

PEACE OF MIND

BY M.D. BLOEMKER



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"There should have been another way."

Tegan flinched to hear the utter despair in the Doctor's voice, to see the hard, tired lines of his face as he stared at the devastation surrounding them. With a shiver of cold fear, she realized that she could not remember ever having seen him like this: bruised, beaten down, defeated. It would do no good to remind him that he had just saved the Earth from an apocalyptic war. He would consider it a Pyrrhic victory at best. At worst, she sensed from the horror in his eyes that she would be hard pressed to convince him that he'd achieved any kind of victory at all.

Behind her, Turlough stepped forward. "Doctor...."

The Time Lord pressed a hand to his forehead as though struck by an intense agonizing pain. Drawing a deep breath, he seemed to force himself to calm; his hands dropped limply to his side as he raised his head to stare blankly at the ceiling for a long moment. Turlough spoke again, his voice changed. "Doctor?"

The Doctor turned away. Still physically drained from his computer sync-up ordeal, his progress was unsteady as he headed for the control room exit. Tegan started after him, but found herself restrained by Turlough. "No," the young man said quietly. "I don't think so. Not yet."

Tegan pressed her clenched hand against her chin. "I'm afraid for him."

Turlough's head inclined slightly. "He'll be all right, do you think?"

She sighed, spreading her hands helplessly. "I don't know. I've seen him angry, irritated, upset, but this is different. Could be ... dangerous."

"Well, then, perhaps you're right--perhaps we'd better go after him."

"No, no--I think you were right. We should give him some space."

"Fine. We'll give him space. Ten feet should just about do it. Right?"

Immediate concern won out over caution. "Right. Let's go."

They caught up with him a short time later. The Doctor was on his knees, gathering the still-damp clothes he had discarded some time ago. Around him were the corpses of two security guards and three Sea Devils, but the Doctor remained steadfastly unaware of the gruesome reminders of the deadly struggle he had tried in vain to stop. Tegan and Turlough paused at the end of the corridor, uncertain whether they dared to approach. They watched as the Doctor smoothed the creases of his folded coat, placing it carefully upon the completed pile. His gaze was fixed, almost glazed; his mouth was opened slightly as though he were having difficulty breathing. He fussed unnecessarily with the stack of clothing for a moment, then sat back, staring down at it.

He did not move again. Tegan's nails dug into the palms of her hands as she

found herself mentally willing the Doctor to snap out of what she sensed was a very precarious frame of mind. Beside her, Turlough gave her a grave look, telling her that the young man was beginning to share her fear for the Doctor.

Unable to bear another moment of waiting, Tegan started forward, grimly picking her way around the evidence of carnage scattered throughout the hallway.

She bent down by the Doctor's side, silent, hoping he would acknowledge her presence on his own. He remained still, his unfocused gaze steady. Turlough, moving to the Doctor's other side, looked to Tegan for guidance. She shrugged, having none to offer. Tentatively, she reached out a hand, touching the Time Lord's shoulder. "Doctor?" she said softly. "Are you all right?"

He roused a little at the sound of her voice. An internal struggle seemed to be taking place, culminating in an attempt to speak. With great difficulty, he managed to form the words, "I'm fine," but his voice betrayed him.

With a sharp sigh, he let his head drop. "No," he said more strongly. "No, I'm not fine. I might as well admit it now and get it over with, else I'll never hear the end of it from you."

"Doctor, we're worried about you," Tegan insisted, stung.

He swept up his clothing in one abrupt movement, getting to his feet. "Excuse me."

"No."

Tegan's sharp tone brought the Doctor up short as he started to turn away from them. "No, I won't excuse you. What gives you the right to blame me for what happened here?"

He stared at her, stricken. "I don't --"

"The hell you don't. You're angry, you're upset, and you're taking it out on me because I'm human and I'm from Earth."

"Tegan, you're talking nonsense," Turlough said, giving her arm a warning squeeze.

"Am I? I don't think so." She addressed the Doctor again. "You blame the Earth people for this, just as you did when they prevented you from helping the Silurians and the Sea Devils the first time. Well, I won't be a focus for your anger, Doctor. If you want to be angry, fine. Throw things if you like. I'll even help you. Just don't throw them at me, okay?" She faltered then, uncomfortably aware of the naked hurt on the Doctor's face. "All we want to do is help," she continued, calmer. "For pity's sake, let us."

The Doctor, his head bowed, had closed his eyes for a brief moment. When he spoke again, it was in a subdued voice. "I was unfair. I apologize."

In the silence that followed, Tegan collected her wits and attempted to evaluate the veiled expressions on the faces of Turlough and the Doctor. The relationship among the three of them had always been thorny, but now it was strained to the limit. She knew that they could not hope to come through this unscathed, but

by proceeding with care, there was a chance something of worth could be salvaged.

In the course of her association with the peripatetic Time Lord, Tegan had suffered several major emotional traumas, any one of which would have destroyed the girl-woman she had been before she had wandered into that strange police call box on the bypass long ago. But she wasn't that Tegan anymore, and she'd made it through each ordeal, scarred but whole. And she'd made it through because the Doctor had always been there, his hand held out to her; she'd always accepted it with complete trust. Yet when she or anyone else tried to reciprocate, they risked getting their hand slapped away. Enough was enough. It was time the Doctor started accepting the fact that he was going to get as good as he gave.

The Doctor shunned his own world and his own people because he cared too much. And because he cared too much, he left himself open to potentially mortal emotional wounds. But conversely, that same capacity for caring brought him the richest rewards of all -- good and loyal friendships. All he had to do was learn to balance the two.

She caught the sidelong glance that Turlough fixed on the Doctor for a brief moment. This was the young man who had admitted only a short time ago that he'd actively tried to kill the Doctor. As far as she knew, he had yet to offer any kind of apology for his actions, and yet he had the audacity to wonder why she didn't trust him. The Doctor had blithely refused to give credence to any of her doubts, leaving her frustrated and wondering whether there was such a thing as being too trusting. But now she sensed the sadness in Turlough's fleeting look and realized that she'd been wrong. The Turlough she thought she knew would have never betrayed that kind of open concern for anyone or anything. She'd misunderstood from the beginning. What she thought was the Doctor's naivete concerning the potentially dangerous young man was really something else, something that had reached out to touch her as well. The Doctor had given them unqualified friendship: no questions, no doubts, no demands. Such a simple thing, simply given. Yet they'd be willing to follow the Doctor to the gates of hell itself and beyond because of it.

Reaching out, Tegan took the damp pile of clothing from the Doctor's arms. "We'll go back to the TARDIS," she said quietly. "You need to rest, Doctor. We could all do with some rest."

"Yes," he agreed, calmer now. "Rest. A holiday, something pleasant. Think of some place pleasant."

Tegan tried, but weariness was fogging her mind. "The French Riviera?"

The strained look returned to the Doctor's face. "Not the seaside, I think."

Turlough spoke in the silence. "Except for the Eye of Orion, which I don't believe would find much favor considering what happened during our last visit, I have no suggestions. The places I've visited wouldn't be considered very restful."

"How does a sleepy little country village sound?" Tegan asked suddenly.

Turlough made a face. "Earth, again, no doubt."

The Doctor smiled slightly. "You've in mind to visit your grandfather?"

She stared at him, incredulous. "When did you take up mindreading? How did

you know that?"

"You've only mentioned it four or five times in the midst of several recent conversations."

She ducked her head, embarrassed. "Oh. That bad, eh?"

His hand went to her shoulder. "I think it's a marvelous idea, Tegan."

She returned his smile, encouraged by the returning warmth in his voice. Turlough visibly relaxed, allowing himself a smile as well. She also caught the appreciative glance he gave her as they turned down the corridor, heading for the TARDIS. It said to her that he recognized the fact that she had managed to turn the situation around, and if he didn't understand how, he was at least grateful for it. Tegan breathed deeply, feeling better by the moment. The sadness still marked the Doctor's face, but he had taken the first step towards healing. He had accepted their hands.

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