

Silver Leaves

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The Master sifted frantically through his thoughts, searching for a strategy. In one decisive stroke, the Time Lords had laid waste to his plans. They did not want to restore Gallifrey. They wanted to end time itself and become beings of pure consciousness.

Involuntarily, his eyes found the Doctor, kneeling broken and bloodied on the floor. The imbecile was still talking, using what little strength he had to berate the Master. Nine hundred years and the fool still found every opportunity to say, 'I told you so.'

The Master gritted his teeth. There must be a way for him to turn this situation to his advantage. He blinked, steeling his resolve. Then he raised his arms up in what he hoped gave him the appearance of supplication.

"Then take me with you, Lord President. Let me ascend into glory!"

He began to kneel for added effect, suppressing the revulsion he felt at even the feigned act of devotion. His failed resurrection had left him with a badly deteriorated body. This could save him, and survival was everything.

Rassilon regarded him with a vehemence that stopped the Master from sinking any lower. The Master narrowed his eyes, trying to reach out with his mind and anticipate the other Time Lord's words. He touched on Rassilon's mind and felt himself recoil at what he found there.

"You are diseased," Rassilon hissed. "Albeit a disease of our own making."

Rage unlike anything he had ever felt before devoured his initial shock. His eyes widened in understanding and glistened with pure hatred.

He had been forced to look into the Untempered Schism when he was just eight years old. The sound of drums had plagued his mind ever since – and *they* had done this to him! The Time Lords had implanted the sound so that they could establish a link to this exact point in time and space. They had manipulated him in order to escape the Doctor's Time Lock. His clenched fists shook with fury.

Rassilon raised his gauntlet, the weapon that could remove an individual from history, and pointed it directly at the Master. "No more," the Lord President of Gallifrey growled.

Click.

Somehow, the Doctor had raised his ruined body from the floor and placed it between Rassilon and the Master. He wasted only a moment to register bewilderment that the Doctor held a gun, and trained on Rassilon, no less. Oh, this was too perfect. The Doctor had swapped his ridiculous screwdriver for a real weapon. The weak deserved to die. Maybe the Doctor was finally ready to accept that no one had a right to life unless they fought for it.

The Master followed his own creed faithfully and launched into that very battle.

"Kill him and Gallifrey could be yours!"

The Doctor would never let the Time Lords take him. The man was like a child protecting his favourite toy. He could even hear the Doctor's mind growling, "*Mine!*" and the sheer savagery of it was intoxicating. Adrenalin set his body to shaking and the Master gloated. He would live to fight another day.

The Doctor swung around.

Click.

Now the Master stared down the barrel of that gun.

"He's to blame, not me!" he shouted angrily, pushing the suggestion from his mind

and out towards the Doctor. The Master's skill with telepathy was legendary. By comparison, the Doctor was simply an embarrassment.

The Doctor's hand shook and the Master pounced on his indecision. Words tumbled from his mouth as he preyed on the Doctor's arrogance, pretending that he had only just figured out what the Doctor already knew. If the Doctor killed him, then the link would be broken and the Time Lords would be sent back to Gallifrey. Stating it so simply, the Master knew that he could make the Doctor feel all the more callous about his decision.

In that knowledge, the Master simply couldn't resist. His eyes shimmered with loathing as he stared down the Doctor and called him a coward. The Doctor would never kill him. Never! The Master grabbed onto each moment that the Doctor hesitated. Then he began to goad him.

“Go on then... do it!”

Time stood still and for the first time, the Master felt a flicker of fear. He shook his head, the smallest of gestures, and felt shame that he had done so.

The Doctor swung back towards Rassilon.

Click.

He felt a rush of relief and pushed his advantage. Killing Rassilon would result in the same outcome. The link would be broken.

The Master stood behind the Doctor, encouraging him to pull the trigger. This was destiny! He could see the monster inside the Doctor and his eyes gleamed as he watched the creature unfurl from its hiding place. The corners of the Master's lips tugged into a self-satisfied smile.

A woman standing behind Rassilon lowered her hands from in front of her eyes and his smile slipped away. The Master had not seen that face in centuries and he looked to the Doctor, feeling the spark of recognition take hold in his ancient enemy. In that singular

moment, the Doctor's monster was gone.

Something passed between mother and son. The Master had not been quick enough to catch it. Then the Doctor swung around again.

Click.

This time, the Master's focus slid straight past the barrel of the gun to the brown eyes behind it. The Doctor's eyes glistened with emotion and in a moment of reprehensible weakness, the Master fell into that burdened look.

His mind drifted back in the way that only a Time Lord could, back in time to the moment of his last death. The Doctor had offered him the stars, just as he had when they were young. He had cradled him in his arms and pleaded with him to stay. He had bargained, coaxed and threatened. Then finally, when every layer of faulty reasoning and self-deception had been stripped from him, the Doctor had wept and laid bare his soul.

"It can't end like this. You and me, all the things we've done."

The Master had watched with a strange kind of thrill at the spit flying from the Doctor's lips as he shouted at him to regenerate. In some ways, that had been more proof that the Doctor was a broken man than the tears falling freely down his face.

His head had pounded out a beat in time with his hearts, just as it did now, and the Master had refused to regenerate. The man who fought death with teeth and broken nails had chosen to die over living a life with the Doctor.

With shocking clarity, the Master finally understood.

The Doctor, with his finger set firmly on the trigger, had forgiven him for everything – but he would never forgive him for that.

Something uncomfortable stirred in the pit of his stomach and his face went slack as the unfamiliar emotion roiled through his body. Sadness. How long had it been since he had last felt sadness?

Abruptly he became aware of every cut and bruise on the other man's face. Scrapes and deep lacerations decorated his features, promising to leave behind a spectacular array of colours. A split lip suddenly reminded him of the time Theta had tumbled down one of the few rocky inclines on Mount Perdition, near the border of his father's estates.

He had tended to that wound, and the sprained ankle, feeling guilty about having dared his friend to climb there in the first place. He had bound that ankle with the sash from his robes and remembered the silver leaves drifting down from the trees as he pulled Theta gently into his lap. He dabbed tenderly at that cut lip with his sleeve then kissed his fingertips, touching them softly to the small wound. Theta had looked up at him with an awkward smile, forgiving him as he always did.

Raw emotion poured from the Doctor's mind and the Master realised with horror that he had been projecting those images and feelings at the Doctor. He also became aware of the Doctor pushing at those thoughts, trying to drive them away.

The Master pulled back suddenly, not wanting to remember. The unexpected retreat left an empty void that ached in his chest.

In spite of everything, he had never believed that the Doctor could ever kill him. They had fought one another across galaxies and millennia. They had trapped one another and left each other for dead on so many occasions that it had become a game; a battle of strength and wits. Killing him now would send him back to Gallifrey to burn, and all he could feel in that moment was profound sadness. This time the Doctor would end his life and he would die without the Doctor ever having forgiven him.

“Get out of the way.”

The Master's lips parted in surprise. He drew a ragged breath and tried to call the Doctor a coward again, just to anger him, but the words never came. Instead, he struggled to work his lips into an appreciative grin and his survival instincts kicked in. The Master threw

himself to one side as the bullet from the Doctor's pistol tore past his face. The white-point star shattered behind him and blinding light flooded into the room.

"The link is broken!" the Doctor screamed as the world shrieked and raged around him. "Back into the Time War, Rassilon!"

The retreating portal pulled at everything in the room and the Master couldn't help but feel impressed as the Time Lords were sucked towards oblivion. The Doctor stared into the jaws of the beast and never flinched. He might try to avoid bloodshed at all cost, but the Doctor had told him of the hell that awaited them on Gallifrey, and he had sent the Time Lords back into that inferno.

A voice of prophecy wailed across the universe, echoing throughout all of time -
Gallifrey falls!

The maelstrom pulled at the Master; tore at his clothes. He fell to the floor and struggled to his knees. The Doctor remained perfectly steady in his shredded suit, wild hair buffeting in the chaos. Tears pricked the corners of the Master's eyes; the violence of it was so beautiful.

Rassilon spat venom as he clutched his staff, trying to keep his feet.

"You'll die with me, Doctor."

And the Doctor responded in exactly the way that the Master should have expected.

"I know."

The Master felt the forge of his anger roar to life once more. That self-sacrificing idiot had learned nothing. The Doctor had saved his life, only to throw his own away without the slightest struggle. The very thought of it repulsed him. He *still* did not understand. They could bend worlds to their will. Together they would be unstoppable!

Rassilon slowly raised his arm.

Anguish tore at the Master. The Doctor deserved to die, but not at the hand of this

pitiful creature. The Doctor had earned his right to be killed by his Master. The Doctor would not die with a whimper but shouting the Master's name, blood spluttering from his lips as he begged him for mercy. He gathered a thought in his mind and fired it at Rassilon with all the telepathic strength he could muster.

“*MINE!*”

The other Time Lord didn't even flinch. The gravitational pull of the collapsing portal increased. Rassilon's gauntlet glowed with power. He aimed it at the Doctor. Fury swallowed the Master whole.

He would kill the Doctor. No, he would *devour* him; ravage him until there was nothing left. He would hurt him, over and over, just as the Doctor had hurt him. The agony of betrayal screamed inside of him. Pain and loss consumed him. The drumming in his head pounded out its rhythm, and silver leaves fell all around, creating a thick carpet about his feet. The Master shook his head to clear the vision but the silver leaves in his mind kept falling.

His mouth opened and he heard himself speak.

“Get out of the way.”

The Doctor turned to stare at him, and despite the surge of pride that flooded into his mind from the other man, the Doctor's stupid face looked only mildly surprised. The Doctor fell back as a bolt of bioelectricity blasted from the Master's hand. It struck Rassilon in the chest, pushing him back towards the retreating Eternity Gate.

“You did this to me!” the Master bellowed.

His twisted mind reached down through the fog of insanity, searching for something he had lost. The image evaded him and the frustration sent shocks of fury coursing through his body. He released another bolt at the Time Lord.

“You – made – me!”

He shuddered as the bursts of energy drained his life force. He was killing himself. It

made no sense. Oh, but he would take Rassilon with him. He would drag him down into the pits of hell and make him suffer for losing... for losing...

His mind shrieked its wrath as the thought slipped away.

“One!” he screamed as he threw another bolt of electricity from his right hand. It struck Rassilon again and this time the Time Lord fell to his knees, clutching his staff to hold him upright. The Master’s form flickered, revealing the skeletal monster beneath. This was what the Time Lords had made him, and the Master didn’t know if it was horrifying or beautiful.

“Two!” A bolt streaked from his left hand. His form flickered again. He had been prepared to let the Time Lords tear apart the Time Vortex. All things, past, present and future would simply have vanished. The realisation terrified him, and his terror almost undid him.

“Three!”

His right hand burned with fire once more but the Master barely felt it. He scrambled about in his mind, searching for that which Rassilon and the Time Lords had taken away. Dying just so he could kill them would be worth it if he could only remember.

“Four!”

As he struck Rassilon for the final time, an image floated out of the madness. The Master clutched at it desperately, holding onto it so that it didn’t slip away.

Somewhere, lost to the locks and laws of time, Theta and Koschei still lay on the deep red, rolling hills of Gallifrey. Silver leaves drifted from the trees around them and they gazed at one another through eyes that swirled with shared dreams and starlight.

His last thoughts, as the vortex claimed him, was of falling silver leaves, brown eyes and a promise that if he survived, he would find and kill the Doctor.