never get here."

Rose lowered her gun. "How many have you seen?"

"Eight at least," Donna replied. She rubbed her eyes. "I was so scared."

The Doctor held back. "You're not Donna," he said, deliberately.

She stared at him, obviously taken aback. "What?"

"Doctor," Rose warned. "Of course that's Donna."

"No," he said vehemently. "It's not."

Rose edged closer to him. "Alternate universe, alternate Donna," she said gently, and low enough that Donna wouldn't be able to hear.

He shook his head in exasperation. "Yes, I know that," he said, as if she'd told him that water was wet. "But I *know* Donna, and even an alternate Donna would never have antennae."

Rose snapped her eyes back to the ginger woman standing before them.

Donna's face went from frightened to blank and something very small on either side of her head twitched.

"Oh. Good point." Rose raised the gun again. "What did you do with her?"

A dark rictus spread slowly across the biomorph-Donna's face, revealing black teeth. "She was delicious."

The Doctor wore his darkest glare. "Where is she?"

The biomorph tossed long red hair over its shoulder. "As if I'd give up the best meal I've ever had. We were all getting sick of accountants. She has fire in her blood."



Rose felt sick with guilt and rage. They should have triple checked the building last night. Quadruple checked. But she'd been distracted, worrying about the Doctor. She hadn't been thinking properly, and now Donna was in danger.

Her trigger finger itched, but she had to let the Doctor talk to it first.

"This is your only warning," the Doctor said. The biomorph didn't seem to realize the trouble it was in. It was still smiling at them. "Tell me where she is *now*."

Biomorph-Donna's smile crumbled into a pout. "Oh, what's the point?" it said petulantly. The pale freckled skin darkened into a shiny black carapace. "All the best bits will be gone soon anyway."

The Doctor was shaking. Rose watched him carefully.

Born in war, said the Doctor's voice in her mind. She might have to hold him back.

"Take us to her," she said, gesturing with her gun.

"Those aren't even real bullets," the biomorph said, still sounding like a spoiled child.

"No," Rose admitted. "But I bet they still *hurt*."

"*Fine*." The biomorph resumed its proper insectoid form. Donna's long ginger hair shortened into wiry black bristles and her blue eyes swelled up until they resembled the inside of a pomegranate. It walked on four of its twelve limbs and pointed towards a door with one long, spindly arm.

The Doctor charged for the door. The biomorph clicked in irritation. A tiny computer-generated voice in Rose's ear said, "You could at least say thank you."

Lalit held up a net. "You gonna come quietly, then, Buggy?"

Rose went after the Doctor.

They were in a storage closet. The air was thick with humidity and the nauseating smell of sickly sweet sweat and rot. She put a hand over her mouth and fought nausea. There were bodies—three of them, probably human—in varying states of decay littered around the room.

The real Donna was in a corner, lying on a metal shelf. She was pale and clutching a thermos like a precious doll. Her eyes were open but unfocused. The Doctor felt her neck for a pulse.

"Donna, can you hear me?"

There was a neat puncture wound near her clavicle. It wasn't bleeding much, but the biomorph venom thickened the blood to an almost jelly-like consistency if left long enough. Donna's head lolled to one side.

"She's still breathing! Donna! Donna, wake up!" The Doctor picked her off of the shelf. The Thermos clattered to the floor; the glass inside tinkled as it broke.

Rose spoke into her comm. "Ianto, is Owen here yet?"

"Just arrived, ma'am." Ianto sounded out of breath.

"Where are you? We've got wounded."

Owen's bored and bitter tones muttered in her ear. "Always a bleeding crisis, isn't it?"

"Hurry up!" Rose snapped. She opened the door so the Doctor could carry Donna out of the storage room. "Go on, get her safe," she said. "Lalit and I will take care of the rest of them."

The Doctor nodded and carried Donna's limp form away.

Of course, Rose thought when three more biomorphs appeared to block his way. She shot without hesitation, taking one out, missing the others. The smaller of the remaining two jumped straight into the air clung to the brackets that held up the drop ceiling. It crawled like a zealous spider and prepared to dive on the Doctor and Donna. He wouldn't be able to dodge in time.

Three green darts appeared on the biomorph's middle. It fell onto a desk with a crash, knocking out dividing walls and destroying a computer. The Doctor darted back, still holding the unconscious woman in his arms.

Rose shot at the third biomorph, hitting it twice in the thorax, once in what could have been called its neck. It stumbled and then tottered over, half-landing on an office chair and rolling comically to one side.

Owen and Lalit appeared at the edge of the cubicle. Lalit still had his gun out.

"Since when can they jump like that?" Owen demanded.

"Hurry!" the Doctor said, cutting off Owen's inevitable string of complaints. "Antidote!"

Owen Harper was a sad bastard most of the time, Rose thought, but he was a good doctor. He wasted no time in helping the Doctor get Donna laid out on the floor. Rose held her breath as she watched. *Don't let her die*, she thought. *Don't do that to him. Please.*

Owen checked her vitals and gave her an injection. The Doctor held tightly to Donna's hand and watched her. Rose tried not to be chilled by his silence. She wanted to kneel on the carpet next to him, to take his other hand and tell him it would be okay. Instead, she was frozen to the spot.

"Are there more?" Faye asked. Faye was brunette, small, and quick-she dealt with their tech, mostly.

Rose wondered where the Doctor's detector had got to. "Faye, you, Ianto and Lalit check the rest of the floor. Owen, how is she?"

"I need to take her back to the Warehouse." He glanced up at her, as if to ask permission.

"Do it."

The Doctor lifted Donna up again.

"Doctor." Rose stopped, not sure what she could say. Mostly, she just wanted to apologize. This was her fault.

His mouth hung open, like there was something that he wanted to say, too.

It could wait. She forced a smile. "Take care of her. I'll see you later, yeah?"

He nodded, and then he and Owen left.

Rose joined the rest of the team.

Donna woke up three times without actually waking up.

The first time, she was staring at a white-and-beige grid that was probably a ceiling. There was a pinching pain in her arm and something that might have been voices, but as heard underwater.

The second time, it was dark and her stomach was tight and heaving. She smelled vomit, but she couldn't tell if it was hers or someone else's. She was freezing cold and her arms wouldn't move. Someone was holding her shoulders and her hair and murmuring softly.

The third time she was blind. Everything was bright white and painful. She was still cold. The skin of her back was pressed against flat metal. She might have screamed. She was scared, but the scream wasn't for that as much as an experiment to see if she could. She heard it through her skull, like her ears were plugged with rubber stoppers. Someone-maybe several people-held her down. She wanted to move, to get out of the bright lights. She wanted to go home. She wanted Gramps and Mum and Dad, but nobody listened to her.

The fourth time she opened her eyes, she was lying on a hospital bed, wrapped in a pink hospital gown. She felt hung over and her arms were heavy. She could wiggle her toes, though it took her a frighteningly long few seconds to remember how. From there, she quickly relearned how to swallow and rub her eyes. There was an empty cup on a little table on the left hand side of the bed, and a plastic pitcher full of water. She found she wasn't strong enough to lift the pitcher with one hand.

Donna had seen plenty of hospital rooms in the last few months, ever since Gramps' heart had started its inconsiderate games. This room was not located in any hospital she was familiar with. It didn't smell right. The walls were too white. The monitor on the other side of her bed wasn't wired up to anything but the wall. Watching a line spike and rest in concert with her own uneasy heartbeat, she realised that it was hooked up to her. She found a two-inch white circular patch like a plaster stuck to her chest. There was probably some kind of microchip in it.

Why didn't the hospital have things like that? Gramps had been wired up like some kind of stereo to boxes and monitors that all made god-awful sounds.

She looked at the monitor again. Her name was at the bottom (NOBLE, DONNA) and there was another line showing something she couldn't identify at first. She found another two stickers on her temples. Why were they looking at her brain?

Who were *they* anyway?

The last thing she could reliably remember was hitting one of the bugs with someone's half-empty coffee thermos and then a pain in her neck followed by a floaty feeling and the vague thought that she should bring her own coffee from now on.

A man came into the room. He had short dark hair, a cold, bored expression and he wore a white lab coat over a dark t-shirt and denim jeans. He looked at her without saying hello and crossed the room to the monitor where he stopped and wrote something on a clipboard.

"Where am I?" Donna asked. "Who are you? Is this a hospital?"

"Not gonna tell you, Dr. Owen Harper, and no." He looked over the clipboard at her. "Anything else?"

Donna swallowed. There weren't any windows.

"Why won't you tell me where I am?"

He crossed a 't' with a ruthless stroke. "Because it's a secret," he said snidely.

"Why is it a secret?" Donna snapped, voice rising. "Why is that machine looking at my brain? How long have I been here? *How do I know that's your real name?!*"

Dr. Harper stared at her a moment, trying to decide between sarcasm and incredulity.

"Owen!" someone shouted. A young Indian man burst into the room. Donna clutched at the neck of her hospital gown. There was blood on the man's shirt. "We need you!"

Dr. Harper left the clipboard on top of the monitor and ran after him.

There were a lot of worried voices shouting. Donna assumed someone was hurt. Was it more of the bugs? She felt a big gauze bandage on her collarbone. One of them had bitten her. Had it sucked her blood, then? Oh, that was *disgusting*.

The commotion outside went on. Dr. Harper was barking clichéd medical orders.

Donna looked at the abandoned clipboard on top of the monitor. She might be able to reach it, but she'd have to get out of bed to do it.

She moved carefully. Her legs worked, even if they were shaky. She planted her feet on the cold white floor. It was some sort of secret government facility, it had to be. She touched the edge of the clipboard and lost her balance. She caught herself on the edge of the monitor. It tried to roll away.

"No, you don't," she told it under her breath. She picked up the clipboard and scanned it quickly.

There was a cry of rage or frustration—a man's voice, probably Harper's—followed by a string of curses.

Donna put the clipboard down and sat back on the bed.

"This is your fault!" Dr. Harper shouted.

"Leave her alone," another man said angrily. He sounded a little bit familiar. There had been someone with her in the dark.

"Shut the fuck up!" Harper raged. "How long have you been here, a week? She's supposed to be the fucking leader, it's her fucking responsibility! You'd better get it under control, little girl!"

"That's enough," said the other man.

A woman's voice said, "No, he's right." There was more but the voices were quieter now, so Donna couldn't hear what they were saying. She was desperately curious to know what was going on.

Of course, she was much more curious as to why "plasmapheresis" was written on her chart. The word was familiar. She knew what plasma was, but what on Earth was 'pheresis'?

There were people in the hallway. She could just make out the echo of their murmured conversation if she strained her ears and held her breath.

"...Not your fault," said the familiar male voice.

"I've got calls to make."

"Rose..."

"Yeah. You should check on Donna."

Donna snuck a silent breath.

"Rose."

A woman's footsteps faded. Donna sat very still and listened for anyone was walking towards her room. She considered pretending to be asleep, but who could have slept through all that racket?

At length, a man appeared in the doorway. Donna turned her head to look. It was the tall, skinny bloke who'd called himself "Doctor." He was wearing the same rumpled blue suit he'd been wearing last night. He had a nine o'clock shadow and dark circles hunkering under glum eyes.

He smiled at her. "Hello," he said with well-acted cheer. "Feeling better?"

Donna wasn't sure how to answer that. "Where am I?" she asked. "And who are you?"

"We met yesterday," he said with an 'aren't I charming?' smile. She suspected that he was used to people taking him at his word. He didn't *look* like a liar, but liars rarely had the decency to be easily identified by sight.

"Yes, I know," she said. "You called yourself 'Doctor'."

"The Doctor," he corrected her.

"Your first name is 'The'?" she asked sharply.

"Er... no."

"Next thing, you'll be telling me your name is John Smith." She narrowed her eyes and he looked sheepish. "I know your game. Secret bases, weird monsters. You're like the *X-Files*, right?" She hesitated a fraction of a second. "Or are you some technology firm? A competitor? Those bugs are part of some scheme to replace people in the securities industry?" She drew herself up as best she could for someone sitting in a hospital bed. "You some sort of Lumic wannabe?"

The Doctor's mouth hung open for a moment. "Who the hell do you think you are?" he demanded hotly. "We saved your life!"

Donna would not be put off. "How did those things get in H.C. Clements, then?"

"They're aliens!" he said, biting the words and spitting them out. "One of their ships stopped here for a nice meal. *We* are collecting them and sending them on their way!"

"What about Mr. Holiday?" she cried. "Where is he, then?"

The man's angry expression cracked like an old concrete wall, only to be replaced by a harder, colder one. "He's dead."

Donna's heart sank. "How long ago?" she asked. *How long was I getting coffee for an alien monster?*

"They found his body three days ago."

"Who's 'they'?"

He laughed bitterly. "Torchwood," he said. "It's always Torchwood."

Donna frowned. "The Torchwood Institute?" she cried. "The Health and Safety committee?"

"Not a bad cover story, eh?" he said, sniffing and glancing at the monitor. His eyebrow arched. "Your heart rate's elevated."

"Do you *think*?" Donna shouted. "My boss is dead, his bug-replacement and its super-fast-growing spawn tried to *eat me*, and now I'm talking to a skinny git in two-day old trousers who tells me that Health and Safety is really the Extra-Terrestrial Immigration Police!"

He was grinning at her. *Mental*. Absolutely barmy.

"I want to go home," she said. "What time is it?"

"Ten after midnight," he said, still smiling like a buffoon.

"What are you smiling about?" she snarled. "Midnight?! I have to get home!"

"You can't leave," he said.

"Like hell, I can't!" Donna threw her legs over the side of the bed. "You're not stopping me!" She stood, wobbled, and fell back onto the bed. Before she even registered that he'd moved, he was beside her. One bony hand was on her shoulder to steady her.

"No, I mean you're still weak. Owen had to perform a complete plasmapheresis to get the toxins out of your system. Even so, you're not going to be on your feet again for a day or so."

"What's plasmapheresis?" It sounded like a bloody monkey, she thought.

"A sort of dialysis."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "They washed my *blood*?"

He seemed surprised. "Yes. Well... the plasma was fine. The toxins actually attach themselves to the erythrocytes and..." He trailed off, seeing her glare. "You don't know what I'm talking about."

"I know *exactly* what you're talking about," she said. "I've seen thousands of hours of documentaries and flashy medical dramas. I just don't care about your technical mumbo-jumbo. I want to go home. *Now*."

"You need to rest," he protested.

"I have to go home," she said again. "And you're not gonna stop me, sunshine!"

"It's all right! Donna!" He put up his hands. "Your house will keep for..." He blinked as if something had just dawned on him. Suddenly quiet, he said, "Your grandfather's at home, isn't he?"

Donna remembered the man who'd brought her home. He'd known about Mum and Dad. These Torchwood people probably knew all about Gramps living with her. There was probably a secret file on every citizen of the Republic in the Torchwood computer.

"I'm not leaving him alone," she said firmly. "He needs me. He's probably out of his mind worrying about me! If he has another attack-" She shut her mouth, unwilling to give voice to her worst fear. He was alone, all alone, she wasn't there. She couldn't leave him alone.

The Doctor put up his hands in supplication. "Donna, listen to me. I'll send someone. Right now. All right?"

Donna tried to master her trembling.

He looked her in the eye. She stared at him, taken aback by his intensity. He held her shoulders in a vise-like grip. She almost believed that he really gave a damn.

"I won't let anything happen to him. I promise."

She was helpless to do anything but nod.

He stood straight and ran a hand back through his hair, making it stand straight up. He needed a hairbrush, desperately. The heavily gelled, spiked look was so three years ago. He also needed a shower. He smelled as if he'd been wearing the suit more than just two days.

He glanced at the monitor again, then went over to the other side of the bed. Donna watched him pour a glass of water. He handed it to her awkwardly, thrusting it forward like a little boy with a peace-offering. She took the cup from his hand. When she drained it, he poured her another.

He was almost out the door when Donna found her voice again.

"Thank you."

The Doctor turned his head and nodded slightly before leaving her alone.

Donna sat in thoughtful silence for a while, wondering why he wouldn't tell her his name. Could she trust him to see that Gramps was taken care of for the night? Who would he send?

At least this Doctor No Name was a human being, she told herself. She very much doubted that Dr. Harper would have even offered to send anyone at all.



As the Doctor marched down the hall, he passed the room where Owen was working. There was paperwork when an agent died.

It was strange. Death wasn't new, but the Doctor had never had to fill out any forms for it, even back in the days when he'd been on UNIT's retainer. The thought of a life being reduced to a stack of dead, dried, pulped pieces of tree was one of those things he'd never wanted to understand about humanity.

He found Ianto carrying a tray with tea and biscuits.

"Miss Tyler is in her office," Ianto said, reading the Doctor like a billboard advertisement. The Doctor rubbed the back of his neck.

"Those for her?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't call me 'sir', Ianto," the Doctor said, wincing. "*Please.*" He hesitated. "Can I ask you for a favour?"

"Of course." Only Ianto Jones could say 'sir' so loudly without actually saying it.

"Donna's grandfather needs looking after. Would you-?" He considered. He could go himself. There was nothing to stop him. The Donna in him was raring to.

"I've taken the liberty..." Ianto began. The Doctor almost started; he hadn't meant to get so lost in the thought. "... Of calling Mr. Mott to alert him that Miss Noble was detained as part of the safety procedures following the quarantine on the H.C. Clements building as per the news story seen earlier yesterday afternoon."

Yesterday? Oh yes. After midnight. Ianto was precise about that sort of thing.

Gramps-Wilf-would have tried to come see Donna. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him that she would be under strict supervision and quarantine for three days," Ianto said. "Just to give us leeway if we need to keep her that long."

"Right." Donna had been determined not to leave her grandfather alone. A voice inside him was practically jumping and shouting in agreement. "Just the same. Do you think you could...?"

You shouldn't be pawning it off, said the voice. *He's your responsibility.*

No, he told himself firmly. *I am not Donna! And besides, alternate universe, alternate Wilf.*

What does that matter? Blood is blood.

"I was planning on checking in on him first thing in the morning," Ianto said. "If you like I could go now."

The Doctor sagged in relief. "That would be brilliant." He paused. "Though, it's late, he'll be asleep..."

"I doubt that, sir." He didn't even flinch under the Doctor's glare. Which was good, because the Doctor hadn't meant to glare like that. "Mr. Mott has called the hotline provided by the news every half hour since three p.m. I'm expecting another call from him in..." He checked his fob watch. "Eleven minutes."

He ought to be in bed! said the inner Donna voice.

The Doctor nodded. "Donna's worried about him," he murmured. The biscuits on Ianto's tray were calling to him. He hadn't realised how hungry he was. He swallowed and thought guiltily of Rose.

"I'll take those up to her," he said.

Ianto hesitated a moment before handing over the tray. "Yes, sir. Shall I report to you on Mr. Mott's status?"

"What?" he asked, stricken. "Oh. No... that's... Follow your best judgement. Or whatever."

Ianto gave him a curt little nod and went to get his coat.

The Doctor balanced the tray on one hand and snatched a biscuit with the other.

Rose's office was down at the end of a long corridor. Most of the Warehouse base was subterranean which increased the "secret base" feel. The Torchwood offices at Canary Wharf (both Canary Wharfs) were all white, glass, and silver. Other than the medical section, this base was all gunmetal and multicoloured lights. The Doctor wasn't particularly fond of either colour scheme.

The door was closed, but both it and the wall were glass, so he could see Rose sitting at the desk. Her arm blocked a view of her face, but she was obviously on the telephone. Her shoulders were slumped and her fingers were tangled into her hair like she was getting ready to tear it out.

The Doctor hesitated. He held his knuckles an inch from the glass and, in two seconds, flashed through fifty or so times he'd knocked on her door before.

Her rooms on the TARDIS, at the Powell Estate, a few instances on various planets were they'd been temporarily sequestered. He'd rarely hesitated then. If he had wanted to see her, to talk to her, he had knocked. (Sometimes he hadn't even waited for her to answer.) Maybe once he'd held back-on Krop Tor. But that had been different.

Maybe it was the glass. Seeing the inside of the room meant he could see how upset she was. Maybe she didn't want to see him. Why should she?

He was just about to turn away when he heard plastic slam against plastic. Rose cursed loudly. She looked and saw him. He waved. Her lips made an abortive attempt at a smile.

He opened the door and took the tray to her desk.

"Brought you some tea," he said. "And biscuits." He glanced down. There were only two left. "I ate a few of them, I'm afraid."

She smirked and took the tea. "Thanks. That's sweet of you."

"Ianto's idea," he admitted. "Can't really take credit."

"Ianto's a smart man," Rose said. She looked at the biscuits. "You can finish them. I'm not really hungry."

"You haven't eaten since this morning," he said. Even so, it'd only been a pastry and coffee. When had she started to drink coffee? It was probably Ianto's doing. The man seemed a bit obsessed with it.

"Neither have you." She rubbed her eyes. She looked like she'd been crying. His insides knotted. "How's Donna?"

"Better. Worried about her grandfather. I sent Ianto to keep an eye on him."

Rose's expression was a mix of surprise and... pleasure? Annoyance? "You sent Ianto?"

"Well..." The Doctor tugged his ear. "Wilf's been calling every half hour demanding to know about Donna, and his health's been a bit off of late, so I thought... I shouldn't be giving your people orders. Sorry."

"No!" Rose cried. "That's fine! I don't mind!" She shook her head. He watched her fingers as they combed through her hair. Suddenly, he wished very much that it was his hand. She picked up her tea and sipped at it. He watched her lips and her hands, her throat, her shoulders, her... And he stopped himself, because there were more important things right now.

The inner Donna voice was silent, but still made its smug opinion known.

"I'm sorry," he said. "So sorry."

Rose looked at him questioningly.

"About..." He gestured vaguely at the papers spread between them on the desk and swallowed. He didn't remember the woman's name. A flush broke out over his cheeks. (Damn human body.)

"Faye Martin," Rose said. She stared into space. "President Jones always insists on calling the families of agents personally. I should, too. I just... I barely knew her. She only transferred here last month."

"You should get some sleep. And food." Calling the family. Another nightmare of the aftermath he'd usually been spared. He didn't like the idea of Rose doing it.

"Yeah." She picked up the receiver. "I'll meet you in the main office in a little bit."

He nodded, though most of him railed. He was dismissed?

She was staring at a piece of paper and dialling.

"I'll be waiting," he said.

Rose nodded, but she wasn't looking at him.

He couldn't find Ianto's biscuit stash. Reaching into a high cabinet over the coffee maker, he caught a whiff of his underarm. Oh dear. He tried to think of the last time he'd showered, but it was somewhere in the mists alongside the last time he'd slept. Well, no. More recently than that.

He *was* tired, or at least his arms were when he raised them to pick up the glass cylinder of tea bags. Telling Rose she needed to rest was all well and good. She'd always liked to sleep. He did not. But this body was weak and it tired easily. Humans ran too hot. Hot blood, pumped by a single heart doing the work that could better be done by two. They needed near constant feeding. (That wasn't too bad, at least. This incarnation loved to eat.)

He sat at Owen's workstation.

He had to stop thinking like that. Regenerations, two hearts, respiratory bypass... That was gone. This was it. This was all he was going to get.

It wouldn't have been so bad, if not for the loneliness. He had lost the Time Lords long ago, lost that connection, their quiet gravity in the back of his mind. But even after, he'd had the TARDIS.

He had assumed that humans didn't feel this way. Their lack of psychic capabilities made them blind to the agony of that kind of loss. Lucky devils, he'd thought.

But being human (plus the Time Lord brain, thank each and every possible deity) was just as lonely. More so, even. He constantly wanted to touch people-especially Rose, mostly Rose-but even if he gave in and did so, it was different. The nerves in his hands didn't tell him the same things anymore.

And his palms got sweaty. Sweaty palms! Him!

Owen had a plastic dinosaur on his desk. It was a pteranodon: it was painted all the wrong colours, of course, but otherwise it wasn't a bad likeness. He held it in his right hand-the old hand, the original hand-and regretted that he'd never taken Donna to Eeeny 2. They'd had an excellent exhibition of extinct Earth animals-clones of course, but without the rubbish frog DNA.

Would have hated it anyway, said the Donna voice. We would have ended up running away from T-rexes to avoid being eaten.

"What are you doing?"

It was Owen. The Doctor jumped out of the chair. "Sitting. I was... sitting." He put the pteranodon back on the desk. "Sitting."

Owen claimed his chair and leaned back into it, spreading his legs in a wide 'I'm the dominant male' posture.

The Doctor crossed his arms, noticed that he'd done so, uncrossed them, and then leaned as nonchalantly as he could manage against Ianto's coffee counter. A small box of sugar packets hit the floor, scattering white paper envelopes everywhere.

As he debated whether or not to pick them up, Owen watched him; he wanted to see if he'd do it. So he shouldn't, right?

Wait a moment, why do I care? He picked them up, but it was because he didn't want to annoy Ianto (other than the 'sirs', he was very pleasant), not because he cared about any stupid male dominance games.

"How long are you going to hang about?" Owen asked.

"I'm waiting for Rose," he replied as he set the acrylic box back on the counter.

"I meant here." Owen jerked his head in the general direction of the entire room. "Torchwood. Just moonlighting or joining up? Or are you just hoping for a few office shags with the boss?"

The Doctor gave Owen a cold look. 'Hotshot alien expert' was how Pete had introduced him. That had been a week ago now. (Already? His time sense was getting slipshod. Damn damn *damn*.) Pete had made it clear that the Doctor was very welcome at Torchwood.

Torchwood made the Doctor uneasy in either universe. People who were certain in the knowledge that what they did was the best thing for the world were dangerous.

Are you kidding me? wondered the Donna voice in his head.

He ignored it.

"I don't know yet," he admitted. He put his hands in his trouser pockets and bounced on his feet. "Still getting my bearings."

Owen looked unimpressed. He spun around in his chair and started to work.

"Well, while you're hanging about, you might as well make yourself useful and fill out a report."

"What?"

The man picked a green file folder off of his desk and held it out to him. "We're a government agency, Doctor. We have paperwork. President Jones reads every bloody report about every bloody encounter." He pulled a pair of glasses from the front of his lab coat and settled them low on his nose.

All the better to look at me condescendingly with, the Doctor thought. Or was that Donna again? Damn. Sometimes it was hard to tell.

"Try and make yourself useful," Owen finished, smiling smugly.

The Doctor took the folder and opened to the top page.

"Oh, *come on!*" he cried.

Owen looked at him from under arched, possibly tweezed, eyebrows. "Is there a problem?"

The Doctor fumed. "This is the supplies manifest!"

The smug smile widened. "Somebody's got to do it."

Oh, let me do it, Spaceman. You're just hopeless.

The Doctor looked at the papers. Right. Donna was good with paperwork. He was part Donna. Easy-peasy.

With a flourish, the Doctor whipped a fountain pen from the depths of his breast pocket. He filled in lines, did sums and ticked boxes enough to satisfy any bureaucrat. It took him exactly thirty-four seconds to finish.

Lucky thing, too, because Rose appeared in the door just as he was flipping the folder closed. He gave Owen a grin, dropped the folder into his lap, and went over to Rose. He offered her his arm.

"All done, then?" he asked her.

"What was that about?" she asked, glancing at her second-in-command as he stared at the Doctor.

"Just doing some paperwork." He held his elbow a little closer to her. "I'm famished, how about you? Chips?"

"You?" Rose was in shock. "Paperwork? *You?*" Her voice echoed in the nearly empty warehouse.

The Doctor gave her a slow smile. "Well... It wasn't hard. Daily expenditures, supplies. Just sums, really."

"Why did...?" She decided not to worry about it. "Never mind."

He stopped them about five feet from the car and looked at her. "Rose..."

She pulled her hair behind her ear and bit back a sigh. "What?"

"I... I just thought..." He grimaced. "Never mind." He fixed his eyes on the ground. "Owen doesn't like me much, does he?"

Rose hesitated. "Owen doesn't like anybody," she said. The Doctor was wearing a strange expression. Was he embarrassed?

Two weeks later, you'd think she'd have started to get used to him. It hadn't taken this long to adjust after he'd regenerated in front of her. He didn't even *look* different. But he was, and he wasn't. He stood on the opposite side of the car from her, posture like the man she knew, but his expression was oddly uncertain.

"Does it bother you?" she asked him, genuinely surprised. "That's not like you." She immediately wished that she hadn't said that.

He winced. "No, it isn't. It's Donna." He sighed deeply. "It's not even that. She'd be the first to tell you she didn't give a damn whether someone liked her or not... but... welllll... *Inside*..." He rubbed his neck. "That's Donna for you. Other Donna. Though..." He paused thoughtfully. "I suspect this Donna's got quite a bit in common with her." He frowned at his own hand on the car door. "Has Owen ever shown interest in you?"

"What?" Rose fiddled with the car keys in her hand. "Owen?" She hesitated, and then decided to tell the truth. "Yeah, I s'pose so."

The Doctor's jaw went rigid.

Rose smiled, but only a little bit. "Owen just likes anyone with a pair of tits and a nice arse." Owen had hit on her a bit, but she'd ignored him and he'd stopped. Faye, however, had seemed to like the attention.

"I thought you said he didn't like anybody?" the Doctor reminded her, one eyebrow rising slowly.

"You know what I mean," she said. "Can we get in the car now? I just want to go home."

"No chips?" he said, disappointed.

"No one around here does 'em right," she said with a sigh. "I bet I could get the cook to make some up. 'Cept we'd have to wake her up, so... no."

"We could find them," the Doctor cried, suddenly grinning. "Be a bit of an adventure! Finding the good chips!"

"I'm exhausted. And I don't mean to be rude, Doctor, but I think you could do with a bit of a shower."

He winced. "That bad?"

She nodded apologetically. "Fraid so."

"Why is Owen the second-in-command?"

Rose hit the button to unlock the car. "Because he's got seniority." She pulled the driver's side door open and got in. "What did he say to you?"

The Doctor shrugged. "Nothing. I was just curious."

The drive back to the Tyler Mansion took one short detour to a small fish place. Rose purchased enough fish and chips to feed a small army (or at least one ravenous human and a Time Lord-human meta-crisis).

The Doctor started eating in the car and fed her chips while she drove. ("You concentrate on the road! I've got this under control!") They were lucky that they didn't cause any accidents. Her driving suffered from the Doctor's occasional bad aim and protracted bouts of laughter. By the time she stopped the car in the drive and they got out, both their hands were greasy and covered in salt. Rose felt good for the first time since they'd come back from Norway.

This wasn't so bad. This felt right. This was how it was supposed to be.

They took the remaining chips to the kitchen so they could sit down and stuff themselves.

Mum and Dad were sitting up with tea and talking in low voices when Rose and the Doctor came in, ineffectively stifling their laughter.

"Where have you two been?" Mum cried, glaring at them over her cup. Rose noticed a new shade of nail polish on her mother's hands.

"You got your nails done!" she said brightly, in hopes that she could keep Mum from talking about whatever it was she wanted to talk about. Whatever it was, Rose did not want to talk about it. "Looks nice!"

"Don't you start," Mum warned, narrowing her eyes. She was in her dressing gown, and her hair was down. She'd had her roots touched up, too. "Where have you been? I've been worried sick!"

"We got chips," the Doctor said, holding up the bag as evidence. "There's enough, if you want some. Hello, Pete."

Dad nodded slightly. "Jackie, it's all right." He squeezed her hand. "Why don't you go check on Tony?"

Mum stood and took the bag from the Doctor's hands. "You do know that it's after two in the morning?" she said, accusingly.

"Yep," the Doctor said, smiling at her.

She reached into the bag and picked out a pair of chips and bit them in half. Then, she shoved the bag back into the Doctor's chest and left him holding it with a bemused expression on his face.

Rose looked at the man who had become her father. He glanced at the Doctor, and then turned back to her.

"Long day?" he asked.

"Yeah," Rose said simply. The Doctor put the bag on the table and looked between them. He seemed to be aware of the discomfort of the room. That was new.

"I'll just..." He glanced at her, waiting for a cue, or just hoping for a way out.

"You were wanting that shower," she offered.

"Right. Shower. Good." He ruffled his hair and then pulled his hand away and gave it a mildly horrified look.

Rose half-smiled at him as he left the kitchen and the chips behind.

"You should have called me," Pete Tyler said firmly.

"I did," she said. She gave him a defiant look. "Not my fault if you didn't pick up."

"This is serious."

"Don't you dare," she snapped, jabbing a finger at him. "Don't you *dare* lecture me like I'm some little kid."

His blue eyes widened. "I wasn't going to lecture you, Rose," he said, gently. "I just meant..."

Rose sank into a chair and put her head on her arms, but only for a moment. She looked up at him again, determined not to cry again, but starting to fail. "There were too many of them," she said. "Just when we found the main nest and had it cordoned off, a dozen more showed up to ambush us."

"It wasn't your fault, sweetheart," he said gently. "Nobody blames you."

"Yes, they do," she said. Owen did.

"Did I tell you about the first time I lost someone under my command?"

Rose wiped her eyes and sniffed. Suddenly, there was a tissue in front of her. She took it. "No," she said.

"We were in Paris, me and the Preachers. Thanks to Jake and Mickey, we'd picked up a few more recruits. We'd found the Cyberman factory. They'd already started..." He trailed off. "Anyway... We didn't all make it."

She couldn't think of anything to say, so she reached out and took his hand.

He squeezed her fingers gently and moved his hand to emphasize his words. "It wasn't my fault they died. Did everything I could. But I felt responsible anyway, because they were with me, and I didn't manage to save them."

Rose glared in the general direction of the chip bag. Faye Martin's death was on her, no matter what anyone said. She should have told them to fall back, but there'd been so many bugs, and they had to keep them from overrunning the building, the streets, *London*.

"You don't have to do this," he said after a long silence.

She looked up at him. "What?"

"You don't have to go back," he said. He looked tired and sympathetic. Rose felt a rush of affection towards him, even as she writhed at the idea of just... packing it in. "You've earned a proper rest, all you've been through this last year."

Her head was shaking before she could even think to make it do so. "No," she said. "I don't want rest. I need to *do* something." Besides, if she ran away after this, she'd be proving Owen right. She could *do this*, no matter what he thought. Just because she was young, that didn't mean she didn't know what she was about. She'd been saving the world since she was nineteen. Not that Owen knew that, precisely. The last thing she wanted to do was sit around on her arse. The Doctor wouldn't want her to just give up.

Which Doctor? The one who abandoned you here, or the one he left for you to baby-sit?

Rose rubbed her eyes. She was so very tired, and she had to be back first thing in the morning. Thank God Ianto always had coffee ready.

"I'm going to go to bed," she said giving his hand a final squeeze before letting go.

He nodded. "Good night, sweetheart."

Upstairs, Rose found herself outside the Doctor's rooms. She could just make out the sound of a shower running, and his voice singing something that sounded suspiciously like a pop ballad. She played with the idea of going in and surprising him, but she suspected that it wouldn't turn out anything like she was imagining.

Not that that was keeping her from imagining. She let go of the door handle and went the rest of the way down the hall to her own suite.

chapter four

Donna felt much better when she woke the next day. The little clock on the heart monitor said two p.m. Had she really slept that long?

A dapper man with a professional smile brought her a tray.

"Thought you might be hungry," he said cheerfully. Donna found the button to bring the bed up.

"I know you," she said. "You drove me home the other night."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mr. Jones, was it?"

He nodded. "I hope you like steak and kidney pie. Dr. Harper said you need an iron-rich diet for the next several weeks. A good excuse to eat red meat."

Donna dug into the food. Usually she wasn't much for broccoli, but she was ravenous.

Mr. Jones produced a familiar red bag.

"That's mine. Where did you get that?"

"I went round to check on Mr. Mott last night. He prepared these things for you. A couple changes of clothes, some reading material..." He pulled out the edge of a magazine to show her. "He also entreated me to inform you that he is well, and that he hopes you recover quickly."

Donna nodded thoughtfully. Mr. Jones put the bag neatly at the end of the bed.

"Did that doctor ask you to do that?"

Mr. Jones nodded almost imperceptibly. "He was quite adamant that your grandfather be taken care of for the night."

She stared at him. "You didn't stay all night, did you?"

"Your grandfather was kind enough to offer the use of the sofa."

Donna tried to shake off her embarrassment; the house wasn't clean enough for visitors.

"You didn't have to do that," she protested.

"It was no trouble. Mr. Mott is a charming gentleman." Mr. Jones smiled. "He demanded that I come back again to report on your health. He also invited me to supper."

Oh Lord, he's going to try to play matchmaker now, is he?

"Don't think you have to do as he says," she said. She drank the cranberry juice, even though she hated it. Probably gave it to her for the anti-oxidants or something. It did not go with the pie.

"When can I go home?" she asked.

"As soon as Dr. Harper sees you're properly on the mend." Mr. Jones took her water pitcher and went to refill it at the lavatory sink.

"Where is Dr. Harper, then?" She needed to use the loo. She was pretty sure she could make it on her own. She certainly hoped so.

"He'll be down directly."

"What about the other doctor?"

Mr. Jones poured a glass of water into a fresh cup. "The Doctor? He's working at the moment."

"Could you tell him I said thank you?"

He smiled politely. "Of course, ma'am. I would be happy to." And then he was gone.

Donna did manage the loo-turned out to be no problem at all, thank God-and then she finished her food and finished off the water pitcher.

She rummaged through the red tote and took out the newest magazine. Dr. Harper appeared without a word and checked her chart and the monitors. At last he asked her routine questions: how's your appetite, any bowel movement, headache, nausea, take a deep breath, one more, are you a smoker?

"Am I okay to go home?" she asked him as he made his notes.

"Tomorrow morning," he said without looking at her.

Donna glanced at the monitor. "What's wrong with me, then?"

"Nothing, now," he replied.

"So why can't I go?"

"Because I'm your physician," he said. He looked at her over that blinking clipboard. "And I said so."

"Can I get a second opinion?" she tried. "What about that other doctor?"

"He's not a medical doctor," Dr. Harper said with a cold sneer. "If you ask me, I doubt he's any kind of doctor."

"Well, what about Miss Tyler?"

Dr. Harper paused. "What about her?"

"I want to talk to her. You lot can't keep me here against my will. You said yourself, there's nothing wrong with me. So I want to talk to Miss Tyler."

Harper's thin lips pressed together. He left.

Donna waited with her magazine, but she wasn't really reading it.

Rose Tyler looked like she'd had a rough night, followed by a rougher day. Her make-up was more subdued than the last time Donna had seen her, and her hair hung thin and limp against her cheekbones. Her posture was informal and just a little bit hunched.

"Owen said you wanted to talk to me," she said in a hoarse voice.

Donna wondered why *she* was the one in the hospital gown.

"I'd like to go home now."

Miss Tyler's expression didn't betray much. "Did he say you were clear?"

"He says I'm fine." Donna felt like a little kid going to one parent for permission the other had already denied. "Miss Tyler... Look, I'm grateful for you saving me from the bugs and everything. But I have to go home. Send me the bill or whatever, but I can't stay here. I've got to start looking for a new job."

The other woman's face showed considerable surprise. "Call me Rose. And there is no bill."

Donna couldn't believe it. There was always a bill. "What?"

"There's no bill," Rose said again. Informal wasn't just because she was tired, then. In fact, standing here, sans the leather jacket and tranquillizer gun, Rose looked like a normal person. What kind of a secret agency was headed up by someone this young? "We've got the budget to pay for all this. We're not gonna charge you."

"Oh." Thrown, Donna needed a moment to regroup. "Good. I mean, thank you. That's very decent of you." She paused. "Can I ask you something?"

Rose nodded. Donna remembered something; it was fuzzy, but there was familiarity in the set of Rose's jaw, the thinness of her cheeks.

"Why do I have the feeling that we've met before? Before the other night, that is."

"'Cause we have." Rose pulled a bit of hair behind her ear and smiled. "We met when you interviewed at H.C. Clements."

"I knew it!" Donna cried. Then, more quietly, she said, "But you work for Torchwood."

Rose nodded.

"And Torchwood deals with aliens?"

The other woman smiled a little wider this time. "Among other things."

"Have you talked to Mrs. Holiday about her husband yet?"

Rose's entire face seemed to ice over. "Not yet. Who told you-?"

"That doctor who won't say his name."

"That *is* his name." She used clipped tones and took a defensive half-step backwards. There was something going on there, Donna thought.

She frowned. "What, 'Doctor'? His parents had high hopes, didn't they?"

Rose shrugged her shoulders and looked around the room once. "That's his name." She shifted on her feet and then pulled her shoulders back into business-mode. "The biomorph venom's nasty. You got a full dose, plus you lost a lot of blood. You almost died."

"I feel fine."

"It's for your own safety. Trust me, I get it. I'd hate being cooped up here, too. But I'll make sure Ianto looks in on your granddad again tonight."

That's a bribe, Donna thought. It made sense that Jones or the Doctor would have talked to Rose about it, being as she was the boss. However, these people were still strangers. Why did they care so much?

Mr. Jones-who did not ask her to call him Ianto-brought her food again around seven o'clock. No broccoli or cranberry juice this time. She picked at her liver and onions and then she read until the lights dimmed to night mode.

Donna changed into her own clothes. She had her socks on before she realised that she didn't have any shoes. No matter. She'd be quieter without them. She peeled off the chest monitor patch and the two patches on her temples. The monitor made a worrying flat-line noise. She hastily pressed the power button and it stopped.

Escape was unlikely-besides, she was holding them to the promise of tomorrow morning. But she could explore while she was here anyway. It was after nine. They'd have all gone home.

Even with her thick cotton socks, Donna could hear echoes in the stark white hallway. The brushing of the bottoms of her trouser legs was unnaturally loud. She decided that they were underground-no windows, and those looked like waste water pipes overhead. It felt like a subbasement. She turned left at the fork and followed the sound of beeping until she came to a massive room.

Her muttered "Blimey!" echoed against the concrete walls and the 'I' beams and rebar in the ceiling. There were four computer workstations. The technology was slick-much better than her computer at work, and that was only a few months old. She stopped by one of the computers and peered at it.

There wasn't a mouse. Curious, she touched the screen. The blue whirling screensaver disappeared, revealing a red desktop with a long honeycomb 'T'.

She poked a few applications, but everything was pass-code protected. Too bad. A place like this would have some kind of keystroke logging software. Donna looked up, expecting cameras. She couldn't see them, but she knew they'd be there somewhere. Damn.

Well, it wasn't as if she could damage anything.

She decided to see what else she could find. There was always a map of fire exits on the wall. This was a top-secret office, but it was still an office.

"There we go." Donna smiled to herself and went up to the white sheet on the wall by the doors with the green 'exit' lights.

After orienting herself, Donna turned on her heels and headed down a new corridor.

She did not expect to find a high-security door. Well no, she *did*, just not so soon.

There was a thumbprint scanner on the wall. Just out of curiosity, she tried it. The panel beeped loudly and turned red. Too bad. So she turned around and tried another hallway.

There were a lot of stairs. A number on the wall proclaimed it Subbasement Five. She went down a couple more flights and entered Subbasement Seven.

She followed the sound of click-and-rattle. Line after line of metal shelves stretched out before her, each filled with boxes of varying ages and materials. One label had the dates 1904-1905, and 'Personnel.' Her fingers itched to flip through folder, but she restrained herself.

The click and rattle became a quiet, steady whir. Donna realised it was a familiar sound. Just between two rows of shelves, there was a desk. A man sat with his back to her. The whirring stopped and she could hear muttering.

When he ran his hands through his hair, grumbling louder at persons unseen, Donna realised that it was the nameless Doctor. He'd taken off his suit jacket. The maroon t-shirt he wore was tight across his back as he leaned over his lap. She could see his spine and ribs. Did he not eat? Mr. Jones ought to have been bringing him dinner.

She ducked behind a shelf when he turned around.

"Someone there?"

Donna held her breath. When enough time had passed, she thought she'd sneak a peek.

The Doctor bumped into her. Startled, Donna cried out. He grabbed her arms to stop her running off.

"Donna? What are you doing down here?"

She tried to think of a cunning lie, but she was too busy wondering how she hadn't heard him coming.

"I was bored," she said, stepping away and affecting nonchalance. "There's no telly in my room."

He glanced at her feet. She wiggled her toes self-consciously. Why was he smiling like that?

"Well..." he said expansively. "Can't blame you. Haven't been watching much telly myself. Anything you're missing?"

She shrugged. "Just *Lost*."

"That's still on?"

Frowning, she asked, "What do you mean 'still'?"

He looked away. "Never mind. So..."

He crossed his arms over his chest, and then hurriedly uncrossed them. "Feeling better?"

"Much," she said. "I'm going home in the morning."

"Good. That's good."

"What are you doing down here? I thought everyone would have gone home by now."

He jerked his head towards the desk. "Going through the Archives. Got a lot to catch up on."

Donna tilted her head. After a long, incredulous moment, she asked, "Is that microfilm?"

"Yep."

Encouraged by the fact that he wasn't insisting she return to her room, Donna ventured over and took a closer look at the screen.

The current picture was a newspaper. She pushed her fringe out of her eyes. "You're reading the newspaper," she accused. She leaned forward and read the date. "From 1973?"

The Doctor tugged on one ear. Donna catalogued the movement: it could prove useful if she ever played him at Texas Hold 'Em.

"Thought it'd be interesting," he said. She would have bet money that that was some kind of a lie.

Donna looked at the headline.

Death of King Gustaf VI Adolf of Sweden - Accession of King Carl XVI Gustaf.

"What's that got to do with aliens?" she asked.

"Nothing, surprisingly," he replied. "I was just..."

She peered at him. "So, why won't you tell anybody your name?"

"I did tell you!" he cried. "The *Doctor*! It's not difficult to remember, is it?"

Donna threw back her shoulders. "Oi, don't you shout at me, skinny boy!"

His mouth shut with a snap. There was the ear tug again.

"Look, I don't..." He grimaced and sighed loudly. "I don't have any other name, okay? Satisfied?"

"You don't *have* one?"

He crossed his arms, uncrossed them, and then in a fervour, he bounded around the desk, ruffling his hair and scrunching up his face. Donna pushed papers aside and leaned on the desk and watched him with misguided fascination.

"No," he said. "No name. I had one, long time ago, but I... I lost it. I had to. I had to give it up, it was the only way I could..." He stopped moving abruptly and stared at the floor. "That doesn't matter. It wasn't me, not really. It was, but it wasn't. I-" He held his breath for a moment, and then he let it out in a rush and looked at her as if waiting for sentencing.

He *was* out of his mind, truly. Certifiable. Completely bonkers. But he looked so lost, she couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

And he'd been kind to get someone to look after Gramps for her.

I'm going to regret this.

Keeping her voice low, she said, "A long story, I'm guessing."

The Doctor's face crumpled for a moment, but he straightened himself and cleared his throat. "Yeah."

Men.

"You don't have to tell me," she said as gently as she could manage without sounding condescending. "I can call you Doctor, if it's easier. It's just odd, is all."

He gave her a watery smile. "Oh, Donna Noble," he breathed, almost reverent. "Always brilliant, you are."

She smiled and shrugged off the compliment. "Don't know about always," she said.

"No, you are!" he cried. He was bouncing about again, leaning on the desk right across from her and putting his face far too close. "Trust me. I know."

She stood up straight, reclaiming her personal space. "How do you know?" She narrowed her eyes. "Oi, have you been watching me, or something? Is that how you know about my granddad? Have you been stalking me?" She backed away, then, changing her mind, she surged forward and applied a forceful finger to the centre of his chest. He fell back and glared at her with growing indignance. Her finger hurt. "You and Torchwood! Tyler and Jones and you, you've all known more than you should... And then that bug thing kills my boss and up you show! Very bloody convenient!"

"No! Donna!" He held up his arms, shielding himself as if he thought she was going to smack him in the head. Not that she wasn't tempted. "It's not like that! I swear!"

"And why should I believe you?" she cried. "I don't even know who you people are! How do I know any of what you've said is true? How do I know I'm not your prisoner, or something?"

"Don't be stupid!" he shouted back. "What would we want to keep you prisoner for?"

"You captured that insect thing-"

"Biomorph. They're called the Zvazveraz."

"Don't interrupt me, sunshine! You captured that insect thing. Does it get a trial? How do I know you're seeing to its rights? How do I know that it was the thing that killed Mr. Holiday? For all I know it was you lot!"

"For all you know," he said, giving her a cross look that said, very loudly, that she was being thick. "This is all a bad dream and you're about to wake up."

Donna gaped at him. "*Oi*," she warned, unable to think of any other response.

"You want to know what's going on?" he said. "Do you really want to know? The truth? All of it?"

"Yes!"

Suddenly, the Doctor was calm. He gave her a smug little smile, snatched his jacket from the back of his chair, and grabbed her hand.

"Good. Come with me."

The Doctor led Donna to a lift and took them back to Subbasement Five. She watched very carefully as he put a wallet over the front of the hand scanner. It turned green and let them pass. Scanning an ID seemed far less secure than a hand scan.

The door was at the end of a very long corridor lined with Plexiglas.

They were prison cells. Donna swallowed and kept close to the Doctor, though part of her wondered why she was doing it. She didn't exactly trust him.

Each cell held one of the biomorphs. Alone in their jail cells, they were far less frightening. She half-expected to see holes poked in the plexi and a bit of grass and a twig for each one. Most of them sat and buzzed listlessly, though a few bounced their glittering heads against their prisons like flies against a window.

The Doctor stopped in front of the last cell. The biomorph inside was bigger than the others; it was probably the one who'd pretended to be Mr. Holiday.

"Donna meet Zzfstaz." The Doctor buzzed at the biomorph and the biomorph buzzed back. "She says hello," he told her.

"You can speak bug?"

Zzfstaz twitched her antennae violently.

The Doctor gave Donna a condescending look. "They don't like being called 'bugs', Donna. It's the equivalent of a racial slur."

She looked back at him and tried to decide whether to laugh at him or not. Not, since he looked so serious, but *really*.

"So are you going to translate?" she wondered. "How will I know if you're doing it right?"

Vexed, the Doctor rolled his eyes. "I speak Zvazveraz. I speak a lot of languages. Well... every language." There was a short exchange between him and the biomorph and then the biomorph began to change colour. The transformation from shiny black to blond and ruddy and clad in an expensive grey suit was rapid. Donna's mouth hung open as she found herself face to face with a red-eyed Edwin Holiday.

"I can understand you," he/she said irritably.

"That's not funny," Donna said. "That man you're imitating is dead. Show some respect, why don't you?"

Biomorph Holiday heaved a mighty sigh. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to look like you creatures?"

"You can change," the Doctor said coldly.

The biomorph screwed up his/her face and a moment later, the blond hair turned long and darker. She looked like a she now, at least. Donna didn't recognize this face, though something in the Doctor's eyes suggested that maybe he did. However, he made no protests.

"What do you want, anyway?" asked Zzfstaz.

The Doctor nodded at Donna. "This is her, Donna."

Donna looked at the dark-haired woman standing in the cell. She wore a very simple sheath dress, and she was tan-skinned. Her irises were still red.

"Did you kill him? Mr. Holiday, I mean."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Zzfstaz stared back at her. "I needed to eat."

"But he had a family!" Donna cried.

"So do I," the biomorph said coolly. She raised her arms to indicate the cells surrounding her. "That's a lot of responsibility. Family is very important to us."

"But you knew that this was a Level Five planet," the Doctor cut in, angrily. "You have no right to be here."

"Under whose law?" Zzfstaz asked. "I don't know anything about this Shadow Proclamation you keep citing."

"So you just killed him, then," Donna said.

Zzfstaz turned her eyes back to Donna. They glittered under the fluorescent lights. "He was alone. His blood called to me. You don't know how intoxicating you are. The smell of you, the heat." She crept closer to the glass. Donna backed away without thinking. The biomorph's irises expanded across her whole eye, deleting whites and black. "All that hot blood. So nutritious. So very good for a growing nymph. Better than anything on our world. Nothing so hot. And all that lovely iron." She smiled, revealing black teeth. "My children tell me you were quite delicious. I suspected as much when I smelled you."

"Stop it," Donna said. She crossed her arms and looked at the Doctor. "Are you just trying to scare me?"

"No," he said, brow creasing. "I'm showing you that everything that happened is real."

She shook her head. "Well, I've had enough."

He looked disappointed, but he nodded. They started to walk back down the long corridor to the door.

"You don't think that I came alone, do you?"

The Doctor spun around. The biomorph was leaning against the glass, arms over her head, and smiling at him, all inky teeth and ruby eyes. Her skin was getting darker by the moment; she was grey now. Donna fought nausea.

"How many of you?" the Doctor demanded.

"Dozens. Hundreds by now. Thousands soon. There are so many of you, enough to feed generations. You'll never find all of us, and even if you did, you'll never contain us."

Donna's mouth went dry. Zzfstaz let out a low drone and shifted back to her insect form. The Doctor took Donna by the arm and led her away.

"What are you going to do?" she asked him.

He didn't answer her. She pulled her arm back to her side. "They've got to be stopped, haven't they?"

The Doctor's expression was like steel. Donna glanced over her shoulder, back to the cells and felt a cold dread creep over her shoulder like a spider.

He took her back to her room and told her to get some rest. She'd be going home in the morning, and she needed to sleep, *et cetera*. Donna found that she did not believe the smile on his face; he couldn't *really* expect her to have pleasant dreams, not after what the alien had said about blood.

She spent most of the rest of the night thinking of Mr. Holiday's wife and son, but mercifully, when she did finally sleep, she didn't dream at all.



The next morning, Donna was awake at eight, packed and ready to go. Her mind raced with speculation and worry over the biomorphs, but she was faced with more immediate needs. She needed to go home and shower, for one thing. She hoped that Gramps was okay.

At eight-thirty, a well-pressed Mr. Jones appeared with a full breakfast in Styrofoam boxes. She ate the sausages and the eggs, and then asked him to drive her home.

"But my car's at H.C. Clements," she explained. "So, you could drop me off there."

"Dr. Harper usually gets here around nine," Mr. Jones said. "I can't let you go without his permission."

Donna picked at a tomato. So much for her diet. At least she hadn't had a cigarette for a couple of days.

Of course, the moment she realised this, a craving with the urgency of a charging rhinoceros hit her.

Mr. Jones left her a fresh copy of the *Times*. She didn't read the printed news-she had thought that no one did anymore-but she picked it up and read the headline. Nothing interesting: something about a MP's sex scandal, another about a large charity ball. She read a few articles anyway, just to kill time. At nine, she could hear the voices of Rose and Dr. Harper echoing in the corridor.

"My guess is it's a surprise inspection," said Dr. Harper with his usual semi-smug boredom.

Rose's voice was grey and tired. "President Jones doesn't do inspections personally, Owen."

"Maybe she's shutting us down, then," he said, suddenly almost cheerful. "I could do with a transfer. Maybe Barbados. Is there a Torchwood in Barbados?"

"You'd be bored," Rose said.

"Bored, but tan."

"Can you tan?"

Their footsteps moved away. Donna rolled her eyes and took off the monitor patches again. Enough waiting around. She slung her tote over her shoulder and found her way to that big central room.

Dr. Harper was at his computer. His whole posture was unconcerned. He didn't acknowledge her, even when she stood with her arms crossed and a carefully constructed look of disdain focused right on his heavily furrowed forehead.

"Donna? What are you doing up here?"

Donna turned and saw that Rose was hunching over a mug of what smelled like coffee—really *good* coffee—and looking at her as if she'd forgotten all about her. Well, that was fine, then.

"I'd like to go home now, please," Donna said briskly.

Harper looked up from his desk. "I wondered how long you were going to just stand there."

Donna ignored him. "I'm all ready to go. Check me out, or whatever it is you do. You're a doctor, aren't you?"

Rose took a sip from her mug and smiled at her. "Owen?" she prompted.

He smirked. "Whatever, boss." He picked what looked like a prescription pad off of his desk and scribbled something. "Get this from the chemist. Eat three square meals a day, no shakes or salads or rubbish fad diets. You seem like the type."

Donna glared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"Ianto'll take you home," Rose said.

"I'll do it."

The Doctor wasn't five feet away from her, but Donna jumped at his voice. How had she not noticed him there? He was clean shaven, except for the sideburns, which were neatly trimmed, but he was wearing the same blue suit and burgundy Chucks. It was possible, though, that he simply had multiples of the same suit. That was the sort of thing eccentrics did, wasn't it?

Rose did not seem pleased. "Are you sure?"

"Of course," the Doctor said with a wide, disarming smile for Rose and a wink for Donna. "What do you say?"

"That's fine," Donna replied. "But I want to get my car."

"*Allons-y!*"

"Stay out of trouble," Rose called after them. Donna noted the worried wrinkle over the younger woman's nose and the slight pout of her lips. There was definitely something going on there.

They were almost to H.C. Clements when Donna gave into her curiosity.

She asked, innocently, "So you and Miss Tyler, then?"

He hit the brakes slightly harder than necessary at the light. "What? Oh. Rose. Welllll..." He glanced in the mirrors. "Not exactly. It's complicated."

"How complicated?" she asked. "'Her dad is rich' complicated? 'You're old enough to have baby-sit her' complicated?"

The Doctor made a put-upon face. "Very complicated."

Donna knew that she was being nosy, but she couldn't help it. "You were on a date the other night, though, weren't you?"

The car started moving again and they'd gone more than a block before he responded. "We've been on dates," he admitted. "So to speak. We used to... we travelled together, Rose and me." He glanced at her. "A lot's happened since then." And then he was forbiddingly silent.

They arrived at the spot Donna had parked her car, only to find that it had a bouquet of tickets on the windscreen and a boot on one wheel. While she swore loudly and cursed the Council, the Doctor went through his pockets. It was several minutes later, after she'd read each brightly coloured paper aloud with increasing indignation, that she realised how many things he had laid out on the blue-painted roof of her car.

"Is that a Rubik's Cube?" she demanded. It had too many squares on each side, but there wasn't anything else it could be.

The Doctor glanced up. "Do you want it? I don't even know why I have it. S'pose I could give it to Tony."

Donna stared at the pile: there were rubber bands; a few coins of unfamiliar colours and shapes; a banana; a very small cactus wearing a tiny false moustache; something that, in life, could have been some kind of aquamarine squid but now was a brittle-looking thing, like a dried sea-star; a fountain pen; and a crumpled white paper bag, among other things.

"All that was in your *pockets*?"

"Why didn't I keep a spare?" he cried, glaring at the pile of objects. "I'm going to have to start from scratch. It's stones and bearskins all over again!"

"Spare what?" Donna asked.

"Doesn't matter." He frowned petulantly at the boot. "I'm afraid it's stuck for now."

Donna held up the tickets. "I certainly hope that Torchwood can take care of these."

The Doctor waved a hand dismissively. "Yes, yes."

"What is all that stuff?"

"Just stuff," he replied.

Something in the pile beeped. The Doctor moved the paper bag aside. "Ah hah!" he cried, triumphantly. "Looks like we've got a nibble!" He held up a little silver box with a mini satellite dish on it.

"What's that thing?"

"Biomorph detector!" He swung it around in an arc and made a circuit around the car. "Ooh, she's close!"

"Are they still in my building?" Donna asked. They weren't far away from there.

"No, H.C. Clements is clear," he said. He pointed down the street in the opposite direction of the office building. "That way! Come on, Donna!" He broke into a run, leaving her by the car.

Donna stared after him. "Wait a bleeding minute!" she cried. Thinking quickly, she swept the contents of the Doctor's pockets and the tickets into her tote bag. After a moment of struggling to find her car keys among the random objects and her dirty clothes, she threw everything into the backseat.

"Wait for me!" She slammed the door and ran down the street after him.

Harriet Jones, President of the People's Republic of Great Britain did not make a lot of visits to the Warehouse. She went to Canary Wharf all the time, but Torchwood Alpha was usually of little interest to her. At least Rose had thought so. She was not prepared for a surprise visit. This was the worst possible time. They were all exhausted from dealing with the Zvazveraz, and they were down an agent.

"That's why I'm here, Miss Tyler," Harriet Jones said, matter of fact. Her greying hair was swept back from her face, which was thinner and less kind than the face of the Harriet Jones Rose had met at Downing Street. "Quite simply put, I'm concerned about the effectiveness of this particular office."

Rose managed to close her mouth. She'd liked the other Harriet Jones better.

President Jones's expression softened a tiny bit. "Your service to this country, this planet, and this universe are not unappreciated Miss Tyler. Rose." She surveyed the office and let out a little sigh. "In fact that is one reason I'm doing this. You deserve a rest."

"You're firing me?" Rose heard herself say.

"Not at all!" President Jones looked scandalized. "In fact, I very much insist you stay on. Torchwood needs agents like you. But the circumstances under which you took command of this base... To be very frank, circumstances have changed. Besides, it was never meant to be permanent."

So, I'm good enough when I'm spending every second of every day working on the cannon, but now the stars are back, and everything's back to normal, so it's back to the trenches.

What she said aloud was, "Dr. Harper will be taking over, then?"

"No." President Jones hesitated. "No, I don't think so. I had someone else in mind, actually. She's very good. She's been stationed at Torchwood Seven, but I thought it was time to bring her home. Her name is Martha Jones. She's quite excellent. She'll be arriving this afternoon with Toshiko Sato. Ms. Sato will be your new technology expert."

This kind of thing was supposed to come from Canary Wharf. Why was Jones concerning herself with it? Rose wondered for a moment if this was Pete's doing, then dismissed the thought as ludicrous. Pete Tyler was rich and powerful, but Harriet Jones was still the President.

"Torchwood Alpha was founded as a research branch," President Jones went on. "I'd like it to return to that now."

"But we've been dealing with an infestation of Zvazvera and-"

"Yes, I am aware of that," President Jones said, smiling. "I don't think Torchwood One will have any trouble picking up the slack. I hear you have a rather brilliant expert on all things extraterrestrial on the recruitment short list."

Rose realised that she meant the Doctor. "That's not settled, yet," she said.

The President smiled wanly. "Well, if all else fails, you can remind him of his patriotic duty. That works on most people, especially men."

Not bloody likely, Rose thought. "What about the rest of us?"

"Mr. Mehra and Mr. Jones will be reassigned to Torchwood One. Dr. Harper will stay where he is. I'm putting you in the number two slot. You'll report to Ms. Jones."

Rose shook her head. "No!"

President Jones gave her a hard look. "I believe in free speech, young lady," she said. "But I am not sure I like your tone."

"Give it to Ms. Jones," Rose said hurriedly. "But leave Ianto and Lalit." She hesitated. "They're valuable team members, ma'am."

"I am aware of that. That's why I want them at Torchwood One."

"Ianto Jones is right in the middle of reorganizing the Archives," Rose said quickly. "If we change personnel now, it'll delay the project by six months, at least."

"Very well," the President sighed. "Keep him. But Mr. Mehra is going to Canary Wharf."

Rose's heart sank. "Yes, ma'am."

The President sipped at the coffee. "Who makes your coffee, dear?" she asked. "It's the best I've had in a while. I've half a mind to hire them for my office."

Rose hesitated a moment before saying, "That'd be Lalit, ma'am."

"Does he? He doesn't seem the type." She smiled pleasantly. Rose wondered if Jones knew she was lying and was humouring her. "I think that's everything, then."

Rose walked with President Jones through the main office. The President smiled warmly at Ianto, Owen, and Lalit, taking a brief moment to say hello to each of them, and complimented Lalit on his coffee-making skills before signalling to her bodyguards and taking her leave.

Lalit stared after her. "Coffee? Me?"

"That was my fault," Rose said.

Ianto was not amused. In fact, he was visibly ruffled. "You told the *President* that *Lalit* made the coffee?"

"It was either that, or lose you to Downing Street," Rose said. "I've had some news. You might not like it."

She told them about Jones and Sato, and Lalit's transfer.

"But I just *came* from Torchwood One!" Lalit protested.

"I know."

"So you're getting demoted, which means I get demoted," Owen said dryly. "Brilliant."

"The President wants us to be more of a pure research facility again."

"And where do you fit into that, if I may ask?" he demanded, voice dripping with insolence. "You're not a scientist, and you're not a doctor. Or even a glorified secretary."

Ianto glared at Owen with frosty dignity.

"I don't make these decisions," Rose said sharply.

Owen wore an insufferable smirk. "Not anymore you don't. Though, we're probably better off for it."

Rose wanted to throw Owen up against the wall and throttle him. Instead, she dismissed him with a roll of her eyes and went back to her office. She'd have to clean out her desk.

Not that there was much there. She'd been installed during a time of uncertainty... back when she'd had no intention to ever return. She was supposed to be there now, with her Doctor in the TARDIS.

She found the sort of cardboard file box people always used for this sort of thing and swept her pens into it. And the bit of asteroid from Salisbury Plain. She had a framed picture of Mum and Dad with Tony when he'd only been a few weeks old. She picked it up and sat in the chair.

She had been ready to leave them behind. It was good that she hadn't had to, she supposed. But it should have been her own choice, and he'd taken that away from her. It wasn't the first time he'd done that, making her decision for her in the name of what he thought was best, but she'd thought it would be different this time. It was like a wound in her chest, throbbing with every injured heartbeat. After everything she'd done to get back to him, he'd just left her.

Someone knocked. Rose wiped her face. "Yeah."

Ianto opened the door. "Am I interrupting, ma'am?"

"Nah, s'all right."

He took a stance a respectful distance from the desk. "I wanted you to know, ma'am, that Lalit and I do not agree with Owen's assessment of your tenure as first in command."

Rose looked at Ianto. He was earnest as ever, just like he'd been that first day she'd met him. "Thanks," she said. "It's okay, though. I wasn't exactly in love with being the boss. It's a relief, actually." It wasn't entirely a lie, either.

Ianto nodded. "As you say, ma'am." He did not move away, which meant he had something on his mind.

Rose felt herself smiling. "So, did you find out anything about Martha Jones, then?"

Ianto's mouth curved ever so slightly. He produced a shiny aluminium clipboard from behind his back and began to read.

"Martha Jones, born second of May, 1984, daughter of Francine & Clive Jones. Two siblings. Sister Latisha, killed in the Cybus Industries incident of 2007. Brother Leonard, second lieutenant in the Army. Ms. Jones left medical school in 2007, after which she joined the London Metro Police and earned rank of Sergeant. She was recruited by Torchwood in August of 2011 and assigned to Torchwood Seven in Tokyo."

What made someone go from wanting to be a doctor to being a copper? It might have been the death of her sister, but you never knew.

"Anything about Toshiko Sato?"

"Ms. Sato was raised in London and Osaka. She joined Torchwood in 2005. She's spent one to two years a piece at Torchwoods One, Three, Nine, and Four, until settling at Seven in 2009. According to this, she's a genius." Ianto pursed his lips. "Unfortunately, the files did not deign to give any more detailed information."

Rose nodded. "That's fine. We'll find out when they get here, won't we?"

The Doctor was never going to believe that Martha Jones is going to be here. Next thing they knew, this universe's version of Jack Harkness would appear. But he was from so far in the future... What were the odds he'd be *anything* like the Jack she remembered, or that he would exist at all? Mum was always saying how different this Pete was from hers...

"Not that I mind," she would say. "At heart, he's the same man. He's just had a different life. The little differences aren't so hard to live with."

When she'd said this, she'd had one eye on the Doctor. Rose was a little surprised that her mum was so keen on the two of them getting together, and she'd said as much.

"It's what you were working for all this time, isn't it, sweetheart?"

But Mum didn't understand about the full effects of the meta-crisis. She got as far as "clone, same memories, one heart," and she was satisfied. Then again, the Doctor had only told Rose about the parts of Donna that lingered.

Rose desperately wished that she knew how to help him. She could see evidence of Donna in his hesitations, his sudden turnabouts-not like the usual mercurial, magpie stuff, which he still did, but actually turning around and doing exactly the things he'd just said he wouldn't do. As if Donna was inside his head, shouting at him.

She didn't know the first thing about multiple personalities. Was this like that? He only gave her vague answers and assurances that he was all right and buried himself in the Archives. He'd have been down there now, if he hadn't suddenly been presented with another Donna.

"Is there anything I can get you?" Ianto asked her.

"No." Rose put the picture frame in the box and stood. "They're coming this afternoon. We'll have to finish clearing out Faye's work station."

"I'll take care of it, ma'am," he said.

Rose glanced up at him and found his expression uncharacteristically soft. "Thanks."

Ianto left her to finish.

She shouldn't be jealous of Donna. The Doctor had told her how he felt: he'd said 'I love you' in her ear on the beach on the second worst day of her life.

He hadn't said it since, but then again, neither had she.

And here was Donna Noble-not the same Donna Noble who had saved every Universe, but she was the next best thing, wasn't she? In fact, without a Donna in this world, they'd never have been able to hone the dimension cannon in on the other Donna.

Rose picked herself out of the chair and propped the box on one hip. Back upstairs then.

Just as she was about to pass through the doorway, the phone on the desk rang. Rose went back and forth a moment before going back and answering it.

"Rose Tyler."

"Is that how you answer the telephone?"

Rose's throat closed with sudden emotion. "Yeah, Mum. Hi."

"How's work, sweetheart?"

"Fine, Mum. 'S fine."

Jackie Tyler's voice sharpened. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

"Nothing," Rose said hurriedly. She cleared her throat. "Really. Just had a visit from President Jones."

"Oh, how is she?" Mum cried. "Did she get the basket I sent her last week?"

"I don't know. She was here on business. What d'you want, Mum? Why're you calling?"

"That's nice! Can't a mother call her daughter without wantin' something?"

"It's eleven o'clock."

"So?"

"Tony takes his nap at two. You never call before then 'less you need something. Is everything okay?"

"No problems here," her mother said airily. "Only..."

Rose waited.

"Well, I was wondering if you and Himself would be home at a reasonable hour tonight. I was just planning supper."

Rose could still remember when that meant a quick trip to the market. Nowadays it meant a long list for the cook.

"I don't know."

"I'm only wondering, no need to take that tone. You've been working so hard since we got home, I thought you could use a quiet night."

"We'll see."

"Rose-"

"We'll see, Mum," Rose said, more firmly.

"I'm worried about you, sweetheart."

Rose held her head with her free hand. "Mum, I'm okay," she said quietly.

"Oh, and I wanted to remind you: your dad's birthday party's this Saturday night."

"I remember."

"You'll need a new gown. Should I have Olga make one for you? Are your measurements the same? And Himself will need a tuxedo. I wish you'd convince him to let me get him some more clothes. I don't care how many times he cleans it, that suit's gonna walk away soon."

"Mum, I've gotta go."

Her mother sighed. "I know, I know. Go save the world. Love you!"

"Love you, too."

Rose hung up. She should have told her. Later. That'd be *great* dinner conversation. *Mum, Dad, today the President demoted me and gave my job to this Universe's version of another woman who travelled with the Doctor. And the Doctor ran off with the alternate Donna. Pass the carrots?*

By the time she was back in the main room, Ianto had already finished clearing every bit of personal debris from Faye Martin's desk. That would be Ms. Sato's station now, Rose supposed.

She put her things down at the empty station to the right of the Argus terminal.

"When will they get here, do you think?" Owen wondered.

"Half one," said Ianto. He nodded at the Argus terminal. "They get to Heathrow in about thirty minutes. Orders are they come here directly." He looked to Rose. "Shall I pick them up, ma'am?"

Rose looked up from the screen saver on her computer screen. "If you like."

Ianto nodded curtly and went to work.

Owen watched her as she placed the picture frame behind the keyboard. She could feel his eyes on her, but the last thing she wanted to do was acknowledge him. He was insufferable enough when he wasn't feeling smug and justified. Right now, he'd only make himself a nightmare.

As if to confirm this, when Rose got up to get herself a cup of coffee, she caught a glimpse of his smirk.

chapter six



Donna caught up with the Doctor only after a hearty chase, which was very unfair, given that she was wearing the shoes she'd last worn to work. No wonder he wore trainers, she thought. Thus far, it was the most sensible characteristic he'd displayed.

When she found him, he was standing on a street corner amongst the usual Thursday crowd. His hair stuck out in clumps. Donna worked to catch her breath as she stood beside him. He was still toying with the little detector, teeth bared in a grimace of frustration.

"What's wrong?" Donna said between deep, almost ragged, breaths. Obviously her exercise regimen was not brisk enough. She'd have to start jogging. (Not that the years of smoking would be helping.)

"The signal's gone," he said. "It was coming from..." The dish stopped whirling. He smacked the box against the heel of his hand and it started again.

"Maybe it's moved on," she ventured. More than a few people were giving them quizzical looks as they passed. Donna sent back 'mind your business' glares.

"I need my screwdriver," the Doctor grumbled.

"Did you leave it on my car?" Donna tried to take a closer look at the little silver box. There were no identifying marks, just a collection of wires and LEDs sticking out of a box the size of a small portable hard drive.

"What?" The Doctor looked at her like she'd suggested something scandalous. "Of course not! I don't have one, that's the problem! I knew I should have started working on it first thing, but I've been distracted by..." He waved vaguely around them. "All this... stuff."

Donna crossed her arms. "If you're not going to talk sense, can we please go back to the car? I do still want to go home."

He jerked his head up and gave her a wounded look. "Oh." He nodded. "Right. Of course, right." He put the detector thing in an inside pocket of his suit jacket, but there was no lump in the fabric. There couldn't have been anything in those pockets, certainly not all that stuff she'd seen him pull out.

"You've got one hell of a tailor at Torchwood," she said as they started to walk back to the cars. He laughed and put his hands in his trouser pockets.

Back at her car, Donna fished his belongings from her bag and watched as he put them away. When he was done, he was as slim in the blue suit as ever. He raised a mischievous eyebrow at her stares.

"I'll call the Council from home," she said as they got back in the SUV. "I can at least get the boot taken care of." She gave the Doctor a significant look and prompted, "Unless Torchwood can take care of this?"

He didn't answer that question, but he did begin to talk. "What I don't understand," he began, "is where they went. You heard what Zzfstaz said: there will be literally thousands of them. Admittedly, the detector works better at finding them when they're in their natural state, but they're not perfect shape shifters. It's not like they grow a full set of human organs. It's mostly just the outside that changes."

"Is that why their teeth are all black?" she wondered, shuddering at the memory of the woman in the cell smiling hungrily at her.

"Wellll... that depends. She wasn't trying very hard; most of the adults are more skilled than that. If they weren't, she wouldn't have been able to fool you into thinking she was your employer for three days."

Donna watched the dashboard in thoughtful silence.

"We've got a very big problem," he went on. "At the rate they reproduce, and with a nearly unlimited food supply, even a handful of Zvazvera could overrun a city the size of London in a matter of..." He winced. "Oooh... Days. Maybe a week. We've got to find a way to stop them."

"I'm going to call Mrs. Holiday," she said, cutting him off.

The Doctor was so busy staring at her that he missed the turn the GPS had directed him to take. "I'm sure that Torchwood can do that..." He swallowed. "You know, all part of the job."

"Are you going to do it?"

He looked genuinely horrified. "What?"

"That's what I thought," she said softly. She pointed out a new route for him to take on the GPS screen. "That's faster."

He glared at the little screen on the dash as if it were cramping his style. "I don't need *that*," he said primly. "I know where I'm going."

"And how is it that you know it so well?" Donna asked him, deciding to humour his assertion.

"Used to live in Chiswick, not too far from here."

She could almost believe it, given the way he navigated the little streets. It wasn't long before they had pulled up in front of her house. Donna saw a curtain move in the sitting room window.

The Doctor stood next to the car and scratched a sideburn. She was halfway to the door when she turned around and called back to him.

"Are you coming in or not?"

He bounded up behind her like a puppy. "Tea?" he ventured. "I could do with a good cup of tea."

"I'll put on a kettle."

The door opened before she could lay a finger on the handle. A few tightly-hugged moments later, she smiled at her grandfather.

"There you are, sweetheart!" Gramps cried. "Ianto said you'd be back this morning. I was hoping they wouldn't try keepin' you for any tests. You know how these secretive government types are. Who's this?"

"I'm the Doctor," the Doctor said, grinning wide enough to impress a game-show host and shaking Gramps' hand vigorously. "Mr. Wilfred Mott, I presume? Lovely to meet you! Donna's told me all about you."

Donna lifted an eyebrow, but decided not to bother correcting him. Gramps was eating it up, anyway.

"S that so?" he asked, smiling and winking at her. "That's my girl. Come in, Doctor, come in!"

Her grandfather led the Doctor into the sitting room, where he began talking the younger man's ear off, mostly about how he'd seen the news about the H.C. Clements building being under a quarantine and how sorry he'd been to hear about those three accountants who'd died. It was a crime what some people thought they could get away with, corporate terrorism and the like.

Donna listened in between trips to her room to put the dirty clothes in the hamper and the kitchen to start the electric kettle and get cups and saucers. The cabinets yielded half a packet of Jammie Dodgers. It was too early for biscuits, she thought, but there was almost no food left in the fridge and she wasn't about to start cooking. Though it was getting close to lunch now, perhaps she ought to make something? She wasn't usually home in the middle of the day on Thursdays.

She turned a baleful glance on the dishes in the sink. How hard was it to load a dishwasher?

The Doctor's voice drifted into the kitchen. He sounded amused. "Aliens, you say?"

"Of course," Gramps replied seriously. "I don't know how else you explain the stars all disappearin' and then reappearin' like nothing'd ever happened. It has to be aliens, doesn't it?"

Donna went into the sitting room. "You're not going on about that again, are you?" She tidied and picked an empty glass off the coffee table and glanced at the Doctor seated on the sofa. He looked perfectly at home sitting across from Gramps. Donna spotted a ratty old plaid blanket folded neatly next to a pillow. The Doctor was half-sitting on the pillow.

"Did Mr. Jones spend the night?" she asked.

"It was late, couldn't have him driving home in the wee hours. We watched *The Thin Man*," Gramps said to the Doctor. "Said it was one of his favourites." He gave Donna a knowing sort of look. Donna's heart sank. Oh *no*, he was already making plans, wasn't he? "Not a lot of men his age like old films."

"Don't you start," she warned, giving him a Look. "He's too young for me, Gramps."

"Who, Ianto?" the Doctor wondered. Donna stiffened as she realised he was looking her up and down. "You're thirty-six, right? Ianto's thirty; that's not much of a difference."

"Nothing wrong with getting a younger man," Gramps said, winking conspiratorially at the Doctor. "How old are you, Doctor...?" He shook his head. "I'm sorry; I didn't catch your name."

"Smith," the Doctor said. Donna was almost impressed how easily the man could lie. She could have believed it, if she didn't know better.

Her grandfather looked doubtfully at the skinny man. "Doctor Smith..."

"John Smith."

Donna hid her face by turning and whipping the pillow out from under the Doctor, who jumped up like a cat. She gave him a tight-lipped smile and picked up the ratty old blanket and took them away to the closet where they belonged.

After realizing she'd forgotten all about the tea, Donna brought the two men a plate of the Jammie Dodgers and a cup for each. "I'm going to take a shower, if you don't mind."

"Of course, sweetheart. Tell me, Doctor Smith, which hospital do you work for?"

"Oh, one of the big ones," the Doctor said mysteriously over his cup. "Like you said, secretive government types."

"I thought as much. Are you married?"

Donna bit back a groan. Through gritted teeth, she said, "He's got a girlfriend. Leave it alone, Gramps."

The Doctor looked appalled. "Mr. Mott- I- That is, me and Donna, that's not- Er... I don't think..."

"See, now you've embarrassed him," she scolded. "You're obsessed."

Gramps was contrite. "It was just a question. You know I just want to see you happy, sweetheart."

"Married and happy are not synonyms," she snapped. "Or am I the only one who remembers Lance?" She glanced hurriedly at the Doctor, wondering what he must be thinking. Her face was burning. He looked back at her, stricken. "'Scuse me."

She hid in her room with the door closed for a while, too mortified to show her face. Gramps meant well, of course he did, but just because a man stepped across the threshold didn't mean that he was interested in being any sort of marriage candidate.

Besides, the Doctor was most certainly *not* her type. Ianto was closer to the mark, but... *No*. Too young. And too *polite*.

She went into the en suite and took a fast, hot shower, then wrapped her hair in a towel and sat on her bed in her bathrobe. The address book in her mobile had Mr. Holiday's home number. She selected the entry and stared at it for what felt like aeons before pressing 'end'. She couldn't do it over the phone like that. She had the home address. Maybe a visit would be more appropriate.

It was better, she thought, that they get the news from her. Better than hearing it from coppers, or spooky secret agent types. Not that Rose Tyler was remotely spooky, but she'd never want to get news like that from somebody like Dr. Harper. At least she'd met the wife before. She had worked for Edwin Holiday five days a week for a year. It wasn't anything like being friends, but at least she knew him.

Not well enough to notice when he was replaced by a giant space insect.

She dressed in a dark suit, something sombre and professional but not black, and then dried and straightened her hair. A cab would be easiest. She'd have to call the Council about her car later. This was more important.

Even if the thought of the parking tickets to come made her stomach hurt.

Donna was more than a bit surprised to find that the Doctor was in her kitchen, and shocked when she realised that he was halfway inside the dishwasher. Surely he would have run back to Torchwood by now?

The lower half of him knelt on the open door. Looking at him from this angle, and a purely objective standpoint, Donna thought that Rose could do a lot worse. She caught Gramps coming back into the room. He gave her an apologetic look.

"It broke last night," he explained. "I only mentioned it in passing..."

The Doctor backed out and held up a palm full of squashed grey-brown... matter. Donna gagged.

"There's your problem," the Doctor said brightly. "Just a clog. You ought to rinse better. Ooh! Or you could get one of those units with the disposal built in." His smile turned into a look of abject horror.

"Oh... Lord help me, I'm talking about appliances." He looked at the stuff in his hand and pulled a dramatically revolted face. "Bleh!" He shook it off into the sink and ran his hand under the tap.

"Disgusting."

Donna replaced the racks, loaded the machine and started it. It rumbled to life. She watched the Doctor put his jacket back on. "Thanks."

"No problem." He sniffed and looked around the room as if he'd just entered it. "It's a nice house. I like what you did with the colours." Donna glanced up at the aqua walls behind the counter. "Did you choose them? I bet the border stencil was yours, too."

"Yeah, we painted it last summer." She gave him a curious look. "How'd you know about the stencil?"

He shrugged. "Lucky guess."

"Donna's always been creative," Gramps said proudly. "The painting hanging above the telly is hers."

"Yeah?" The Doctor ducked into the other room. "Oh, that's brilliant, that is!"

"It's just a meadow," Donna said, feeling a blush encroaching. "I did it at university. I don't do that sort of thing anymore."

The Doctor came back. "Why not?" he asked, disappointed. "You should! Never mind what Mum said about art school, you've got a great eye."

Donna stared at him. "What was that?"

He blinked. "What?"

"About my mum."

"Did I say 'mum'?" He waved a hand as if clearing smoke. "Wellll... you know mothers. Pushing this way, pulling that way. They're all like that." He eyed her suit. "Are you going out?"

She smoothed her jacket over her hips. "I'm going to the Holidays'."

"Your boss?" Gramps frowned. "Is he making you pick up his dry cleaning from home again?"

"No, Gramps." Donna caught a glimpse of her fingernails; the polish was chipped. She hadn't even thought to do them. Then again, it was a clear coat. Even a woman like Mrs. Holiday couldn't take notice of that.

"You've been ill," he went on, turning red. "You should get the whole week off!"

"It's not like that," Donna soothed. "Calm down." She put a hand on his arm and squeezed gently. "Mr. Holiday passed away."

The old man's face went slack. "Bloody hell. I had no idea! They didn't say that on the news. Oh, Donna, I'm so sorry!" He hugged her tightly. Donna buried her face in the wool of his jumper. She would have to fix her make up if she let herself cry, so she didn't.

"I'm all right," she said, giving him a smile. "But I want to go talk to his wife."

"Of course. Didn't he have a boy at university?"

"Yeah."

Gramps shook his head sadly. "Poor thing. It's never easy."

Donna nodded and tried not to think about dead parents, but it was all too easy to remember being thirty and thinking, *I'm too young for this*. Josh Holiday was twenty. She wondered if there was a body to bury, if the family would be able to recognize it. There needed to be a funeral. They deserved to get a funeral and a body to bury. They shouldn't have to wonder what happened.

Maybe she shouldn't have been doing this alone.

"Doctor?"

The Doctor looked up from a photograph he'd picked off of the breakfast table. It was a picture of her and her father when she'd been about seven.

"Yes, Donna?" he replied.

"Could you...? Would you mind driving me to the Holidays'?"

He smiled at her. "I'd be delighted"

The Holiday house was large and brick, with a garden in the front, and a clean-swept driveway. Donna watched the bay window at the front. Two long-haired grey cats watched her in return. One of them twitched a tail and jumped out of sight. Donna and the Doctor sat in the car. He seemed to be waiting for her to make the first move.

"Does Torchwood have the body?" she asked.

The Doctor nodded. "They have a strict quarantine procedure."

"Does that mean they have to keep it?"

"I don't know," he replied, frown deepening.

"Why not?" she demanded. "You're Torchwood, you should know!"

"I am *not* Torchwood," he said firmly, like it was the association he resented, rather than the ignorance.

"You're working for them," she argued.

"Not *for* them," he spat. "I don't work *for* anyone."

"Then what are you doing, exactly?"

He glared at her, then the steering wheel. "I'm trying to save everyone."

Donna stared at him. Now if that wasn't a case for a psychoanalyst, she didn't know what was. And she'd been in therapy, so she ought to have some idea.

She looked at the house and its lush garden. It looked so peaceful. She was here to ruin all of that. She took her time walking up to the front door.

A blonde woman answered. She was wearing an expensive grey jumper and blue jeans. It took Donna a moment to recognize her. Mrs. Holiday wasn't wearing any make-up. Her eyes were puffy and tired, and she looked about ten years older than she was.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Holiday," Donna began. "I'm sorry to disturb you." When the other woman's face did not change, she went on. "Donna Noble. I'm your husband's personal assistant. This is the Doctor. He's an... acquaintance."

"Donna..." Mrs. Holiday nodded, only glancing briefly at the Doctor. "Yes, I remember. The Christmas party; you won the raffle, didn't you?"

"Actually, that was Francis from H.R." Donna stopped herself. "That's not.... well, I'm actually here about your husband."

Mrs. Holiday nodded. "Oh. Yes. Thank you."

She backed away to let them in and ushered them into an absolutely exquisite parlour. It was something out of a magazine, very elegant and classic in ivories and pale wood. Part of her drooled in envy as she noticed the curve of the sofa back and how it flowed into the arms.

The Doctor was looking at Mrs. Holiday.

"You already know why we're here," he said.

Mrs. Holiday blinked at him. "The police came by this morning. Edwin's been missing since Monday night. I called Tuesday, after that business on the news..." She glanced at Donna, probably taking in the plaster on her collar bone. "I thought maybe... But there was no sign of him until last night." She was calm and collected. Donna couldn't imagine how she did it. She'd have been hysterical, she was sure. She hadn't exactly been stiff upper lip after Mum and Dad had died.

"I am so sorry," said the Doctor sympathetically.

"Did they tell you what happened?" Donna asked.

"They said it was the same toxin that killed the other people," Mrs. Holiday replied. "Bio terrorism." She looked at her hands a moment, and then said, "I'm sorry, I haven't offered you anything to drink."

"We're fine," Donna assured her. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

Mrs. Holiday gave a smile free of any warmth. "No, we're all right."

"Is Joshua still at school?"

The other woman looked a little surprised by the question. "No, he's come home. He's going to take a short leave of absence. He's upstairs."

Something beeped loudly. The Doctor reached into his breast pocket.

"Is that your mobile?" Mrs. Holiday wondered.

Donna looked at the bug detector in the Doctor's hand. The dish was spinning wildly. The Doctor leapt from his seat.

"What's wrong?" Donna asked, worried.

"Mrs. Holiday, when did you last see your husband? Did he spend any time at home recently?"

She blinked at him, affront and confusion on her face.

"What kind of a question is that? Are you some sort of detective?"

Donna watched the little dish spin. "Are they here?"

"Your son, get him down here, now."

Mrs. Holiday didn't argue; nobody could argue with that voice. The Doctor's posture and tone spoke of danger. Even his hair was standing on end. Donna's heart was beating harder. She followed Mrs. Holiday and the Doctor into the foyer.

"Josh!" Mrs. Holiday called up the stairs. "Josh, come down!"

Before the boy had had a chance to even call back the Doctor was dashing up the stairs, two at a time. Donna held back, not sure if she should get in the way. At the same time, she remembered how Louise had reacted to the bugs at the office. She doubted very much that Mrs. Holiday would prove to be the rough and tumble type. Donna galvanised her nerves and followed the shaking widow.

The Doctor paused a moment on the landing. He followed the signal to the left.

"What is that thing?" Mrs. Holiday cried.

"Stay back," he advised. Donna put a hand on the other woman's shoulder.

"What's going on?" Mrs. Holiday asked fearfully. The Doctor glanced over his shoulder. "There's an alien bio-signature in that room." He nodded at a closed door at the end of the hallway. The door opened. A tow-headed boy of twenty years poked his nose out.

"Mum? What's going on?"

Mrs. Holiday took a step towards her son. "Josh."

The boy frowned at the Doctor and Donna in turn before opening the door a little wider.

"Who are you?" The Doctor held up the detector. The sound seemed louder now. He held up his arm to stop Mrs. Holiday.

"What's going on, Mum?"

The Doctor took a tentative step towards the boy. "We're not going to hurt you."

"What are you talking about?"

"You think he's one of them?" Donna murmured. Josh looked entirely human. He even had acne, for Pete's sake.

The Doctor didn't take his eyes off of him. "It's all right," he said calmly. "How many of you are there?"

Josh gave the Doctor a funny look. "Just me... Mum, are you okay?"

Mrs. Holiday looked uncertainly at the Doctor. Donna turned her head; she'd caught movement in the corner of her eye. The door to the right of Josh's room had moved. She waited, hoping to see it again. Had she imagined the black claw beneath the door?

"Doctor, over there!" Donna grabbed his arm. "Over there!"

The Doctor held the device up close to Josh's face, then, apparently satisfied, he pulled the boy by the arm and into his mother.

Josh was red in the face and glaring. He looked very much like his father when he was angry. "What the hell are you do-?"

The Doctor had turned the door handle and pushed the door open, revealing a man-sized biomorph, complete with twelve spidery limbs and a shiny black approximation of a human face. It was rigid, like a plastic mask. Two red eyes glowed out of it and the mouth was set in a grotesque smile. Mrs. Holiday screamed. Donna nearly did, too, but there was the distraction of another door opening to their right. Without thinking, she grabbed the Holidays and shoved them back towards the staircase.

"Go! Get out of the house!"

"Hallo!" the Doctor said to the masked-biomorph.

Donna turned and saw that several more biomorphs had come out of the first room and were making to surround the Doctor. His friendly smile wavered as they skittered and buzzed threateningly. His expression went from tense to worried to terrified in quick succession.

Josh took his now-hysterical mother down the stairs, where her screams only got louder.

"Where are they coming from?" Josh cried.

"Doctor!" Donna shouted. She was too scared to move.

"Donna, run!" He was trapped against the wall. She wanted to run, but she couldn't. She couldn't leave him, they'd kill him.

She cast about for anything she could use as a weapon. There were paintings on the wall and a pedestal with a vase and flowers. One of the biomorphs was advancing on her. There was no sound that could compete in her mind with the buzzing, not even the rush of blood in her ears.

"Run!" the Doctor shouted.

Donna grabbed the vase off the stand. She threw the flowers in the face of the closest biomorph to her. While it backed away in confusion, she went for one of the bugs blocking her way to the Doctor. The vase shattered in a spray of glass and water. The biomorph didn't drop, like a human would have, but it staggered, giving her opportunity to reach for and grab the Doctor's hand.

They hurried down the stairs. Mrs. Holiday was shouting-they were still in the house. Why hadn't they gone outside?

The Doctor kept hold of Donna's hand as they went towards the noise. The bugs from upstairs were following them, making enough noise on the stairs to be mistaken for a herd of elephants (and their flies). Donna picked up another vase-this one was too light, like it was made of papier-mâché. She held the end like it was a bat. A cricket bat would have been just the thing. Better yet, a big can of bug spray.

"Don't you have any weapons in those pockets?" she asked the Doctor, hopefully.

He looked scandalized. "Why would I want weapons?"

"Are you kidding me?!"

In the kitchen, Josh and his mother were holding off their attackers with a meat tenderizing mallet and a large chef's knife, respectively.

The Doctor pointed at a small fire extinguisher hanging on the wall beside the refrigerator. "Josh! Hand me that!"

The boy glanced around and pulled it off the wall and lobbed it to the Doctor.

The Doctor pulled the pin and held it up, aiming it at the first biomorph to face him. "Stop right there," he ordered. Another of the bugs turned. It buzzed meaningfully.

"You don't want to do that," the Doctor advised. "You really don't."

The bug buzzed again, and the others chorused in. Donna abandoned her vase for a chair. She held it up like a lion tamer, keeping the bugs behind her and the Doctor at bay. They looked at the legs with apparent concern. Why didn't they just attack? There were at least eight of them, only four humans...

One of the bugs between the Doctor and the Holidays put out a claw and stepped towards Mrs. Holiday. Josh swung at its head, just as the Doctor warned him to stop. The mallet made contact with the biomorph's segmented eye. It screeched in pain. As one, the other bugs surged forward.

Donna brandished her chair and found herself scrambling on top of the kitchen table. The Doctor sprayed a bug in the face. It screamed and fell back. Josh was hitting wildly at the bugs nearest him and his mother, while Mrs. Holiday stabbed and swung her knife at anything that came too close.

The Doctor sprayed two more of the bugs with the fire extinguisher. The ones he hit fell back, or to the ground. Donna wondered if it was the chemicals or maybe the freezing temperature of depressurized gas, but mostly, she was busy trying to stay out of reach of the bugs' many arms and proboscises. Or was it probosci?

When the Doctor ran out of chemicals, he swung the red metal cylinder like a club, knocking one bug's arm away from Donna's leg. She winced at the crunching sound it made as the shiny exoskeleton cracked.

One of them had her. She screamed as the claws dug into her thigh and waist. She lost her grip on her chair when one pulled it away from her and dragged her off of the table.

The Doctor shouted something, made sounds like he had when talking to the bug in the cell at Torchwood, then shouted something, not angry, but victorious, as he clambered onto the kitchen island.

Mrs. Holiday screamed her son's name as he was overpowered by one of the bugs. Donna struggled to keep her exposed neck away from the barbed straws coming at her. She attacked with elbows, heels, teeth. Bloody exoskeletons! She just wasn't strong enough to do any damage on her own.

There was a high pitched screech. Donna clenched her eyes shut involuntarily, and would have clapped her hands over her ears had they been unoccupied. The sound grew higher and louder, until she wasn't even sure she was still hearing it, but she could definitely feel it, like a mosquito in her ear.

Suddenly, she was free. She opened her eyes and looked at the biomorphs that had held her. They were falling to the floor, shivering and screeching piteously.

Donna extricated herself from the limp grasp of the claws and went over to where the Doctor stood on the island, holding up what looked like a smoke alarm. He grinned manically at her and jumped down. He tossed the alarm into her hands, and pulled Josh to his feet. There was a bloody mark on the boy's cheek, maybe a bite, or perhaps a stray cut from his mother's poorly aimed attacks. He wobbled. Donna quickly went to help him, semi-successfully stepping over the biomorphs as they lay twitching on the floor.

The Doctor held up his hands to Mrs. Holiday. "It's all right."

She stared at him, eyes wide, both hands shaking around the handle of the knife. There were red and black stains on the steel. The Doctor held her gaze. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Daphne," she breathed.

He smiled at her and spoke gently. "Lovely. Give me the knife, Daphne. It's all right. We're going to get you and your son someplace safe, all right?"

She held out the knife. He took it from her hand and set it on the counter before taking her hand and giving her a quick, comforting hug. She sobbed into his jacket. "There now, it's all right. You come with us now. It's all right..."

Donna pulled Josh's arm over her shoulders and helped him out the front door. They got into the SUV, the Doctor gave Josh a shot of something, and they drove away at speeds that certainly weren't legal on a residential street.

In the backseat, Josh seemed to have fainted. His mother held his head to her chest and rocked back and forth. Donna wondered what had been in the shot.

She glanced at the Doctor once or twice as he drove. Back to Torchwood, she supposed.

"Can you take me home?"

For a moment, he didn't speak. He seemed disappointed. "Are you sure?"

She looked at the Holidays. She could imagine Gramps alone at home, those things surrounding him, no one to defend him.

"He'll be fine," the Doctor said. When she frowned he went on, "Your granddad. He's a tough old soldier." His eyes darted behind them for a moment. "They could use your help."

Donna stared out the window for a few moments. All those people, unaware that anything was going on. Any of them could be surrounded by these things, and not know it until it was too late. She took a deep breath.

"I've got to protect him," she said quietly. "He's all I've got."

The Doctor nodded.

Outside her house, the Doctor gave her a card. It was blank, except for a watermark of the honeycomb 'T' and a telephone number.

"If you need anything, call." He gave her a small smile. "Thank you, Donna Noble."

She glanced at the black SUV, where the Holidays were waiting. "For what?" she wondered.

He dug his hands deeper into his pockets. "Well... You know... for everything." He nodded back at the car. "They would have been killed if you hadn't insisted on seeing them."

Donna hugged herself. "Or they might have been left alone," she said, though she knew it wasn't true.

"Call me," he said. "Any reason at all."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Are you asking me out?" she asked, in what she hoped was a forbidding tone.

He blinked. "No! Just... You know. If you see any more Zvazvera buzzing around. Or if you, you know... just want to. Not for a date. Just... whatever."

He was sort of darling when he was awkward. She tilted her head. "Good. Because I think that Rose would have something to say about that."

He blushed. "Right."

"I'm going to go in."

The Doctor nodded. "Right. You go." Donna smiled and turned to go up the walk to her front door.

"Donna?"

She turned back. "Yes, Doctor?"

"If I don't see you again..." He hesitated. "Be magnificent."

She laughed. "You, too."

Donna avoided the inquisition from Gramps for a few minutes by standing by the window. The SUV drove away, but she thought she caught a glimpse of the Doctor looking back at her before the car was out of sight.



chapter seven

The Doctor helped Daphne and Josh Holiday from the SUV. He was a little surprised, but pleased, that Daphne was so calm. He'd half-expected her to still be shaking. Good for her, he thought.

Rose was standing at the front of the car when he looked up. She had a cross look bending her lips and eyebrows, and her arms were tightly folded. He closed the car door and it echoed across the empty warehouse floor.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

"Took Donna home," he began. He nodded at the Holidays. "Then we rescued them from a nest in their house. Took Donna home again. How are you?"

She did not smile at him. The Doctor frowned. Why was she angry?

"And who are they?"

"Rose Tyler, meet Daphne and Joshua Holiday." Daphne nodded a greeting, since she was largely occupied by holding up her half-conscious son. Rose stared back at her.

"You went to their house?"

"Donna wanted to see them."

Rose grimaced. "The police were handling it."

"We didn't know that." He nodded at Josh. "Besides, the police were in and out and never knew that they had a nest under their noses. Lucky thing Donna and I showed up. Josh here got a bite." When Rose's eyes widened, he said, "Just a little one. I already gave him some antidote. Still, Owen'll probably want to have a look at him. I thought I'd bring them back here. They can't go home at the moment. Speaking of which, somebody ought to go back there and capture the Zvazvera. There were nine of them that I saw, might be more still hidden."

"Stop!" Rose cried. She shook her head. "Just stop."

The Doctor closed his mouth. "What's the matter?" he asked after a moment.

Rose turned to Daphne. "Come with me, we'll get you sorted, yeah?" She darted a glare in the Doctor's direction. He kept silent, deciding it was best until he figured out exactly why she was annoyed with him. Everything was all right. He'd gotten Donna home, like he'd said he would, he'd rescued two people, incapacitated nine Zvazvera with a slight modification to a smoke alarm (without his

screwdriver, even!), and no one had gotten killed, or even seriously injured. Except maybe a few of the Zvazvera.

As he followed the others down the stairs to the office, he thought over the incident. There was the gore on Daphne's knife... that was worrying... and the way Josh had hit that first biomorph.

And the one he'd hit himself with the extinguisher. The gas wasn't any more harmful to the biomorphs than it was to a human (okay, so it wasn't *healthy*), but when it had run out... Their arms had been reaching out, clawing at him, at Donna... He hadn't even thought about it, he'd just reacted. He'd smashed that Zvazveraz's leg. Like he'd hit the one who'd attacked Rose at H.C. Clements. No thought, just action, and he'd struck out. That one had come out with a crushed thorax... His attack had had far more force than necessary to incapacitate it. He hadn't measured the blow. He could have, should have. He hadn't been thinking. Rose had been in trouble, and he'd just...

He'd have to be more careful, he decided. The adrenaline this human body produced clouded thought. Couple that with the other hormones-troublesome testosterone for one-and he was a bomb waiting to go off. He was dangerous, maybe more so than his Time Lord self had predicted. He couldn't go around hurting people just because they were his adversaries. That was what a human would do. He was better than that.

You are human, Spaceman.

Half human. I can still behave like a Time Lord.

There's nothing wrong with protecting the people you care about.

"Not like that," he muttered, determinedly.

"What?"

He looked up. Rose was looking at him with a crease on her forehead.

"Nothing," he lied. He glanced around the office and saw that Owen was already ushering the Holidays down to the medical bay. They'd be all right. He turned back to Rose and was about to ask her if she'd had any lunch when he stopped dead.

There were two new people in the room. They stood near the main entrance, followed closely behind by Ianto, who nodded a greeting to Rose.

Rose went over to the newcomers and extended a hand. "You must be Martha Jones," she said, in a not entirely friendly tone, which wasn't like Rose. Rose was always friendly. The Doctor frowned.

Wait, had she said *Martha Jones*?

He blinked and stared. It was, it *was* Martha. His hearts-heart-leapt and he stood up straight, unable to suppress a grin. She looked just as he remembered her. Well, no... she was several years older; her hair was in long braids swept back from her face into some sort of elaborate twist. The smile she gave Rose

was not the brilliant and bright thing that *his* Martha had had. It was small, restrained, and just a little smug. She carried herself differently. Her shoulders were stiff and square. Despite the fact that she was several inches shorter than Rose was, she had a towering sort of look to her. She wore a leather jacket and black trousers. He was disappointed to see that the jacket was dark green and not red.

Her companion was a Japanese woman dressed in a grey pencil skirt and an indigo blouse. She had a pair of horn-rimmed glasses on, and her hair pulled back from her face, giving her a librarianish look. He thought that he recognized her, too, but he wasn't quite sure where from. Maybe there'd been a version of her in Torchwood back in the other universe.

Martha Jones shook Rose's hand. "A pleasure to meet you. This is Toshiko Sato."

Sato, yes! There'd been a Dr. Sato doing the autopsy on that poor pig when the Slitheen had tried to destroy Earth.

Toshiko shook Rose's hand. The look Rose gave Toshiko was decidedly nicer than the one she was giving Martha.

He put himself forward. "Rose Tyler," Rose was saying, "And this is the Doctor."

He nodded. "Nice to meet you. New recruits?"

Martha raised an eyebrow at him, and then turned to Rose. "You should keep your team better informed," she said.

Rose's smile faltered. "He was out when President Jones informed me you'd be coming."

"Wait, Harriet Jones was here?" the Doctor cried. "Why'd she come here? Incidentally, what's she like? I've been wondering ever since..." He trailed off, seeing the looks on the women's faces. "Anyway... You could inform me now."

"I'm taking over this branch of Torchwood," Martha said. She gave the room a quick survey. "My reward, I suppose." She gave Toshiko a private smile. "Well, Miss Tyler, you might as well show me to my office. You can brief me on the current situation. Your man Mr. Jones wasn't very forthcoming."

Ianto, who had retreated to his coffee nook, glanced up at his name.

"Of course," Rose said.

"Doctor..." Martha began.

"Yes?" He didn't like the look she was giving him. Like she thought she knew everything there was to know about him just after one quick glancing-over. His Martha'd never looked at people like that.

Alternate universe, alternate Martha, chimed the Donna voice.

"You can show Ms. Sato to her station. And then I think I'd like it if we could get some sort of lunch."
Martha looked at Rose.

"Ianto can arrange it," Rose replied. "There's a good sushi place nearby. Make you feel more at home."

Toshiko and Martha exchanged glances.

"Is she serious?" Toshiko muttered in Japanese.

The Doctor caught the quirk of Martha's lips. "I think sushi is the last thing we want," Martha said diplomatically. "Sandwiches would be fine."

Rose gave Martha a plastic smile and walked with her down to the head office. An uneasy feeling settled in the Doctor's stomach. When he turned around, Toshiko was waiting.

"Sorry," he said when he realised she was waiting on him. Then, in Japanese, "So, how long have you been with Torchwood?"

She looked surprised, but pleased. "Eight years. How about you?"

"Oh, I'm not an agent." He smiled. "Just helping out."

"Miss Sato?" Ianto walked over with a large mug of coffee in a teal blue mug. "Your coffee."

"Thank you," she replied, in English. With a British accent, no less. The Doctor grinned.

"Would you like any coffee, sir?" Ianto asked.

"Yes, thanks." Then, remembering, "Hold the 'sir'."

Ianto gave that same little nod he always gave.

"Which is my desk, then?" Toshiko asked.

The Doctor looked at the desks for a moment. There were three of them in a semi-circle around the central terminal.

"I'm... not sure..." There was Owen's on the far left, with the dinosaur, then there were the two on the other side of the Argus interface. The one in the middle had a picture of Pete and Jackie holding baby Tony, so that would be Rose's desk...

Rose's desk? What Martha had said about taking over sank in.

He pointed at the empty one on the right. "I assume it's that one."

Toshiko sipped her coffee as she walked over. "It's rather dark in here, don't you think?"

The Doctor looked up. The lighting was minimal, but they were several levels underground. "Not too bad," he said reasonably. "No windows, of course."

"It reminds me a bit of the Hub in Cardiff. Now that was a dank little hole in the ground." She smirked at the computer as she pressed the screen, signed in, and started to manipulate different files at an impressive speed. (For a human.)

"Oh, I don't know," the Doctor said. "I expect there's a charm to it."

"I liked the facilities in Washington, personally. But then again, I like Federal architecture." She brought a new file to the screen; it looked like technical schematics, then quickly dismissed it and moved on.

"Hang on!" He bounded forward. "Bring that back!"

Toshiko stared at him. "What?"

"Those schematics."

She brought the diagram back to the front. The Doctor was almost open-mouthed in his amazement.

"Do you know what you have here?" he asked her.

She pushed her glasses down her nose and peered at the screen. "It's a sonic wave generator."

"It's not just a generator," he said. "It's an amplifier. Where did you get that schematic?"

"It was in the Archive," she replied. "It's something I've been studying for the last six months. I thought, since I was going to be stationed at Alpha now, I could have a look at the physical document."

"Do you understand it?" he asked her.

Toshiko hesitated. "I can't read the language, if that's what you mean. The Torchwood language matrix has never been able to give more than a partial translation; not enough extant data. But I think I understand the major principles."

The Doctor felt himself grinning from ear to ear. "Oh, Toshiko Sato, you and I are going to be best friends."

She frowned. "I'm sorry?"

He pointed at the screen. "What if I told you that I have my own plans for a sonic device, better than this one? And that I can read what that says?"

"I'd say you were lying," she replied shortly. "Our scientists haven't come anywhere near this far in that field. And the idea that any human could know the language of a species we've never even encountered-"

"Not yet," he said. "I imagine these schematics came through some sort of rift in time and space."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know?"

"Want me to teach you?"

Toshiko took off her spectacles and gave him a searching look. "Who are you?"

"I'm the Doctor." When she opened her mouth to ask his name, he said, "And yes, that's all of it." He sighed. "Blimey, never satisfied, you lot, are you?" He stood up straight and jerked his head towards the stairs that led down to the tech lab. "Come with me."

Toshiko was bright-almost frighteningly so-and it didn't take her long to understand the basic principles behind sonic manipulation. She was also quite adept at asking just the right questions. She'd be an excellent companion.

What are you going to do, stuff her in the TARDIS and fly off?

He grit his teeth and kept working. The lab was full of spare parts and abandoned projects. It was easy to steal a casing here, a filament there... By the time Ianto had brought them lunch-sandwiches and surprisingly good chips-the Doctor had a pile of parts to sort through.

Ianto peered at the sketch the Doctor had made to illustrate his plan to Toshiko. "May I ask?"

"Just a little pet project," he replied.

"Is this what you wanted?" Across the room, Toshiko was holding up what looked like a comm headset from a Q'alatrix warship. The Doctor grinned. "Exactly!" He hopped eagerly over and took it from her. He put it on and peered through the viewer with one eye. "Just the thing!" He went back to the work station, yanked off the headset and popped off its earpiece. Toshiko caught the headset as he tossed it back over to her. She looked down in dismay.

"Was that it?"

The Doctor pried the earpiece open and poked at the innards. He held up the little blue emitter on the tip of his finger. "The Q'alatrix are masters of sound production. This little gizmo can produce up to three megahertz. With a few modifications, I can get that up to five."

"That's ultrasound," Toshiko said. Ianto looked pained, but curious.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Average human can't hear above sixteen thousand Hertz. The Zvazveraz can hear up to one-point-five megahertz; more than that and they're a bit worse for the wear. Like nails on a chalkboard..." He frowned. "Take it too high, and it liquefies them in their shells." At Toshiko's grimace he said, "Of course, being somewhat similar to Earth insects, their internal organs are already relatively liquid."

"These are the things you've been fighting?" Toshiko asked.

"They're sentient beings," the Doctor said, less patiently than he'd intended. "Not things."

"Sentient beings who want to eat us and take our planet," Ianto said with a tiny smile.

The Doctor frowned stubbornly at the workstation. "It's what they've evolved to do. Humans eat other animals all the time."

"You're not suggesting we should let them?" asked Toshiko.

He glanced at her. "No," he said, "of course not. But acting like they're just inhuman monsters to be destroyed..."

"We've only killed one, so far," Ianto said. The Doctor met his eyes. There was no judgment in Ianto's expression, but it was clear exactly which Zvazveraz he was talking about. The Doctor looked away.

"With this," he said, holding the emitter between finger and thumb, "we can incapacitate them without harming them. A lot more efficient than darts."

Four hours, forty-three minutes elapsed between the time Ianto brought the sandwiches and when Martha came into the lab to demand a report on what had happened at the Holiday house. Every minute ticked by in his head, a comforting, familiar sense among unfamiliar senses and impulses. Moments were punctuated by cutting wires and discussions on the relative merits of a titanium versus adamantium casing, even debate on what the proper colour of the lens ought to be. He liked blue. It had been blue for a long time. Toshiko had suggested that he ought to expand the infrasonic range he had planned. And that red was sportier.

The discussion was cut short by Martha's arrival. Toshiko vacated the lab after one nod from her.

Martha Jones-the one he'd known in the other universe-had been more scrutable. Not an open book, exactly, but there had been the little smirks, the rolling of the eyes both incredulous and irritated; she'd had a lovely, expressive face.

The Martha Jones of this world was... well, her smile was wrong, for one thing. That was the most obvious and unacceptable difference. At least this world's Donna still made the same face at him when she thought he was insane. Martha Jones gave him a critical eye and demanded that he *explain himself*. The nerve!

"As I said," he growled through his teeth. "I took Donna home and then I brought them here."

"This would be the same Donna Noble who works at the H.C. Clements building, witnessed two separate attacks there, and was in the holding area last night when the subject Zzfstaz informed you of the presence of high numbers of invaders in the city of London?"

"Yes."

"And you just took her home?"

"Yes."

Martha gave him a very cold look. "I don't suppose you gave her any retcon?"

"No. She wouldn't have wanted that."

"Her wants are immaterial next to the security of this planet, Doctor."

The two of them glared at each other.

"She's not going to go shouting Torchwood secrets from the rooftops, Ms. Jones."

"What I find most interesting," Martha said, "is that a man who is not even a Torchwood agent has been able to insert himself into--"

"I'm going to stop you there."

There was the incredulity he remembered. "Oh?"

"You were going to go on about how I'm not Torchwood, so what am I doing in your base, playing with your toys, right?"

"That is a good question. Rose has told me that you aided in the original Cybus Industries incident in 2007. Obviously, you're some kind of technical expert." She looked at the work station. "Peter Tyler has vouchsafed for you, and is eager for you to join the team officially." There were several seconds of silence as they regarded each other.

"So what are you waiting for?" she went on. "You've had two weeks to see what we're about."

It took him half a second to realize that his mouth was open. "Are you asking me to join up?"

"That is why you're here, isn't it?"

He glanced at the bare-bones of a sonic screwdriver at his fingertips, thought of Rose, and the Holidays, and Donna smashing a vase and reaching out to help him.

"I haven't decided yet."

Martha let out a short sigh. "Well, I can't force you. But we could always use another agent. And Rose thinks very highly of your abilities."

That brought up a question that had been buzzing around his mind. "Why are you replacing her?"

She smiled wanly. "I'm not at liberty to discuss internal affairs with outsiders."

"I guess that answers my question then," he said nastily.

Martha raised an eyebrow.

Nice, Spaceman. Such a measured response.

He went back to work for twenty-six minutes until the space that had been occupied by Martha held Rose. He inhaled her perfume, looked up at her face, and decided that he could leave the sonic screwdriver until later.

Rose was hugging herself. The patterned green and blue fabric of her blouse bunched around her elbows and stretched quite pleasantly over her breasts and hips. He had never really considered women's fashion to be of much interest before. He wondered if the change was due to Donna, or to the new hormone cocktail.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"What go?"

"Talking to Martha."

He looked away from her breasts, stared at her clavicle for a moment, and then busied himself with the tool he'd modified into a passable hyper-spanner. "Fine."

Rose chewed on a lip. "Did she ask you to join?"

"Yep."

"Are you going to?"

There was something in her tone, obviously nervous, or maybe it was exhaustion... She always looked tired. Maybe she wasn't sleeping? He ought to get her away from here. They could go to... He grimaced.

"Do you want me to?"

Her mouth hung open for a moment. "I don't know. It's your decision, isn't it?"

"That's not what I asked."

"Do what you want," she said. It wasn't a dismissal, not the way she said it, but he felt a twinge anyway. She pulled her hair back and nodded at the work station. "What's that you're doing?"

"New sonic screwdriver. I meant to start it ages ago, but there was all that mess with the living arrangements and biorhythms and alien invaders and whatnot." He waved a hand in disgust.

"You look tired."

"I'm fine," he said, automatically. He hesitated. "You look..."

Rose rubbed her eyes. "I'm half-dead." She tilted her head and looked at the bits on the table. "How long is that going to take?"

"The basic structure will only take a few hours, assuming I can find all the materials. The programming is another matter, of course. The last time I needed a new screwdriver, I had old templates to build on. And the TARDIS."

She nodded. Then, after a long, horrible, awkward silence, she asked, "How are you holding up?"

"I'm all right."

Rose narrowed her eyes. "Well. That's good. Glad everything is hunky dory."

"Oi," he said, feeling his hackles rise at her sarcasm. "You don't have to take that tone."

"I'll take whatever tone I like if you're going to lie to me," she snapped back.

"Look, there's nothing you can do, all right? I'm fine! I'll be fine!"

"*Fine*," Rose said, mockingly. "You go ahead and play with your screwdriver, then. I'm going home." Before he could come up with a response that didn't sound childish, she had marched out of the lab.

That went well.

"Oh, shut up," he muttered.

Unacceptable. There was no other word for it. The Doctor sat heavily on the shiny chrome stool. He'd never had this much trouble adjusting to a regeneration-and that was including the sixth and the ninth. The ninth had been bad. He'd been more than a bit mad after... After. He'd wandered aimlessly, ended up on Earth a few times, saved a family from their fate aboard the *Titanic*, seen Kennedy shot, not to mention a few hazy adventures that he couldn't entirely remember. And then he'd met Rose, and aimless as he still had been (he *liked* aimless) he hadn't been talking to himself anymore. He'd had a hand to hold.

He flexed his right hand. Well... not this hand. He'd barely gotten to know it before he'd lost it. (It had been the replacement hand that had taken hers outside the Powell Estate that Christmas, out there in the not-snow.) This one had touched hers before that, in the TARDIS right after the discovery of the mole and before he'd flown the TARDIS into the pavement. That was this hand. The hand that pressed the big threatening button. (Not the fighting hand, though he was beginning to wonder.) It was the hand that had taken up the sword in the first place. The hand that Donna had given new life.

Half life, half human, one bloody heart, and the echoes of his friend in his head. Absolutely unacceptable.

All he had to do was *one, simple, solitary thing*, and that was be with Rose, but here he was, sitting alone in Torchwood basement while she went home to her family. And she was cross with him.

But she kept poking where he didn't want to be poked, and... and...

He waited for the answering Donna voice. When it said nothing, he felt a sudden crushing emptiness. That had been simple. Him and Donna, just mates, running around the universe. None of these twisted, pining, agonizing feelings gutting him. (At least, not in the foreground.) He thought of going to Chiswick, just to have a chat with her, or Gra-Wilf.

No. He had to remember that he was a stranger to them.

Donna might have been a comfort, but he wanted Rose. But the first thing in the zeppelin from Norway, the very first thing, she'd asked for time. It wasn't easy for her, either. She'd been stranded here with him, when what she really wanted was *him*. She hadn't said it, not like that (she was too kind for that), but he'd known it. He still knew it.

He considered several options. One: go after her now, and maybe have a row. Two: go after her now, definitely have a row. Three: Go after her now, no row, but suffer Jackie's probing until bedtime, when he would be allowed to retire to the rooms he'd been given to spend the night reading or watching horrible late-night television. Four: stay here and work on the sonic screwdriver, maybe even finish the basic programming by the time Rose came back in the morning, drink coffee.

He decided on option five: drink coffee, then stay and work on the screwdriver.

On his way to the coffee, in between wondering when he'd started to find lists so satisfying, he stopped at Rose's desk. Everyone seemed to be gone for the evening, except Ianto, who was working quietly at the Argus station.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"No, I'm fine." The Doctor winced. "Actually, I was hoping for a bit of coffee."

Ianto left Argus for the coffee nook. The Doctor stood his ground, unconsciously putting his hands in his pockets and keeping a good distance away. The nook was Ianto's domain, at least when he was here.

The sense of human personal and territorial boundaries was useful, at least. Not as useful as a tongue that could taste the molecular composition of things, but useful.

He liked coffee more now, too, which was good, because he was going to need the caffeine. He could feel his body flagging. Fifty-seven hours might be pushing it. Thing was, he still had a Time Lord brain, and it did *not* need all that wasteful sleep.

After some quiet, controlled, but largely abstract (at least to the Doctor's mind) busyness, Ianto presented him a cup of espresso.

"A double-shot," he said with a tiny smile.

"What did you do before Torchwood, Ianto?" the Doctor asked, genuinely curious.

"One year of University, and a summer of painting houses."

The Doctor grinned at him. "I spent a summer painting houses, once," he said. "Well... when I say houses... More like daub and wattle huts."

"Habitat for Humanity?" Ianto ventured.

"Yeah," the Doctor lied. He drank from his espresso and winced. Too hot. His poor human tongue couldn't take it. "Ow."

"Planning on burning the midnight oil, then, sir?"

He gave the young man an annoyed look. "Yes. No *'sir'*. I mean it." He sipped his espresso more cautiously this time and only after blowing on it. He couldn't be sure if the effect was real or psychosomatic. Damn tongue-he might as well have it coated in wax. "Are you sure you weren't somebody's butler?"

"I was Mr. Tyler's personal valet for four years."

"Ah! That explains it. Wait... Was this after you joined Torchwood?"

Ianto smiled conspiratorially. "It was my first assignment."

The Doctor glanced at gun at the young man's hip. Like most Torchwood agents, Ianto went armed. (He and Rose had argued over that the first day he'd come to the Warehouse. And it had turned out that Rose's gun only ever had tranqs in it.) Was 'valet' really code for 'bodyguard', then?

"I got to know the Tylers quite well."

"How well?" the Doctor asked.

"Well enough to know that you were never actually part of Habitat for Humanity. At least, not in this reality."

It took the Doctor a few moments to collect his chin from his chest, metaphorically speaking.

"You... what?"

"I've known Miss Tyler for some time, Doctor. You were," he constructed his language like one might arrange flowers, "... a frequent topic of conversation."

The Doctor put down his saucer. "Ianto Jones, I think you have me at a disadvantage."

"Yes, sir."

Well, that was something.

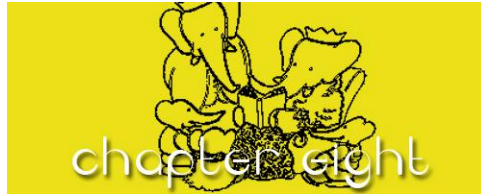
"Tell me about myself, Ianto."

"I wouldn't presume."

"What is that, valet/valee confidentiality?" the Doctor teased. "What can you tell me? Perhaps you can fill me in on things I ought to know about them? Or can you not presume that, either?"

"That's a long list," Ianto replied, somehow managing to show thoughtfulness without moving more than just one muscle in his (generous) forehead.

"Whatever you can tell me," the Doctor said, holding in a sigh as he thought about Rose leaving the lab. Ianto began to talk.



He woke up with the hyper-spanner pointing right between his eyes. His cheek was pressed against the table, and the hand under his temple was numb.

Part of his brain informed him that Something had made a noise; it had been loud, but it seemed to have stopped now. He groaned and closed his eyes against the florescent lighting. He wondered if he'd damage this world's timeline too much if he just went ahead and "invented" a more energy-efficient light source that didn't hurt human eyes so bloody much.

"Doctor!"

The noise again.

Jackie.

Wait, *Jackie*? Where was he?

He sat up quickly; his stool leaned back just a little further than his centre of gravity could balance. His arms pin wheeled and his hands *just* failed to grip the edge of the table.

The Doctor looked up at the ceiling. He was temporarily windless from the impact. (Human lungs were *dreadful*. No wonder some of his companions had needed so much breaking in...) Maybe if he didn't move, he could preserve some semblance of dignity.

Jackie Tyler's face appeared in his vision. She frowned worriedly at him, but instead of asking if he was hurt, she said, "You have something on your face."

He felt his cheek and pulled off a little silver ring of scrap metal and flicked it away.

Once he was upright again-he tried to move as if he were not in pain-he looked at Jackie.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. He was still in the lab. Why was Jackie in the lab? Did Rose know that Jackie was here?

"You didn't come home last night," she replied sharply.

"I wasn't aware that I had a curfew."

Jackie put her hands on her hips. "We need to talk."

He grimaced. "You mean that you need to talk and I'm to keep my gob shut, am I right?"

"Whatever," she said. The Donna bits translated this: *yes*.

"Look, I was working on something, Rose wanted to go home, I don't see-"

"This isn't about Rose," Jackie said.

Oh. He glanced uncertainly at her. "It isn't?"

Jackie rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically. "Not everything is about your relationship to my daughter. Besides, Rose told me to keep out of it, so I'm keeping out."

"You are?" he wondered, unable to keep the disbelief out of his tone.

Jackie sniffed. "If you hadn't noticed, and I'm assuming you haven't, you keeping yourself locked up in here when you're not swanning around London, but the rest of us have lives. You're coming with me."

"I am? Where?"

"You'll see."

She went to the door and waited, arms folded across her well-tailored but garishly green blazer. Jackie Tyler was certainly better dressed these days, but there was no curing what the Donna bits wanted to simply call colour blindness.

The Doctor wondered if he should resist Jackie's efforts to pry him from the lab. He couldn't imagine that anything that Jackie could plan would hold any interest for him. In fact, he fully expected some sort of domestic torture, accompanied by a never-ending stream of prattle.

Then again, it would upset Rose if he upset her mum. And he dearly wished that he knew if it was Doctor or Donna who provided this thought: maybe if he listened to the prattle, he might glean some information he could actually use. (It was probably Donna. It had to be. When would his Doctor side ever advocate listening to Jackie chatter?)

Feeling strangely like he'd been coerced, he picked the sonic screwdriver off the table and slipped it into his inner breast pocket.

Jackie had a small limousine waiting outside. Her driver, a bloke named Morris, opened the door for them and tipped his hat.

"You really need all this?" the Doctor said, still writhing under the man's cheerful, "Good day, sir!"

"We're paying him good money," Jackie said pragmatically. "What good is being rich if I can't employ people?"

"Where are you taking me?" he asked hoping for an answer this time.

"You need clothes for the party tomorrow night."

"What?!" The car was already in motion. His hand spasmed around the door handle. Locked. Bloody hell!

"Don't you dare start fussing!" Jackie warned in such a severe tone that the Doctor wondered if he was in store for a Tyler slap. "You've been in that same suit for ages! I'll shave my head before I let you wear it for Pete's birthday party."

The Doctor frowned. "Birthday party?"

"Yes," she said as if he were thick. "Pete's. You know Pete? He's the one who's been feeding you and putting you up?"

Jackie seemed to have mastered new depths of sarcasm in the last three years. He gritted his teeth. "I never asked for-

"Oh, don't be stupid," Jackie said, rolling her eyes. "I didn't mean it like that. We're happy to do it. But you can't spend the rest of your life workin' and runnin' about. You've got to live a bit."

"I know how to live, Jackie."

"I don't think you do," she argued.

"I'm over nine hundred years old!"

Jackie gave him an exasperated look. "You've been alive three weeks!"

The Doctor closed his mouth and turned his face to the window. The hand on his left knee moved. When he looked down, Jackie was holding it tightly. The human hand. His right clenched and he pulled it close to his body.

"You've got to learn how to take care of yourself," Jackie said quietly. "You're going to have to sleep in your own bed and take meals and have more than one pair of shoes."

He swallowed. He couldn't remember the last time someone had... acted motherly towards him.

Suddenly, he could remember a thousand times, but it wasn't Jackie or even his own long-lost mother. It was Sylvia Noble; stroking his hair, giving him a hug, plastering a scraped knee, tickling him as he wriggled and laughed.

The Doctor took a deep breath and fought for self-control. Those were Donna's memories, not his. He tried to replay them again, recasting himself as Donna, more specifically, the little girl she'd been when she'd experienced such things.

This world's Sylvia Noble was dead and gone; why did that have to hurt so much?

I'm not Donna.

Jackie squeezed his hand a little tighter and smiled sympathetically. "You've got us to help you, sweetheart. I know it isn't easy, but you'll be all right."

He swallowed against a stubborn lump in his throat and nodded. He didn't trust himself to talk, so he simply squeezed her hand back and forced a smile. (That was the human thing to do, right? Funny how it didn't feel as false as he expected.)

She let go and gave a satisfied little sigh. "Let's get you a new tuxedo."

The man in the mirrors looked... *Well...* he had always looked brilliant in a tuxedo. And this was a very nice one, with a waistcoat and everything. He played with the shirt collar while a tailor pinned the hem on the trousers. He still couldn't recall Rose mentioning the party to him, but they'd all been distracted by the Zvazveraz. Maybe she had said something and he hadn't been paying attention. (Donna was suggesting to him that this happened quite a lot more than he thought it did.)

Jackie came back into the room.

"That's much better!" she said happily. "Don't you look handsome!" Her eyebrow lifted knowingly. "Rose will be pleased."

The Doctor fiddled with the bow tie. He needed a shave. Again. He could swear that his beard grew ten times faster now. How patently unfair.

"Did they get you the shoes? Doesn't Asim have the best taste?"

The tailor looked up and smiled modestly. "Thank you, Mrs. Tyler."

"Now, as soon as you're done with that, Doctor, there are some other things I want you to take a look at."

"Jackie..." the Doctor groaned, "it is too much." He wasn't sure how much more he could take. Mothering was one of those things you outgrew, and he'd outgrown it centuries ago. So how was it that Jackie Tyler, of all people, was making him feel like a petulant kid?

"I haven't even got started yet," Jackie said breezily.

Asim the Tailor looked up. "You must hold still! Otherwise your hem will be above your ankles, and I cannot be responsible!"

"Sorry." The Doctor straightened and tried not to move. He watched Asim surreptitiously via the mirrors. He seemed oddly familiar; like the man who'd fit him for robes at the Academy. What had his name been? He frowned as he tried to remember.

"How is that?" Asim asked.

"Perfect," he replied without looking. Coritaxavrot? No, that wasn't it. It had started with 'Cor', though.

"I'll have everything sent to the house tomorrow afternoon, Mrs. Tyler."

"Two o'clock if you can," Jackie said. "The party starts at eight, but I want everything ready as early as possible."

Asim bowed slightly. "Ma'am."

The Doctor had barely reclaimed his clothing before Jackie had dragged him into another room. He rolled his eyes and groaned. "What else could you possibly...?"

The room was full with rack after rack of trousers, shirts, and suits in a variety of colours. There was an entire section devoted to denim, another to belts and sundries. And shoes. And *hats*. Did people wear hats here? He pushed down the pang of loss he felt; no TARDIS, no wardrobe, none of the familiar things. He was stuck with twenty-first century Earth clothing. Not that he wanted to wear a Napoleonic General's uniform, or anything like that.

Jackie let out a little sigh of contentment and looked at her watch. "All right. We've got three more hours before I have to get home to Tony. Rose should be done with Olga by two. I'm going to call the caterer and check in with the band. I've never used them before, but they're supposed to be good." She gave him an indulgent look. "Mark'll take care of you while I do that. Get anything you want."

A merry tune played, and she pulled her mobile from her purse. "Laurie? I was just about to call you, love! No, just shopping. With Rose's friend. You'll see him tomorrow night..." She wandered away and was replaced by Mark, a young man with dark hair and a smile that reminded the Doctor a bit of Ianto for all its careful inoffensiveness.

The Doctor looked out across the racking, feeling a strange mixture of trepidation and excitement.

I've always wanted to get you shopping.

With another pang, the Doctor put his hands in his pockets. Rose would make this fun. The *real* Donna would, too, though she'd spend far too much time trying to get him to put on things he didn't like. Proper Martha would probably have gotten bored; she'd never shown as much interest in clothing as either Rose or Donna had. He had learned on the one shopping trip she'd asked for that she was rather like him when it came to clothes. She knew what she wanted from an outfit, she got what she wanted and that was it. No fuss, no dawdling over piles of blouses or bawdy earrings and scarves. (Well... scarves. He'd liked scarves, once upon a time.)

Rose would have been a lot more fun.

It occurred to him that this was long over due. If he thought of the current situation as a regeneration, true and proper, then it was all well and good that he find new clothes to suit the new man.

You and your puns, Donna groaned.

"Where would you like to begin?" Mark asked him, wearing a servant's smile. All these people running around, doing things for people... What did Rose think of having a cook, or a dress-maker? It made him feel caged and watched.

It was slow going. Most of these suits were too boring. Charcoal grey, grey with grey stripes, navy blue with no stripes. Black with white pinstripes wasn't too bad. He put that aside and got a burgundy shirt to go with it.

"I need a tie," he thought aloud.

"Right over here." Mark escorted him to a massive, multi-tiered table filled with ties in a whole visible-to-the-human-eye spectrum of colours and designs.

A grin spread over the Doctor's face. "*Oh yes!*"

The toile was definitely out, he thought. At least, until the fourth time it came up. Before he knew it, he had a whole mountain of ties.

"What do you think of this one?" Mark held up a grey jacket.

He made a face. "Grey? Grey's boring!"

Mark held a sleeve up for closer inspection. There was a bright orange pinstripe subtly woven in, but it caught the light if moved just so. That was something.

"Not bad," he said reluctantly.

"Have you considered the brown?" Mark suggested. "We have classic cuts, modern cuts... I think you'd do well with it."

The Doctor stopped. The other man was holding up a brown blazer. It was nothing like the one he'd worn; no stripes, it was double-breasted (ye gods, no) and the cut was all wrong.

"No," he said vehemently. "No brown." Mark's face registered surprise, so he said, "Boring."

By the time Jackie returned, he'd narrowed it down to five suits, twenty shirts, three dozen ties and a bounty of socks and pants. (When pressed, he'd told Mark that, out of the available choices, he preferred boxer briefs, but a couple of pairs of shorts wormed their way in. He wasn't quite sure how.)

Jackie's mouth opened and shut with deafening surprise, but she made no complaints as she told Mark to put it all on the account.

"Are you sure you don't want any blue jeans?" she asked. "Nothing casual?"

"Jeans aren't me," he said, mostly sure that that was true.

"You're wearing a t-shirt," she pointed out.

"Under the suit," he replied, wondering how she could miss that detail.

"We can always come back," she sighed. "Did you get shoes?"

"I have shoes."

Jackie made a face. "You need more," she insisted.

"They don't have the kind I like," he said, hoping that would be enough to get her to let it alone.

"Really, Jackie..."

"Okay, okay! I'll take what I can get. Thank you, Mark."

"Thank you, Mrs. Tyler. Doctor. Everything will be delivered tomorrow afternoon."

Back in the car, Jackie asked, "Have you eaten anything today?"

Lunch with Jackie. He dissembled. She gave him a look rather like the one Rose had more than once. That was the 'you're being especially thick' look. He wasn't sure that it was deserved. Jackie couldn't want to have lunch with *him*. Things weren't *that* different.

"You're all bones," she protested. "I already thought you were thinner when we were on that ship-thing. You look like you've lost a stone since then!"

"I have not!" he cried indignantly. "I'm svelte."

"You're a scarecrow!" She looked worriedly at him. "You haven't got some sort of alien eating disorder, have you?"

The Doctor stared at her a minute before bursting out laughing. "Wha-what?" he managed amidst guffaws.

Jackie turned pink. "How am I supposed to know? You're not human!"

He got a rein on himself. "That is probably the nicest thing you've ever said to me," he said wryly. He added, "Any me."

"Are you hungry or not?"

"Yes," he admitted. His stomach growled in agreement. He glanced down in surprise. Since when did his organs have comic timing? Was that a human thing? Should he be worried?

"There's some time before I need to be home. We'll get something and then I'll drop you off at the Warehouse."

There was no getting out of it now, he supposed, so he nodded.

"So..." Jackie was suddenly feigning a casual attitude. Suspicion popped up inside him like a rodent from its burrow.

Oh dear, here it comes.

"... Rose tells me you found the alternate of your friend Donna." Jackie smiled, readying herself for gossip. "Tell me about her!"

Rose walked into the Warehouse main office feeling hassled and irritable. She hadn't wanted a bloody new dress, what did it matter what she wore? It wasn't as if Pete cared...

Owen was on the telephone, arguing with someone about medical supplies. Toshiko and Martha were huddled next to Argus. Ianto greeted her with only a perfunctory hello before going to Owen and handing him a clipboard.

"What's going on?"

Martha turned. She looked calm, but her tone was biting. "You're back. Good. My office, please."

Rose followed her, feeling like a child being escorted to the headmaster's office, or like that time on Ba'an Vei, when she'd been sentenced to death for desecrating a temple by talking in it. And then arguing with the monks who'd arrested her.

She took in the changes to the room. There was a family portrait on the desk, and another showing Martha in a black mortarboard and a smiling young woman leaning on her shoulder: the sister who'd died. There was a coral sculpture on a rosewood pedestal on one corner of the desk. Next to the pale white coral was an empty soapstone pencil holder.

When she felt the weight of Martha's eyes on her grow too heavy, she sat down.

"What were your plans for the prisoners?"

"We hailed their ship and demanded that they retrieve them. We were waiting on a response."

Martha raised an eyebrow. "You were going to send them home? After they killed four people?"

"Yes."

The other woman looked thoughtful. "This morning, I got orders from Torchwood One to turn the aliens over to them."

"And what are they planning on doing with them?"

"We turn them over, then they're not our problem," Martha said.

"Then why did you ask what I was going to do with them?"

Martha leaned forward and rested her elbows on the desk. Her hands were clasped in front of her face.

"You've worked for Torchwood for three years, am I right?"

"Yes."

"You tested the dimension cannon yourself. That was incredibly risky."

She wasn't sure if she was expected to respond, but it didn't matter, because Martha went on. "I know that President Jones and the Torchwood heads want this facility to concentrate on tech and research, but I don't think we can function without a field team. Of course, you need a partner."

Rose did her best to hide her frown. "You want me to convince the Doctor to stay on."

"We need him," Martha said bluntly. "I've seen the records of the Cyberman incident; I know that he was the object of your mission when you used the dimension cannon to go through to his universe."

Rose fought to keep her face impassive, though it was getting harder.

Martha narrowed her dark eyes. "I also know that you were at Lumic's control centre."

Rose flipped her hair over her shoulder. "You've read my file."

"I may not have the title, Miss Tyler, but I am a detective." She leaned back in her chair. "A 'restricted access' stamp isn't much of a deterrent."

"Is there anything else?"

Martha plucked a small white envelope from the neat papers on the desk.

"I did want to ask you about this."

Rose took the envelope. Martha's name was written out in fancy script. "Looks like an invitation."

"To Peter Tyler's fifty-ninth birthday party." Martha looked almost suspicious.

Rose handed the envelope back. "Dad always invites everyone in Torchwood, though most of them don't usually come. It's just a bit of fun."

"If any of my things were here, I'd say that I'd go through my closet, but my things are two days behind me."

Rose uncrossed and re-crossed her legs. "I could give you the name of the woman my Mum and I go to. If you want."

There was hesitation on Martha's face. "That's very kind of you, but I doubt that I could afford it. My pay isn't *that* good."

She pulled the number from her mobile and took the only stray paper she saw to write on. "Tell her that I sent you," she replied. "It won't be a problem."

"That's very kind." Martha finally smiled. "Thanks."

If Rose hadn't known better, she would have thought that Martha was relaxing a bit.

The rest of the day went quickly. She checked the lab for the Doctor, but only found a cluttered work table and a sketch of the sonic screwdriver. She studied it for a little while before folding it up and putting it in her pocket. That wasn't the sort of thing one wanted to leave lying around.

The Doctor wasn't in the Archives, either. Where had he got to?

Donna. He'd run off with her again. Rose sat in the empty chair by the microfilm viewer and thought black thoughts; mostly helpless, abandoned ones. What had she expected?

It was an unconscious thing that moved her hand to her mobile. She didn't even realize she'd dialled until she heard her mother's voice.

"Rose! Hello, sweetheart! How did it go with Olga?"

"Mum...?" She wiped her cheek and tried to clear her throat without making a sound. "Mum, he's gone."

"Who's gone?" Mum wondered, alarmed. "Is it your dad? What's happened?"

"No, Mum. Dad's fine. The Doctor. I don't know where he is." Rose forced a shaky breath. "It's my fault. It was so stupid-"

"Rose, sweetheart! He's here."

Rose wiped her face again. "What? Where are you?"

"We're at home. I took him to get some clothes and then we had lunch and-"

"You? And the Doctor?" Rose gaped at the clutter on the desk. "You took him *shopping*?" She wasn't sure whether to laugh or scream in frustration.

"You don't have to sound so shocked. I practically had to kidnap him, anyway."

"He's there now?"

"He's playing with Tony. When are you coming home?"

"I don't know."

"Come now," Mum urged. "They can spare you for the night."

"I should stay. There are reports I have to look over and..."

"Rose!"

"I've gotta go."

Mum sounded disappointed. "Rose!"

She ended the call and went to the loo to straighten out her face. She was relieved, she told herself. He hadn't disappeared with his new companion. Mum had probably had to drag him to see Asim, anyway. The poor Doctor-even she didn't particularly like shopping with her mum.

She sat at her desk and continued working on the report the Torchwood One agents had sent over after the clean up of the Holiday home. Rose had requested to see them specifically. This whole mess was her fault. She hadn't thought everything through properly. All the bureaucracy and the paperwork and the procedures...

Owen whistled at her. "Oi, Tyler!" he hissed when she didn't look up.

"What?"

"What are we doing about the two in medical?"

Rose clicked over to page five of ten. Whoever had written this had far too much time on their hands. "I thought Canary Wharf was taking care of them?"

"Yeah, well, Mrs. Holiday wants to see her husband's body."

Rose darted a glance across the way. Owen was serious-faced. It had a way of making him look like an old man.

"You recommended the quarantine," she reminded him.

"Yeah, well, that was days ago. Any contagion or unknown effects of the toxins, my tests would have shown something by now. His family deserves to get to see him."

"I'm surprised you think that."

Owen looked offended. "I'm not heartless! Besides, we're going to retcon them both anyway. But they'll still get to take the body home to burn or bury, and I don't have to be Frankenstein hoarding corpses in the basement.

"You'll have to ask Martha," Rose said, turning back to the report.

His voice darkened. "Martha Jones doesn't want us going to Faye's bloody funeral."

Rose froze. "Why not?"

"Apparently, it's against some Torchwood policy. I told her to shove it." His wide mouth bent into a glower. "Are you going?"

"When is it?"

"Tomorrow morning."

The guilt she'd been trying to ignore for the last few days washed over her. "I doubt I'd be welcome."

"Bollocks," Owen said. Some internal battle was won, and he said, "She really liked you."

"You and she were close, weren't you?" Rose asked quietly.

"We fucked," he said, shrugging. "It wasn't anything big."

He was lying. Rose closed the report document. "I'm sorry."

Owen turned his chair away from her and back to his computer. "Not your fault."

Stunned, Rose stared at him. Before she could think of any reply he said, "So, are you coming or not?"

"I'll come," she said quickly.

He nodded. "Good. Fuck Jones and her rule book."

Rose put a foot on the edge of her desk and leaned back. "I've never heard of this rule," she said, thoughtfully.

"I looked it up." Owen picked up the red toy pterodactyl and gesticulated with it. "Apparently, it's on the books from the 1880s, back when Torchwood was mostly just a few nutters in Scotland going on about alien werewolves or some rubbish like that. They were more of a secret society back then. And whenever an agent died in the line of duty, the practice was to keep their body in cryo indefinitely. Don't ask me where they got the cryogenic technology from."

"You're kidding me," Rose said, horrified.

"So, no funerals for members who died in the line of duty, and other agents were forbidden to attend funerals for former agents, not that there were many for the sake of secrecy."

"They don't keep agents' bodies now, do they?"

"Lucky for us, no. They changed that in the Sixties after somebody zombified the contents of the Torchwood freezer in Cardiff." He held the pterodactyl up to the light from his desk lamp. "Course, it looks like they didn't bother to change the rule about the rest of us *going* to funerals, even if they do release bodies to their families now."

Rose shuddered to think of those people kept in cryo drawers. It was sick.

The phone on her desk rang. She jumped, and her legs hit the floor with a thud. She snatched up the receiver before it had a chance to ring again.

"Rose Tyler," she said, once she'd collected herself.

"Rose, it's me."

"Dad? What is it?"

"Go home, Rose."

She gaped.

Owen's ears pricked up. "What is it?" he asked nosily.

Rose turned her back to him. "Why?" she asked her father in a low voice. "Did Mum call you?"

"Go home, Rose Tyler. It's Friday, it's four-thirty, and if you're not home for supper tonight, your mum is going to hound me."

"I was in the middle of-"

"Go home." He spoke softer, "You've had a hard week. Let someone else finish up there, all right?"

She bit her lip. "Yeah. Okay."

"Do you want me to send Morris to get you?"

"No, I can manage." She paused. "Thanks."

"No worries. See you at home."

"Bye."

Owen was still watching her. "Orders from the General?"

Rose flashed him a deflective smile. "I'm off."

"It's good to be the boss's daughter," Owen observed dryly.

"Send me the info for tomorrow morning," she said as she gathered her jacket.

"Right."

She stopped by the door, thinking that she would thank him, or maybe say something clever, but Owen was hard at work, as if she were already gone.

When she arrived at the mansion she was immediately greeted by two-year-old Tony Tyler. The toddler had chocolate on his face and red-and-white striped shirt, and his hair was a tousled mess.

"Ro!"

She picked him up, giving him a good swing around into the bargain. He laughed with delight.

"You are getting big, Tony-tony!"

He pressed his sticky face to her cheek. "Play with us!"

"Whatcha playin'?"

The Doctor rounded the doorway in what looked like a panic. When he saw them, he sagged in relief. "There you are!" he cried, then, "Rose! You're home early." He sounded so pleased that she momentarily forgot that she had intended to be angry with him for disappearing.

"Yeah." She looked the Doctor over. He'd discarded the jacket and his t-shirt was spattered with finger paints. "What have you been doing?"

"Well... Sarah wasn't feeling well and Jackie had more calls to make, so she asked me to watch Tony." He scratched a sideburn. "He moves fast; one second he's showing me his favourite book, the next I look up and he's scampered off."

"He is two."

The Doctor wore a wicked grin. "I was going to say he's a Tyler."

Rose put Tony on her hip. He grabbed a fistful of her hair and started to play with it. She failed to keep him from putting it in his mouth. "I didn't think you liked kids."

"I love kids!" the Doctor cried, offended.

"Last time I saw you with one, you were terrified," she said. She carried Tony up the stairs towards the boy's room.

"That was a baby," he pointed out. He took the stairs two at a time, almost bounding ahead of her. "I'm rubbish with babies. They're so..." He made a face. "Fragile. And helpless... Loud... smelly... Cute, though. Very cute."

Rose took Tony to the en suite off of his room and sat him on the counter and started to wash his face and hands. The Doctor leaned in the doorway and watched. Tony whined and wriggled as he lost his hard-won dirt and gunge. Rose dried his chubby cheeks and combed his brown hair with her fingers.

"That's better," she cooed, setting him down again and letting him run back over to his toys. There were the finger-paints on the play table, but he settled on the floor with his blocks.

She realised that the Doctor was watching her. "So, you have fun shopping?" she asked.

"It wasn't as bad as I expected," he admitted. "And the sandwiches, Rose! You have never seen sandwiches like the one I had today!"

Rose laughed. "Mum took you to Temple's, didn't she?"

"It was brilliant." He grinned at her and pointed at her cheek. "You've got chocolate."

Rose rolled her eyes and groaned, "Tony..."

"Let me."

The Doctor ducked into the en suite and picked up the flannel she'd been using. But instead of handing it to her, or just using it on her face, he paused. Rose stood still as he took her chin in one hand. He stroked her cheek with the other, laying gentle pressure with the pad of his thumb across the patch of transferred chocolate. He stopped at the corner of her mouth. For a moment, she thought he was going to kiss her, or perhaps even lick her cheek. The second option seemed more likely, since this was him, and he had that tendency to lick things. Their eyes locked. His were wide and dark. The floor of Rose's stomach fell out, like a lift dropping down the shaft.

That was when she knew that she really wanted him to kiss her. *Really*. Why wasn't he kissing her?

She didn't realise that she was holding her breath until the Doctor took one, deep and ragged, and glanced down. "Rose, I-

"Ro? Ro? Ro!" Tony pulled on her hand and held up a cardboard book.

Sick with reluctance, she tore her eyes away from the Doctor's face. "What is it, Tony?"

"Story, Ro!"

The Doctor cleared his throat and ran a hand across his hair. It sprang back into place. "Ah. Yes. That would be the one." He took the book from Tony's outstretched hands and looked at the cover. His face twisted into a mix of horror and bemusement. "*The Littlest Eel?*" He appealed to her. "That's not even a word! Whose idea was it to give him a book where the *title* contains an obvious grammatical error?"

She gave him a look. "It's just a book. Besides, it's his favourite."

Tony reached up towards the book in the Doctor's hand, a look of determination on his face. "Doc-tur! Doc-tuuuur!"

The Doctor blinked down at the child like he'd just realised he was there. "What?"

Rose slid the book from his hands before crouching down in front of the toddler. "You want me to read it, Tony?"

Tony nodded with all the gravity a two-year-old could possess. "Ro, read it!"

"I do all the voices," she explained.

"Ah, well, then. Who can argue with that?" the Doctor replied with a sly smile. He nodded towards the door. "I'll just go..."

Tony picked a plush elephant in a green suit off the floor and held it up to the Doctor. "Babar," he said.

The Doctor took the toy. "Babar, indeed! I loved him when I was little," he said, smiling fondly and almost caressing the big grey elephant ears. Rose gave him a funny look and he blushed. "Donna loved him."

Rose sat in the story chair-it was bright red, very comfortable, and big enough for two grown-ups. She pulled Tony into her lap and started to read. She was nearly half way through the strange story of the tiny eel as it moved from its tiny pond to the great big ocean when the Doctor settled into the chair beside her. By the time she'd finished the story, Tony was curled against her and drowsing. When she tried to get up, she discovered that she was pinned under more than the toddler.

The Doctor was fast asleep and leaning on her shoulder. Suddenly, it was like iron bands were tightening around her chest. She put the book down on the arm of the chair and gently brushed the Doctor's hair away from his forehead. True to form, it bounced right back to where it belonged.

Rose's face hurt from smiling. She always loved these moments, when the Doctor would be still and quiet and she could just watch him. They were rare, since he was always jumping about, running here and there. When he slept, he looked young, so young, and she could imagine that all the pain and loss he was running from (what else could it be?) was forgotten. She was witness to his peace, and she loved him like this as much as she loved him fast-talking and brilliant.

For a moment, she hated herself. It felt like a betrayal, thoughts like that, but she couldn't help it. He'd changed, yes, he was different, but he was still the Doctor, how could she doubt it? She'd loved him when he had that worn leather jacket and big ears, she'd loved him in pinstripes and great hair and she loved him like this. Uncertain and blushing, but still so mad and brilliant. (He still had really great hair.)

But they were off-kilter and it was agony, and he sometimes he seemed so lost and frightened. What could the rest of them do if the *Doctor* was afraid?

She manoeuvred out from under his heavy head and took Tony into his crib. When she came back, the Doctor was rubbing his eyes.

"Sorry," he said. "What was-" He yawned hugely. "Sorry."

Rose yawned in response. "'Sokay. Tony's asleep. You must have worn him out. He never wants to go to sleep before seven."

She watched the Doctor stand and stretch. He yawned again. "I'm not that tired," he told her. "I got a couple of hours last... this morning. I think."

"There's probably time for a nap before supper," she said. "You should get some rest."

"So should you," he said earnestly. "You look terrible."

"Thanks," she muttered.

"Not terrible," he said quickly. "Just tired. I thought maybe you haven't been getting any sleep."

"Have you?" she asked. "Tell me the truth."

He frowned. "I don't need-"

"You know that can't be true," she said, trying to be gentle about it. "I know you stay up all night."

He didn't look at her. Rose reached out and took his hand. That got his attention. "Just a nap," she murmured. "I'll wake you when it's time for supper."

Something flitted across his face, but she was too slow to catch what it was. "All right," he said reluctantly.

She left him at the door to his room. For a moment, she considered following him in, but he didn't ask, so she figured it was a bad idea. Back in her own bedroom, she lay on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Nerves, confusion and dread were coiling up in her stomach, threatening to spill out.

Why hadn't he kissed her?

It hadn't been her intention to fall asleep, but minutes later, she was.



Donna had just finished loading the dishwasher when the telephone rang. "Can you get that, Gramps?"

He picked up in the living room. Donna finished wiping down the counters and chewed on the inside of her cheek. She used to always have a cigarette after supper. She hadn't given smoking a second thought while she'd been running around with the Doctor-she'd been too bloody terrified. Was adrenaline a good replacement for nicotine?

Then her sense kicked in and she wrote, "Buy patches and gum" on the notepad hanging on the icebox.

"Donna, it's for you, darlin'."

Donna sighed. "I've got it in here," she called. She picked up the phone. "Hello?"

A woman's voice, common and a bit on the grating side said, "Hello, my name is Jackie. Is this Donna Noble?"

"Yes," she answered. "If you're selling something, we don't want any."

"Actually," Jackie said, not in the least bit fazed by Donna's tone, "I wanted to invite you to a party."

Donna frowned. "A party? What kind of party?"

"It's a birthday party. For my husband," Jackie replied.

She rolled her eyes. "And who's he?" she demanded.

"Pete Tyler."

Donna felt like her limbs had been locked into place. "I'm sorry? Did you say Pete *Tyler*? Vitex Pete Tyler? H.C. Clements Pete Tyler?"

"That's right." The voice sounded like she was smiling. "You and I have a mutual friend. We were talking, and I thought you might like to come and celebrate with us."

"When is it?" Donna wondered, before her brain demanded that she ask, "What friend?" That was Rose Tyler's father. Was Rose behind this? Why on Earth?

"He's called the Doctor," Jackie said. "And it's tomorrow night. I know it's dreadfully late notice, but I hope you can come. It would mean the world if you did."

Donna's left hand managed to grip the icebox. "Jackie... Tyler?"

"That's right," Jackie said patiently. "The party's at my house at eight o'clock. Your grandfather is invited, too, of course."

"*You*," Donna started. "Jackie Tyler of the insanely rich Tylers... want me to come to your *mansion*... for a birthday party?"

"You don't have to," Jackie said quickly. "I know, it might be a bit much. But I thought you could maybe do with some fun."

"I... I don't have anything to wear..." Nothing posh, nothing rich. She was a *secretary*, for Pete's sake! Just that black dress she'd worn to that executive dinner back in April that Mr. Holiday had dragged her to. She'd only been there to take down notes and hold onto the cards people gave to him.

There was a short thoughtful silence on the other end. "Oh, that's not a bother. I can send someone by in the morning. How is eleven o'clock?"

Donna was flabbergasted. "That... that's fine." Catching her own reflection in the glass of the china cabinet, she was surprised to see that she was smiling. "That'd be brilliant."

Jackie made a high, happy noise. "It's settled then!" Then, her voice lower, "Ten o'clock then. I'll send a car."

Donna fanned herself with one hand and tried to keep her voice steady. "Thank you, Mrs. Tyler."

"Call me Jackie, love. I look forward to seeing you and meeting your granddad. Cheers!"

"Cheers!" Donna put down the phone and did a silent, vibrant, fist-punching dance of excitement before running into the next room. Gramps was watching telly.

"Who was that, sweetheart?"

"Oh. My. God! You are *never* going to believe this!"

He turned around in his chair and smiled at her. "What's got you so excited?"

"Jackie *Tyler* just invited us to her *mansion*. Us!"

"Who's that?" he wondered.

Donna rolled her eyes. "Oh, Gramps. You know! Wife of the billionaire?"

"Oh, that was very nice of her, then," he said. "Why'd they invite us?"

"I don't even know. But apparently they're friends of the Doctor's. I don't know. But someone's coming by in the morning to fit us or give us clothes or something."

"When's the party?"

"Tomorrow night at eight."

Gramps frowned. "But I'm supposed to meet up with the lads at the pub tomorrow night."

Donna gave him a look. "You. Are. Not going to the pub when you could be going to a fancy party."

"They're expecting me!"

"You'll see them next week!"

He sighed resignedly. "All right, all right."

That night, it was all she could do to get to sleep. When she did, she had very strange dream that included such incredible images as a mountain made of sapphires, and ridiculous ones like the Doctor handing her a paper crown which turned to bright gold the moment she put it on her head.



There was also something about a volcano and a man who looked like an octopus. The octopus man had a beautiful operatic voice. She followed him down a long dark corridor, lit only by the crystal lantern he held aloft in his right hand. It kept getting darker and darker, but the music got louder. What had been a sort of lamenting aria became a bouncier swing tune. The octopus man's lantern was a trombone now. God knew how he was playing it, but they were in a great big hall now, and there were bright lights and she was wearing some spectacular gown that she couldn't quite see, but it was a blue or black with bright sparkling lights like stars on it. And there was the Doctor again, but his hair was flaming red, and his suit was a vibrant purple. He was dancing with Rose, who was wearing grey-flecked furs. Then there was some bloke in a toga who turned into a biomorph in front of her eyes and she woke up, feeling out of breath and not quite sure why.

At eleven o'clock, Ianto Jones showed up at the door with a car and took her and Gramps to a very fancy clothier, then to a dress shop. Donna drank it all in, feeling for the first time in her life like she was somebody important. The woman who showed her gowns was friendly and called her 'madam' like she was a lady. Everybody called Gramps 'sir', and it was obvious that he was enjoying it almost as much as she was. When they got back home, Donna was in a spectacular mood. She didn't even complain when Gramps asked Ianto in for tea and started going on about God knows what.

"So this party, eh?" he said. "Is it some big thing with toffs and bigwigs and all that?"

Ianto smiled into his teacup. "Some. But there's a large contingent of government workers, as well. I don't think you need to worry about fitting in."

"Not with the duds we got today," Gramps agreed. "That suit's better than the one I got married in, I don't mind telling you."

Donna poured herself a second cup of tea and munched on a chocolate biscuit. "I wanted to thank you again," she said. "For bringing my car back yesterday."

"Not at all," Ianto replied. He finished his tea. "You should be hearing from the Council by Tuesday afternoon about the parking tickets. A very nice young man named Eddie promised me that they would be taken care of by then. If not, you should let me know."

"That's brilliant." Donna pushed the plate of biscuits towards him.

He declined with a shake of the head and patted his stomach. "Watching my figure. Thank you."

"My Donna always keeps me fed," Gramps said proudly. "Always taking care of people."

She waved away the comment. "You said there would be a car later?"

"Be ready to go at seven-thirty." He glanced at a fob watch he had kept hidden in his waistcoat. "I'm afraid that I must get going. I have a few other things to do before the party this evening."

They walked Ianto to the door.

"Oh, I wanted to ask..." Donna wondered if she wasn't being stupid. "Should we bring a gift?"

Ianto looked amused, but not cruelly so. "Mr. Tyler prefers that his guests donate to charity in lieu of gifts. Though, if you like, he's partial to Scotch whisky. McCrimmon & Bell, specifically."

"Thank you. Again. For everything," Donna said.

"My pleasure, Ms. Noble. I'll see you both this evening."

Donna sent Gramps out to get the whisky and started on her hair. She wasn't about to look common, even though she fully expected to feel so. She found herself looking forward to seeing the Doctor and Rose. At least she knew them.

By the time the car arrived, she looked as good as she was going to get. The skirt of the gown was a bit wider than she'd anticipated. Getting through the door was unfortunately comical and the whole process did not do much to inspire confidence. She helped Gramps into the car and checked her make-up for the fifth time.

"Do you think this is okay?" She peered into the tiny mirror-the only one that fit in the ridiculously small clutch she'd gotten to match the deep blue of the dress-and pressed her lips together. She should have chosen a different colour lipstick. This one wasn't bright enough.

"I told you, you look lovely," Gramps said, patting where he thought her knee was, but missing. What he patted was the edge of the seat.

She clicked her clutch closed and pulled the top of her dress up. "I feel like I'm going to fall out. I knew I should have gotten something with straps. Why did I let that woman talk me into this dress?"

"Stop worrying, Donna." He adjusted his bow tie. "Is this straight?"

"It won't be if you keep fussing with it." She flipped her scarf aside (smacking both of them with the heavy beaded end) and arranged his tie.

"I wish you'd have let me get the clip-on."

"Nobody there's going to be wearing a clip-on tie. These people are quality."

Gramps frowned. "You say that like we're not."

Donna gave her grandfather a baleful look. "You know what I mean."

"Tyler's one of those self-made types," Gramps pointed out. "He's not going to care about ties." He pulled her hand from dusting his lapel. "Just like your Mum, worryin' yourself over nothing." She stopped and stared back at him. "Just look at you. You look like a goddess off the silver screen. Any of them who can't see that ain't worth a thought."

Donna squeezed his hand. "I do like the dress," she murmured, a smile creeping over her mouth.

"Try an' have a good time. One night of dancing with the rich and famous." He squeezed her hand. "I just wish you had someone 'sides me to share it with."

She looked at his eyes as they turned red and shining. She took his hand a little tighter, and shook it for emphasis. "Well, there is nobody I can think of I'd rather be with. You're my world." She sniffed and cried out in dismay. "Oh, lord, I'm gonna ruin my mascara!"

Gramps chuckled and helped her dab at her eyes.

By the time the car pulled into the neat gravel drive of the Tyler estate, Donna's make-up was immaculate and their eyes were clear. She was giddy when a man opened the car door and helped her out, and surprised that he seemed to know their names. They were shown to the front door and through a magnificent foyer lit by a crystal chandelier the likes of Donna had only seen in films. Wearing a floor-length gown made her move carefully. She was regretting the strappy shoes a bit, though she was still glad she'd turned down the stilettos.

Gramps offered her his arm in a playful mockery of a gentleman. Grinning, she accepted. Her attempts at a demure smile were completely defeated by her excitement.

The main party seemed to be out behind the house. She could hear bright, brassy music, laughter and talking, the clinking of glasses... Then she heard her own name. She looked around and saw a woman waving for her attention. The woman had blonde hair in a spectacular up-do, and her dress was a charming rosy pink. Donna smiled automatically. The woman hurried over and clasped her hand like she was a long-lost friend.

"It's so good to see you! I'm late getting to the door to greet everyone. I'm so glad I caught you."

"You're Jackie," Donna said, her brain finally catching up. Jackie looked different than she'd expected. She'd never read the biography, but she'd seen the cover when the book had littered book stores those years ago. This woman was less serene, less poised, but she looked happier.

Mrs. Tyler held out her arm to Gramps. "This must be your granddad!"

"Wilfred Mott. Pleased to make your acquaintance." Gramps actually bowed a bit and kissed Jackie's hand.

Donna was ready to wish for the floor to swallow her up, but Jackie was delighted. "Oh, you charmer! Go on, then! There are nibbles everywhere, lots of champagne..."

Gramps nudged Donna.

"We brought a gift," Donna said. Gramps held up the sparkly orange gift bag.

"Oh, that's so sweet!" Jackie took the bag and smiled conspiratorially before peeking inside. "Ooh, he'll love you for that." She kissed Gramps on the cheek. "I'll make sure he gets it. Go now, I'll catch you both later." She waved over their heads. "Amanda, love! Is that you? My God, your dress!"

And thus Jackie was gone as quickly as she'd come.

"Shall we, then?" Donna said. Gramps took her arm again and they continued on. They stepped out onto a lovely courtyard lit with fairy lights and what looked like a million candles leading up to a tent that was bigger than their entire house. The music was coming from inside.

Donna's heart fluttered a little to see all the glorious dresses and the men in their tuxedos-she recognized a good number of them from telly and the Net. Gramps pointed out the President standing and talking with a woman Donna had seen on some entertainment programme.

"That's Harriet Jones!" he said, barely keeping his voice at a whisper. "I voted for her!"

Donna grinned. "Oh, this is wizard! Better than any old pub, right Granddad?"

The band ended their song ("Begin The Beguine") and a very handsome man took hold of the old-fashioned microphone stand.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he said in a pleasing American baritone. "I just wanted to say how happy we are to be here tonight." He flashed a smile brighter than the glints of light off of the brass instruments behind him. "I hope to see you all dancing. And just so you know, we do take requests. We have the entire Glenn Miller, Count Basie and Lady Gaga songbooks." The people who were listening laughed. "Enjoy the party!"

With a flourish that sent the tails of his jacket whirling, he turned to the band and counted off. Within moments, there was an energetic swing in the air.

"Who is *that*?" Donna wondered, mesmerized by the man as he half-danced, half-conducted.

"Fifty-first Century Brass," Gramps said.

Donna gave him an odd look. "Up with the latest music trends?" she teased.

"Nah, it says so on the bass drum."

A man with a tray passed by, distracting her from her appreciation of the handsome bandleader and his equally dishy band. She gave Gramps a mock-serious look. "Jackie said something about nibbles, I do believe."

"Lead on, my girl!"

"Rose?"

The Doctor tapped on her door with two knuckles. "Are you in there, Rose?"

He waited. There was no sound from inside. He waited five more seconds, then six, ten, fifteen, thirty...

"Rose? Are you all right?"

Okay, now he was worried. He tried the knob. It was locked. He wondered why she was locking the door; who exactly did she want to keep out?

Just when the Donna voice suggested that maybe it was nosy gits like him, he whipped the sonic screwdriver from inside his tuxedo jacket. (The first test had been to modify the inner pocket to allow for bigger-on-the-inside. More tests were forthcoming.)

Time to test it on a lock.

The blue light at the end glowed promisingly and the whirr was at the right frequency. At least it started out there. Suddenly, the screwdriver made an annoyed sort of screech and the light went out.

"Oi!" he grumbled. "That's not helpful!"

The door opened. Rose stood with one hand on the door knob and the other on her hip. "Were you sonicing my door?" she accused.

"Apparently not," he said ruefully as he examined the sonic screwdriver. He tapped it against the door jamb until it lit up again, and then he turned it off and put it back in his pocket. "Still got some bugs to work out."

Rose rolled her eyes and retreated back into the room. He followed.

"Close the door behind you," she said wearily.

Rose was not dressed, though she was by no means naked. There was a satiny dressing gown obscuring all the best bits (okay, *some* of the best bits, he thought, catching a good glimpse of her leg as she sat down at the vanity) but it was pale ivory and he could see the outline of the back of her thong through the material. He became suddenly very lost in thought when he realised that she wasn't wearing a bra. Thought that was rudely interrupted by the Donna bits' commentary on how she couldn't stand thongs. He shut the voice down as fast and hard as he could; he was *not* going to acknowledge the fact that he had intimate knowledge of Donna's opinions on and experiences with... intimates.

"The party's started," he said, hoping this would help him ignore the unwanted information.

"I know." Rose still had her back to him. She was looking in the mirror and sweeping her hair back and off of her shoulders. Even with his human nose, he could smell her perfume.

"I can go..." he began.

"No, 'sall right. I need help zipping up the dress anyhow."

He swallowed and nodded quickly to cover up the fact that he'd done so. "Right."

She put on her mascara and eye shadow. She worse less make-up now than she used to. He sat on the little padded bench at the end of the bed with his hands suspended between his knees as she went into the next room. He wasn't sure if it was an en suite, or simply another room. He'd discovered the other night that he not only had his own en suite bathroom, but also a small sitting room. Even as he'd wondered what he needed with his own sitting room, he had been somewhat relieved by the idea of having more than one room that was *his*.

Rose emerged and the Doctor found himself staring. The dress was black and strapless. It was form-fitting at the top, and had a sort of gently gathered look to it from the top to her hips. The skirt was simple, and the fabric had a satin sheen to it that looked like it would feel wonderful under his fingertips. Rose smiled at him.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"You look brilliant," he said. That wasn't right. Not what he meant. "Beautiful."

"For a human?" she wondered, eyes sparkling with just a hint of mischief.

Somehow, he dared to stand and move closer. "So beautiful."

She turned to show him her side. "I got the zip up most of the way. Just need a hand for the last bit."

His hands didn't shake as he pulled the zip upwards. How were his hands not shaking? He hadn't been this close to her since yesterday before he'd slept through supper. He'd had *dreams*-the sort that he wasn't used to having-and he'd spent most of the day burning to speak to her and never finding the opportunity. He had to make her understand how important...

"Thanks," she said, smiling shyly up at him.

"You're welcome," he murmured.

"I suppose Mum sent you up here to see what was taking me so long."

"No," he said. He hesitated. She had moved away from him and back to the vanity to put on her jewellery.

"Give me a hand?"

He did the clasp on her necklace. Why was this so hard? She *knew* how he felt. She'd said it. (Once. Years ago.) He'd said it. (Three weeks ago as of this morning.)

Why couldn't he just *say* what he was thinking?

In the back of his mind, Donna sighed. *Because men never do, do they?*

"Rose?"

"Yeah?" She turned to look at him over her shoulder. His hand was already resting there, on her bare skin. The urge to reach for her face was like some sort of hurricane inside him.

"I wanted to... to ask you about..."

Her eyebrows crowded together. "Ask about what?"

"You know what we said on the zeppelin... On the way here."

Fear flickered in her eyes. "Yeah..."

Oh. She wasn't ready. He was an idiot for even mentioning it! She was still thinking about *him*. How could he compete with that? He may have felt the same about her as *he* did, but that didn't mean that she felt the way she had.

He tried to take his hand from her shoulder and back away. His hand, however, did not obey.

"What's wrong? Doctor?"

The right hand was still on her shoulder. He stared at it. He was going mad. His hand did *not* have a mind of its own, and it was *not* trying to rebel, or stage any sort of coup.

Are humans always this hysterical?

Don't start, Spaceman.

Rose's hands found his face. "Doctor? Are you okay?"

"I know I'm not the same," he said suddenly. "And you're probably furious with him, and I don't expect..."

Rose's mobile rang. She glanced to her bedside table. "Ignore it," she said.

He shook his head, dislodging her soft fingers. His throat was all tight and his stomach felt like it had been replaced by a black hole. Part of him wondered if he wasn't ill. "No, no, you'd better get it."

"Are you s-"

"Yeah. Go ahead. It's fine."

Her hands left his face entirely and he wanted to collapse on the vanity stool. His heart was pounding worryingly. He wasn't sure how much more it could take. One muscle the size of his fist could not possibly withstand this for very long.

Rose answered her phone. "Rose Tyler." She frowned. "When? Do you want me to- I know, but I can..." She sighed. "No problem. Call me if- Yes, ma'am."

She dropped the phone on the bed.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

Rose was glaring at the little black phone on the dark blue duvet. "That was Martha. There was a power surge at the Warehouse. She says Toshiko got everything back online, but they lost all the systems for a few minutes. The Argus terminal was fried." She let out a growl of frustration. "I don't want to deal with this anymore!"

"You don't have to," he said, confused. "If you want to leave Torchwood-"

"It's not Torchwood," she said, and for a terrible moment, he thought he understood.

The single heart wasn't going to last long. At least, the metaphorical one wasn't. Funny how he thought in metaphors. Not that he hadn't before. They were just *significant* now.

He nodded. "We should go down to the party."

"I'll be down in a minute. I have to finish my hair."

"I could help," he said.

"I've got it." Her voice was cheerful, but the smile was fake, and he knew it and she had to know that he knew it, so why was she doing it? It was like she'd forgotten. He'd never thought she would forget.

Cursing the time lost and the aching singularity in his gut, he went downstairs and joined the party. The tent was a spectacle, all bright lights and bubbling champagne. There were more than a hundred people here, and a lot of them were dancing to the swing music. (Though most of them didn't seem to know what they were doing.)

He surveyed the band. Nice large saxophone section, plenty of trombones and trumpets. The drummer seemed to favour Chick Webb, the guitarist was trying to sound like Django Reinhardt, the pianist

looked a bit like Blossom Dearie, and the bass player... He was standing with a bright white upright bass, wearing a tuxedo and grinning at his band mates as he played.

The Doctor took a deep breath. He *was* going mad. Because he knew that man, and he *couldn't possibly* be here. He didn't *exist*.

Despite whatever could or could not be, there was Lee McAvoy. Well... That wasn't his real name, of course. At least it hadn't been.

But there was no mistaking him. Donna *knew* that face. The way he stood and smiled, his laughter, his dear voice, and the touch of his hands.

The Doctor left the tent as quickly as he could without running. Out on the garden pavement, he stopped a caterer carrying a tray of champagne and drank two glasses in quick succession. Then he found a chair and sat down and fought the panic roiling inside him.

Donna's voice was silent. He squeezed his eyes shut and cursed himself and Donna and *him*.

He had known that losing the family she'd had in the Library computer had been hard for Donna. Until this moment, he hadn't known how hard, how devastating. What recovery she had made had been aided by the knowledge that what she'd lost was only a fantasy.

But if Lee was *real* in this world then it was possible that he'd been real *there*, too. And she'd given up looking for him. She'd promised that she would find him, and she'd just *given up*.

He'd given up. He'd said goodbye to Rose and left her alone, and he'd given up on ever seeing her again. Oh, maybe in his weakest moments, he'd snuck the occasional glimpse at her childhood (always at a distance), but he hadn't tried everything he could to get her back, and he should have. To hell with timelines and universes and the Void, he should have *kept trying*.

"Doctor, is that you?"

The Doctor lifted his head and saw a vision in ginger and blue.

"Donna?" Whatever this mental illness could be called, it was very cruel this evening, he thought bitterly.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked.

He bobbed his head from side to side. "Going a bit mad," he said.

"Going?" she teased.

He scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, well..."

"Mind if I sit down?"

He shrugged. The vision of Donna sat in the chair next to him.

"Brilliant party," she said. "I should thank you."

"For what?" he wondered. He'd only caused her trouble. He didn't even want to think of what *he* had had to do to the real Donna. He couldn't process it. The Donna in him bucked up in rage at even the tangent of thought.

"Well, when Jackie invited me, I got the impression it was because of you."

Pushing the mental Donna to the side, the Doctor stared at the one sitting beside him. "Jackie invited you?"

Donna frowned. "You didn't know?"

"I had no clue."

"Oh." Donna looked away nervously. "I see. I'll let you get back to your madness, then." She started to get up.

"Donna, wait!" He grabbed her hand and pulled her back. She stared at their hands, a little bit surprised, a little bit scared. "I'm sorry, I was only... Don't mind me." He spun a finger around his temple. "Quite mental. I am *glad* you're here, though."

Her smile returned and she squeezed his fingers reassuringly before pulling her hand away. "Isn't it posh? I love the candles everywhere. And did you *see* the band? I haven't seen that many beautiful men together since that time Nina dragged me to a gay club."

"Good music, too," the Doctor said.

"Oh yeah. They played my favourite song."

"What's that, then?" he wondered.

"'A Sunday Kind of Love'," she replied. Then she blushed. "It's smarmy, but I love it."

"That's a good song," he said.

"That bandleader has a great voice. He ought to be in shows."

"Which one was he?"

Donna gave him a sly little smile. "If you have to ask, then you didn't see him."

"Ah! Somebody devastatingly gorgeous, then." Then, as an afterthought, "It wasn't the bassist by any chance, was it?"

"No, he didn't have an instrument." She stood up and nodded towards the tent, wearing that smile she always wore when she was trying to cheer him up. "Come on inside. You look like you could use something to break you out of your sulks."

Dear old Donna. "Yeah," he agreed. "That'd be lovely."

She pulled him into the tent by his cuff links, showed him which *hors d'oeuvres* were the best ("Avoid the grey stuff."), made sure that he got a glass of champagne (he drank this one a little more slowly, since he was afraid that the last two might have made him a teensy bit squiffy...) and then she tried to find Wilf so that he could say hello.

"Where's he got to?" she grumbled.

"Over there." The Doctor pointed in the direction of an elderly socialite in ivory. Wilf was spinning her across the floor and smiling like he was having the time of his life.

"Oh Lord..." Donna moaned.

"Let him be, he's having fun." The Doctor waggled his eyebrows. "And so's she from the looks of it."

"Yeah, all right." Donna looked at him. "So, what happened to you? Somebody make you comb your hair?"

Baffled, he stared at her. "What?"

She pointed at his head. "Usually you look like you stuck your finger in a socket."

The Doctor put a hand to his hair, which was combed down at the moment for the sake of formality. "Oi! I spent a lot of time cultivating that hairstyle, I'll have you know. Took me years to get it just right."

"I'll bet." She flipped a bit of her hair back over her shoulder. She was wearing it down and curled, except there was a bit at the top where she'd pulled it back and put in some shimmery hair pins. Her dress had some of the same features as Rose's (strapless, gathered on top) but it was a deep blue that was almost the same colour as the TARDIS. The skirt was grand and had gathered sections dotted with bright rhinestones, plus there was a big patch of rhinestones in a vee on the bodice.

"That's a very nice dress," he said. Indeed, there was a thread of jealousy in him.

"Thanks," Donna said. "I thought so. So... Where's Rose, then?"

The Doctor looked away and watched the stage. They were playing an Ellington tune. The pianist was having quite a good time. "Upstairs," he said.

"You should go get her." Donna had one meaningful eyebrow raised at him.

"Nah," he said with false nonchalance. "She'll be down in a minute."

Donna did not believe him, he could tell. That was precisely the look that went with, "Time Lord code again?" Except this Donna didn't know it was Time Lord code.

He realised, either from internal sources or lightning strike epiphany, that he wanted to tell her everything. Maybe it was because she was part of him now, but he knew that she would understand,

or even if she wouldn't *understand*, exactly, she would listen. He wondered if they could get away now. He could take one of the cars and they could just drive and talk and maybe it would help.

Then he turned and saw Rose standing at the entrance of the tent. His heart stopped. Or started to race, he couldn't have even been sure. (Stupid contrary human biorhythms.) All he knew was that his chest felt like it was going to burst and that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Donna bumped him on the arm. "Go on," she whispered encouragingly.

He couldn't move. "I don't-"

"Don't be thick," Donna said. "She's looking for you."

Rose was looking around the tent, yes, but that didn't mean that she was looking for-oh. She was smiling now, and walking right towards him.

Donna gave him a little shove. He stumbled and glared back at her. When he turned back, Rose was there, still smiling that wide, brilliant smile. Her hair was a combination of twists and cascades, and her eyes were bright and sparkling, and if he didn't kiss her now, he was never going to forgive himself.

"Rose!"

Jackie. Oh, no, not *now*! The Doctor groaned as Rose turned around gave her mother a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Don't you look lovely! Hello, Donna!"

Donna smiled broadly. "Hello, again."

"Rose, have you seen your father? He's supposed to be in here by now."

"Haven't seen him," Rose said, shaking her head. "Did you check in the house?"

"Of course I did," Jackie said, rolling her eyes.

"I think I see him over there," Donna said. "Let's go get him, shall we?" Then, with a tiny wink in the Doctor's direction, she gracefully directed Jackie away and walked with her toward the other side of the dance floor. "Tell me, Jackie, where on earth did you find this band?"

Rose rolled her eyes in relief. "God bless Donna," she said.

"Amen," the Doctor replied with a smirk. He reached out and took her hand. "Do you want to get something to eat?"

Her fingers moved serpentine between his. Maybe it wasn't him she was tired of dealing with? Hope rose up in him like a bird of myth.

"Sounds like a plan," she said, tongue peeking between her teeth, and for one wonderful moment, it was just like the years apart had never happened. They walked hand in hand to the buffet table. They

didn't talk, but they didn't have to. It was perfect enough that he decided he could forgive himself just for a little while longer.

They danced together next. The band was playing "Moonlight Serenade." The Doctor held Rose close. She let him press his cheek to hers and her hand wandered from his arm to his waist.

When the song changed to "Come Fly With Me", he grinned and they danced a livelier step. The words started and he murmured along, half-singing, half-reciting.

Rose stopped dancing. She turned her head to the stage and stared. "Oh my God."

He frowned. "What's wrong? I thought I was dancing rather well."

She swatted at his arm. "Not you, up there. Aren't you listening?"

The Doctor looked up at the stage and his mouth fell slack. "I have gone mad," he decided.

Rose grinned back and grabbed his arm in her excitement. "Oh my God, it's *Jack!*"

Jack Harkness was on stage in a white tuxedo, singing and dipping the microphone like a dance partner.

"He's the bandleader," the Doctor said helplessly. "How is he the bandleader?"

"That's so *brilliant!*" Rose exulted. "Oh my *God*, do you think he's still a Time Agent? He looks younger than he did on the *Crucible*. Like when we first met him." She pulled him by the arm towards the stage. "We have to say hello!"

He held her hand, trying to hold her back. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why not?" Rose wondered. "You can be friends with Donna. I want to say hello to Jack. What harm can it do?"

"For one thing, he might not be going by Jack," he said. "That was a name he assumed when he was in 1941, remember?"

Rose's smile fell away. "Oh. You're right. He never told me his real name. Did he tell you? You must have had a chance to find out, after you met him again. How did he get to the twenty-first century, anyway? I wish I'd had more time to talk to him."

"Didn't ask," he said carefully. "Anyway, Rose... He's just here to play for the party." He darted a glance at the rhythm section. Lee was taking a solo. He wondered if Donna had noticed him at all.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around, expecting Donna, but to his surprise it was Martha Jones. She was in a garnet gown and she was flushed and a little bit out of breath.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said.

Rose tore her eyes away from the stage. "Martha? You made it! You look-"

"Can I have a word with you two?"

"Of course," Rose began. "What's-?"

"Outside." Martha turned on her heels and headed out of the tent.

The Doctor and Rose exchanged glances before following her. Martha didn't stop until they were actually out in the grass, quite a ways from the tent and all the party goers. There was, however, Toshiko wearing a teal dress and Owen looking sullen in a tux. Toshiko smiled at the Doctor as they approached. She was holding what looked like a larger version of the biomorph detector he'd made, except it didn't have the little dish.

"Status," Martha said.

Toshiko called out as they approached. "Still one signal. It's very faint."

"Are they here?" Rose asked sharply.

Martha gave her a sidelong look. "The power surge that knocked out our systems? Turns out the source was down in the Warehouse holding cells. Something that the Zvazvera did."

"They created a bio-electric field," Toshiko said. "Apparently they can create a charge by-"

"What matters," Owen said, cutting Toshiko off. "Is that when they knocked out the power, they were able to escape. By the time we had the system up, they were long gone."

"How did they get past you?" Rose wondered.

"They dug a tunnel." Martha pulled the hem of her gown up and revealed a wide black garter on her thigh. It had a holster on it. The Doctor narrowed his eyes at the small pistol.

"You don't need that," he said.

Martha raised an eyebrow at him. "Says Mr. Expert. I don't suppose you were aware that they could tunnel through concrete?"

"I'd never seen them do it," he said, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. "I suppose I knew it was *possible*, but..."

"We have to get everybody out of here," Rose said. "If they come here, people will get hurt."

"They're already here," Martha said.

"But you said the signal was faint!"

Toshiko shook her head. "The scanner can't get a good reading on them when they change shape. I think they mask their bio-signature with a sort of-"

Martha turned to Owen. "Do you have the tranquilizers?"

He held up a silver briefcase. "Right here. Ianto is supposed to have the gun."

"Where's Ianto?" the Doctor demanded.

Owen rolled his eyes. "I'm not his keeper! I haven't seen him since this morning."

Martha narrowed her eyes. "This morning?"

Owen whirled on her. "That's right, I went to the funeral! Why don't you just demote me? I'll clean the ruddy toilets."

"We all went," Rose said, voice rising in challenge. Martha's eyes were steely.

The Doctor felt off his game. What funeral? This morning? That was the problem with sleep, you missed things!

Rose continued. "Ianto, Owen and me, and Lalit, and my dad. Faye was one of us. You can give us reprimands later, if you like. But right now, I want to do whatever is necessary to keep any of these people from getting hurt."

Toshiko held up a hand. "Um... I'm sorry to interrupt, but we've got movement."

The Doctor peered over her shoulder. It seemed that she'd rigged up a simple visual user interface. There was a sweeping line like a radar screen, showing a moving yellow blip. "That's twenty meters north of us."

"Nobody leaves," Martha says. "We followed them all the way here. There's more than a dozen individuals, all of them could have assumed a human shape. Keep on the look out for any odd behaviour." She held up her gun and cocked it. Toshiko winced at the sound.

"The tranquilizers work," the Doctor growled. "You don't need to kill them."

"I won't aim for their heads, if that's what you're worried about," she replied.

"They're not human, they're invertebrates," he snapped. "A gunshot wound could be deadly no matter where your aim is."

"He's right," Rose said. "We don't need to kill them."

"If you had killed them instead of capturing them, we wouldn't be in this situation," Martha said coldly. Rose glared defiantly back at her. "Toshiko, can you get a read on distinct life signs?"

Toshiko shook her head. "There are too many people. I'm sorry."

"Owen, find lanto, get that tranquillizer gun. I want minimal casualties."

The Doctor appealed to Toshiko. "I think I can help you with the scan." He took out the sonic screwdriver and tried to adjust the perimeters of the readings.

A scream rang out. All five of them froze on the spot, but only for a moment. Martha and Rose ran back towards the house, Owen right behind them. The Doctor took a few more seconds with the scanner before tossing it back to Toshiko. "Try that!" he cried and ran after the others.

She scrambled to hold it upright again. "Wait! Doctor! What did you do?"

Another scream. From this distance it sounded like Jackie. His heart thundered in his chest as he ran.

"It's the bloody tuxedo," he complained as he caught up with Rose in the foyer. "Every single time I wear one...!"

Rose flashed him a smile before hurrying towards the large parlour. Most of the guests were out in the tent, but there were some who wanted a quieter atmosphere.

Martha, the Doctor and Rose burst in on what appeared to be a quiet political conversation. Harriet Jones was seated across from a man who looked vaguely familiar, but not familiar enough that the Doctor bothered to figure out why.

"Miss Tyler!" Harriet Jones's bodyguards had their weapons raised and pointed at the three of them. "What on earth?"

"Are you all right, ma'am?" Rose looked President Jones up and down.

"Of course I am! What's going on, Miss Tyler? Ms. Jones?"

Martha had her gun pointed back at the bodyguards. "We heard a scream, Madam President," she said. "My team and I have reason to believe that there is a group of hostile aliens on the premises."

"I didn't hear any scream," President Jones said. "Oh, put those down, Harry, Daniel. These people are Torchwood." She turned to her companion. "I'm sorry, Mr. Green, you'll have to excuse me. These things happen all the time in my job." She brushed off the front of her simple black gown and let out a quick little sigh. "All right then, what do you need me to do, Ms. Jones?"

"Sit tight, ma'am. Tosh!"

Toshiko came forward. "Yes."

"Scan the room."

"Clear."

Martha lowered her weapon. "Okay. Rose, Doctor, Tosh, you keep looking. I'm going to secure this room and call for back up from Torchwood One." She put on a small earpod-like device and made the call. They left Martha with the President. A bewildered Mr. Green followed them.

"Aliens?" he asked weakly. "I thought Torchwood was an extension of Health and Safety?"

Toshiko gave him a tiny smile. "I suppose that depends on your definition," she said.

Mr. Green nodded distractedly. "Yes, I suppose it would."

"Where did that scream come from?" Rose wondered, frustrated. "And where are Owen and Ianto?"

"We'll split up. Rose, you take Toshiko and go to the tent and double check that everyone is all right. Keep them calm."

Rose nodded. Then, she opened her mouth to ask a question.

The Doctor paused. "What is it?"

"Mum couldn't find Dad," she said.

"I'll find him. It'll be all right."

She nodded and turned to go with Toshiko.

"Rose?"

She turned back. "Yeah?"

It only took two steps to close the distance. He held her face and lowered his to meet her.

The kiss was too brief, but those four seconds seemed to stretch before him, growing and enveloping him completely. He could almost imagine the golden light of the Bad Wolf burning his lips.

When they came apart, Rose was pink in the face. She cleared her throat and said, "Is that what you were wanting to ask me?"

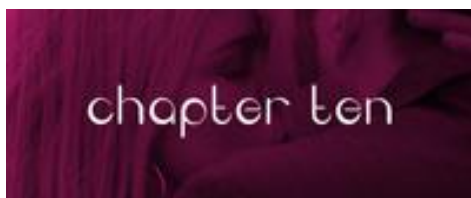
The smile that burst across his face was completely involuntary. "Yeah, I suppose it was."

She kissed him. He barely had time to close his eyes before it had ended. (Why couldn't time expand around that one?)

"There's your answer," she said.

Even as she hurried away, the Doctor wanted to crow. Or shout, or sing, or something.

Of course, there were pressing matters to attend to. He ran up the stairs two and three at a time.

A rectangular title card with a dark red, textured background. The text "chapter ten" is centered in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font.

chapter ten

Donna was in the tent dancing with a very nice and slightly handsome man named Lewis who worked at Vitex when she heard a scream. Her first thought was that it was high spirits, until she heard the second one.

"What was that?" she wondered aloud.

"What was what?" her partner asked absently as his hand drifted down.

Donna gave him a good, hard glare. "A scream. Somebody just screamed."

"I didn't hear anything."

"No, apparently not. So what better time to cop a feel?"

Lewis balked, then gave her a sheepish grin. "Er..."

Donna pulled his hand off her arse and left him standing on the dance floor.

The first person she thought to look for was the Doctor. If things were going to get dangerous, he was the person to see.

Who she found was Dr. Harper.

"Dr. Harper?" He didn't look up from the silver briefcase he had spread open on a table. "Owen?"

He glanced at her and frowned. "Donna? What are you doing here?"

She folded her arms. "I *was* dancing. What is that stuff?" The case was filled with little vials of liquid packed in black foam.

"Antidote," he said, making a face. "Which is good, except, it was supposed to be tranquillizer. Other case must still be in the car." He sighed. "That's just great. Bloody fantastic."

Donna glanced around to see if anyone was listening to them. She leaned close and whispered, "Are they here? Those biomorph things?"

Owen made a slightly different face, this one darker and more annoyed, maybe at her, maybe still at the briefcase. "Yes."

"Then why aren't you getting everyone out of here?" she asked him, worried.

"Because the fucking bugs are already here, and they could be anyone." He gave her an appraising look. "You've dealt with them. Have you seen any thing suspicious here?"

"No. But I thought I heard-"

"Have you seen Ianto Jones, then?"

"Not since this afternoon."

"Bugger." Owen flipped the case shut. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a gun. As he checked to see if it was loaded, he asked her, "Do you know how to use one of these?"

"Of course I don't!" Donna hissed. What if someone saw the gun? People would freak out.

"Neither do I." Owen smirked. "But I'm pretty good at *Halo*."

"Isn't that a video game?" Donna wondered, not quite sure.

There was another scream. This one cut through the music and people were starting to mutter. Donna and Owen exchanged a glance before running towards the sound.

"What are you doing?" Owen demanded, stopping her with one arm. "You gonna stab 'em with your shoe?"

"Oi!" Donna held up a warning finger. "Don't start with me!"

Owen threw up his hand. "Fine! Get yourself killed."

People had moved, as they do, towards the entrance of the tent. They were packed together, craning their necks and chattering and completely blocking the way.

"Pardon me, excuse..." Owen swore under his breath.

Donna took a deep breath. "*Out of the way!*"

The crowd parted around her. Owen gave her a look of mingled disbelief and respect.

She smiled politely at the staring people. "Thank you."

They had reached the back door of the house when there was a crash. Shards of glass rained down on them and two bodies sailed out onto the grass. Donna gaped. The Doctor was on the ground wrestling with another man in a tux.

"What the hell is he doing?" Owen cried.

"Doctor!" Donna ran over to where the two men struggled.

The Doctor took a punch to the jaw and fell back. The other man got on his knees and took the Doctor's throat in both hands. She hesitated a moment-the man the Doctor was fighting was Pete Tyler. You couldn't walk in London without seeing his face at least once on a billboard or something.

Why would Pete Tyler try to kill the Doctor? (Unless Pete didn't want him dating his daughter. If so, this was a bit of an overreaction.)

The Doctor's face was turning red; he struggled to pull Pete's hands away from his neck, but the other man was stronger.

Donna ran back to the paved part of the garden and picked up one of the folding garden chairs.

"Oi! Let him go!"

Pete did not let go, and when he looked at her, his eyes were bloodshot and mad with anger and hunger. The Doctor's lips were blue.

Donna raised the chair and swung it as hard as she could against Pete's back.

He fell away to one side, but he wasn't unconscious. He barely looked stunned. But he had lost his grip on the Doctor.

Donna got between the Doctor gasping on the grass and Pete as he stood to menace them.

"That's not my husband!" Jackie's voice came from the broken window above. "Donna! He's one of them morpher things!"

"I know!" Donna bellowed.

Not-Pete grinned at her like a hungry lion. "Hello there, Donna. How you been?"

"You leave him alone," Donna warned, gripping the chair tighter to combat the shaking of her hands. "Go home, why don't you? Leave all these people alone!"

The whites of Pete's eyes turned red and glittering. "Make me."

Owen had helped the Doctor to his feet. "Stop what you're doing right now, Zvee," the Doctor said in a hoarse voice.

"Or what?"

"Or I'll have to stop you."

Donna wondered if his brain had suffered from the lack of oxygen.

Zvee, or whatever his name was, bared black teeth.

"Back off!" Rose appeared by her side holding a gun.

"Oh, not you again," Zvee moaned, his face falling.

"Where is he?" she shouted. "If you killed him, I swear..."

"Rose!" Jackie leaned out the window. "He's with me! Is there a doctor down there? A regular doctor, I mean!"

Rose nodded towards the window. "Owen!"

"Got it!" He pushed his way into the house.

Donna marvelled that so many people could just stand around while all this was going on. She put down the chair. "Fat lot of good they are," she muttered.

The Doctor rubbed his neck. "Some people just can't take it." He looked at Rose and said, softly, "You can put the gun down, Rose."

"Put the gun down, Rose," Zvee mocked, in perfect imitation of the Doctor's voice.

Rose's lips curled back. "Shut your mouth."

"Are you going to shoot me, Rose?" The biomorph was using a woman's voice now. Rose's hands were shaking.

"Rose," the Doctor whispered, urgently. "Don't listen to him." He took a couple of steps closer to her, and slowly reached for the weapon. "Pete's all right."

"Shut up!" she cried. There were tears running down her face. (She must have had a really good mascara, though.) "You shut your filthy mouth, you-"

Suddenly, all the people who'd been standing and staring from the tent were running and screaming. Donna spun around.

"Gramps!" Forget Zvee. She ran back to the tent. She could dimly hear the Doctor calling after her and Rose swearing. Donna cursed her shoes and the grass and the skirt as she ran. If they hurt her grandfather, she'd kill them.

People were streaming from the tent in a chaotic horde. There was no way she was getting in the there. Then, in a stroke of brilliance, she went to the side, pulled up the white fabric wall of the tent and stumbled inside.

On the stage, there was a fight going on. The handsome bandleader punched a guest in the face. The guest, an unassuming middle aged woman, took the punch like a 300-pound boxer. She swung her arm into the bandleader's solar plexus, sending him careening into the music stands.

Right.

Donna looked around to see if she could find her grandfather. Maybe he'd fled with the crowd. She ought to have checked.

Then she heard his voice. He was waving one arm over his head. "Donna! Run, sweetheart!" A young man in a tuxedo was advancing on him and a few others who had gotten penned in a corner.

She strode towards the biomorph. "Oi! *Bug!*"

The young man-biomorph turned its head around like an owl on a nature documentary. Gramps paled and looked nauseated. Then it turned to look back at him. Gramps tried a smile while Donna mimed: pull up the tent; run away.

"Didn't you hear me, *bug?*" Donna said.

The biomorph turned back and buzzed angrily.

"That's right," she said. Gramps helped the others outside. "You disgusting thing." Donna wished she had a cockroach or something to smash. (It had worked for Will Smith.) "Why don't you go and find a nice big pile of dung to play in?"

The biomorph began to circle. Donna realised that she'd made a very big mistake coming alone.

Gramps saw the last person outside and dropped the tent fabric. She jerked her head and mouthed, "Go!"

He shook his head. Donna grimaced. Eighty-seven year old man with a weak heart versus a giant shape-shifting insect from space. *Fantastic.*

"I could drain you dry, little ape."

"I doubt that," Donna said haughtily.

"Oh, I think he could." Donna spun and saw the middle-aged woman who'd beat up the bandleader walking up behind her.

"Bugger," she muttered.

"Donna, run!" Gramps shouted. He looked around helplessly for something to pick up or throw. "You leave 'er alone!"

The biomorph woman smiled at him. "Oh, isn't that sweet, sister? The old one wants us to drink him first."

"Don't you touch him!" Donna snarled.

"I'll take her, sister," said the one shaped like a man, "and you can have him."

Human features melted away into dark exoskeletons. Gramps looked like he might faint. Donna took the opportunity to run over to him. The one on the right swiped an arm at her as she passed, but it was a weak move. Donna tried to think how that could be an advantage; if they couldn't do much while they were changing, maybe...

The buzzing was growing to a deafening level. Gramps held her by the arms and tried to put himself between her and the biomorphs, but they were circling again, so the best they could do was stand back to back.

That was when the screaming outside got louder, and they could hear more broken glass. People were coming back into the tent, some of them frightened, crying, angry, others stone-faced and sinister. Donna spotted the Doctor, Rose, Jackie, Owen, and a green-looking Pete Tyler among them.

"Donna!" The Doctor looked relieved to see her. "Are you all right?"

"We're fine," she called back. Then, because she couldn't resist pointing out the insanity of the situation, "Thinking of heading home, though. I don't think we really fit in with the other guests."

The President stepped forward. She wore a cold smile, but even that faded away as she approached the two biomorphs who had Donna and her grandfather pinned in place on the dance floor.

"Who told you that you could reveal yourself?" the President demanded.

The biomorph on the left ducked its head and let out a cockroach hiss. The President looked to the other one, who did the same in a lower pitch.

"I am very disappointed in you," the President scolded; she sounded like somebody's mother. Then she looked at Donna. "Hello again, Donna."

"Do I know you?" Donna said sharply, not wanting to show how bloody terrified she was. The President was an alien. The bloody *President*. That was *so* not good.

"It's Zzfstaz," the President said, putting a hand over her... the place where a human heart would be. "We've spent quite a lot of time together, actually. I'm a bit offended that you don't recognize me."

Donna lifted her chin. "Well," she said with all the bravado she could muster. "All you bugs look alike to me."

The biomorph to Donna's left hissed and jabbed at her. She jumped back, squeaking unintentionally.

"Listen to me, Zzfstaz," the Doctor said. He glanced quickly at the crowd, taking in the frightened and the apparently injured. "You can let these people go. You don't have to kill them."

Zzfstaz turned and looked at him. "What exactly do you presume to do? My children must feed. And with a body like this one," she gestured grandly at the facade of Harriet Jones, "I can orchestrate the feast with ease."

Owen stepped forward, only to be pushed back by a snarling woman in Dior. He still had his silver briefcase. "At least let me treat the people you lot have bitten."

Zzfstaz tilted her head too far to the right. "And why would I do that? It'd stop them curing."

"Stop this," the Doctor pleaded, desperation straining his voice. "Please, just stop."

"You are a puzzle, Doctor," Zzfstaz said with a rumbling sigh. "You're not even one of these apes. Besides, that Torchwood woman thought she could stop me." She held out her arms. "Obviously, she didn't. Amazing, really, how easy it was fooling you into thinking I was her." She laughed wheezingly. "And then you *left me alone with your President*. All I had to do was send a signal to my sisters. We'll take the faces of your most influential members of society, the faces of your Torchwood forces, and then we will take this city. The rest will be easy."

The Doctor's expression was very dark. "Did you kill Martha?" he asked, voice dangerously quiet, like a thunderstorm on the horizon. "Answer me."

Zzfstaz waved a hand. "She's dead by now, if that's what you mean. Too bad. She was rather succulent."

"I suppose I should take that as a compliment."

Donna stared. A dark-skinned woman in a green leather jacket had come through the tent side, accompanied by Ianto Jones. Both of them had hand guns at the ready.

"Oh, *really!*" Zzfstaz groaned. "Why is it so hard to kill you?"

"Bit like cockroaches, the human race," the Doctor mused, a smile growing on his face. "Two of my favourite Joneses! Good to see you, Ianto! Martha Jones, you marvellous thing!"

"Good to see you, too, sir," Ianto said, lips quirking.

"I've got two words for you," Martha said to Zzfstaz. There was a fiery, defiant look in her eyes, and she was showing her teeth in a predatory grimace. "Bug spray. You and your kids get out of here, back to your ship, or I'm going to drop a bomb on this place that will turn you inside out."

Zzfstaz sneered. "Oh, yes. Because dropping poison on a bunch of apes is such a good idea."

Donna had to admit, Martha Jones had one hell of a poker face. She raised one eyebrow delicately and gave the tiniest of smiles and held up her mobile. "One button," she said. "I press it; you die."

There was movement on the stage. Out of the corner of her eye, Donna could see the bandleader slinking behind the chairs. There were one or two others back there, too. She wondered if a trombone could double as a weapon.

The Doctor stepped away from the crowd. He walked with his hands in his pockets as if he were out on a stroll. "You know, Zzfstaz," he said. "There are some factors I don't think you've considered."

"Such as what?" she scoffed. "Indomitable ape spirit?"

He smiled, but it was not a nice smile. Donna wondered if the Doctor wasn't a bit mad. Then it occurred to her that maybe he'd seen the people on the stage as well and he was trying to give them a chance to get away without being noticed.

"Well..." The Doctor pulled a slim silver thing from his pocket. "Guns and bombs aren't the only weapons in our arsenal."

"What is that?" Zzfstaz wondered.

"It's a screwdriver," the Doctor replied with a gratified smile.

Zzfstaz was unimpressed. "Are you making a joke? Ape humour doesn't translate very well, you should know."

"Doctor," Rose said. Her eyes flickered between hope and uncertainty.

Donna glanced at the stage again. The bandleader and another man were changing the wires on some of the speakers. When the bandleader caught her looking, he gave her a wink. She turned back at the Doctor. Suddenly, she remembered the fire alarm, and how the biomorphs had fallen around them.

"A screwdriver," Zzfstaz said. She narrowed her eyes. "You're insane, aren't you?"

He bobbed his head. "It has been suggested. Lately. By me. But that's not the point. The point is, all I need to stop you..."-he waggled the tool between two fingers-"is this."

Donna coughed into her hand. The Doctor glanced at her. Hoping he would understand what she was saying, she darted a meaningful look at the stage and the working men.

His mouth curled ever so slightly.

"Though... It is nice to have a help from friends." He grinned hugely. "Absolutely brilliant, actually."

Zzfstaz looked at her children. Most of them were watching the Doctor with expressions of confusion. The party guests didn't look very impressed either, mostly scared. However, Donna could see a grin working its way across Rose's face.

"Look, Doctor," Zzfstaz said, "I'm very sorry, I simply don't have time for this. It was fun playing, I suppose, but this is really getting tiresome."

The Doctor shrugged. "Yeah, all right. I understand. Just one thing, though." He went to the stage and leapt onto it. He took the microphone in hand. "Testing? Ooh, that's a bit hot, don't you think? Oh well, so much the better." He held the screwdriver thing up to the boxy silver head of the mic.

Realisation dawned on Zzfstaz's face. "What are you doing?"

"This." The Doctor pressed a button on the shaft of the screwdriver-thing. The top lit up like a pen torch, but a bright, stinging blue. Donna squeezed her eyes shut.

The sound was a high-pitched whine loud enough to hurt her ears. Gramps ducked his head. All the humans winced, or made faces.

The biomorphs, however, screeched. As the sound passed out of human hearing, the aliens shuddered and fell to the ground. Those still in human shape shifted rapidly back. The Doctor kept the screwdriver to the microphone, even after every biomorph had fallen twitching to the ground. There were about two dozen of them. Had they all been aliens the *entire* time, or only after Zzfstaz had called them? Donna wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Rose ran up to the stage. "Doctor!"

He looked down at her. She held her hand out to him in supplication. "Doctor."

"I told you there were aliens," Gramps muttered, excited, looking in awe at the huge black insects writhing on the floor. He squeezed her arm. "Didn't I say?"

"Yeah, you said," Donna agreed. "You were right the whole time." She hugged him tightly.

Owen was already moving around the crowd, handing out vials to anyone who was looking poorly. Jackie Tyler was supporting her husband. Martha and Ianto were next to Zzfstaz. Ianto checked his cartridge, checked Martha for approval and fired two shots.

Donna let out a sigh of relief when she realised that they were only tranquillizers.

Rose was on the stage now, standing next to the Doctor. He had lowered the screwdriver; it was dark in his hand. Rose kissed him briefly, then wrapped her arms around him. The wretched look on his face softened just before he buried it in her hair.

The bandleader got up off the ground and dusted off his suit.

"Last time I wear white," he complained.

His companion, a tall good-looking bloke with dark hair, saw her looking at them and smiled lopsidedly at her. Donna blushed, but she managed to give them both a smile.

Over the next few hours, Martha Jones organized a crew of people—mostly Torchwood people who showed up after she called, a lot of good they were now—to get the biomorphs packed safely away in vans. Zzfstaz was kept by herself. The actual President was found, given the antidote to the venom, and sent home in the care of five or six agents, including Ianto.

Donna mostly just helped the guests collect themselves and get home. It was easy enough to call for cabs for those who didn't have drivers, or whose drivers were missing. She tried not to think too hard about what that meant for some of them.

Gramps refused to go home until she did. Resigning herself, she sat him down at a table with the still-recovering Pete Tyler.

Jackie was running about, applying tea wherever it was wanted, and sometimes where it wasn't. She did most of this while carrying a bright-eyed two-year-old on one hip.

Then, one moment, Donna turned around and everything was over. The guests had all gone, and it was just a few Torchwood people, the Tylers, the Doctor, and her and Gramps left, aside from a couple of people from the band packing up. They sat around a table closest to the stage.

"No more parties at the house, I think," Pete said as he took his son from his wife's arms. "Next time, I'm renting a building, and whatever shows up can trash it for a change."

"Happy Birthday, Dad," Rose said with a smirk.

Donna sat next to her grandfather and took off her shoes. "I hope nobody minds," she said.

"I took mine off an hour ago," Rose said, holding up a foot and wiggling her toes.

One of the women from Torchwood, Donna thought she'd heard someone call her Toshiko, turned to Martha. "I'm sorry that-"

"Don't worry about it," Martha said quietly. She rubbed her eyes. "It's too bad, though. I really liked that dress."

"If it makes you feel any better, it looked really good on her when she looked like you," Jackie said helpfully.

Martha gave her a rueful smile. "Thanks."

"What happened to it?" Toshiko wondered.

"Got ripped to shreds. Probably when Zzfstaz shifted."

"Oh. That's too bad."

"Yours is very nice, though," Martha said. "I love what they did with the strap across the back."

"So," the Doctor said, cutting across the dress talk. "Music." He was looking at the bandleader who had wandered close by. "You've got a nice voice."

The handsome man grinned back at the Doctor. "Thanks. I liked what you did with the with the sonic device. I was just going to cross wire everything to create feedback."

"Not bad." The Doctor smirked. "My idea was better, of course. What do you call yourself? I'm the Doctor."

"Name's Jack Harkness." He shook the Doctor's hand. Rose nudged the Doctor in the ribs. Jack turned to his remaining band mate, who was zipping up the case on a bass. "I kinda have a feeling we're not going to see the rest of the band again."

"They'll s-show up," said his friend, stuttering a bit. "They'll w-w-want paying."

"So, where you boys from?" Rose asked.

"Oh, here and there," Jack said with a charming smile. "We travel a lot."

Rose was looking at her mother. "How interesting! Isn't that interesting, Mum?"

"I thought so," Jackie said lightly. "Toshiko, sweetheart, do you want any more tea?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Tyler."

The Doctor leaned back in his chair, a cat-who-ate-the-canary grin on his face. "Not a bad evening," he mused.

Pete rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right." He rubbed his eyes. "I don't know about any of you, but I'm knackered." He shifted the sleeping toddler in his lap gently into one arm. "And I think Tony's had enough, eh?"

Jackie took the little boy. "I'll put him back to bed. I'm just glad none of those things went into his room." She shuddered. "I was frantic!"

"He's all right, Mum," Rose said. She bumped the Doctor's leg with her own. "Everything's all right." The way the two of them were looking at each other, Donna supposed that that was supposed to be a hint in his direction and that he'd actually gotten it. Thank goodness.

"Well, I think we'll be off then. Right, Gramps? Gramps!"

Her grandfather shook himself awake. "Sorry, what?"

"Past your bedtime," Donna said. She patted his hand. "I'll call us a cab."

On the way to the door, Pete stopped her. "Can I have a word?"

Donna's heart sank. "If this is about the chair... I was pretty sure it wasn't actually *you* trying to kill the Doctor. I mean... I hoped it wasn't. But I had to-

Pete gave her a funny look. "That's fine. Donna, I was wondering if you'd like a job."

"But... But I already work for you. Technically. I think."

"I meant at Torchwood."

Donna stared at him. "Me? Torchwood? Fighting aliens?" She could almost feel herself go pale. "What, all the time?"

He nodded. "You keep your head in a crisis, and I can see your organizational skills are pretty good. The Warehouse has been trying to get a handle on the Archive for some time now; I think Ianto would appreciate the help."

She was surprised to realize that she was disappointed. "So... I'd be his assistant?"

Pete frowned at her. "Is that a problem?"

She swallowed. Worst he could do was fire her from the job she wasn't sure she even had anymore. "I've been someone's assistant my whole life. If I was going to be looking for a new job, it would have to be something more executive."

He looked thoughtfully at her. "Fair enough. When can you start?"

Donna gaped. "What, seriously?"

"We're going to have a lot more clean-up to deal with this Zvazveraz thing. We haven't got all of them. It's going to be a lot of work. Think you can handle it?"

She grinned. "Absolutely."

"See you Monday, then." He shook her hand and then headed up the staircase. Halfway up, he turned around and said, "Thanks for the whisky."

"You're welcome," she said breathlessly. "Happy birthday."

Donna had to work very hard to hold in the dance of excitement building in her feet. It helped, though, that the Doctor came over.

"Congratulations," he said.

She stared at him. "You were listening to that?"

"Course I was," he said cheekily. He was smiling wider than a Terry Gilliam animation. "I'm proud of you."

She waved a hand. "What for?"

"Oh, Donna," he sighed, shaking his head. "Because you're brilliant. I knew you'd be brilliant."

"Stop it!" she cried, blushing and smiling despite herself. She added, shyly, "You weren't too bad yourself."

Suddenly, the Doctor was hugging her tightly. "Donna Noble," he said, as if her name alone were something of great significance.

She laughed and swatted him off after a moment. "You're going to make Rose jealous."

"Nah," he said. "Rose knows, you and me, we're just mates."

"Good." She poked his chest. "Because I'm not having any funny business."

The Doctor nodded seriously. "Never," he agreed. "Never ever."

"So, come over for tea then, you and Rose, once you get everything settled here."

One might have thought he'd been invited to have tea with the Queen, the way his face lit up. "Really? That'd be brilliant!"

"Well, Granddad adores you. Daft old thing that he is."

He grinned. "Absolutely mental."

Rose appeared at the Doctor's side. Donna gave her a hug. "See you on Monday, then," she said brightly.

Rose gave her a funny look. "Yeah? Why? What's going on?"

With a smile and a little wave, Donna went outside to where the cab was waiting.

The Doctor pulled Rose close to his side. She leaned into him. Oh, he'd missed that.

"What was Donna talking about?"

"You'll see on Monday," he said mysteriously. He ran one hand down her arm and entwined his fingers with hers. "Right now, I have something very important that I need to say."

Rose smiled up at him. "And what's that?"

"First off," he said. He leaned down and kissed her. "Second; I love you. Third; I love you." Her smile widened. "I could go on," he said airily. "But really, that'd would get in the way of my plans for the rest of the evening."

"Would these plans include any running?" she wondered. She had a glint in her eyes that meant... well... *more* than it had before. How had he ever missed that? That was a marvellous glint full of almost delicious intent. It was downright lascivious. Lascivious was good. "Because I'm a bit tired for that."

"Not unless you want to," he promised. He held her tightly against him; one hand, that right hand, pressed between her shoulder blades before sliding down to her waist. He kissed her again, because he *could*. That was a good feeling. He could kiss Rose Tyler whenever he wanted.

Then, because he could, he swept her up into his arms and lifted her clean off the ground. She shrieked and laughed and her hair brushed his cheek. "What are you doing?" she cried.

"Carrying you upstairs," he said as he began to walk. "I should think that was obvious."

Her arms circled around his neck. "I have a few plans myself, actually," she said thoughtfully, and pressed her lips to the side of his neck. *Oh*. Why hadn't he thought of that? He returned the favour. "And I'm not *too* tired," she whispered.

The Doctor's heart beat steadily away, filling him with blood. His lungs breathed in deep, taking in oxygen and the scent of Rose. His right hand was holding Rose, the left had her legs, and the fabric of that silky, sexy dress felt just as good as he'd thought it would.

At the top of the stairs, he put her down and kissed her again. She smiled against his mouth. Her hand slipped into his and she said just one word before dragging him away.

"Run!"

