

# **A Matter of Time**

**By**

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**Summary:** *A time travelling, action-adventure, romance-filled science fiction romp ensues when Ianto runs into Jack in the fifty-first century after an accident with a vortex manipulator. Laser blasters, alien dance clubs, mercenaries, a little too much public sex for Ianto's tastes, sneaky plans and circular logic can be found here.*

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## **Chapter 1**

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All extraordinary days begin with waking up.

The eighth of June was no particular exception. Ianto had gone home late after prying himself off Jack, ostensibly because he wanted a change of clothes, but really because Jack's bed was less than comfortable, and if he was only going to get three hours of sleep he'd like to be able to sleep soundly. They'd had three separate arguments about it, and Ianto was beginning to suspect that Jack was refusing to get a bigger bed for fear Ianto might spend the night in it more often.

But maybe that was just Ianto being paranoid.

So, all things considered, it was an ordinary morning. Ianto had been first in (after Jack, of course, but he didn't count), handing out hot coffees as the rest of the team straggled in. Once everyone had settled in for the morning, Toshiko beckoned him over to his desk.

"I finished with these yesterday," she said, pushing a cardboard box towards him on the table. "So they're all set to be archived. They're profiled on the mainframe under identification numbers – got a pen?"

Ianto pulled one out of his shirt pocket, and bent over her desk, grabbing a sticky note. "Go ahead."

"397374 – that had four parts, A through D, and then 297375 through 297379," she listed off, and then pointed to a tall, lamppost shape object next to her desk. "That's 297376, it wouldn't fit in the box. I can help you move it down, if you want."

"No, shouldn't be a bother," Ianto said, smiling up at her and folding the note into his breast pocket. "Thank you Tosh."

"No problem. I'm sorry I'm unloading them all at once, but it took me a while to figure out which ones worked together and which ones were unrelated. We found them all together."

"In Bute Park, I remember. I had to figure out whether or not to retcon the three year old along with her parents."

Tosh looked intrigued.

"Did you?"

"In the end, no. I decided that if she ever does tell her parents about the time she started

teleporting from place to place, they're not going to take her seriously," Ianto said, smiling. "Besides, I wasn't sure what to do about dosage for someone so small. Not to mention possible side-effects on toddlers."

"Good thing we're predisposed to disbelieve our children," Tosh said.

"Indeed," he replied. "I'll get these out of your way, then."

Ianto hauled the box under one arm, picked up the alien lamppost with his free hand, and headed down to the archives.

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He'd catalogued the set of four items that were 397374, now entered into the archives under "contact lenses and remote recording devices" and categorized as "eyewear, lenses, visual recording, audio recording, espionage, data transmission, communication". Item 397375 was still a mystery, Tosh hadn't made any headway trying to get it to give any information beyond "inert lump of metal", and so Ianto filed it in the "unknown" section of the archives, under "manufactured, metallic" and the chemical compounds of which it was composed.

He'd just come back from putting the lamppost in section F – which had actually turned out to be an alien lamppost, much to his amusement – on a shelf (filed under "light supporting device: furniture, electrical, household, twenty-eight century", the last thanks to Jack) and had opened up Tosh's file on item 397377.

Item 397377 wasn't a whole piece, or at least, so Ianto assumed. It looked to be the innards, or a small part of some greater device, with wires coming out of it, melted at the ends into a clump on one side. Jack had looked at it and pronounced it junk, some technical device from the mid four thousands, judging by the circuitry. Tosh had been intrigued with some of its design, however, and had run some thorough tests on it, most of which had produced sheets of data unintelligible to anyone unfamiliar with the tests she ran on alien devices. None of the readings, however, had been familiar to her, so she'd concluded that Jack was right: space junk it was.

Ianto ran over the data again, out of habit. On rare occasions he recognized correlations with other items in the archives that Tosh missed. He scanned the data on neutrino emission and paused, frowning. That was familiar. But from where?

Ianto tapped into the mainframe and entered some criteria for a search based on the data. If anyone had ever entered similar data into the archives, it should show up. Ianto limited the search to the last three and a half years – the neutrino detector had only showed up in 2005, so nothing before then should have any data of the kind Ianto wanted to see.

Five minutes later the mainframe spit out the answer. Ianto stared at the screen for a few moments, and then down at the device. And Jack hadn't recognized it? Then again, Jack wasn't particularly technical, he tended to recognize items based on design rather than structure. Or perhaps the readings were a coincidence, and the device in his hand was unrelated to Jack's own. Nonetheless, Ianto wanted to be thorough, so after he finished cataloguing the rest of the items in the box, he printed out the two data sets, grabbed the device, and headed back up to the main hub.

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"So, I'm pretty sure it just died of heart failure," Owen was saying, gesturing at the alien on the table in the morgue. "At least, assuming its heart is what I think is its heart."

"Then what was he doing on the corner of Wharton and St. Mary's?" asked Jack.

"By his toxicology report," said Owen, gesturing to the screen, "Having a pint, I would say. Or returning from having a few. His blood-alcohol levels are through the roof."

"So, we have a drunk who had a heart attack downtown and died on the corner?"

"That would coincide with witness reports," called Gwen, who was working at her station.

"Lovely," said Jack, rolling his eyes. "Wrap it up, then, Owen. He was probably just a tourist. His species is pretty friendly, from what I can recall. I think we can close this one."

Owen nodded and began closing up the body. Jack turned to head up the stairs and almost collided with Ianto.

"Ooof," he said, surprised, grasping Ianto's forearms to keep from barreling into him. "Are you being sneaky on me, Mr. Jones?"

"Not in the slightest, sir," said Ianto. "I was simply waiting for an appropriate time to interrupt."

Jack hummed thoughtfully, and looked him up and down. "I think I prefer you inappropriate, actually."

"Oi," said Owen. "I don't want to hear it."

Ianto rolled his eyes and held out the artifact.

"I wanted to ask you about this."

Jack looked at the item.

“I’ve seen this already.”

“Yes, but, have you seen the data Tosh collected on it?”

Jack shook his head.

Ianto handed him the device’s data. Jack perused it for about half a second and then looked up at Ianto, a bit of a smirk on his face.

“How about you let me skip the guessing game and let me know what you’ve found out?”

Ianto hesitated. There was a small possibility Jack would not be pleased with what he was about to find out, but its not like what they had done was in any way indefensible. Nonetheless, he steeled himself as he handed over the other data.

“The reading’s Tosh got from it with the neutrino detector bear a striking resemblance to data we collected on another item a few months ago. Some of the other data correlates as well, particularly that picked up by the rift detector. I thought perhaps the items are related.”

Jack took the other sheets from him and looked at the heading.

“Item 397225,” he read, his eyes running down the page. “Catchy. Does it have a better name?”

“I assume so,” said Ianto, resisting the urge to bite his lip. “But I don’t know it. It’s your wristband, Jack.”

Jack’s head snapped up.

“My *wristband*?” he asked, voice low.

“Yes sir.”

“May I inquire why,” Jack said, the touch of menace that was already in his voice making Ianto wince, “my wristband has an entry in the archive database?”

“You may.”

Jack raised an eyebrow, and gestured.

“Anytime you’re ready.”

Ianto cleared his throat.

“After Abbadon, sir, when you were dead for five days? We ran some scans on you, and we also ran some scans on your wristband.”

“And that was necessary, why?”

“The scans of you?”

Jack just looked at him.

“Erm, well, you were dead-”

“Something I don’t know?” Jack interrupted, frostily.

“You were dead,” Ianto continued, pointedly. “And Gwen mentioned something about you looking for a particular doctor. I thought you probably meant The Doctor, and that perhaps you had some way of contacting him.”

“Obviously, I didn’t.”

“We know that *now*, sir,” said Ianto, “But we didn’t then. Frankly, sir, we were just grasping at straws. We took some readings but couldn’t figure it out, so we filed the information and put it back on you.”

“I thought it was a bad idea,” piped up Owen. “You were just going to come back, find it was missing, and throw a holy rage.”

“Alright,” said Jack, looking pensive and not entirely convinced.

“I can understand the motivation to look at my wristband,” he said, and then looked at Ianto sharply. “What I don’t understand is why *you* felt the need to include the information in the archives.”

“I...it’s my job, Jack. Research, file, look up research again.” Ianto shrugged. He hadn’t really thought about it at the time. It was just another artifact to be archived.

“What do you have this filed under? Jack Harkness’ personal belongings?”

Ianto didn’t answer. Jack looked at the paper in his hands.

“Let’s see... 108298.” He looked up. “What kind of a category is that? Not particularly informative. I would almost say it’s *misleading*. Not very good archiving habits.”

“I didn’t create the file, Jack,” Ianto said softly. “I just found it.”

“And didn’t tell me about it? And *used* it?” he demanded.

“I found it more than a year ago, Jack. By the time I... wasn’t hiding things from you anymore, it wasn’t on my mind. And then, well, you died, and were gone, and I forgot about it all over again.”

“Ianto, you never forget anything in the archives,” said Jack.

Ianto just stared at Jack. He looked furious – worse than that, he looked betrayed.

“And I suppose you’ve read everything they’ve got on me?”

“Maybe if you told me anything about you I wouldn’t have to,” Ianto snapped. “Did you even consider that?”

They glared at each other. Ianto could see Owen creep out of the autopsy bay out of the corner of his eye. Jack reached out and took the device from Ianto, pocketing it.

“I want you,” Jack bit out eventually, “to get me a hard copy of everything filed under ‘108298’, and then delete or destroy everything else. Don’t “misplace” it, or file it under something obscure, because I will find it. Clear?”

“Clear, sir.”

Ianto spun on his heels and climbed the stairs out of the medical bay, fuming. He hadn't been lying when he told Jack he'd forgotten about the file. That's not to say he would have told Jack about it if he'd remembered it in the months since Jack's return, but Ianto would have liked to have been given the benefit of the doubt. More than that, he was angry at how afraid Jack seemed to have been of him knowing even the tiniest bit about him.

When he got down to the archives, Ianto opened up all the files archived under the 108298 category. The data on the wristband was several times larger than the rest of the data combined - just a few news clippings, reports of Jack Harknesses over the past one hundred years - some actually Jack and some not - and a couple of photographs, both clearly of Jack. Not ten pages of information. Ianto sent all of it, along with the all the data they had collected after Abbadon, to the archive printer.

Once it was printed and shoved, unorganized, into a manila folder, Ianto walked back over to the terminal, and moved to delete the data, irrevocably, from the electronic archives. He hesitated for barely a moment before sending the necessary commands. He trusted Jack, he really did, and if Jack didn't want anyone else to see that data, well, he was their leader and that was his prerogative. Besides, Ianto had it all memorized anyway.

Grabbing the folder, Ianto headed up to look for Jack.

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Ianto found him in his office, bent over his desk, and, apparently, soldering. He walked up to the desk and dropped the folder on it unceremoniously.

"Here. The extent of my knowledge of Jack Harkness before his time at Torchwood. Would you like to retcon me as well?"

Jack grunted, and didn't look up. "Don't be stupid."

Ianto didn't reply, just stood there, waiting for him to finish. If they were going to have it out they were going to do it properly. He could wait until Jack finished doing - Ianto suddenly realized Jack was working with the artifact he'd taken from him. He'd removed his wristband and had somehow opened it up, so that its inner circuitry was exposed. He'd undone the tangle of wires coming out the artifact and had connected some of them to his wristband. Ianto's curiosity got the better of him.

"Do you know what that is, then?" he asked.

"Yep," said Jack, still focused on his work. "It's the same as my wristband, or at least a part of one. It's a few centuries more primitive, though, which is why I didn't recognize it. Never seen one this old."

"Does it work?"

"Now? No, it's missing a lot of pieces. But I'm seeing if I can jerry rig it with mine."

"So you can travel in time?"

Jack paused here and looked at Ianto, eyes glimmering in the low light of the office. He looked very calm, now, after his previous outburst, but somehow Ianto found calm Jack more frightening than angry Jack.



"You know what it does?" he asked.

"No," Ianto shrugged. "But you were a time agent, whatever that is, and that's what Captain John's seemed to do."

"Fair enough," said Jack, nodding. "That's what it's supposed to be, a vortex manipulator. But it's disabled, and I don't have the technology to activate it. I'm seeing if this will let me bypass the part of mine that's disabled, more or less."

"Any success?"

"Not yet."

"That's too bad," said Ianto, letting the sarcasm bleed through, much to his own dismay. Angry at Jack and he still didn't like the possibility of him going anywhere else.

Jack caught onto it. "Ianto, I meant it when I said I didn't want to be anywhere else. I'm not even sure why I'm trying to fix it; the person who broke it had good enough reasons. I don't have anywhere to go, even if I could get it to work."

Ianto was tempted to tell him to stop, then, at let it rest well enough alone. But - *time travel*.

"It could be useful," he said, instead.

"Oh?"

"Certainly. If your... vortex manipulator had been working when you'd ended up in 1941, you never would have gotten trapped."

"And Owen would have never opened the rift," Jack finished. "No more disaster, no more Bilis, no more Abbadon. But you wouldn't have gotten to shoot Owen, either."

"That would have been a shame, " deadpanned Ianto. Jack grinned at him, full on, and Ianto felt his gut clench. Jack must have seen something in his face, because he moved as if to reach out and touch Ianto, but stopped himself at the last moment.

"Look, can you help me?" asked Jack, pulling his hand back in. "I really need someone to steady this while I attach the last wire."

Ianto stepped up beside Jack, and moved his hands to hold where Jack directed.

"There are better tools down in the hub," he observed, trying to hold his arms so they didn't get

in Jack's way.

"Mmm," hummed Jack in agreement. "I didn't want to do this too near the rift monitors, it might have fried them out."

Ianto opened his mouth to reply, and then, suddenly, it happened.

With a sensation that he would later describe as a combination between throwing up and suffocating, except over each individual cell and magnified by a hundred, Ianto's vision went black and the world around him disappeared. For a long, shocking moment, he couldn't breathe, and then he was gasping again, the ground solid beneath his feet, and someone's arms holding him up.

His vision swam before him, spots of colour dancing across his eyes, sounds consolidating first as someone's voice came into focus.

"Why hello there," it said. "And you are?"

Ianto held onto consciousness for just long enough to realize that the voice and the arms gripping him belonged to Jack before his legs folded under him and the world went dark.

## **Chapter 2**

*In which some things are explained, and many more are not.*

~

When Ianto woke, he didn't feel much better than when he'd passed out. His tongue was fuzzy, stuck to the roof of his mouth, and his hands and feet were freezing. It took him a moment to get a hold of his stomach before the nausea retreated enough to open his eyes.

The light danced across his vision for a moment before he could resolve the pattern on the ceiling. When he could focus a little better, he tried to sit up, only to flop back down when his muscles seized up.

"Careful there. You're probably going to need ten minutes before sudden movements are advisable."

Ianto – slowly – turned his head towards the speaker. It was Jack, thank God. Whatever had happened, at least Jack was still here.

“What’s wrong with me?”

“Time sickness, I think,” Jack said, coming over to the side of the bed. “Do you know when you are?”

“Time sickness?”

“Uh-huh,” said Jack, placing a hand on Ianto’s cheek. “Dizziness, blurry vision, cold extremities?”

“Sounds about right,” Ianto replied, trying to get Jack’s face to become something a little less fuzzy.

“It’s that or space sickness, but judging by the getup, I’m guessing you’re not from this century,” said Jack. He reached down and fingered Ianto’s tie, tugging it out of the front of his suit jacket. “Or millennia.”

Wait. That wasn’t right. What wasn’t right? Ianto cursed under his breath. His mind was having trouble; it felt like someone had given him a book with too-small type that he couldn’t quite make out.

“Jack, what’s going on?”

“Sorry, not Jack,” Jack said.

No, something was definitely not making sense.

Ianto struggled to get up again. This time he was successful, and he looked around at his surroundings. He was in a small room that didn’t contain more than the bed he was lying on and a bench-like chair. Or a couch-like bench. Or a-

“Not Jack?” Ianto repeated, the pieces finally falling into place. He looked back at the person beside him, this time taking a closer look.

No, he realized, with a certain amount of horror. This was definitely not the person he’d been standing beside what felt like only a moment ago. And yet – it was. The same face, the same eyes, the same cleft in his chin, the same dimples at the sides of his mouth. But younger. Younger, with different hair, and, most importantly, a look in his eyes that was impersonal. Like he was staring at a stranger.

This Jack didn’t know who he was. And this Ianto was feeling more and more that he didn’t know who this Jack was either.

The nausea came back with a vengeance, but Ianto shoved it aside. This wasn't his Jack, okay, he could process that. But then how was this man related to Jack? Was he in the same dimension? If he was, this must be Jack before Ianto knew him, because otherwise, he'd remember him. Ianto's mind whirled, trying to sort out the sudden rush of data, the logical conclusions. He looked younger, and every photo Jack had shown Ianto of himself since his arrival on earth had shown the same person, unchanged by time.

Which meant that this Jack was probably not immortal. This Jack was from before, before Jack had met the Doctor, before he'd died and come back, from when-

*I wasn't a good person, Ianto. You don't want to know the kind of things I did.*

Ianto's gut wrenched. Suddenly, the only person he felt safe with, wasn't.

"Hey, hey. Don't go into temporal shock on me. The laundry service here is rubbish, and I'd like to use these sheets for the next few days."

"When am I?" Ianto asked, surprising himself with the evenness of his voice.

"5056. I'm guessing you didn't end up when you were expecting? Or you weren't expecting to end up anywhen at all?"

"No," said Ianto, faintly. "I wasn't planning on going anywhere in particular."

"Ouch," Jack said, looking sympathetic. "Accidental time travel's a bitch on the system. Explains why you passed out in my arms, too. Generally, I know why that happens."

The hair might have been wrong, Ianto thought numbly, but the smirk was exactly the same.

"So, this Jack," Jack – no, not Jack – said, "Is he as hot as me, or were you still blinded from the shock when you thought I was him?"

*The first rule of time travel, Ianto, Jack had said to him, is never tell anyone anything about their future. So no, I won't tell you what happens in the twenty-first century. Just remember that it changes, and be ready for it.*

But this *was* the future. So, in a sense, anything Ianto told anyone here had already happened, so he couldn't cause any temporal paradoxes, or self-fulfilling prophecies. Except for the niggling detail that Jack was a rebel in all things, including in the tradition of following a linear timeline. So, telling this Jack anything about him would be telling him about his own future, and Ianto's logical mind could quickly grasp all the problems with that.

“There’s some resemblance,” he answered when he realized young not-Jack was looking at him, expectantly. “I got confused, for a bit. He was with me when it happened. I thought he’d still be here.”

“No problem,” said not-Jack, cheerfully. “I’m sure you won’t mistake me for anyone else next time.” He stepped back from the bed and held out a hand. “Can you stand up, carefully? Being vertical sometimes helps the symptoms recede.”

Ianto took his hand and used it to pull himself up, almost tipping over in the process. Not-Jack grabbed him around the shoulders to steady him. When Ianto was standing on his own without swaying, he ran his hands down Ianto’s arms, tugging at his cuffs and then across his front to finger the buttons on his jacket.

“So lets see. A... suit, is it? With a fabric necklace for men, a-”

“Tie,” Ianto supplied.

“A tie, right. Because you tie it. Manufactured plastic buttons, tightly woven fabric, and natural fibers, both plant and animal based,” he listed, touching Ianto’s collar and then stepping up closer, turning Ianto’s head and pressing his nose to Ianto’s neck. “Artificial scents, probably decorative, traces of methane, fluorocarbons, fluorine and chlorine.”

He stepped back and looked Ianto up and down with a surprisingly clinical eye.

“Late twentieth century?”

Ianto raised an eyebrow. Jack – not-Jack – shrugged.

“Either that or you’ve got a fondness for period dress, and polluted air and water supplies.”

Ianto shook his head, ruefully. Even here, far from Ianto’s time and probably not much older than Ianto himself, Jack still had a know-it-all air.

“No, you’re pretty close. 2008, actually.”

“Ah. I thought suits went out of fashion in the late nineteen hundreds.”

“Not quite. Most people don’t wear them much anymore, except for special occasions.”

“Didn’t.”

“Pardon?”

“Most people didn’t wear them much anymore,” not-Jack elaborated. “You should try switching your tenses as soon as possible, it’ll probably help with adjusting.”

Ianto looked at him for a long moment, his stomach dropping.

“Adjusting to what?”

Not-Jack spread his arms wide. “To your new home, temporally speaking.”

“You can’t send me back?”

Not-Jack frowned.

“How would I be able to do that?”

*Because you’re a time agent*, Ianto thought. But he couldn’t say it – he didn’t know it.

“Isn’t there a way?” Ianto asked, wincing at the desperation that was leaking into his voice.

“You must have some way.”

Not-Jack shrugged.

“The Time Agency could, but they don’t deal with displaced persons, not forward in time, at any rate. Maybe if you begged, but you’d be lucky to get an appointment.”

“Oh,” said Ianto, giving into the urgent need to sit down. Not-Jack bounced over to the bed and sank down next to him.

“Don’t look like that,” he said. “It’s not that terrible. It’s an all right time, lots of booze, lots of sex, lots of interesting species mixing together. It could be worse, you could be stuck in 2770.” The last part was said rhythmically, Ianto noted. Like an expression, or a proverb.

“What happened then?”

“Oh, humanity spent the next sixty years celibate,” not-Jack said, waving it off. “Don’t ask; it was as boring as it sounds.”

“All right.”

Jack turned to him with a faint look of concern written across his features, and reached out and

put a warm hand on Ianto's thigh.

"Hey, I'll make sure you're fixed up good. Find you some decent people who'll make sure you don't get eaten by the wrong species," he said, rubbing his thigh in a gesture that was probably meant to be soothing, but only made Ianto think of his own Jack, three thousand years away.

"Kethan Brisho, by the way. I don't think I ever got the pleasure of hearing your name."

Ianto's name was part of this man's future. But then, so was Ianto himself. Surely knowing his face was just as bad as knowing his name.

"Ianto. Ianto Jones."

"I-an-to Jones," not-Jack – Kethan – repeated slowly. "Sounds as delicious as you look."

All of a sudden it was too much for Ianto: the sound of his name in Jack's broad American accent, the innuendo in his words, the lecherous look that was oh-so-familiar, the brush of his hand on Ianto's leg. Ianto lurched up again and stumbled a few steps to the far wall, placing his hands against it and resting his forehead on the cool metal. He took a few deep breaths, trying to focus his thoughts and calm his stomach. Jack – *Kethan*, damnit – started to say something, but was interrupted by a rap at the door. Kethan got up from the bed and opened it.

"Keth, love," said the person on the other side, just out of Ianto's view. "Are you going to keep the pretty one all to yourself, or let us in on the details any time soon?"

"Oh, I'm not sure he's so into sharing," said Kethan, and Ianto could hear the grin in his voice. "He's twenty-first century, just barely."

"Twenty-first? That's a long way. Know why he's here?"

"Nope," replied Kethan. "And I don't think he does either. Look, I think he's gonna need a bit to sort things out, how about I meet you in the cafeteria on E at seven?"

"Sure. Just wanted to make sure he hadn't stabbed you."

"Make sure he hadn't, or join in if he had?"

There was a shout of laughter, and then Kethan was closing the door and turning back to Ianto.

"You all right there?"

Ianto considered this. No, scratch that, he didn't want to consider this right now. Best to focus on the moment, or the sensation of being so completely gone from where he should be would

overwhelm him again. He thought about the exchange he had just heard – there had been something strange about it. Kethan’s voice had sounded different, like Ianto had been hearing him from behind a wall, with a faint echo.

“Why did you sound different?” Ianto asked.

“Just now?”

Ianto nodded.

“I wasn’t speaking English. The fish was translating for you.”

“The what?”

“Fish.” Kethan reached into the collar of his shirt and pulled out a thick chain, with a small, semicircular item clasped in the middle. “It’s a telepathic autotranslator. Seventy-eight languages in this one, standard twentieth-century English included, lucky for you. You’re close enough it’s working right now. Don’t wander off on your own, unless you happen to speak one of the Galactic Universals.”

Ianto considered this. The explanation had given him several questions to ask, and he sorted out which one to ask first.

“But you were speaking English before? And now?”

“Yup. The fish let me know it was your language, just after you passed out.”

“But – do people still speak English?”

“No, not except for some historians. Lucky for you, I happen to like history,” Kethan said, a bit of a salacious grin on his face.

“All right,” said Ianto, swiftly moving on. “Why is it called a fish?”

Kethan shrugged. “Jax Penther – the inventor – never would say. Always just laughed and said people needed to read more.”

Well, that explained that, Ianto thought. At least he hadn’t fallen into an alternate universe, courtesy of Douglas Adams.

“Any more questions?”



“Just one,” Ianto admitted. “How is there more than one Galactic Universal? Isn’t that a bit contradictory?”

Kethan barked a laugh.

“Not much gets by you, does it? You’re right, it is absurd, but there are three. A, B and F. People never were very good at agreeing to give up their local tongues. There used to be seven, but we’ve whittled it down to three so far.”

“C, D, E, and G lost out?” asked Ianto wryly. If anyone could understand the appeal of local tongue, it was a Welshman.

“Exactly,” Kethan said, grinning.

“I see.”

Ianto leaned back against the wall, shoving his hands into his pockets. It was getting easier by the moment, processing the time change, as he gathered more information. The more he knew, even petty little linguistic details about the fifty-first century, the less lost he felt.

“So lets see. I’m in the fifty-first century – 5056, to be precise – where they don’t speak English, have some form of instant translation, with a man named Kethan Brisho. Is that all I know so far?”

“Unless you’re telepathic, I think so.”

“What else should I know?” Ianto asked.

“Right away? Well, you’re on a ship, you might like to know. We’ll be in space for another six days – 36 hour clock, but the hours are a lot shorter than you’re used to, I’ll get you a watch – and we’re headed for the main hub of the Trell System in the Burning cluster.”

“A space ship?” Ianto asked.

“Galactic cruiser, class C9, model 5043. A real hunk of scrap, actually. Less of a decadent cruise and more of an orgy in a closet.”

“And you’re on it, why?”

“I never turn down an orgy.”

Ianto had to laugh, then.

“Just traveling. Meeting some friends on Trell Major,” Kethan said, shrugging.

Oh. Ianto knew that shrug. That was Jack’s ‘I’m casually dissembling, nope, nothing here to know, nothing here to hide’ shrug. A quick glance at Kethan’s left wrist cemented the feeling: there was Jack’s wristband, a little less worn and stained, but unmistakably the vortex manipulator. Kethan was more than able to get him back to the twenty-first century, unless Ianto missed his guess.

Which meant that he’d better not lose this young Jack, because he was probably his best bet if he ever wanted to return to his own time. The question was, how to persuade him to send him home when Kethan clearly wasn’t interested in owning up to his own time-traveling aptitude.

“So what are you going to do with me, then?”

“With a face like that? Whatever you let me.”

No, Ianto decided, the smirk wasn’t the same, it was worse. But then, he’d always known that Jack came from a less prudish time. It only made sense that he’d reined himself in after landing in Victorian times.

“I’m assuming I’m stuck on this ship until we land. Is there somewhere I can room?” Ianto asked, ignoring the pass.

“Unless you have a few hundred credits on you, no. They don’t take kindly to stowaways, so best not to ask them if you can have a room. The ‘but I accidentally fell through a temporal rift’ line doesn’t usually work on cruise directors,” Kethan said. “You can stay here, with me.”

Ianto made a show of looking around.

“And sleep, pray tell, where?”

Kethan gestured at the bed. “I won’t bite.”

“Unless I ask?” Ianto quipped, immediately wishing he hadn’t. It would be too easy to fall into his and Jack’s traditional banter with Kethan, if he wasn’t careful, and Kethan was sure to take that as a come on.

“Just say the word,” Kethan grinned, and then held out his palms, upward. “Hey, I know you people aren’t as forward, so if I’m scaring you off, or anything, let me know. I don’t do anything without consent.”

Ianto nodded at him.

“And when we reach Trell?”

“I told you, I know some nice people there. They’ll help you get on your feet,” Kethan said, and then gave him an apologetic half smile. “I’m really sorry I can’t do more, but I-” He cut himself off, shrugging.

“No, that’s fine,” Ianto said slowly. “I understand.”

“Good,” Kethan replied. “Now, I’ve only been on this ship for a fortnight, but I’ve met some people who know how to have a really good time. Join us for supper?”

“Sure,” said Ianto, pushing off the wall and following Kethan out of the room. “Just supper?”

“Just supper,” Kethan confirmed. “We’ll break you in slowly, I promise. And don’t worry, I know I take some getting used to, but you’ll sort me out in no time, I’m sure.”

Yes, Ianto thought. No time at all.

### Chapter 3

*In which some clothes get ruined.*

~

When you are trying very hard not to call your lover by his name for fear of causing an apocalyptic paradox, getting drunk is not a marvelous idea.

Fortunately, even soused, Ianto had a remarkable amount of self-control. Kethan’s friends – and they were *very* friendly, considering they had only met two weeks ago – were cheerfully curious without being invasive, and Ianto didn’t have a hard time misleading the occasional question about his life that might pertain to Jack, though for the most part, they were just interested in his time.

“So, you archive alien artifacts? I thought humans were still desperately backwards back then.”

“Erm, well,” Ianto said, over the loud protests of the other humans at the table. “Things are – were – changing. Alien activity on Earth was increasing over the last decade or so, and there were some people who were aware of it.”

“Where’d you get the artifacts from?” asked Jack-Kethan.

Ianto hesitated. He could still keep his mouth shut after the three unidentifiable purple drinks, but he was feeling the impairment when it came to sorting out whether or not he could give an answer. Temporal mechanics didn’t make much sense when sober, and Ianto was feeling at a serious disadvantage drunk.

“I bet I can guess,” Jack – *Kethan* – replied. “You’re Welsh, aren’t you?”

Ianto looked at Kethan, surprised. “How’d you know?”

“Bit of a historian, remember? I’ve heard your accent before, and trust me, it’s not one I’d forget.”

“What does that have to do with where I find the artifacts?” asked Ianto, slowly.

“The Krift!” called a large human (or so Ianto thought – the tattoos could have been genetic) called Yuri.

Kethan snapped his fingers and pointed at Yuri.

“Bingo! Or,” he said, turning to Ianto, “As you might know it, the Cardiff Rift.”

“You know it?”

“We all know it,” said Yuri. “It’s the major temporal fault on Earth, so it’s pretty vital on a whole lot of counts.”

“It’s probably why you’re here,” added Kethan. “Were you in Cardiff when it happened?”

“Yes,” Ianto replied. This was good, he realized. If they thought the rift was the reason why he was here, Kethan was less likely to suspect that his own wristband had anything to do with it.

“We were running some tests – I don’t know what, our technician was doing them – and then, suddenly, I was here.”

“Poor boy,” Kethan said, slinging an arm around Ianto’s shoulders. “Leave anyone important behind? Lovers? Girlfriends? Boyfriends? Permanent partners – what are they called again?”

“Wives. Or husbands.”

“Ah, marriage,” sighed Kethan, leaning his head on Ianto’s shoulder. “Fun fact of the evening,

folks: humans in the twenty-first century were expected to mate for life.”

The table ooh-ed appropriately for a moment and then burst into laughter.

“Isn’t that boring?”

“God, I can’t imagine having only one partner for a month, let alone a lifetime.”

“How do you *choose*?”

Well, mused Ianto, at least Jack hadn’t been lying when he said monogamy was not something he’d grown up understanding.

“We don’t really mate for life,” he said, shrugging Kethan off his shoulder. “I mean, a lot of people get married, but most people have relationships before then. At least, where I’m from, we do. You sort of – try out a bunch of people, and when you find someone you really fit with, you commit to be with them, if you want to.”

“Why would you want to?” asked Kethan, looking intrigued.  
Ianto shrugged.

“It’s fulfilling. Knowing someone will always be there for you, no matter what. Until death do us part.”

The laughter died down as the table considered this.

“And when you do die?” Kethan asked.

“What do you mean?”

“If you’ve put all your love into one person, it must be awful if you lose them.”

Ianto raised an eyebrow.

“I thought we were just talking about sex.”

“You weren’t.”

“You were,” Ianto pointed out. “Unless you love someone new every month.”

“Sure,” Kethan said, looking at him quizzically. It was Jack’s look, too, when he was trying to make sense of a twenty-first century attitude. “If you meet someone who you love, you love

them. Isn't that it? And if you meet someone you'd like to have sex with, you have sex with them."

"I guess," said Ianto, staring down at his fourth drink. He picked it up and threw it back, feeling the alcohol burn down his throat. "Easy come, easy go."

He stood up, rather faster than he should have, grabbing the edge of the table to balance as he stepped over the bench.

"I've had a bit too much to drink," he said. "If you'll excuse me." Three thousand years of time displacement was no reason to forget his manners.

Ianto followed the rows of tables out of the cafeteria, and headed for the stairs that led to the deck with Kethan's room. What kind of spaceship has stairs, he groused as he tried not to fall down them, passing a few dozen people on the way. He made it to the right floor and located Kethan's room, only to realize he had no idea how to open it. Ianto leaned his forehead against it and tried to resist the urge to feel incredibly lost.

"Here," said Kethan, coming up and reaching in front of him, his arm brushing against Ianto's. "It's a bio-lock." He pressed a finger to the dark circle where the doorknob should be, and the door slid open, suddenly enough that Ianto all but fell through it.

Ianto stumbled over to the bed and sat on it, rubbing his face with his hands.

"You should go back to your friends," he said to Kethan, who was watching him from the doorway.

"You're more interesting."

Ianto laughed.

"As a maudlin drunk? I don't think so."

"No, as a time-traveling maudlin drunk," he replied, stepping fully into the room, the door swishing shut behind him. "You're allowed to be sad, you know. You did just lose everything you know."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"There was someone, wasn't there?" Kethan asked, sitting down beside him and twisting so his back was to the wall at the head of the bed.

“Yes.”

Kethan tucked his legs under him and leaned over, taking one of Ianto’s hands, and then the other, carefully scrutinizing them. Ianto watched him, amused.

“No rings. So that means no wife?” he asked, looking up. “No husband?”

“I couldn’t have a husband,” said Ianto, dissembling.

“Not legal yet?”

“Not quite.”

Kethan sat back.

“Still haven’t answered my question.”

Ianto flopped back onto the bed and stared up at the corrugated metal of the ceiling. He had some basic training in temporal mechanics from Torchwood, but the fact remained that they really had no idea what any of it meant, so he was essentially left with his wits. Unfortunately, Ianto already felt that they were failing him miserably. If this was Jack, before he knew Jack, then why hadn’t Jack known him when he met him?

There were only two answers to that question. Either Jack did know him, and simply didn’t say anything to preserve some sort of pre-existing timeline, or somewhere between now and then, Jack lost – loses – will lose – his memories of Ianto. If it was the former, then Ianto needed to be careful what he said. What if he told Jack about Lisa? Gave Kethan the whole story about how he betrayed his boss by hiding a Cyberwoman in the basement? There was no way Jack had pretended to be ignorant of that; the betrayal on his face had been too real. Ianto was half tempted to blurt it out – ‘I’m going to hide a Cyberwoman in your basement’ – just to test the theory.

If he told Kethan that he was with a man named Jack, and he remembered it, then that would explain Jack’s smug assumption that he’d be able to get Ianto into bed. Ianto wasn’t sure he wanted to give Jack that knowledge, but it shouldn’t be the end of the universe. And if Kethan loses his memory on the way to becoming Jack, well, that made it even less important.

“There’s someone.”

“This Jack of yours?”

Ianto reached up and started to undo his tie.

“How’d you know?” he asked.

“Just a guess. He was the first person you asked for,” Kethan said as he reached over and took the tie out of Ianto’s hands, wrapping it around his fist. “Are you monogamous?”

“Depends who you ask.”

Kethan furrowed his brow.

“Who else would I ask?”

“Him or me,” Ianto said, sitting up again and sliding out of his jacket. “I’m monogamous. He’s not.”

“How does that work?”

“Mostly? I deal,” he replied as he slid off the bed and laid his jacket out on the couch. “I don’t care who he sleeps with, as long as he comes back to me.”

“Oh,” said Kethan, rubbing the silk tie along his jaw. “So he’s the someone who will always be there for you?”

Ianto shook his head. “We don’t have that kind of a commitment.”

“Why not?” Kethan asked. “You seemed to think it’s a good idea.”

“For some people,” Ianto said, smiling slightly. “Jack’s... not someone you can tie down.”

“A fifty-first century kind of guy.”

Ianto froze. It took him a moment to remember to breathe, to remember that Kethan didn’t know anything— despite actually knowing a whole lot – about Jack, and that he was just making a realistic observation.

“Yep,” Ianto finally managed. “Listen, do you have anything I can sleep in?” he asked. “I’m afraid I’m going to crash soon.”

“I’m surprised you’re still awake, actually,” Kethan said, sliding off the bed with Jack’s customary grace. “Time sickness and four drinks would be enough to put me out.” He went over to the rucksack in the corner and dug around in it for a moment. The pair of trousers he pulled out were softer than silk and a shade of blue that exactly matched one of Jack’s favourite



shirts. Kethan handed them to Ianto and then pulled his own shirt over his head.

“I sleep in the buff,” he said, reaching down to the zipper on his trousers. “Would you rather I didn’t?”

Ianto let his eyes wander up the familiar terrain of Jack’s body. Of Kethan’s body.

“No,” he replied, not quite meeting Kethan’s eyes. “That’s fine.”

~

There was something unfair about *finally* waking up with Jack in a bed that was big enough for two and having Jack not really be Jack. Kethan had rolled over to his side in the night, his face pressed against Ianto’s arm and one knee digging into his thigh. Ianto lay there for a few minutes, reveling in the warmth of another body next to his and trying desperately to convince his own body that this *wasn’t Jack*.

Kethan probably wouldn’t object to him wanking in bed, but Ianto was still British, even three thousand years in the future.

When he couldn’t take it any more, Ianto crawled out around Kethan, put on yesterday’s clothes, and slipped out the door.

~

Two days later Ianto was starting to feel a little more settled, to his significant relief. He and Kethan took rowdy meals with his friends and acquaintances, of whom Kethan had many; people seemed to gravitate to him and his group, drawn in by his charisma and willingness to talk to anyone about anything. They spent the rest of their time amusing themselves in the lounges: Kethan playing games, flirting, and occasionally snogging with various other passengers, and Ianto reading and talking, gathering as much information as possible about the fifty-first century.

Kethan had lent him his fish, and had given him a device that resembled a laptop, minus the keyboard and with both a touch screen and a speech input. It was connected into a network that covered all the major galactic transport routes, according to Kethan, and Ianto spent a significant amount of time browsing their version of Wikipedia, catching up on three thousand years worth of history, which would have probably been overwhelming if it hadn’t been for Kethan. Jack’s younger self had an extensive knowledge of history from the birth of Christ on (not that his understanding of Christianity was particularly strong) and he was more than willing to discuss it with Ianto.

Ianto tried to enjoy this talkative version of Jack, such a change from two years of non-answers and forget that his willingness to share what would have been Ianto's future probably meant he didn't expect he'd ever return to 2008.

He had been sitting in the cafeteria on F deck for the past hour, drinking coffee (thank God they still had coffee, Ianto might have walked out an airlock in despair if they'd lost that art form) and studying the first settlements of extra-solar planets in the thirty-one hundreds when Kethan walked in. Ianto smiled at him and started to wave him over, but Kethan's sharp shake of the head stopped him. Instead of joining Ianto, Kethan strolled over to another table and sat down opposite a burly man Ianto hadn't met.

"So, Quinn," he said, loudly enough for Ianto to hear. "When you said you could sell me a fish, I sort of understood that to mean you could sell me a working fish."

"At least," Kethan continued, raising his voice and looking around, "I think most honest folk would assume that's what you meant."

Ianto watched as Kethan reached into his pocket and pulled out a chain, dropping it in between him and Quinn. The room quieted down slowly, and as the moment stretched out whispers and the occasional scrape of a bench across the floor were the only noises. Ianto could almost see Kethan counting beats, manipulating the quiet to his advantage, until he pulled himself up and leaned over the table.

"You owe me some credits," he said softly, pushing the translator across the table.

Quinn grinned, and stood up as well.

"Not my fault you didn't check out the merchandise beforehand," he picked up the fish, and then Kethan's hand, and put the translator in it. "Keep it."

What exactly happened next, Ianto wasn't quite certain. All he knew was that one moment, Kethan and Quinn were standing across the table from each other, hands gripped together, and the next, Kethan was on the other side of the table shoving Quinn's face into it. The glint of a knife caught Ianto's eye: Kethan had it pressed up to Quinn's jaw.

"Like I said," Kethan continued as if he had never been interrupted. "You owe me some credits."

Quinn relented, wisely, and when Kethan had gotten what he wanted from him, he walked over to where Ianto was sitting.

"Come on," he said, crossing his arms in front of him. "Let's blow this popsicle stand."

Ianto followed him out of the cafeteria, jogging slightly to keep up. Kethan didn't say a word until they reached his room, where he sank down on the couch with a groan and a wince. Ianto started.

"Are you all right?"

Kethan began pulling his jacket off.

"I think so," he said, tossing his jacket on the floor and pressing a hand against his side. "I should live." When he pulled the hand away, it was covered in blood.

"I didn't ask if you would live," snapped Ianto, kneeling down in front of Kethan. "I asked if you were all right."

"Same thing," sighed Kethan, leaning back and shutting his eyes as Ianto peeled his shirt up. Ianto's lips twitched as the wound was revealed, deep and long across his abdomen, blood seeping out between the smooth edges of the cut.

"You're going to need stitches." He paused. "Do they still have stitches?"

"What are stitches?"

"A way of sewing up wounds when they're too deep to heal on their own," replied Ianto. "I'm guessing that means 'no'."

"Ew," said Kethan, wrinkling his nose. "Please don't tell me you literally mean 'sewing'."

"If you don't have stitches," Ianto continued, ignoring him, "what do you use?"

"Binding gel. You'll probably need a clotting spray, too, or the gel won't stick. There's some in my bag, bottom front pocket."

Ianto reached over and pulled the bag towards him, opening up the front zip. There were a few small bottles and tubes in it, along with some bandages. A first aid kit. Ianto pulled out the bottles and tubes and held them up.

"Yeah, that one, the blue with the red writing. That's the clotter. Spray it all over, it'll speed up--"

"The clotting process?" asked Ianto dryly.

"Uh-huh," replied Kethan, a grin on his lips. "Catch on quick, you do."

Kethan was silent while Ianto tended to the wound, except for a few quiet instructions. Ianto was taping gauze to the edges when it finally occurred to him just how close he'd come to losing Kethan. Which meant, losing Jack. If Jack had died here – because of him, Ianto thought, realizing suddenly that the extra fish was probably meant for him – what would happen? He would never have met Ianto, which means Ianto would have never shown up, and *that* would mean that he never would have died.

Ianto let out a puff of breath. Best not to focus on what might have been. Better to prevent it from happening.

“You could have died,” he said, more calmly than he felt, smoothing down the edges of the tape. Kethan hummed and shifted under his fingers. His skin felt the same as Jack's, though a little cooler, but that could have just been the blood loss.

“Would you miss me?”

Ianto's hands stopped moving. He splayed them across Kethan's stomach, and then pulled back onto his haunches.

“Yep.”

They watched each other for a moment, and then Ianto stood up, breaking the moment.

“You are the only person here I really know,” Ianto said, shrugging. “It would be a shame to have to find a new guide to the fifty-first century.” He gave Kethan a hand and hauled him up.

“Yuri would help you,” said Kethan, allowing his momentum to bring him into Ianto's personal space. “He likes you.”

“Well,” said Ianto, willing the flush off his face. “He's not as pretty as you.”

Kethan smiled widely.

“No. Most people aren't,” he said, leaning in, his breath ghosting across Ianto's cheek.

“Not to mention his grasp of twenty-first century slang isn't up to my standards,” said Ianto, stepping back and crossing his arms. Kethan paused, looking confused.

“What?”

““Let's blow this popsicle stand'?” Ianto quoted, raising an eyebrow. “Where in God's name

did you pick that up?”

Kethan twitched, and then started laughing.

“Oh, I read it somewhere,” he said, shaking his head. “You know what, Ianto Jones? I think I like you, twenty-first century standards and all.”

“Glad to be of service,” Ianto began, but Kethan interrupted him.

“You may be harder to get than most others around here,” he said, reaching out and running a broad hand down Ianto’s cheek to grasp his chin, “But I suspect you’re worth it.”

Ianto brushed off his hand and stepped forward, pressing a light kiss to Kethan’s lips.

“Hard to get,” said Ianto, picking up the discarded shirt and jacket, “is underrated.”

“Now,” he continued, “the shirt’s a goner, but the jacket’s just bloody, which I can probably fix. Is that all right?”

Kethan looked at him, wide-eyed, and then threw up his hands.

“Do what you want,” he said, heading for the door. “I’m going to find someone else to shag, since you won’t relieve me of my suffering.”

Ianto watched him go as he considered yet another way Jack was still like Kethan: sex was still more important than the laundry.

## **Chapter 4**

*In which Ianto walks a fine line.*

~

He was going to have to do it all over again.

The last time he met Jack, Ianto had been deliberately flirtatious. People talked, even at Torchwood One, and he had learned that Jack had a fondness for – well, as Tosh had put it, anything gorgeous enough.

He hadn’t been flattering himself when he presumed he was gorgeous enough; he’d been desperate. Lisa needed to be hidden somewhere safe, somewhere with enough technology to support her artificial components, and Torchwood Three had been Ianto’s best bet. So he’d

flirted with Captain Jack Harkness. He'd put up with the harassment, encouraged it, and suggested that if Jack tried hard enough, he just might get to see under Ianto's well-pressed suits. If there was one thing that would distract Jack, it was the promise of sex.

They had never spoken of it, never acknowledged that Ianto's willingness to play along with Jack's innuendo-filled games had been nothing more than a cleverly executed con, but Ianto knew Jack had recognized it for what it was, too late. Jack was more than clever enough to realize when he had been played, and Ianto's betrayal had been all the worse for it.

Now here he was, meeting Jack anew, realizing that he needed to seduce him this time through as well. Not convince him to sleep with Ianto – like Jack, Kethan didn't exactly need to be persuaded to have sex – but to convince him that he wanted nothing more than to sleep with Ianto. And, once he had Kethan convinced that Ianto Jones was someone he really wanted to get to know better – he needed to deny him, to hold back, to make him wait. Ianto suspected that he'd be a whole lot less interesting to Kethan once they'd had sex, and Ianto needed Kethan to keep him around.

They were due into the spaceport the next afternoon, and Ianto was sprawled out on the bed in their little room, resting against the wall, computer in his lap. He wasn't reading, just staring blankly at the page, trying to remember everything he had done to seduce Jack the first time round. What had particularly caught his eye? He had mentally catalogued a few things - suits, calling him sir, using his hands, bending over to pick things up, sarcastic comments - when the door slid open and Kethan fell through it, wrapped around a woman Ianto had chatted with a few times, Zui.

Ianto watched, a little startled, as Zui shoved Kethan up against the wall and dropped down in front of him, hands going to the front of his trousers. Kethan was laughing as he helped her with the clasp, touching her hair and then slapping his palms to the wall as she took him into her mouth.

“Fuck,” Kethan breathed out, shutting his eyes and dropping his head against the wall. “And here I thought it was your hands you were good with.”

Zui leaned back, replacing her mouth with her hands and stroking slowly.

“We can try both, and you can compare, if you like,” she said, voice low and sultry.

“Oh,” panted Kethan, pressing his hips forward in her grasp. “I'll definitely need to collect a significant sample to make a fair comparison.”

Zui laughed and leaned forward, licking her way up his cock and then swallowing down again. Kethan groaned and opened his eyes, looking straight at Ianto for the first time. A grin ghosted

his mouth before he bit down on his lower lip and shifted his stance, spreading his legs and resting more of his weight against the wall. He dropped his head backwards again, letting out breathy little moans and murmured words of encouragement

In short, Kethan was putting on a very attractive performance, all for Ianto's benefit. Or detriment, as the case might be.

Ianto, for what it was worth, couldn't tear his eyes away. Jack was one of the only people he'd met who looked completely comfortable in his own skin during sex, and Ianto had never seen anything so attractive in his life. He reached down to adjust himself in his trousers, and couldn't resist pressing down against his erection as he watched Zui quickly reduce Kethan to a quivering wreck.

Kethan came with an abbreviated shout, trying to buck forward as Zui's hands held him against the wall. He shuddered, reaching out to stroke Zui's hair before pulling her up and pushing her onto the bed in front of Ianto, where he crawled over her and kissed her thoroughly.

Ianto's ability to think, which had disappeared five minutes ago, returned with a vengeance when Kethan lifted his head and gave him a grin that was pure, cheeky Jack.

"Sorry Ianto, I forgot you would be in here."

Ianto just looked skeptical.

Zui righted herself and leaned back on her palms next to Ianto. "Would you like one?"

"Pardon?" Ianto spluttered.

She smiled and reached over, palming Ianto's cock through his trousers. "I'd be a bit of a cock-tease if I put on a show like that and didn't offer, wouldn't I?"

Ianto resisted twin urges to rock up into her hand and to gape.

"She's good, Ianto," said Kethan from where he was propped up against the headboard.

Ianto shook his head and shifted out from under Zui's hand, off the edge of the bed.

"Um, no, thank you," he stuttered, cursing at himself for not getting out sooner. This wasn't part of the plan. "I'll just leave you to – whatever." He grabbed the computer from where he'd dropped it and started for the door.

Kethan's arms wrapping around his waist stopped him before he'd made it two feet.

“Hey now,” Kethan purred in his ear, pulling him back so he was sitting on the edge of the bed between Kethan’s legs. “You don’t really want that, do you?”

Zui plucked the computer from his hands and came round to stand in front of him, smiling.

“I know this is strange for you,” she said gently, “But really, I’d love to.”

Kethan pressed himself against Ianto’s back, mouthing at his neck and running his palms from Ianto’s chest to his groin, stroking too gently for Ianto to feel anything but more frustrated.

“What do you think?” he whispered in Ianto’s ear. “Initiation into the fifty-first century by a gorgeous woman?” He rubbed a little harder. “Or by me?”

If you’d told Ianto five years ago that he would ever want to turn down a beautiful woman who wanted nothing more than to give him a blowjob, he would have said you were off your rocker. He never could have predicted how Jack made him feel, made him want to –

Kethan. Ianto’s eyes snapped back open.

“Zui,” he gasped. “Please.”

Kethan made a small noise that might have been disappointment, but moved his hands up and started undoing Ianto’s trousers instead as Zui dropped to her knees and brushed her hair back around her ears.

This was not how he meant it to go, Ianto thought hazily as Zui’s mouth running over his cock and Kethan’s hands running over the rest of him made thinking increasingly difficult. This was *not* playing hard to get. It was too late for regrets now, though, and Ianto gave himself over to his fifty-first century companions’ ministrations, pleasure overwhelming him and pushing him towards the edge.

He came quietly, shaking in arms that weren’t quite Jack’s.

~

Afterwards, when Ianto had separated himself from Kethan and barricaded himself behind Zui, he discovered why she was really there.

“Here,” she said, placing something in Ianto’s hand.

He looked down at it. It was a fish, like Kethan’s except on a fabric cord instead of a chain. He



glanced up at Kethan, who was lazily drawing circles on Zui's stomach.

"You found another one?"

Kethan smirked. "Nope. Same one from Quinn. Zui here," he said, tickling her softly, "is a technical genius and repaired it."

"Ah," said Ianto, watching them. "Shouldn't you be repaying her with sexual favours, then, rather than the other way around?"

Zui laughed. "Oh, he already did."

Ianto took in the pleased look on Kethan's face, and decided he really didn't want to pursue that line of questioning.

"So you're a technician?" he asked instead.

"A computer technician, yeah. That," she said, nodding at the fish, "is just a simple computer with some fancy telepathic circuitry. The circuitry was intact, so I could fix it."

"Thank you," Ianto said, meaning it wholeheartedly. He reached up and unsnapped Kethan's fish, which he'd been wearing for the last few days. Ianto handed it back to Kethan, ignoring the spark of heat when their hands touched.

They lay there for a while, Zui and Kethan chatting about telepathic circuitry and how much of a pain it was to get replacement parts, Ianto mostly listening and sometimes asking questions. It was surprisingly comfortable, lying in a bed with the two of them as if they knew each other so well, brushing up against warm bodies and reveling in the comforts of simple touches. Jack had always joked about threesomes, but Ianto had never imagined one could be anything less than awkward. He'd certainly never associated them with the feeling of good friends gathered for coffee, which is what this reminded him most of, minus a few pieces of clothing.

Ianto still tried to avoid Kethan's touch, letting his own hands wander no farther than Zui, and staying mostly out of reach of Kethan's. The occasional flicker of a frown that crossed Kethan's face told Ianto he hadn't ruined his plan entirely – Kethan still wanted Ianto for himself, and if he was anything like Jack, he'd probably keep trying as long as he thought there was a chance.

All Ianto had to do was walk the fine line between acceptance and rejection and he would have Kethan exactly where he needed him.

The three of them left for the cafeteria together, so Ianto managed to avoid being alone with Kethan until they went to bed that evening. There was an uncomfortable silence between them. Ianto could almost see Kethan's confusion hovering around him.

They were undressing when Kethan snapped.

"Look, do you want me or not?"

Ianto finished unbuttoning his shirt (well, the one Kethan had lent him) and folded it neatly. It wasn't a hard question to answer; he wouldn't even have to lie, mostly.

"I'm sorry," he started.

"For what? Being completely obtuse?" Kethan said, frustrated.

"Yes," he shrugged. "I'm not trying to lead you on." Maybe a bit of lying was needed.

"Not doing a very good job," huffed Kethan, putting his hands on his hips.

Ianto closed his eyes at the Jack-ness of the pose.

"Where I'm from, you can divide people into roughly two categories. People who do casual sex and people who don't."

"They do, what, relationships?"

"Yes."

"And you," Kethan asked, "What do you do?"

"Relationships," Ianto replied. "I'm not – well, I know people who will do it, but I've never been the kind of person to sleep with someone for fun."

Kethan pursed his lips.

"I know it must seem insane to you," Ianto said, anticipating what Kethan wanted to say. "But sex has always been part of something else for me."

"Love?"

"Sometimes that. Sometimes other things too, but there's always been an emotional

connection.”

“And you don’t have that with me.”

No, thought Ianto dully. I have that with you. You just don’t have it with me, because you haven’t even met me yet.

“Not really. I like you, but you didn’t seem to be the sort to want a relationship.”

Kethan sat down next to Ianto.

“I can do relationships, you know. And love and feelings. I’m not a sex-robot.”

“Oh?” said Ianto, lips twitching.

Kethan rolled his eyes.

“Not being monogamous doesn’t mean not connecting with people, you know. It just means I don’t connect with only one person at a time, or that having sex with one person doesn’t mean I’m not in love with someone else.”

Ianto thought that over.

“What’s the longest you’ve been with one person?” he asked. “Not exclusively, but continuously?”

“Four years.”

Ianto looked up in shock.

“Four years? How old are you?” he asked. Kethan didn’t look older than thirty, and that would make four years a significant portion of his life.

“Twenty-eight.” Kethan looked like he was trying to figure out if he should be offended or not. “Minus a few months here or there. It was back when I was training to – back when I was studying. We weren’t always in the same place, but I loved her, and she loved me, and we spent time together for those four years. What you would call a relationship, I think.”

“I’m sorry,” Ianto said genuinely. “I didn’t know.”

“No,” said Kethan, leaning back. “You didn’t.”

“What happened to her?”

A shadow crossed Kethan’s face, but he just shrugged and said, “We lost touch. Moved around a lot. That sort of thing.”

“Oh,” Ianto said, leaning back and matching Kethan’s pose. They sat in silence for a moment.

“So does that mean you do want me?” Kethan said, humour creeping into his voice.

Ianto shoved at his arm, laughing. “Of course I do, I’m not a monk.”

“A what?”

“Celibate religious men.”

Kethan wrinkled his nose. “But you need something more before you’ll sleep with me.”

“Yes,” Ianto said, looking sideways at him. “I think-” he cut himself off.

“What?” Kethan pressed. Ianto shrugged.

“It’s not impossible.”

“For us to have a relationship?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

Kethan smiled at Ianto. It was a real smile, not a smirk or a cheeky grin, but a wholehearted smile. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to Ianto’s cheek.

“I guess this sex-robot will just have to wait and see then, huh?”

Ianto laughed, but on the inside his stomach was rolling. Jack pining for him was exactly what he needed, but manipulating his feelings all over again was the last thing he wanted to be doing. He watched Kethan slip under the bed covers and hold them up for him.

He shook himself, tugging off his own trousers, and followed his future lover into bed. How many kinds of future lover, only time would tell.

~

The next day Kethan packed up his things and Ianto’s suit, minus the trousers, which Ianto was

wearing, into his rucksack and dragged Ianto over to a porthole.

“Nice transport ships have whole walls of glass so you can see the planets,” he said, “Orgies in a closet have holes in the wall.” He peered through one, and shook his head.

“Nope. Wrong side,” he said, before taking off again.

Ianto followed Kethan through the corridors, glad he was as tall as he was. When Jack moved, he moved with purpose and speed, and Kethan was the same.

“What’s Trell like?” he asked.

“Interesting history, kind of boring now,” Kethan answered, peering through another porthole. “They used to have a really interesting native species, but now it’s just a spaceport. Full of come-and-goers, not a whole lot of permanent residents.”

“What happened to the native people?”

“Genocide.”

Ianto’s pace faltered.

“By whom?”

“Not humans, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Kethan replied, checking another porthole. “A species from a planetary system over. They came with the technology, lived a few centuries on Trell, and then decided they’d like the planet to themselves. It was over before almost anyone outside the solar system knew what was going on.”

“How long ago?”

“Three hundred years, give or take.”

“And how many people?”

“Nearly eight billion,” Kethan paused again, looking out into the stars and shaking his head. “We’re on completely the wrong side of the ship. Let’s cut across.”

“How do you overwhelm eight billion people?” Ianto wondered aloud. “Didn’t they fight back?”

Kethan snorted.

“Nope.”

“You mean, not at all?” asked Ianto.

“Not one smidgen. Pacifist species,” Kethan said, sounding disapproving.

“You think they should have?” Ianto asked, curiously. In his line of work he couldn’t exactly claim to be peaceful, but he never could quite grasp the idea of killing another human. Or another sentient being. Assuming weevils weren’t sentient, that is.

Kethan stopped walking and turned to Ianto.

“Violence can be necessary, if there’s something you believe in strongly enough. They didn’t even believe in their own species, their own *children*, enough to defend themselves,” he said in a low, urgent voice. “Of all forms of violence, defending the innocent is the most noble.”

“I hadn’t thought about their children,” Ianto admitted. “I don’t have kids, but my brother does, and he said once that he never thought he could kill a person, until he had Rebecca.”

Kethan nodded, and started walking again. They reached the far side of the ship and Kethan stopped outside the first porthole.

“A couple more over, then you’ll see,” he said, taking Ianto’s hand and pulling him down the corridor. “The Trellians, they had this complicated belief system, but it basically boiled down to believing that death held rewards and punishments for your life, and killing another sentient species was the worst offense.”

“Not unlike lots of humans,” said Ianto. “Not that it stops us from murdering each other.”

“No,” replied Kethan grimly. “We are stellar at righteous violence.”

He stopped again.

“And, speaking of stellar – well, not really, because the stars are boring and it’s the planet you want to see,” he said, pulling Ianto in front of him, up to the latest porthole. “Take a look at that.”

Ianto put his face up to the small window and looked out. There, glimmering in the star-speckled blackness, was a planet. He breathed out. “It’s beautiful.”

“Isn’t it?” said Kethan, sounding pleased. “Even after all that violence, all that death.”

He wrapped an arm around Ianto's waist and put his chin on Ianto's shoulder. "Do you think they were right?" Kethan asked, breaking Ianto's reverie.

"About what?"

"Being punished or rewarded after death."

Ianto shifted in his arms.

"Are you asking what I think about life after death?"

"Sure," Kethan said, pressing his nose into Ianto's hair.

Everything Ianto *knew* about life after death had come from Jack. He couldn't exactly start talking about his immortal friend back in the twenty-first century. He didn't have to, though, because what he did know from Jack – and Suzie, he supposed – didn't have a whole lot of bearing on what he believed.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that there is something more to us than biological impulses. Knowing what I do, about myself, about life, about the mysteries of the world, I can't believe everything is nothing more than the interactions of particles. And since I believe there's more to our existence than just the physical world, I have to believe that physical death is not the end of all there is, as well. But whatever it is out there, I don't think we're supposed to know. I don't think we could know, not yet, not while we're all tangled up in the physical world."

Kethan squeezed him and laughed softly against his neck. Ianto pulled himself free and turned around, frowning.

"Is that amusing? Very twenty-first century of me?"

Kethan shook his head, smiling.

"No, not at all. I was just thinking that my vision of green fields and free martinis sounds very childish in comparison."

"Thinking about death a lot is not usually very healthy," Ianto said, shrugging.

"No," Kethan replied, a wry smile on his face. "I'm pretty involved in the 'being alive' aspect of living."

Ianto grinned in agreement and turned back to the window.

“It looks a lot like Earth,” he observed.

“Most inhabited planets do, from a distance. Some have more water, some have less, but the actual margin of error for a life-bearing planet is pretty small.”

“The margin of error in life is pretty small,” Ianto laughed and pulled Kethan up beside him.

They stared out at the planet together, and for a moment, Ianto could pretend he was with Jack, standing on top of the millennium centre, gazing out at the world and marveling at the beauty of it all.

## **Chapter 5**

*In which Ianto is screwed.*

~

They watched the planet grow larger, until it stretched past the edges of the window and a debarking announcement rang out through the ship. The ship didn't land on Trell; instead, it docked with a space station in orbit. Kethan and Ianto joined the rest of the passengers in the slow march from ship to station, and then into the lines for the shuttles down to the planet's surface. When they finally reached the surface, Ianto felt pasty and jet-lagged.

“I need coffee,” he said, following Kethan through the halls of the spaceport.

“Can you wait until we're downtown?” Kethan asked. “Spaceport coffee is terrible, I know of some nice places to eat in the city.”

“Certainly,” replied Ianto, trying to decide if he should ask Kethan what he was going to do with him. He didn't want to remind Kethan he was supposed to be ditching him now, in case he did, but he desperately wanted to know if his plan was working. If it wasn't, he'd need to re-evaluate, and fast.

They took a sort of a light-rain train from the spaceport into what Ianto assumed was the heart of the city. It certainly felt like it: it was full of bright colours and sounds, bustling with pedestrians (no cars, he observed), shops and food in the mid-afternoon light. There were no neon lights or shiny glass buildings, or people on hovercrafts. It was a far cry from the austere images of the future science fiction generated: this city was rich in life and culture.

“I thought you said Trell didn't have much of a permanent population,” Ianto asked.

“The spaceports have the most people,” Kethan said, ushering him into a street side café. “They



cater to tourists and passers-by. This is all the original Trellian architecture, but if you go far out of the main hubs, things get pretty deserted.”

They took a seat by the open window and Kethan waved over the waiter (waitress? Ianto was a bit out of his depth when it came to the multitude of species around him) and ordered two coffees in the muffled tone that meant he wasn’t speaking English.

“What happened to the species that killed them all?” Ianto asked, stretching his aching legs out under the table. “Didn’t they stick around to collect their spoils?”

Kethan shook his head.

“Not for long. Once the galactic community realized what had happened, they imposed a trade embargo on Trell. No one would deal with them, at all, which wasn’t good for their economy or love of fancy new technology. Most of them left, either for their other settlements or more multicultural planets.”

Their coffees arrived, and Ianto picked one up and took a grateful sip.

“Mmm,” he groaned. “This is marvelous.”

“Imported all the way from Earth,” said Kethan, smiling. “I thought you might like a taste of home.” He picked up his own mug.

“Trell was basically untouched for a century. It’s a rich planet, but it was a bit of an Auschwitz. It was too good of a location – right on the edge of the Burning cluster, on the side most people come from – for the transport routes to avoid it, but even now most of the planet is empty.”

“But they get tourists?”

“A little now. Not much else here, but they’ve developed a reputation for good entertainment by the spaceports. Most people passing through take a few days to enjoy it.”

“So you’re just passing through, then?”

Kethan eyed Ianto, nodding.

“My friends are a couple of days behind me. I need to pick up some supplies at some point, but other than that, I’m all yours.”

Ianto raised an eyebrow.

“That sounds promising.”

“Well, said Kethan, grinning. “I intend to show you a good time. But first, we need to get you some clothes. Mine aren’t showing off your body to its best advantage, and I’m getting tired of sharing.”

“I don’t have any credits,” Ianto pointed out.

“I’ll put it on your tab.”

Ianto looked skeptical, but Kethan stopping him before he could protest.

“Don’t argue. It’s no problem, and what else are you going to do, anyway? Nothing but your body to recommend you, and while it is a *lovely* body, I think you’ll find sex doesn’t sell as well as it used to.”

“Oh?” Ianto asked.

“Prostitution is for sexually inhibited societies. Sex is free here, in all senses of the word.”

“Well,” said Ianto, finished off his coffee quickly. “I guess I’ll just have to rely on your generosity a little longer.”

“Not too generous,” replied Kethan. “I may have an ulterior motive.”

“Oh?”

“Oh yes,” he said, smirking into his coffee. “You in a tight shirt and pants? And a leather jacket? I’d definitely drop credits for that.”

Ianto laughed.

“And you say sex doesn’t sell.”

~

It was early evening, and Ianto was the proud owner of a rucksack of his own, new clothing, some essential toiletries, and a small computer that doubled as a fifty-first century mobile phone. They had lingered over dinner, discussing fashion statements of the fifty and twenty-first centuries. Kethan paid the bill and they gathered up their packs.

“I’m just surprised you can tell anything about anyone from their clothing any more, with so

many cultures and species mixing together.”

“Well, most of this only holds for humans, honestly. Don’t ask me to explain Uris or Mapalligorian fashion sense, not that the first has much of one. And it varies from sector to sector, but for the well-educated and cultured, it’s uniform enough.”

“The casual clothing isn’t that different. Zippers, buttons, all that’s still there.”

“There are only so many ways to cover a human body efficiently,” Kethan said, shrugging. “It’s mostly fit and pattern that change with the times. And it’s all cyclical. The height of fashion now looks a lot like it did in the forty-nine thirties.”

“Well,” said Ianto, glancing at his own reflection in a window. “It’s more casual than I’m used to anymore, but it’s well enough cut. Not cheap at all.”

Kethan looked affronted.

“You think I would take you to the cheap stores?”

“No,” said Ianto, smiling. “I have high standards, that’s all. My father was a tailor.”

“I see.”

The clothes were quite nice; the leather (which wasn’t actually leather, he confirmed with Kethan) was buttery smooth and the rest of the clothes were soft and light. The shirts fit his body in a style he hadn’t worn since university and clubbing were his main activities, and Kethan had been particularly approving of the pants that fit like jeans but weren’t actually made of a jean material.

“Were you close to your parents?” Kethan asked, quietly.

“Yes,” said Ianto, slipping his hands into his pocket.

Kethan reached over and grabbed the wrist closest to him, pulling Ianto’s hand out of his pocket and taking it in his own.

“I’m sorry.”

Ianto caught himself before telling Kethan he had nothing to be sorry for. Kethan had no idea Ianto had every intention of returning to the twenty-first century. Admittedly, Ianto hadn’t got much farther in his plan than ‘stay close to Kethan and hope he decides to admit he’s a time agent and send you home’, but for now, it would do.

He squeezed Kethan's hand.

"Thanks."

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

"Oh!" exclaimed Kethan, coming to an abrupt halt. "*La Traviata*."

"What?"

Kethan pointed to a banner stretched out across a large building. Most of it was illegible to Ianto, written in a script he'd never seen before, but the words *La Traviata* were written on it in small type, underneath the main heading.

"English?" he asked, puzzled.

"Well, Italian, but same alphabet. The opera?"

Ianto shrugged.

"I've never been to an opera."

"Well," said Kethan, gleefully. "You are in for a treat, if I can scam us some tickets. It's the Martian Opera House visiting, and I've seen them once before, on Earth. They are *fabulous*."

He dragged Ianto up the steps of the theatre and into the foyer.

"Oh, very nice," said Kethan, spinning around in the foyer. "They've done it up in period architecture. Authentic?"

"A little before my time," said Ianto, taking in the marble and velvet. "I didn't know you liked opera."

Kethan shot him an amused look.

"You sound surprised. I'd be a pretty boring person if you could learn everything about me in a week."

"N-no," stuttered Ianto, cursing his slip up. "Of course not. You just didn't strike me as the, um," he said, trailing off.

“Cultured type?” Kethan smirked? “I wasn’t until I left my home planet. Bit of a backwater, actually. My friends at school were a little more worldly, and introduced me to a lot of theatre and music. Opera being my favourite.”

He went up to the ticket box and came back smiling.

“Not sold out! The performance is in an hour, what do you say we find a hotel and drop off our packs?”

Ianto agreed and they went back outside, going only a couple of blocks before finding a hotel Kethan approved of. They changed into slightly more formal clothing, Kethan in a silky blue shirt that laced at the throat, and Ianto back in his own dark red dress shirt, and went back to the theatre.

Shopping, dinner, and the opera, Ianto thought. Funny that this was the most date-like date Jack had ever taken Ianto on, and he’d only known this Jack for a week.

~

After the Opera was over, Kethan and Ianto found a bar and settled into a booth far from the – very busy – dance floor.

“Well?” asked Kethan, expectantly. He had obviously enjoyed himself thoroughly: his eyes were sparking and he couldn’t keep the smile off his face.

“It was beautiful,” Ianto said, honestly. “If little unrealistic.”

“How do you mean?”

“Things moved pretty quickly. I mean, one moment, Violetta is laughing at the idea of falling in love, and then next she’s hopelessly devoted to Alfredo. And then when his dad comes along, she swears she could never leave Alfredo, and then three seconds later she’s given in.”

“Love is fickle.”

Ianto rolled his eyes.

“Not that fickle. But I can suspend my disbelief. The music was beautiful.”

They ordered drinks as Kethan chatted about the relative merits of the performers’ voices.

“And the father was brilliant – although I thought he was going to sweep Violetta off for

himself for a moment there.”

“I know!” said Ianto. “They had more sexual chemistry than Alfredo and Violetta did. It was kind of disturbing.”

“Disturbing?” asked Kethan, looking uncertain. “What do you mean?”

“She wasn’t going to sleep with her lover’s *father!*” Ianto began, sounding a little outraged. He was stopped by Kethan’s giggles. “Oh, you, seriously. Stop messing with me.”

“It’s too fun,” Kethan said, still laughing. “Not that I haven’t slept with any of my partner’s parents, but for the historical context of the play, it was a little odd.”

Ianto was saved from hearing more about Kethan’s sexual adventures by the arrival of their drinks. Beer this time, he noticed with relief. The hypervodkas Kethan had introduced him to previously had been a little shocking.

“To new friends,” Kethan said, raising his glass, “and new times.”

“Iechyd da,” Ianto replied, clinking his glass to Kethan and taking a sip.

“Speaking of friends,” he said, catching Kethan’s eye.

“Yes?”

“Are you going to introduce me to those people you know? If you’re going to be leaving in a couple of days, I should start sorting out what I’m going to be doing here.”

Kethan dropped his glass onto the table with a thunk.

“What do you want to do?” he asked, not looking away.

Ianto swallowed under the full force of the intense look he knew from Jack.

“I,” he started, and then looked down. “You said you couldn’t help me.”

“I can’t help you get back, no,” said Kethan softly. “But maybe...”

Ianto looked up sharply.

“Maybe what?”

Kethan watched him for a moment.

“There was some discussion of a relationship,” he said, straightening up and leaning over the table. “Are you still interested in seeing if that happens?”

Yes, Ianto thought, weak with relief. Thank god. Kethan wasn’t going to dump him at this spaceport and disappear. But he had to be sure, first.

“Kind of hard to do in a day,” Ianto said in a low voice, watching Kethan’s face. “Don’t you have people to do, places to see?”

Kethan smirked.

“I do have things to do,” he said. “But of the people – well. There might be a place for you among them.”

“Doing what?”

Kethan shook his head.

“Can’t tell you, yet. If you come, though, you’ll know eventually.”

Ianto didn’t hesitate.

“Alright. I’m in.”

“That was fast,” Kethan said. “Be certain. I’m not headed off for a joy ride; there will most definitely be danger ahead. It might be over your head.”

Ianto picked up his glass and took a long swig.

“I’m three thousand years from my home, Kethan. Everything is over my head. Better be lost with someone I know than all alone and just as confused.”

Kethan looked unsure. For a terrible moment, Ianto thought he was going to take back his offer but instead he chugged the rest of his beer and stood up, offering Ianto a hand.

“Fantastic. Dance?”

“What?”

“Dance with me,” Kethan said. “I like this song.”

Ianto couldn't help but flash back to the last time he danced with Jack. Gwen's wedding, shape shifting people eaters, alien pregnancies; whatever Kethan was headed off to do, it probably wasn't much more dangerous than Torchwood.

He took the proffered hand.

"I'd love to."

~

The dance floor was large, loud, busy, and had a very loose dress code, Ianto noted. Most of the people were dancing in couples, with the occasional single on the prowl or threesome. The music pulsed with a strong bass line and not a whole lot else, resonating through Ianto's body. The addictive scent of fifty-first century pheromones wafted across the dance floor, and Ianto felt his pulse jump as Kethan placed his palm onto the small of his back and steered him into the middle of the dancers. They wove through them and Ianto caught glimpses of skin and caresses and realized that some of them were doing a little more than dancing.

Kethan found a spot that matched whatever criteria he had in mind and stepped up to Ianto, placing his hands on his hips and leaning in.

"This familiar enough?" he shouted into Ianto's ear, barely audible over the pulse of the music.

Ianto slung his arms around Kethan's shoulders and nodded back. It was familiar; the dancing was the same free-form style found in the clubs Ianto had frequented in university, except the blatant sexuality somehow seemed less out of place. Ianto had liked the music and the dancing, but grinding up against strangers had always been a bit awkward. Here, though, Ianto could see himself doing that, and more, without feeling the least bit self-conscious.

Kethan clearly didn't feel self-conscious at all. He looped his thumbs through Ianto's belt loops and pulled him in, pressing up against him in time to the music. Ianto let his hands wander down the silky front of Kethan's shirt, feeling the thump of the bass vibrating through Kethan's chest. The mixture of touch and sound and scent was intoxicating, and Ianto felt his cock twitch every time it brushed against Kethan's hips.

Kethan dragged one hand around the waistband of Ianto's trousers and grasped the bottom of his shirt, flicking one and then another button undone. He worked his way up Ianto's shirt, and when it was all the way open, he pressed his palm against Ianto's stomach, curling his fingers against Ianto's hot skin. Ianto shivered and slid a hand behind Kethan's neck, pulling him in. Their lips met, and Ianto kept it simple for a moment, before tilting his head and forcing Kethan's mouth open, licking into Kethan's mouth and running his tongue along his lips, just



like he knew Jack loved.

Kethan groaned into Ianto's mouth and encircled Ianto with his arms, one hand on his back under his shirt and the other sliding down his arse to pull him closer. The music surrounded them as Kethan surrounded Ianto, sliding a muscled thigh between Ianto's legs and grinding up against him.

Ianto broke the kiss with a gasp and brought his hands to Kethan's shoulders, holding tight as Kethan drove them together. A part of him – the part that wasn't feeling drugged with smells and sounds and Kethan's goddamned *hands* on his arse – was aware that he was basically getting off surrounded by dozens of people. His eyes, which had fallen closed, opened and he glanced around and the shifting sea of bodies around him.

Kethan caught his glance and leaned back into his ear.

“We can go.”

Ianto took the opportunity to lick up Kethan's neck, tasting the salt of his sweat and reveling in the shudder underneath him.

Kethan pulled back and looked at him for a long moment, stilling his movements. Ianto stared back and nodded, running his hands down Kethan's chest and scratching his nails over his nipples. Kethan twitched and moved suddenly, spinning Ianto around in front of him and pressing up against his back instead, his breath hot on Ianto's neck and his hands moving rapidly over him.

“You,” he said, his voice resonating just loud enough to hear, “Are getting off on this.”

He reached down and cupped Ianto through his trousers to prove his point. Ianto bucked into his hand in time to the beat, the never-ending beat that didn't change with the songs and was setting Ianto on fire.

“Oh yeah,” said Kethan into his ear, grinding his obvious erection into Ianto's arse.

He *was* getting off on this, Ianto thought hazily as he moved with Kethan. One of the benefits of time travel: public sex held all the taboo appeal of the twenty-first century, but the fifty-first century had the society to accommodate it. Jack would love to see him like this.

Kethan ran his other hand down Ianto's sweat-slicked chest, stopping to flick a nipple before reaching the waistband of his trousers. Ianto thanked whatever god had made him wear the ones he did as Kethan undid his fly and slipped a hand inside, his hot, slightly callused fingers running down Ianto's cock.

“I’m going to make you come, right here,” Kethan growled. “And then I’m going to drag your beautiful self back to the hotel and fuck you senseless. Is that all right?”

It sounded more than all right, Ianto thought as Kethan did something with his hand that made Ianto flex his hips forward reflexively. He made a noise of assent that Kethan certainly couldn’t hear but probably could feel, and twisted his head back to find Kethan’s mouth, hot and wet. Kethan kissed like Jack did when he was impatient and horny; filthy and messy and oh so good

Kethan shifted to support more of Ianto’s weight and set up a relentless pace, pulling at Ianto’s cock and licking the curve of his ear. Ianto kept his eyes open, not focused on anything but taking in the rhythmic movements of the crowd around them, the hands on breasts and arses and stomachs and legs, all of them Kethan’s hands on him, an extension of their connection multiplied around them. The hand that wasn’t on his cock was wandering around his chest; teasing his nipples and rubbing against the sensitive skin along his sides, making him arch again and again.

Kethan bit down on his neck and Ianto came, gasping in the hot air as the world closed in around him, the music deafening and covering the *Jack* that fell inescapably from Ianto’s lips.

~

Kethan was true to his word, and by the time they collapsed Ianto’s body was feeling all the pleasant aches of really good sex. Kethan fell asleep first, and Ianto watched him as long as his own exhaustion would allow, tracing the planes of his face with his fingertips and thinking of his own sleepless lover, three thousand years away.

~

Ianto woke slowly, enjoying the first stretch of slightly sore but well-rested muscle. He started to curl up, only to realize one of his hands was stuck.

Not stuck, he realized suddenly. Handcuffed to the bed. Sitting up quickly and tugging on his wrist, he looked around for Kethan. He wasn’t in the room.

Panic started seep through Ianto, but then the door to the bathroom opened, and Kethan, fully dressed, stepped out. He looked over at Ianto, and walked to the foot of the bed.

“You’re awake,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “Good.”

“Kethan,” Ianto said, not sure if he needed to be worried or if young Jack was as into bondage as his Jack was. “What’s going on?”

“Funny, that’s exactly my question,” Kethan said mildly. “Would you like to tell me exactly who you are, and how the fuck you know me, or am I going to have to get creative here?”

Shit, though Ianto, tugging once more against the cuff. This was not the plan at all.

## Chapter 6

~

Ianto stared at Kethan, at a loss for words. He had considered this; realized that at some point he might have to tell Kethan the truth, but the shock of being caught in his lies of omission robbed him of any reasonable explanations.

Kethan let the silence drift on, his stance relaxed, but Ianto could see he was coiled and ready to take advantage of any weakness Ianto showed.

“I…” he started, voice breaking from just waking up. “I’m sorry, what? How I know you?”

Kethan walked up beside Ianto and threw a leg over his, straddling him. He took Ianto’s face in his hands and kissed him. Ianto let out a small sound of surprise, his free hand clutching at Kethan’s back, instincts taking over.

He opened his mouth to Kethan’s ruthless tongue and let his hand drop down to Kethan’s arse, dragging his fingernails as he went. Kethan bit sharply on his bottom lip and he jerked, gasping, more in surprise than pain as Kethan pulled back, his eyes dark with lust and something else.

“Listen, Ianto Jones,” he said, his voice even, pressing Ianto by his shoulders into the headboard. “I’m pretty experienced. I’ve had a lot of lovers, and none of them, not *one*, has ever hit so many of my kinks in one night as you did. You knew exactly how to touch me, and you didn’t fumble once. Maybe if you were some sort of telepath or sex god, I could buy it, but nobody is that good on round one.”

Ianto gaped. Kethan smirked, and grasped Ianto’s jaw with one hand, tilting it up.

“I seriously suggest you start talking, because I’m pretty adept at making men talk. Particularly naked ones,” he said, a look in his eyes that was frighteningly familiar. He trailed his hand down Ianto’s chest and rested it on Ianto’s groin. “Do you need me to break it down for you?” he asked, pressing lightly, threateningly.

Ianto nodded, for a lack of anything better to do.

“Two questions. One: who are you, really, and two: how do you know me? I could add a third, if you like, and that would be what are you doing here, but let’s start from the top, shall we?”

Kethan reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet. His wallet, Ianto realized, recognizing the worn black leather. It had been in his trousers as usual when he’d been sucked across time, and presumably Kethan had retrieved it while he was sleeping. Kethan opened it up and dropped it into Ianto’s lap.

“Ianto Jones, born August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983. Twenty-five or three thousand and seventy-three, depending on how you count. License to drive a vehicle, cards to access health care, digital money, and a library. Is this an elaborate cover?”

“No,” said Ianto quickly. “They’re real. *I’m* real. I’m from the twenty-first century, like I said. Born in Newport, Wales, went to the University of Liverpool, working for-”

“Yes?”

Ianto exhaled. “Torchwood.”

There was no flicker of recognition.

“They monitor the rift, when I’m from. I’m their archivist, just like I said. I promise, I haven’t lied about any of that.”

“Alright,” Kethan said slowly. “Let’s say I believe you on that count. That doesn’t change the fact that you lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie,” Ianto insisted, tugging fruitlessly on the cuff. “I just didn’t tell you everything.”

Kethan spread his hands. “You’re not going anywhere. Now might be a good time to start.”

“I can’t,” Ianto ground out.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m from your future, damnit,” Ianto cried. “I can’t tell you because you don’t *know*.”

Kethan watched him for a moment, his expression unreadable, and then leaned back, weight resting on Ianto’s legs.

“So you do know me,” he said, crossing his arms. “In 2008?”

Ianto nodded.

“I see. That explains a lot.”

“Like?” Ianto asked, curious.

“Well, for one- hold up, am I your Jack?”

“Yes,” said Ianto, startled. “How?”

“Like I said, you’ve slept with me before, and I know he’s your lover. You also thought I was him, when you woke up that first time. And – *fifty-first century kind of guy* – I remember that too.”

“You said that.”

“Ah,” Kethan said, nodding. “I did. But I’m still right, aren’t I? Your lover in the twenty-first century, he’s me.”

Kethan suddenly rolled off Ianto and stood up.

“Oh, god,” he said, flicking open his wristband. “It all makes sense now.”

He waved his wristband around, looking agitated.

“The readings I got when you arrived made me suspicious, because they suggested you’d come by vortex manipulator, not a rift accident. But they were a little strange, a little off. I checked when I woke up this morning because I thought you were hiding something, and sure enough,” he flicked a button and a hologram, full of unintelligible symbols, popped up, “there was a signature in it that I recognized.”

He shut off the hologram.

“You came by *my* vortex manipulator. That’s how you ended up with me, isn’t it? You linked the two across time, jumped from one to the other.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Ianto insisted. “It was an accident.”

Kethan gave a disbelieving snort.

“But you’re right,” Ianto relented. “It did involve your vortex manipulator.”

Kethan looked triumphant. “So that answers how you got here and who you are, but – I still don’t get how you know me.”

“You’re Jack,” Ianto said, hoping he could leave it at that.

“Well, sure,” Kethan said, rolling his eyes. “That doesn’t tell me what I’m doing in Cardiff in 2008, presumably semi-permanently, if we’re lovers.”

“I can’t tell you that!” said Ianto. “Haven’t you been listening? I’m from your future; I could mess with the timeline if I told you too much. It’s already too much, me being here.”

“Are you sure?” Kethan asked.

“You didn’t know me,” Ianto said firmly. “I thought maybe you were lying, but it makes no sense. The first time you saw me, you’d never seen me before.”

“Maybe I was lying to preserve the timeline.”

Ianto hesitated. “What if I tell you something I know you didn’t know?”

Kethan was the one who hesitated, this time. “How about this,” he said, pensively. “Let’s start with whatever you think is the worst thing you could possibly tell me, something that if I know, it would change my actions dramatically.” He held up a hand. “Don’t blurt it out. Think it, and start to say it, slowly.”

Ianto considered. Lisa was the most obvious option, but for Jack, that wouldn’t matter for well over a century. What was Jack’s biggest secret?

Well, that was obvious enough. Ianto opened his mouth to tell Kethan he becomes immortal but before he got a whole syllable out, Kethan was on him, hand slapped across his mouth.

“Well,” Kethan said, breathing heavily. “For fucks sake, don’t say that. Don’t even think that again.”

Ianto mumbled under his hand. Kethan pulled it back and sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Do you know what it was?”

“No, and I never can,” Kethan said sharply, raking a hand through his hair and looking shaken. “May I lead an interesting life, fuck.”

He didn't say anything for a bit, and Ianto was quiet, letting Kethan collect himself again. Eventually, he spoke.

"How about something less... important. Something particularly relevant to you, personally."

"I hide a Cyberwoman in your basement." This time, Ianto got the whole sentence out, and Kethan didn't so much as flinch.

"You what?" he asked, looking puzzled.

"I- never mind," said Ianto, picking at the coverlet with his free hand. "But you didn't know that, I swear. You couldn't have pretended. It would have been insane."

Kethan frowned, saying "You haven't changed anything by telling me, though."

"How do you know?" Ianto asked. "How did you know to stop me, before?"

Kethan eyed Ianto, pursing his lips. "Do you know what I am? What I do?"

"You're a time agent."

"Right, of course you know," Kethan said, rolling his eyes. "Explains why you never asked what I did for a living. If you're going to lie, do it right next time."

Ianto looked sheepish; he hadn't thought of *not* asking being more suspicious.

"Well, in order to be recruited as a time agent, you have to have an unusual circadian rhythm."

"Your internal clock?"

"Yes. If I asked you what time it is now, what would you say?"

"That I'm on a strange planet without a twenty-four hour clock and I have no idea."

"Right. Well, how long do you think we've been talking, by your clock?"

"Eight minutes?" Ianto said, hesitantly.

"Not bad. Seven minutes and forty-six seconds, to be exact, from the moment you asked what was going on."

“You can tell time to the second?” Ianto asked, intrigued. He’d never known Jack to do that. In fact, Jack was usually late for things. Then again, he’d always suspected Jack arrived exactly when he wanted to.

“Yes, but that’s just a parlour trick. My circadian rhythm is even more sensitive; it can sense the flow of time, and, more importantly, when it’s going to break.”

“Break.”

Kethan nodded. “Imagine time as a stick. Sticks are bendy; they’re not fragile and they have some inherent flexibility. So you can bend one, and up to a certain point, it’ll bounce back to its original shape, right?”

“Of course.”

“Time is like that. You can mess with it, to a point. If you go past that point, it snaps, and a new timeline forms. Like breaking the molecular bonds in the stick; once it’s done you can’t force it back together again.”

“Like if you killed your father?”

Kethan made a face. “That’s a little different, that’s an impossibility loop born of a paradox. That’s a whole two year course at the Time Agency, ask me later if you really want to know.” Kethan stood up and started pacing.

“Most people can’t tell if a timeline is going to change. For most people, it doesn’t matter. Linear time is great that way, you can make any choice and time will continue on in a linear fashion. No splitting, no loops, no paradoxes, nada. But some people are born with an extra-sensitive rhythm, and with some training and temporal displacement, they can feel time bend.”

“How does time bend?”

“Like the stick, remember? I can feel when the timeline is flexing, and better yet, I can feel when it’s about to snap. If I couldn’t, I couldn’t travel back in time, I’d destroy something, get stuck in a loop, or just cease to exist because I didn’t know what was going on. I’d be one of the menaces the Time Agency was set up to catch.”

“But you’re not out of your time now,” Ianto pointed out. “Are you?”

“Well, I don’t really have a time anymore, it all feels the same to me. You get displaced enough and you never really fit back into your own time. This is approximately where I’d be if I never left linear time. But you are part of my future, and so I could feel the bending of time around



you when you tried to say whatever it was.”

“But you didn’t know I was before.”

“No, because you hadn’t done anything to jeopardize the timeline.”

“Good to know,” Ianto said, feeling relieved.

“I’m guessing that’s why you didn’t say anything?”

“Yes,” Ianto said, “I couldn’t figure out how to ask you to send me home without telling you I knew you were a time agent. I was, well, we’ve messed with time and space enough where I’m from.”

Kethan shook his head, exasperated. “This could have been a lot easier if you had just told me. I wouldn’t have had to try and trick so much out of you, and you could have stopped trying to seduce me.”

Ianto opened his mouth, and then shut it. He tried again.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

Kethan laughed, and walked back over, taking his cuffed wrist in hand.

“Good enough to work, *not* good enough that I didn’t know you were doing it,” he said, unlocking Ianto from the bed. Ianto rubbed his wrist.

“I’ll have to try harder next time.”

~

After packing and catching a bite to eat, they got back on the light-rail and headed out of town. As they traveled, the buildings didn’t get any less dense, but they started to look more and more like ruins as the population dropped off. About half an hour into the trip, they got off at a deserted station and walked for about five minutes, arriving at a building that looked a little less decrepit than its neighbors.

“So will you tell me what we’re doing here now?” Ianto asked.

Kethan leaned over and pressed something on the side of the door. After a moment, it slid open “Like I said earlier,” he said, stepping inside. “Supplies.”

“I gathered,” Ianto said dryly, following along the well-lit corridor. “I was more wondering what kind of supplies, and for what.”

“Curiosity killed the bragreth.”

“Isn’t it cat?”

“Hm?” Kethan said, poking his head in a doorway and then continuing on. “Oh, probably.”

A man stepped out of a room at the end of the hall.

“Down here boys,” he called out.

“You’ve rearranged,” Kethan said when they caught up with him.

“Yeah,” the man replied. “Better use of space, we repaired another building and moved some of the stock over.”

Kethan didn’t introduce Ianto, which was unusual so he probably had his reasons. Ianto trailed behind them as they went up a flight of stairs and into a room that was split up by half-walls and pillars, with a few tables set up in the largest open area. A woman and another man were standing by the window, chatting.

“Liria and Trevis will get whatever you need. I’ve got to make a call, I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Sure,” said Kethan, walking up to the table. “What is this, the beginner’s table? You could throw out some of the serious pieces to start.”

Ianto followed him over and watched as Kethan picked up a small gun and twirled it around his fingers.

“I mean, seriously, an eighty volter? Come on people, I’m not an amateur.”

“If you stopped making rookie mistakes, people might actually start to believe that.”

Kethan froze. Ianto looked up and saw they had company: a man, different from the one who had brought them in, was standing in the doorway, weapon trained on Kethan.

“Drop the volter and step back from the table, Agent,” he said. “The rest of you, too.”

Kethan let the weapon fall from his hands with a clunk and then turned around. “Hello Uno,” he said. “Took you long enough.”

“Over to that wall,” he said, gesturing with his free hand.

“How’d you find me?” Kethan asked, moving over to the specified location. “You didn’t have a tracker or you wouldn’t have waited six months.”

“Eight.”

Kethan looked surprised. “They’ve known for that long?”

“*I’ve* known for that long. I rather suspect they’ve known for longer.”

“Well then,” Kethan said, sounding very casual for someone held at gunpoint. “If you know all about it, you probably know why I’m doing it.”

“Like I give a shit, Keth,” Uno said with a mean laugh. “Unlike some people, I don’t bite the hand that feeds me.”

“Then you might as well be a mercenary.”

“As if you’re any better.”

“Well, you know how it is. Conscience is a bitch of a lover,” Kethan said, shrugging. “How’d you know I was here?”

Uno snorted.

“Has someone finally fucked your brains out? You used your manipulator. Not too hard to track you down to here. These,” he waved at Ianto, Liria and Travis, “are known associates of yours. Just had to wait until you showed up.”

That was something, Ianto noted. He had been wondering why he hadn’t been corralled with Jack. Uno seemed to think he was one of the arms dealers.

“Ah. Bit of a manipulator accident, actually. Thought it mightn’t have been picked up.”

“How unlucky for you. Make a move to touch it and I’ll shoot.”

“You won’t anyway?” Kethan asked, arching an eyebrow. Ianto inched closer to the table.

“I’ve got orders to bring you in.”

“Lucky me.”

“Very. And didn’t we pay you not to interfere?”

Uno swung round and aimed at Ianto, who dove at the table, tossing the first thing he grabbed in Kethan’s general direction and hitting the ground, hard. There was a sharp noise, and Ianto saw a body – Uno’s, thank god – fall to the floor through the legs of the table. He scrambled up quickly.

Kethan was standing over Uno, some sort of gun – presumably whatever Ianto had tossed him – in hand. He looked slightly annoyed.

“Marek!” he hollered at the door.

The first man – Marek, presumably – stepped in through the door, looking at the body on the floor. Kethan pointed the gun at him.

“Give me a compelling reason why I shouldn’t shoot you.”

Marek shrugged. “I didn’t tell him you were bringing someone else?”

Kethan didn’t move for a long moment, and then lowered his gun, shrugging. “True. How about you throw in whatever I want pro bono and we call it even?”

Marek nodded, looking rather nonplussed for someone who’d just sold out a customer. “Handhelds?”

“Please,” Kethan replied, tossing the gun in the air and then tucking it in his belt. “I’ll start with this one. Lucky toss, Ianto. I think you’re going to be useful.”

Ianto had made his way around the table, grimacing as he rotated his shoulder. He came up beside Kethan and looked down at Uno.

“He’s dead,” he said, surprised.

“Uh-huh,” said Kethan, nudging the body with his toe. “You were expecting Sleeping Beauty?”

“No-o,” Ianto replied, frowning. “He wasn’t trying to kill you.”

“And yet, he was stupid. Funny how that leads to death.” Kethan stepped over the body and strode up to the table where Liria was unloading a box of weapons.

“Oh, hello there, pretty one,” Kethan said, leaning over and grabbing a sleek black gun. “Is this the Laser X50?”

“Sure is,” drawled Marek, walking over and taking it out of Kethan’s hands.

“Semi-automatic, 0.32, 60/3, targeting scanners with an internal scope.”

“The collimator’s good enough for distances worth that?”

“You bet. Up to thirty meters.”

“Sharp,” Kethan grunted, taking it back and fitting it in his palm before setting it down in front of him. He sorted through the rest of the weapons, trying some and discarding most. Once he’d collected a few in front of him, he beckoned Ianto over.

“What’s your poison?” he asked, gesturing. “Money being no object, thanks to these idiots.”

“Er,” hesitated Ianto, looking over the intimidating pile of weaponry. “Stun gun?”

Kethan laughed. “How about we get you out of the kiddie pool and let you swim with the big kids, huh? Something with a little more oomph. A sonic blaster, or laser if you’re up for it.”

“My stun gun had oomph,” Ianto said, affronted.

“In 2008 when no-one had heard of them, sure. You try and take me out with a little stun gun and I’m not going too far. Neither will most of the people we’re going to run into.”

“I’m afraid that’s the only futuristic weapon I’m familiar with, sir,” Ianto said sarcastically.

Kethan looked amused. “Did you just call me sir?”

Ianto blushed. “I could fire a gun, if necessary.”

“Well,” said Kethan with a small grin. “We could get you something classic. What did you carry?”

“A 9mm Beretta, nothing fancy. I wasn’t out in the field much until recently.”

“Alright. You take this,” he handed Ianto one of the blasters in his pile. “And I’ll show you how to use it later. Marek, can we see some monomorphic light projectile weapons?”

Marek went off to an adjacent room and came back with a small box. Kethan pulled it over to

him and took out a handgun.

“These should be more familiar. Here’s what would pass as a Colt 1911 in 45 ACP in your day, good powerful bullet, much better action than anything you would have seen. Doesn’t get much more classic than that.”

Kethan put it down and rooted around in the box.

“I’m surprised you still use bullets at all,” Ianto said, picking up the .45 and weighing it. It wasn’t made of any material he recognized from Earth, but it felt good in his hand.

“Oh, everybody serious carries projectile weapons.”

“Why?”

“This,” Kethan said, holding up the black, smooth blaster he’d picked up at the beginning. “Will fire sixty times, or last me three days. After that, the batteries die out, and it needs to be recharged. They’re great to start with, but a good old fashioned projectile weapon is a whole lot more reliable in the long run.”

He handed Ianto another gun. This one was an assault-type rifle, and a whole lot bigger. Nothing you could tuck in the back of your pants, more like an M16 than a handgun.

“I liked the first,” Ianto said. “More familiar. I’d feel more like I knew what I was doing.”

“Alright,” Kethan said, taking back the rifle and adding it to his own pile. “The .45 it is.”

“Anything else?” asked Marek, scooping up the leftover blasters.

Kethan pursed his lips. “I’d like to see some flash-grenades. And a selection of sonic disruptors. Oh, and do you have those little things you chew on?”

Ianto looked around for a chair. This was probably going to take awhile.

~

When Kethan had finished picking out enough weaponry to arm an SO19 team and Ianto had loaded it all into their rucksacks, they headed back into the deserted streets.

“So,” said Ianto, casually. “Are you going to tell me what that was all about?”

Kethan gave him an unreadable look. “How about you tell me what you think it was all about?”

“Looks like the Time Agency is less than pleased with you,” Ianto said, hazarding a guess. From what he’d followed of the tense conversation before Kethan had shot Uno, he’d gathered that Uno was a time agent, and that Kethan had been on the run for at least eight months.

Kethan snorted. “That’s one way of putting it. Here,” he passed Ianto the box of ammo he had in one arm, “Can you hold this for a minute?”

Ianto took the box and watched as Kethan flipped open his wristband and accessed the controls. For a minute, nothing happened, then a hologram of a man’s head popped up in front of them.

“Hey Keth,” said the face, “What’s up? We’re on schedule.”

“Good,” said Kethan. “I am too, but we’re going to have to change the plans. You can’t land; we might never get off the surface. Dock at the station instead, I’ll meet you there. Don’t even cool the engines, alright?”

“Trouble?”

“Of a sort. We need to boot it from here, quickly.”

“I’ll sort it. We are short of fuel, I’ll see if we can jump the queue.”

“You’re an angel, Soren,” Kethan said, Ianto noting he was in full-on flirting mode. “Let me know when you dock, I’ll be up there.”

“Roger. Evening Star out.”

The hologram cut out and Kethan shut his wristband.

“I’m good,” said Ianto when Kethan tried to take the box back. “Were those your friends?”

“Yeah. Their pilot, Soren. He’s got the nicest legs a man has a right to,” he said, looking wistful.

“I see I’ll be getting all the important information on the crew before we board,” Ianto said sarcastically. Kethan laughed.

“You’ll like them, trust me. Well, you might not like Aharon at first, but he’ll grow on you.”

Ianto shot him a look. “You’re not big on the straight answers, are you?”

Kethan sighed and put a hand on Ianto's shoulder, bringing him to a halt. "Ianto. You spent the last week lying your ass off to me, seducing me, and manipulating me. You're lucky I believed you this morning. Actually, you're lucky I didn't shoot you a week ago."

"Shoot me?" Ianto asked, shocked.

"Yes, shoot you, you idiot," Kethan growled. "I'm running from the Time Agency. What do you think my first instinct is when someone shows up by vortex manipulator? If you hadn't so obviously *not* been used to time travel, I would have shot first and asked questions later."

"Well," said Ianto faintly. "Good thing you didn't. You might have been very angry at yourself in a few years."

Kethan stared at him for a long moment. Ianto stared back, uncertain, until Kethan broke into a smile, shaking his head.

"God, you'd think time travel would get boring after ten years. But the strangest things always happen to keep it from getting dull."

"So happy I'm making life interesting for you," Ianto replied solemnly, before cracking a smile of his own.

Grinning together, they headed back to the train platform. Time travel wasn't what guaranteed this would be interesting, Ianto mused. It was life with Jack that never failed to be anything less than remarkable.

## Chapter 7

~

The shuttle back up to the space station hadn't been much more pleasant than the trip down, and Ianto felt dazed as he followed Kethan through the wide corridors. The station was very crowded, and Kethan had grabbed Ianto's hand when they'd exited the shuttle, pulling him along almost at a run.

"Are we in a hurry?" Ianto called, a little annoyed at being tugged around like a small child. "I can follow you on my own, you know."

"And get kidnapped by someone trying to get to me?" replied Kethan. "No thanks."



“Do you think there’ll be more time agents waiting for us?” he asked as Kethan pulled him into a lift. Twice as many people as Ianto thought possible followed them into the small area, pushing Kethan and Ianto to the back.

“If you shout that loud enough, probably,” Kethan hissed.

“I’m sure they’re eavesdropping in the lift.” Kethan was more paranoid than Jack, apparently.

“No, but possibly on the security camera,” Kethan whispered, jerking his chin up towards the ceiling. “If the Agency has found out Uno’s dead, they’ll certainly send someone else.”

“Couldn’t they have just, I don’t know, appeared wherever you were? Why did Uno have to look for you on the planet’s surface, anyway?”

“You can’t track a manipulator jump to that degree of accuracy. They probably knew I was en route for Trell when it happened, but not which ship I was on.”

“Couldn’t they hack the passenger logs?”

“Yes, because when I’m running from the Time Agency, I always use my real name to book transportation,” said Kethan, rolling his eyes as they exited the lift.

Ianto looked at him in surprise. “Kethan Brisho isn’t your real name?” he asked, hoping he didn’t sound as dismayed as he felt.

Kethan shook his head.

Well. Just when he thought he was finally learning something about Jack. “So all this time I’ve been calling you Kethan, it hasn’t been your real name?”

“Well, actually,” he started, looking around, “Kethan is my birth name, Brisho isn’t. I was registered under K. Brisho. Kethan’s common enough I didn’t mind using it casually.”

“What’s your real last name?” Ianto asked, hoping he might finally get a straight answer.

“Can’t say,” he replied. “Not here. Too many ears.”

“On the ship, then?”

Kethan gave him a look. “Why so curious? It’s just a name.”

“It’s a lot,” Ianto said, shortly, removing his hand from Kethan’s grasp. “Is this space station

bigger on the inside, or are we going to reach our destination any time soon?”

“Patience, young one,” Kethan intoned, but then lifted his arm and waved. “Brenneth!”

Ianto looked ahead. A man was standing by an airlock, grinning broadly and waving back. When they reached him, he leaned down and kissed Kethan firmly, and then pulled him into a hug.

“So, where are the spies you’ve picked up? Do I need to get you out of certain death again?”

“I definitely saved your life, last time.”

“Not in my timeline!” Brenneth laughed. “You were younger than I’d seen you before, twenty-six?”

“Are we talking about the time on Enni?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Right, I remember,” Kethan said. “By my count, though, I last saw you at the carnival.”

“That was seven years ago.”

“And I’m still waiting for that drink,” Kethan shot back.

“Then get your arse inside,” Brenneth replied, slapping the behind in question and waving them through the airlock. “I’m sure Jotir has something good in the kitchen.”

Brenneth smiled at Ianto and followed him and Kethan in through the airlock. “You must be Ianto.”

“Yes sir,” Ianto replied. “Are you the captain of this ship?”

“No, I’m the second. You needn’t call me sir, in either case, Brenneth will do fine.”

Ianto nodded. It was habit, after Torchwood One, and he’d kept it up with Jack despite Three’s comparative informality. At the time, it had been a deliberate attempt to distance himself from the man. Now when he used it, it was a small – futile – attempt to maintain a professional relationship with Jack outside of the bedroom. Or hothouse.

They made their way through a short passageway and came into a large room, packed with crates and containers. They passed through the main floor and out a hatch at the far end,

coming out into a room that seemed to be a kitchen, dining room, and living room all at once. Two human women and an alien, sex unidentifiable, occupied the table in the middle of the room, but they all stood up when Kethan, Ianto and Brenneth came in. The women came up to them, but the alien, a pale, wispy thing, took off out the exit at the back of the room.

Ianto watched, hanging back, as hugs and kisses were exchanged between Kethan and the women, observing them as they exchanged greetings. They were both older than Kethan, in their fifties likely, attractive in the way older women who are confident and fit are, though in very different ways. One was tall and broad and could probably take Brenneth – who towered, even over Kethan – and the other was wiry and perhaps the same height as Gwen. She seemed to be doing most of the talking, while the first woman was content to sit back and listen.

Kethan, beckoned Ianto over, interrupting his observations.

“This must be the mysterious Ianto Jones you wrote to us about,” said the short woman, looking him over with a clinical eye. “You really think he’s up for it?”

Ianto bristled, but Kethan just laughed and the taller woman shook her head.

“Don’t mind Zoanne,” she said, her voice low and calm. “Her bark is worse than her bite.”

“But don’t get sick,” Kethan cautioned. “Then her bite is far, far worse. She’s the ship’s medic,” he added at Ianto’s curious look.

“Doctor, thank you. I didn’t train for six years to be a field medic.”

“And this,” Kethan continued over Zoanne, “is Opal Varelle. She’s the Captain of this spacewreck.”

The Captain was, apparently, used to Kethan and didn’t rise to the bait; instead, she reached out and shook Ianto’s hand. “Good to have you on board, Ianto Jones. Many hands make light work. Can I ask what you specialize in, for distribution of labour purposes?”

Ianto hesitated.

“Ah, yes,” said Kethan. “I forgot I hadn’t told you yet. Ianto is a bit of a guest now.”

Captain Varelle raised an eyebrow. “This isn’t a cruise ship, Kethan.”

“No,” interrupted Kethan. “I didn’t mean a guest *here*, I meant a guest *now*. As in, in time. He’s twenty-first century.” He grinned at Ianto. “Followed me home, mum, can I keep him?”

Varelle frowned. “Not familiar with our tech, then, I suppose,” she mused, looking as though she received time travelers on her ship every day. “That rules out a lot, but we can have you doing the busy work.”

“I worked with the mainframe, and the archives, back home,” Ianto offered. “And made the coffee.”

“Excellent,” said Zoanne, briskly. “Kareh can show you around our computer, maybe you’ll be a fast learner, and Jotir will introduce you to the kitchen. Lord knows I could use your help in the infirmary, the last three shipments are still lying everywhere, I’ve gotten behind.”

“Zoanne,” said Kethan, looking amused. “I’ve seen the infirmary across twenty-five years, and you *always* have the last three shipments to put away.

“It was sparkling in 5044,” she said, looking smug.

“You’d been raided. They took all the medical supplies.”

Zoanne reached around and slapped his bottom. “Just checking. I wasn’t sure you’d been there yet.”

“How old are you?” the Captain asked quietly. Ianto got the feeling that she was not the kind of woman to make a scene, even in the case of an apocalypse.

“Twenty eight. First time I’m not back in time, actually.”

Captain Varelle had a pensive look on her face, which Kethan noticed. “What are you thinking?”

“Just that this is the oldest we’ve seen you,” she said. “So either you’ve caught up with yourself or—”

“Or I die a terrible death in short order. Good to know,” Kethan shoved his hands in his pockets. “Where’d Jotir disappear to?” That must have been the alien who’d left when they came in,

“Away from you, I’m sure.”

“He likes me!” Kethan said, sounding affronted.

“You keep telling yourself that,” replied Zoanne. “Never mind him, Ashild will be more than—”

She was interrupted by a sudden screech, and Ianto was almost knocked over as someone barreled past him into Kethan. The blur resolved into a woman, who successively hugged, kissed on both cheeks, and punched Kethan.

“How old?” she demanded.

“Twenty-eight,” Kethan said, smirking.

“Shit!” she said. “It’s never going to happen, then, is it?”

“I couldn’t let you have that sort of an advantage over me,” Kethan said solemnly, but then broke into a real smile. “It’s great to see you, kiddo.”

“You too. Say goodbye this time and I might even see you again.”

“It was an—”

She waved him off. “I need to do a last minute supply run, want to come?”

Kethan shook his head. “Can’t. Work to do. Important people to see.” She glared at him, and he softened. “Honestly, I can’t risk being out in the open any longer. You’ll have to take someone else.”

She shrugged at him and then turned to Ianto.

“Well then, how about you?” she said, in a pitch perfect Jack-getting-to-know-you voice. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced.”

Ianto couldn’t help blushing. She was very attractive, curvy in all the right places, with a wide mouth that twitched suggestively.

“This is Ianto,” said Kethan. “Leave him alone, Ashild.”

“Whatever for?” she asked, looking puzzled.

“He’s a one man kind of boy,” he said, holding up a hand when she started to talk. “No, don’t ask, I’ll explain the social mores of past centuries to you later. Go get your supplies and we’ll get smashed together later, alright?”

Ashild conceded, and went off to gather other members of the crew.

“Who’s she?” Ianto asked after she left the room.

“My daughter,” said Varelle, who’d been watching the exchange with amusement. “And Zoanne’s.”

“Don’t let her hear you introducing her that way,” Kethan warned. “She’s security, if you ask her.”

“She’s twenty-four,” grumbled Zoanne. “And stupid.”

“No,” said Kethan, grinning. “She’s just headstrong. Like a couple of other women I could mention.”

Zoanne tsked him and then went off herself, leaving Ianto and Kethan alone with the Captain.

“Do you need your own room?” she asked, turning to Ianto. “We’re full up with Kethan, but we can rearrange if necessary.”

“He’s with me, Opal,” Kethan said, firmly. “Don’t worry about it.”

She nodded. “Ellis and Aharon are refueling, and picking up a few spare parts. Don’t ask me where Kareh is, you’ll probably have to hit the mainframe and dig him out from under the wires. Soren’s on the bridge, ready to boot us if they decide they’d rather we stick around. Take a few minutes to settle in and meet me on the bridge when you’re ready to talk strategy.”

When she finished, Ianto had the strong impression that she was dismissing them, like Jack sometimes did without actually needing to say the words. Kethan, for one, seemed to pick this up as well and Ianto followed him out of the mess.

~

Ianto and Kethan stowed their packs in a small room in the passenger section of the *Evening Star*, then went to the cargo bay, where Ianto met Ellis – the ship’s mechanic – and Aharon, whose job went unidentified. The four of them unloaded the supplies Ellis had picked up from the station. As they were finishing, Ashild came in, sealing the hatch behind her. Kethan dragged Ianto up to the bridge to “say goodbye to Trell, your first alien planet”. When they had left the spaceport and Trell behind, Kethan apologetically urged him off the bridge.

“Things to discuss with the crew,” he said, patting Ianto on the shoulder. “Make yourself comfortable in the mess, I’ll be down in a bit.”

Resigned to being left in the dark for a little longer, Ianto left Kethan, Varelle, Brenneth and

Aharon on the bridge and wandered back to their room, grabbing his computer before heading down to the mess. Jotir, the alien, was cleaning the counter, but he took one look at Ianto, tossed the cloth into the sink and disappeared. Clearly, Jotir was not comfortable around strangers. Ianto found himself a glass of water and sat down at the table to read.

Twenty minutes later, Aharon came in. He nodded at Ianto, and went to the kitchen. When he was done there, he sat down across from Ianto and handed him a cup of coffee.

“Thanks,” Ianto said, gratefully. He’d been wanting caffeine since the trip up, but the fifty-first century appliances in the ship had given him a headache just looking at them, so he’d settled for water.

“You’re welcome,” Aharon replied. “So, Kethan says you’re from the twenty-first century.”

“Yep,” Ianto said, nodding. “Know much about it?”

“Not much,” he said, “Do you miss it?”

“Of course,” Ianto said, shrugging. “Not that this time isn’t fascinating, but it isn’t—”

“Home?” he interrupted.

“Exactly.”

Aharon sat back in his chair, wrapping his hands around his own cup, watching Ianto over the edge of it. “So you’re not a time agent.”

“Um,” said Ianto, confused. “No? I time traveled by accident.”

He took a sip of his coffee. “What if I could get you home?”

Ianto heart leaped. *Home*. Kethan had told him that he was sorry, but he couldn’t use his vortex manipulator. Too likely to be tracked, too likely that any additional information would give away his position entirely. “What do you mean?” he asked cautiously. “You aren’t a time agent.”

“No,” he said, putting his mug down and leaning forward. He lowered his voice, “But I might be able to get you a deal with them.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you know what Kethan’s doing? Has he told you?”

Ianto blinked at the non-sequitur. “Not really, no.”

“Then you’ll have to trust me when I say what he’s doing is very, very dangerous.”

A bad feeling was settling in the pit of Ianto’s stomach.

“I’m sorry,” he said, reverting to politeness. “I don’t follow.”

“I think you do,” he said. “Ianto, he needs to be stopped. He’s found out some things he really shouldn’t know, and if the Time Agency doesn’t get hold of him soon, he’s going to do some serious damage.”

This was not good, Ianto thought. He needed to get Kethan, now. He started to stand up, but Aharon put a hand on his forearm to stop him.

“No, hear me out, first. We’re on a ship in space; I’m not exactly going anywhere. Besides,” he said, a dark grin on his face, “do you really think he’d believe you?”

“You work for the Time Agency,” Ianto said flatly. How did Kethan not know this? From what he had learned, Kethan had flown with this crew over a dozen times in the past couple of decades, and Aharon had been a member of it for years.

He shrugged. “Freelance, occasionally. Let’s just say they’ve convinced me that Kethan needs to be stopped. In exchange, I have access to some of their tech. Kethan won’t send you home, will he? Says it’s too *dangerous* for him. He’s screwing you, Ianto.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Ianto challenged. Aharon had to realize this was stupid; what was preventing Ianto from turning him over to Kethan?

“Because you’re an honest person,” he said, smiling briefly. “I’m not a mercenary, Ianto. You have to believe me when I say Kethan is not a good person.”

*You don’t want to know the kind of things I did, Ianto.*

“Besides,” Aharon continued, as if reading Ianto’s mind. “He wouldn’t believe you if you told him. You may be in his bed *now*, Ianto Jones, but I’ve known him for ten years. Intimately. Why would he believe you?”

“He trusts me,” Ianto replied, for a moment feeling like he had with Owen. *Part time shag.*

“No. You’re a pretty boy, and he likes pretty boys, in case you haven’t noticed. He likes me



just fine, too. Who's bed do you think he sleeps in when he's on board?" Aharon smirked. "What do you know about Kethan? Has he told you *anything* about himself?"

Ianto hated to admit it, but Aharon had a point. Kethan didn't even trust him with his real name, he was hardly going to believe Ianto if he started accusing his friends of turning on him.

"What would you have me do?" Ianto asked, cautiously. He needed to know more.

"I need him disarmed. I can't take him if he's carrying that blaster of his; he's too fast. But he wouldn't suspect you, Ianto. You could take it from him, given the right opportunity."

"And then you'd, what, shoot him?"

"No," he shook his head. "I need to take him to headquarters. He won't be harmed. We'll remove his memories of the last year or so, back to when he first got hold of the classified information."

Ianto started at that. Remove his memories? Was this why Jack hadn't known about him in the twenty-first century? Maybe this was what had happened. He didn't say anything for a long moment, playing over the options in his head.

"Is that all I need to do?" he asked, eventually. "Disarm him?"

"That's all. Back me up a little, but I'll restrain him. After that, I'll send you home," he held up his arm; on it was a thick band that looked somewhat like Kethan's. "And then Kethan and I will be on our merry way. No harm done to anyone."

Ianto nodded, slowly. "Alright. I'll do it," he said, wishing he could think of a better way to do this. But Aharon was likely to go ahead with or without Ianto's help, and if he were there...

"Great" Aharon said, smiling. "I'll set it up, okay? Don't worry your pretty little head about it, nothing will go wrong."

He picked up his mug and stood, dropping it off at the kitchen, before leaving the room. The longest five minutes of Ianto's life passed before he, Kethan, and Varelle came back into the room, chatting away. Kethan saw Ianto and came over, dropping into the chair across from him. Varelle sat next to Ianto, and Aharon across from her.

They were discussing laser weapons, and Kethan was bragging about the X50 he'd picked up on Trell.

"It's gorgeous," he said, pulling it out of its holster and displaying it in his hand. "Thirty meters

of penetrating power, would you believe?”

“I don’t know,” Varelle replied, looking skeptical. “I liked the old M12. Maybe not thirty meters, but you could burn through a Habbai with it at ten.”

Aharon looked over at Ianto, a little apologetic. “We’re leaving the poor boy out of the conversation, Kethan. What kind of a friend are you? Have you even let Ianto hold your toys yet?”

“Which ones?” Kethan asked, grinning. Aharon just rolled his eyes. “No,” admitted Kethan. “We haven’t really had a whole lot of time to go over fifty-first century weaponry yet.” He looked down at the X50, then turned it around so that the handle was pointing at Ianto.

“Want to try?”

Ianto hesitated.

“I don’t want to shoot anyone by accident,” he said, not daring to look at Aharon. “What if I press the wrong button?”

“Just don’t press this,” Kethan said, pointing to the trigger in an exaggerated manner, “and we all should survive it.”

Ianto reached out and took the gun. He glanced down at it in his hand for a second, then across the table at Aharon, who didn’t wait a second to pull out his own blaster and aim it at Kethan.

“Don’t anybody move.”

“What the fuck, Aharon?” Kethan cried, holding his hands up in the universal gesture of surrender.

Aharon ignored him. “Ianto, disarm the Captain, if you please. Don’t even think about it, Opal, or Kethan gets a hole in his head.”

“No,” replied Ianto, instead lifting the X50 and training it on Aharon.

“Not a good idea,” Aharon said, eyes narrowing. “I can’t get you home if you shoot me.” When Ianto didn’t waver, Aharon swung his blaster around and aimed it at Ianto. “I’d rather not shoot you,” he said, failing to sound completely sincere. “But I will if you don’t *get out of my way*.”

”Aharon—” started Kethan.

“Drop it,” Aharon interrupted. “On the floor, or I shoot you and take Kethan despite your heroics. And this ain’t no stun-gun, sweet cheeks.”

“I *will* shoot,” Ianto replied. “Do you think I won’t?”

“No,” replied Aharon with a sneer. “I think you’re a coward. I think you’re bluffing”

Clearly, Aharon had never had a heart-to-heart with Owen. Ianto didn’t hesitate. He pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. *Shit.*

Time seemed to stop, everyone frozen in place, and for a long moment, Ianto thought this was the feeling of time slowing down right before he died. It was only when Aharon lowered his blaster that he realized he hadn’t fired at all.

“This ain’t no stun-gun, sweet cheeks?” Kethan drawled. “What kind of movies have you been watching?”

“One’s with you in them, apparently,” Aharon shot back, holstering his weapon. “You can put that down now.”

“Wha-?” Ianto gasped, his senses suddenly tuned up high enough that he could feel his blood rushing through his body.

Kethan reached out and plucked the blaster out of Ianto’s hand.

“You pass,” he said, grinning. “With flying colours.”

Ianto sagged, tension leaving his body all at once. “That was a test?” he whispered. He tried again, louder. “That was a *test*?”

“Bingo,” said Varelle, getting up from her chair. She hadn’t moved the whole time, Ianto realized.

“I could have shot him,” he breathed, feeling a little hysterical.

Kethan held up his blaster. “Disarmed.”

“Why?” was all Ianto could manage.

“Had to be sure,” Kethan said, not looking the least bit apologetic. “Your story was good, but it

didn't mean you wouldn't betray me, when it came down to it."

*Loyalty.* Ianto thought numbly. Kethan was testing his fucking loyalty.

"Fuck you, Jack Harkness," he snapped suddenly, his hands starting to shake. "Fuck you, Kethan Brisho, or whomever the fuck you are. Just—" He turned and walked out of the room, and didn't stop until he reached the cargo bay, where his legs gave out under him and he sagged against the wall.

~

Ianto hadn't been in the cargo bay for a minute when Kethan climbed through the hatch and came over to where he was leaning against the bulkhead.

"You okay?" he asked, sounding a little concerned.

Ianto considered. Adrenaline was pumping through him, but it wasn't something he was unfamiliar with. The Cybermen, the cannibals, weevils, even Owen had all introduced him to that feeling before. Even so, the sensation of having just barely escaped death, even if it had all been an elaborate prank, was overwhelming.

"I thought I was dead," he said in reply.

Kethan reached out to touch him on the shoulder. Ianto flinched, and then grabbed Kethan's arm, spinning him around and shoving him up against the wall with his body.

"Don't you *ever*," Ianto spat, "Do something like that to me again. Clear?"

Kethan had the gall to look amused. "Doing it once was kind of the point," he said mildly. "It's not exactly something that would work again."

They stood there, Ianto glowering at Kethan and Kethan calmly matching his gaze until Kethan shifted under Ianto's grasp. His chest rubbed along Ianto's and he tried to bring his free arm up, but Ianto grabbed it and pressed it to the wall, adrenaline overwhelming him. He slammed his mouth against Kethan's in a violent kiss.

Kethan made a small noise of surprise but returned the kiss with vigour, arching up against Ianto. Kethan was hard, Ianto realized, and so was he, probably from the adrenaline rush. Ianto dropped his grip on Kethan's arms and reached down, scrabbling against the edge of his t-shirt for a moment before he caught it and yanked it over Kethan's head. Kethan raised his arms obligingly, then dropped his hands to his trousers, undoing them as Ianto pulled off his own shirt.

“You-” Kethan started to say, but Ianto slapped a hand over his mouth, his other hand reaching down to scratch across Kethan’s stomach. Kethan let out a muffled sound and started on Ianto’s belt, fingers scrabbling over Ianto’s fly and then reaching into his pants. Ianto let out a groan, and Kethan started to drop to his knees, but Ianto shook his head and pushed at his shoulders, telegraphing what he wanted.

“Back pocket,” Kethan gasped, pulling Ianto in and grinding them together through the thin material of their shorts. Ianto reached back and found what he needed, taking it out and shoving Kethan’s trousers and pants down his hips before turning him around. His hands shook as he opened the packet of lube and slicked up his cock. Kethan leaned forward in front of him, resting his forehead against the bulkhead and spreading his legs as much as his tangled trousers would allow.

Ianto stepped forward and lined up, running a hand along Kethan’s thigh before gripping his hip. He hesitated for a moment, and Kethan turned his head, putting his cheek against the wall.

“Do it,” he said roughly, pressing back against Ianto. Ianto took a moment to breathe, running his free hand down the bumps of Kethan’s spine before coming to rest on Kethan’s other hip, and then he pushed in.

“Fuck,” he said, exhaling sharply. “I’m not going to last.”

Kethan’s laugh was nearly as hysterical as Ianto felt. “You and me both.”

Ianto snapped his hips forward without warning, and Kethan let out a sharp breath. He adjusted his angle and pushed in again, this time getting a moan. He set up a relentless pace, swimming in sensation as he felt Kethan shudder under him, bracing himself better with one hand and bringing the other down to jerk himself off.

“Shit, Ianto,” was all Kethan managed before his orgasm shook through him, Ianto following a few moments after, gripping Kethan’s hips hard enough to bruise. He leaned over Kethan, mouthing at his shoulder blades and wrapping his arms up against his chest.

“Urg,” he moaned, panting hard against Kethan’s back.

“Yeah,” said Kethan, breathlessly.

Ianto took a moment to collect himself, then moved away, pulling his trousers back up and sinking down against the wall. Kethan followed suit, coming round to Ianto’s other side to avoid the mess on the wall. He’d have to clean that up, Ianto thought.

“Remind me to threaten your life more often,” Kethan said, putting a hand on Ianto’s knee. “That was one hell of an adrenaline rush.”

Ianto let his head fall back with a thud. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Kethan snorted. “No. Well, not in a bad way.”

“Good,” he said, vaguely. “I’m going to go to sleep now, if that’s alright.” The exhaustion from the day, no longer overwhelmed by adrenaline, seeped through him.

Kethan barked a laugh. “Take your time.” He dropped his head against Ianto’s shoulder, shifting a little. “You know, for a twenty-first century man, you certainly get off on an audience.”

Ianto’s head snapped up. “We had an audience?”

“Uh,” said Kethan, waving his hand up at the second level. “You didn’t notice when you came in?”

Ianto looked up at the balcony. Two of the crew waved back down at him.

“Ahhh,” Ianto groaned, covering his face with his hands. Of all the first impressions he’d made in his life, this was definitely the most interesting. Weevil hunting came a far, far second to this.

“Oops,” said Kethan, cheerfully. “Well, now they’re probably all the more eager to get to know you.”

Ianto just buried his face in his arms.

## **Chapter 8**

~

Ianto woke up to someone’s breath on his face. He opened his eyes, and found himself staring back at Jack.

No, not Jack, he thought with a quiet sigh. He always forgot when he woke up. Ianto didn’t think his subconscious would ever sort this out. He’d gone to bed with Kethan for seven nights running, and he still woke up thinking he was with Jack. Last night he had crashed, exhausted after a long day of explanations, firefights and space travel, in the small room in which he and

Kethan had stowed their packs.

“Morning,” smiled Kethan, trailing a hand down Ianto’s side, moving to draw small circles on his skin. “Sleep well?”

Ianto hummed a response. “Much better wake-up than yesterday,” he said, voice husky. He could see Kethan’s eyes glaze over for a moment as he recalled what happened yesterday, and then he let out a small laugh.

“Didn’t like the cuffs?” Kethan teased.

“I like cuffs just fine, thank you. Usually you’re the one wearing them, that’s all.”

“Oh, really?” Kethan said, arching an eyebrow. “I must trust you a lot.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t let people tie me up unless I know them pretty well. Dangerous, in my line of work, letting someone have that kind of advantage over you.” Kethan eyed Ianto thoughtfully.

“You’re pretty loyal to me, aren’t you?”

Ianto nodded.

“What,” Kethan asked, looking amused. “Don’t want to talk about it?”

“What is there to say?” Ianto asked. He wasn’t really used to this; he and Jack never actually discussed the details of their relationship. Neither of them were talkers when it came to the emotional details, though for different reasons. Ianto preferred to let his actions speak for themselves, and Jack – well, Jack just wasn’t interested in emotional complications, Ianto presumed.

“You would have died for me, yesterday, without a second thought, without knowing anything about what I’m doing. I wasn’t expecting Aharon to threaten your life; I was a little annoyed he took it that far. I don’t expect you to die for me, Ianto. Do I in your time?”

“No,” Ianto laughed. “You don’t. But if—” you could die, Ianto thought “—it was necessary, I would.”

“*That’s* what I’m interested in.” Kethan said, leaning back to look Ianto more fully in face. “The sex must be pretty good to inspire that kind of loyalty,” he joked.

Ianto gave a small smile and rolled onto his back.

“It is, but that’s not why. You—earned it, I suppose. Gave me my life back.”

“Gave you your life back,” Kethan echoed, intrigued. “How did I do that?”

Literally, Ianto thought wryly. But that wasn’t the important way.

“I betrayed you, actually. I worked for you, I was supposed to be one of your trusted soldiers, and I completely abused that trust.”

“You work for me?” Kethan asked, intrigued. “At this Torchwood thing?”

“Yes,” Ianto said, waiting a moment for a shagging-the-boss joke. It never came; perhaps there weren’t any strictures against sleeping with your employer anymore. He took a breath and continued.

“You said that you must trust me, when I’m from. That’s the thing, you do, but you shouldn’t. I don’t deserve it.” He dropped his hand on Kethan’s where it was resting on his stomach.

“Should I be telling you this?”

“I’ll stop you if I need to. So you owe me? That’s why you’d die for me?” Kethan made a face. “I’m not sure I like that.”

“I did owe you,” Ianto admitted. “And for a while, it was just sex between us, but it changed. I grew to respect you.”

“Ah, respect,” said Kethan solemnly. “The founding principle of any relationship.”

Ianto rolled his eyes. “The founding principle of our relationship was definitely lust. Everything else came after.”

“I thought you didn’t base your relationships on sex,” Kethan asked. “Or was that just you conning me?”

“No,” said Ianto, shaking his head. “I wasn’t conning you. Jack and I – you and I – didn’t – don’t –”

“Ignore the tense issues,” Kethan injected. “I can figure it out.”

“Alright,” said Ianto, breathing out sharply. “We didn’t have sex until after I betrayed you. Until after you’d forgiven me.”



“When you owed me?”

“Right,” said Ianto. “When I owed you.”

“Again, not sure I like that.”

“It wasn’t like I was trying to get your forgiveness,” Ianto pointed out. “You’d already forgiven me. But I was hurting, and you were hurting, and the sex – sort of made us forget about it.”

“Ah,” said Kethan, sitting up. “I know that kind of sex. The angst driven, lust-filled rutting that is just another version of drowning your sorrows in a bottle of booze?”

“Yep,” chuckled Ianto.

“When did it change?”

“You left,” Ianto said simply. “And then you came back, and somehow, it was different. I was different, I think, and so were you.”

Jack *had* come back different from his time with the Doctor. He’d told Ianto very little of his time away, but Ianto was smart enough to realize that whatever questions Jack had had about himself, his immortality, had been answered to some degree. Whereas before, Jack had never been willing to commit anything beyond the next night to Ianto, now he seemed more prepared to make long-term plans. Well, thought Ianto wryly, long-term in the sense of a date on Friday. They certainly weren’t saving up a down payment on a house.

“Do you love me?”

Ianto started. “Pardon?”

“I don’t mean me, now,” Kethan said, shrugging. “I mean Jack. Do you love him?”

“Does it matter?”

“I think you do,” Kethan said confidently, throwing a leg over Ianto and straddling him. “I see it when you look at me. You’re missing him, missing your lover. I’m close, but not quite, aren’t I? So it hurts, every time you look at me, and it shows in your eyes.” He leaned over and ghosted his lips over Ianto’s. “That’s why you’d die for me. Not because you *owe* me, or anything so coarse. Because you *love* me.”

Ianto looked away. “I think we all do, really.”

“All?”

“Your team. There are four of us, and you.”

“Would they die for me, too?” Kethan asked.

“Yes,” Ianto said. It was a bit like cheap grace, he thought. None of them would ever be tested on that, but nonetheless, Ianto knew that each and every member of Torchwood Three would lay down their lives for Jack. Ianto was nothing special, in that way. He was just the one Jack took into his bed.

Ianto stared up at Kethan, who looked like he was lost in thought, probably at the idea of having four people who were that loyal to him. He was beautiful; naked and warm, his knees hugging Ianto’s hips, one hand resting on Ianto’s stomach, the other raised to his mouth, rubbing absently. Of course he loved him, Ianto thought. He had never met anyone who inspired more love in the people around him than Jack. Irritation, anger, and even fury, yes; but at the end of the day, they all loved him. They couldn’t help it.

Ianto reached up and took the hand that was at Kethan’s mouth, using it to pull Kethan down to him before rolling them over, chest to chest against the wall of the small bed. Kethan smiled up at him and rubbed his nose against Ianto’s, bringing back memories of their third meeting. This man was a stranger, as Jack had been then. Could you know someone if you knew who they would be? If he loved Jack, did he love Kethan too?

The falling sensation in the pit of his stomach was the same, at least. This time, Ianto gave in and let his weight fall onto Kethan, his mouth pressing against Kethan’s as if he could kiss the answers out of him.

They kissed languorously for some time, bodies shifting together leisurely rather than passionately. This was how it was, after the long days at Torchwood when Ianto was too tired to do anything else, or when Jack needed to be reminded that peace could be found in some places, even if they were as small as Ianto’s arms. They moved unhurriedly, Kethan twining a leg around Ianto’s and pressing his hands to Ianto’s back as Ianto buried his face in Kethan’s neck, finding the places that used to make Jack gasp and sigh.

Kethan smoothed a hand down Ianto’s arse, pulling them together as Ianto reached between them, curling his hand around their cocks and stroking, slow and strong. Kethan arched and twisted under him, seeking more contact. Steady pressure built as they rocked in a slow rhythm lips and cocks and arms and thighs brushing together, and soon (too soon) Ianto was coming, eyes forced open to watch Kethan’s face as Ianto slicked his hand and brought Kethan over the edge, leaning down to capture the small sigh in a final kiss.

Ianto moved off Kethan, just far enough to let him breathe, and they lay there, panting.

“This is so weird,” Kethan murmured after a while. “It must be even weirder for you.”

“Sex with you?” Ianto asked. “It is, a little. My brain can’t figure out if I’m cheating on Jack by sleeping with you or not.” He’d given up thinking that maybe he shouldn’t be sleeping with Kethan at all. Jack had been irresistible enough when Ianto was ignorant of what he was missing; trying to keep out of his bed all over again would have been a pointless exercise.

Kethan laughed. “Unless I’ve changed a lot by the time I know you, I don’t think I’ll mind.”

“No,” Ianto admitted, “Probably not. Why is this strange for you? Aren’t you used to the complications of time-traveling?”

“I am, but it’s never been like this.”

“Like what?”

“Ianto,” he said softly, “Sex with you is like coming home. Whatever we have, in the twenty-first century, it must be good. It’s like you know me better than I know myself.”

Ianto rolled off the bed and found a dirty shirt, which he used to clean himself off before tossing it to Kethan. “I don’t,” he said, shortly. “I don’t know you well at all. I don’t even know your real name.”

Kethan sat up and wiped off his own stomach, frowning. “That is strange. Maybe telling you would mess with the timelines.” He looked thoughtful. “Maybe I don’t even remember my name.”

“Is that possible?” Ianto asked. Jack was old, but he wasn’t old enough to forget who he used to be.

“I forget you, apparently. Who’s to say I don’t forget a whole lot more than that, as well. Maybe that’s why I go by ‘Jack Harkness’, or whatever it is.”

“Harkness,” Ianto corrected, putting on a clean pair of trousers and finding a shirt. “I doubt it. You have plenty of secrets you don’t share with anyone.” He pulled on his shoes, laced them up, and was halfway out the door before Kethan called after him.

“Elariu.” Ianto turned back. “Kethan Elariu, born in the Boeshane Peninsula in 5028.” He smiled. “It was spring.”

Ianto nodded. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

~

After Ianto had eaten, Brenneth sent him off with Kareh for a grand tour of the *Evening Star*. Kareh had been one of the crew who’d gotten a little more of an introduction than Ianto had intended, but the only comment he made was a mild “and you’ve already acquainted yourself with the cargo bay”. The tour ended in the mainframe, a little cave-like room that appeared all the smaller for the sheer amount of technical equipment packed into it, connected with a hodgepodge of wires.

“This,” Kareh said, throwing his arms widely, “is my baby. She keeps the ship ticking when we sleep, detects spatial disturbances, plots our courses, takes astronomical data, tracks our enemies, regulates our environmental controls, and plays a mean game of chess.”

Ianto stepped up and ran a hand across a panel. “Does she have a name?”

“Just the *Evening Star*. The ship may be her body, but this is her brain.”

Ianto examined the display that was central to the room and took up four panels. Kareh reached past him and tapped the screen, bringing it to life. Ianto started.

“I know this,” he said, in surprise. “This is the same interface as the mainframe at Torchwood.”

“Torchwood?”

“Where I work,” he answered absently, stepping forward and touching an icon on the screen.

“It isn’t touch-screen, and it’s in English, but it’s the same operating system.”

“She’s a bit of a mash-up between a couple of common systems,” Kareh said. “I’d be surprised if you’d seen her before. My predecessor designed her.”

“Your predecessor?” Ianto asked, squinting at the alien text. “Can I plug in my fish, somewhere?”

“Here,” Kareh said, pointing to a port. Ianto pulled off his fish and plugged it in, and Kareh reached over to some keys. The screens divided so that half of them showed what was presumably the same thing as the original Galactic Standard in English. “I’ve only been here for twelve years and Opal’s been captain of the *Star* for more like twenty. Lirone was the previous computer technician and this is his system.”

“What happened to him?” Ianto asked, flicking through system menus. Definitely the same interface as the Hub’s mainframe.

“Died.”

“I’m sorry.”

Kareh shrugged. “I never met him. He was the Captain’s lover, though, so be careful what you say around her. She doesn’t like to talk about him.”

“I thought the Captain and the Doctor...?” Ianto trailed off.

“They are. They’ve been together since, well, forever. Since they were your age, I think.”

Right. Ianto thought. Non-monogamous.

“Here,” Kareh said, stepping up. “Shall I show you the basics? Nav and Enviro are good places to start; everyone on board should be able to use them. You can access both from the bridge as well, but we’ll disturb fewer people down here.”

Ianto picked up the system quickly; he should, he spent enough time buried in the hub’s mainframe trying to figure out how to get her to run as smoothly as possible. Working with Kareh made Ianto wish the man worked for Torchwood, since Ianto had often felt like he was dealing with a foreign language when accessing the hub’s systems. Kareh could probably make the *Star* play four-dimensional Tetris if he felt like it. By the end of the two hours they spent going over the *Evening Star*’s systems, Ianto had collected enough information to rework several of the mainframe’s vital systems.

When they finished, Ianto left Kareh to his work and went to the mess, where Jotir was ensconced in frying pans and cutting boards. He didn’t look up as Ianto wandered over to the counter.

“Can I help?” Ianto asked softly, trying not to startle the alien. Jotir glanced up, giving Ianto his first look at the alien’s small, pale eyes, and then back at the vegetables he was frying, nodding his head and handing Ianto the wooden spatula he was stirring the food with.

“Stir this. Don’t let it burn,” he said, gesturing with long, translucent fingers.

Ianto felt relieved to hear the alien speak; the silence had been a little disturbing. Now that he knew Jotir was capable of speech, though, he didn’t push it, and they cooked the meal in silence until the rest of the crew started trickling in, finding seats around the long table and

grabbing plates and cups.

“Paravian stir-fry!” cried Kethan, leaning over the counter and picking out of the dishes with his fingers. Jotir let out a sigh, but didn’t say anything.

“Jotir will put extra chili powder in your curry again if you keep doing that,” warned Ashild, tugging on his sleeve. “Sit down and be patient.”

“Sorry Jotir,” Kethan said, flashing a shit-eating grin at the alien. “I’ll keep my fingers out of your... offerings, I promise.”

The mechanic – Ellis – let out a bark of a laugh. “Jotir wouldn’t let you anywhere near his offerings, Kethan. He’s got some brains.”

“What do you have, then?” Kethan smirked, pulling out a chair. “And the rest of this crew?”

“A bizarre fondness for your wicked ways, of course,” replied Ellis. “Jotir is the only one who hasn’t fallen for it.”

“You’ve slept with the whole crew?” Ianto couldn’t help but ask, setting bowls of hot food on the table before finding a seat between Kethan and Zoanne.

“Except for Ashild, of course,” answered Ellis for him.

Ianto glanced at Ashild. “Not interested?”

She made a face. “In incest? Not quite.”

“It wouldn’t really be incest,” Kethan objected, waving a fork. “But it would be weird.”

“Are you his sister?” Ianto asked, confused.

“He didn’t tell you?” she asked, turning to glare at Kethan. “Ashamed of me, are you?”

Kethan looked guilty. “It didn’t come up.” He turned to Ianto. “I’m her surrogate father.”

“Excuse me?” Ianto asked, successfully swallowing the bite of food in his mouth.

“It’s sort of a long story,” Kethan said, looking down at his plate.

Zoanne let out a snort. “He hates telling it. Thinks he comes off badly in it.”

“I do!” Kethan replied, spearing an orange vegetable. “I almost got you all killed.”

“You saved her life.”

“No, I almost destroyed it. *You* saved her life, with my consent.”

Varelle interrupted. “My apologies Ianto, they have this argument every time it comes up.” She took a sip of her water and cleared her throat. Ianto noted that everyone else quieted down and gave her their full attention.

“Twenty-five years ago Zoanne and I worked on a ship, not the *Evening Star*, that delivered medical supplies to war zones. Zoanne was the ship’s doctor and we were expecting a baby. I was not even three months along when we ran into Kethan.”

“Twenty-five years ago?” Ianto clarified. “He was back in time?”

Kethan nodded. “It was five years ago, for me. I was twenty-three, fresh out of the Academy, and an idiot.”

“Some things never change,” quipped Brenneth.

Kethan made a rude gesture and continued. “I was ordered to stop some temporal smugglers – people taking future technology and bringing it back in time – who were supplying one side with weapons that were swaying the balance of the war. But there was a mix-up in the intel and I thought the *Methrin*, the ship Zoanne and Opal were on, was the smuggler’s ship.”

“Which would have been cleared up in no time,” inserted Varelle, “But we were ambushed by one side looking to stock up on supplies when we landed. Unfortunately, it was the side the smuggler’s weren’t supplying—”

“So I thought they were attacking the source of their enemies weapons, and joined them in the firefight until the *Methrin*’s crew were disabled enough for me to go in and shut them down. By the time that happened, most of the crew was dead or injured, and Opal had been shot,” Kethan said, sounding disgusted.

“They would have ambushed us without you,” Varelle pointed out mildly, and then continued. “When Kethan realized his mistake, and that I was going to lose the baby, he offered to be a surrogate host.”

“A ridiculous offer,” Zoanne added. “He didn’t even know us and it would have been six months of his life, but I was angry so I took him up on it, determined to make it his punishment for hurting Opal. And there was no other way, really. I was the only one around who could

perform the surgery, and I couldn't exactly do it on myself."

"So Zoanne removed the... foetus from Opal and implanted it into you?," Ianto clarified, looking at Kethan, "And then you carried Ashild to term?"

"Yep," Kethan said. "And I don't care what they say about medicine being able to make it easy for men, *nobody* should have to go through that, male or female." He shuddered, and then looked over at Ashild.

"It wasn't entirely selfless," he admitted. "When Zoanne told me Opal was pregnant and going to lose the baby, I knew that if I didn't find some way to keep that from happening, the timelines would have snapped. Ashild had to survive, had to be part of the future. Offering myself up as host was the only thing I could think of."

"You know," Ianto said thoughtfully. "You did mention that you'd been pregnant, once. I think we all thought you were joking."

"Unfortunately, no."

Ianto sat quietly, for a moment, food forgotten. "So let me get this straight. Twenty-four years ago in linear time Ashild was born. Which is why she's twenty-four now,"

"Yep," said Ashild.

"But it was only four years ago for Kethan, who went back in time to—"

"2032, when I was born, but it was 2031 when he arrived," Ashild supplied.

"So he spent six months back then, had you, and then, what, left?"

"Yeah, the Agency was really pissed at having to give me unplanned paternity leave. Usually with their male agents they at least get some warning that they're trying to conceive, since the Agency's health care pays for the surgery. Besides," Kethan said, grinning, "I wasn't exactly ready to settle down and become a stay-on-ship father. I visited when I could."

"I see." Ianto speared a pink vegetable and chewed thoughtfully. "When did you become captain of the *Evening Star*, then?" he asked Varelle.

"When Ashild was five, so nineteen years ago. Brenneth was my pilot back then, and Ellis a mechanic, but the rest of the crew has turned over once or twice since then."

"And what do you do, normally?"



Varelle met his gaze calmly. “We’re smugglers.”

“Pardon?” Ianto asked, furrowing his brow.

“We bring supplies behind the Embargo lines.”

That was familiar, Ianto had read about this while on the transport ship. “The region of colonies that was cut off after the Terran-Irolic war thirty years ago?” Thank god he had a superior memory. The sheer amount of history he’d absorbed in the last week would have overwhelmed most people, but knowing something about the world – or rather galaxy – around him made Ianto feel more secure.

“Yep,” said Brenneth. “They opposed the war and wouldn’t send troops to support it. Earth responded by cutting them out of the Galactic Accord. That would have been fine with them, except they were mostly new colonies, hardly terraformed or self-sufficient. They had, and still have, limited access to technology and medical supplies, so neighboring systems pick on them. Earth won’t back them up, so we do. Most of us are from those planets.”

“Boeshane was one of them,” Kethan added. “Until ten years ago.”

“What happened then?”

“They formed an accord with Earth. We were attacked by a local species on a fairly regular basis, and it went beyond our ability to handle. In exchange for some limited conscription from the Boeshane population and the rights to build military outposts, Earth agreed to send in troops to defend us.”

“So when you would go back to the *Evening Star*, did they ever help out Boeshane, before the accord?” Ianto asked Kethan, who smiled.

“You pick up this time travel thing pretty quickly.”

“I do deal with a massive temporal rift for a living,” Ianto reminded him. That, and he had a logical mind with an excellent ability to track detail.

“It shows. Yeah, they have run supplies to Boeshane before, but I never joined them for any of those missions. The Agency didn’t know what I was doing, but if I started crossing my own timeline, they might have picked up on it.”

Zoanne let out a disapproving noise. “The *Agency*. I still don’t know why you won’t leave them, Kethan.”

“Clearly, I have,” said Kethan, looking a little annoyed.

“You haven’t left, you’re just messing around without their permission. What do you think you’ll do when they get you back? Let them wipe your memories so you can go back to doing their dirty work all over again?”

“Someone has to do it,” Kethan said, dropping his utensils. “Do you know how many times the Agency has stopped people from completely fucking up the timelines? Who else would do that job?”

“Half of those people are only able to mess with time because of the Agency in the first place. They’re only interested in timelines that benefit themselves anyway, not actually preserving a good one. After all you’ve learned in the past year—”

“Leave him alone, Zoanne,” said Aharon, gruffly. “He’s just a kid.”

“He still can make good choices.”

“I don’t need *you* to defend me, Aharon,” Kethan said sharply over Zoanne.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You—”

“Boys.” They all looked over at Varelle. “We don’t need to agree with each other, but please, let’s refrain from violence over lunch.”

The tension hung in the air for a long moment before a *beep* disrupted it. Soren glanced at his wristband and jumped up, heading for the bridge. He wasn’t gone thirty seconds before he clambered back down to the mess.

“We’re about to have company. A patrol ship wants to run an inspection.”

Varelle nodded once and stood. “You know the drill, stations, check the wares, erase any suspicious data, and make sure the logs are clean. Jotir, can I ask you to get Kethan hidden?” She turned to Kethan. “Is Ianto safe?”

“Well,” said Kethan, frowning. “Uno didn’t recognize him, which means the Agency had no idea I wasn’t traveling alone, but I’m not sure I want to gamble that they haven’t connected us by now.”

“Very well. Jotir, will they both fit?” Jotir nodded in response. “Good. Move!”

Kethan and Ianto followed Jotir through the hall to the cargo bay, where he popped the lid of a large crate.

“We’re hiding in *there*?” Ianto asked in disbelief. The crate was big enough for two people, as long as they were very friendly six year-olds. Kethan grinned and shook his head, climbing in. Ianto watched as he reached down and then stood up again. When Ianto peered over the edge of the crate, he could see that Kethan had pulled open some sort of a trap door, below it was a small enclosure.

“It’s shielded from scans. They’ll look in the crates, but they don’t think to look under them,” Kethan said, dropping into the room. “I’ve never actually had to hide in here before. Good for some ‘trapped in a closet’ role play, though.”

“Lovely,” Ianto said, following Kethan into the crate and through the trap door. There was just enough room for the two of them to sit cross-legged. “How long are we going to be down here?”

“If the crew does their job right? An hour. Two, tops.”

“Even better,” Ianto said, trying to figure out how to sit without his legs cramping up. “Turn around.”

Kethan looked amused, but obeyed, spinning around and shuffling back between Ianto’s legs so they could both stretch out a little. They’d just gotten organized when Jotir stepped into the crate and dropped the trap door over them with a clang.

“Thanks for the warning,” Ianto grumbled. At least the room had a couple small lights built into the walls.

“He’s not much of a talker, in case you haven’t noticed,” replied Kethan, letting his weight fall back against Ianto. “I haven’t figured out if he’s shy, or just has low tolerance of humans.”

“How long has he been on the ship?”

“Erm,” said Kethan, tilting his head so it rested against Ianto’s shoulder. “Let’s see, he wasn’t there seven years ago, but he was three, and... six? I think? It’s always hard keeping track of who’s going to be here, since I don’t visit in any sort of order. Varelle used to run new crew members by me, to make sure they would stick around.”

“Why don’t you visit in order?”

Kethan shrugged. “More fun?” He wriggled in Ianto’s grasp. “So, are we going to have some fun of our own? Not much else to do in a space the size of a Kitaran hotel room.”

“Actually,” said Ianto, slowly. “I had some other ideas.”

“And what would those be?”

“You, telling me exactly what is going on. Why you left the Time Agency. Why they’re after you. Why we have to hide in this little hole.” Kethan stopped moving. “What? You know you can trust me now.”

Kethan sighed. “I know. I just don’t like thinking about it more than I have to, that’s all.”

“I deserve to know,” Ianto said calmly.

“Yeah, you do.” Kethan blew out a breath. “But where to start? Where I started, or where it all starts?”

“How about the shorter version, for now.”

“Okay,” Kethan said, straightening up and twisting to look at Ianto. “Have you ever heard of a TARDIS?”

## Chapter 9

~

Oh no, thought Ianto. This was about the Doctor. Again.

“I figured you hadn’t,” continued Kethan, but Ianto interrupted him.

“Actually, I have.”

Kethan blinked. “Really?” Ianto nodded. “How?”

How was a little complicated, truth be told. Some of what Ianto knew was common Torchwood knowledge, other bits and pieces he’d dug up in the archives. (Torchwood Three had a significantly larger section on the Doctor than London had; Ianto suspected this was Jack’s doing, and that London had no idea Jack had been keeping closer tabs on their “Number One Enemy” than them.) The most definite things he knew, though, were the things Jack told him in

his occasional fits of honesty.

“Torchwood has an interest in him,” Ianto answered eventually.

“Him?” Kethan asked. “You must be confused, the TARDIS isn’t a person.”

“No, I know,” Ianto replied. “It’s a sort of a ship, but the person who – owns – it is of interest to Torchwood.”

Kethan had tensed between Ianto’s legs, and now had the focused look on his face of someone who had just found out something important.

“Let me get this straight – you know who flies the TARDIS?”

Ianto nodded. “We’ve never met, but I’ve seen him from a distance, and I know people who have met him.” He felt absurdly like he was name-dropping, popping out with how his auntie had met David Beckham in the chemists shop, or some such thing.

Kethan was practically vibrating in his arms. Ianto was pretty sure he was not happy to be in a tiny box of a room; if he were Jack, he would have been pacing and gesticulating all to hell right about now.

“This could change *everything*,” Kethan said under his breath. “Or at least, give us some more options. What’s his name?” he demanded.

“The Doctor.”

“Just ‘the Doctor’?” Kethan asked.

“Just the Doctor,” Ianto confirmed. “Apparently he uses John Smith occasionally, but I don’t think that’s actually his name. I’m not sure he has one.”

“That could make things difficult, then,” Kethan murmured, but then pressed on. “What else do you know?”

“Not much,” Ianto admitted. “He shows up on Earth, in my time, sometimes. Usually when everything’s gone to hell. Ja—people say he’s preventing disasters from happening. Or from getting worse,” he added, thinking back to Canary Wharf. “Erm, he’s not human, but he looks it. And he can change his form.”

“Like a shape shifter?”

“No,” Ianto said, remembering how Jack had told him that his Doctor hadn’t been the same. “He sticks to one form for a long time, but sometimes takes on a new one. I don’t know how.”

“What else?”

“About the Doctor? That’s about it, I’m afraid,” Ianto said apologetically. “I could give you a list of twentieth century events he’s been linked to, known sightings, etcetera, but I don’t know any other details about the man himself.”

“And the TARDIS?” Kethan pressed. “What do you know about that?”

“Just that it’s a sort of spaceship on steroids.”

“Not just a spaceship,” Kethan injected. “A *timeship*.”

Ianto nodded. “I know. It takes the form of a police box, too, as a sort of disguise, and uses perception filtering to stay unnoticed. I’ve also been told it’s bigger on the inside.”

“A police box?”

“A sort of telephone box they’d put on streets, before mobile phones – mobile communication devices.”

“I know what a phone is,” Kethan said absently, tapping his fingers against his mouth.

“Right,” Ianto said. “Why do you need to know all this? What does this all have to do with the TARDIS?”

Kethan took a breath. “What Zoanne said about the Time Agency, over dinner? She’s sort of right. We – they – weren’t always self-serving, but the people at the top haven’t been so selfless as of recently.”

“So they’ve been choosing the timelines they want, like she said?” Ianto asked.

Kethan shook his head. “*That* wasn’t true. They can’t.”

“But isn’t that what you do?” asked Ianto, confused. “Go back in time and fix the timelines?”

“Fix them, yes, but only when someone has used time travel to screw them up in the first place. That’s what the Agency does; monitors time to detect rifts and breaks, and then sends people to clean up the problems. Ever since we discovered how to manipulate time, we’ve needed people to regulate it, as with every other invention known to man.”

“But they don’t misuse it themselves?” Ianto asked.

“Like I said, they can’t, not really. Being able to travel backwards in time just means you can create new causes, or remove old ones. It doesn’t mean you can predict the effects any better.”

“I don’t follow.”

Kethan frowned for a moment, and then started up again. “Okay, let’s say I roll a die. What’s the chance it lands on a three?”

“Six-sided?”

“Yes.”

“One in six.”

“And what decides which side will land face up?”

“Nothing?” Ianto said, thinking it over. “It’s random.”

“Right. That’s probability. Now, I could go to roll a die, go forward in time, see where it landed, come back, and tell you “three” before I rolled it. And I would be right, every time.”

“Good way to cheat at the casino.”

“If only the sudden flash of a person disappearing wasn’t quite so obvious, it’s a shame,” Kethan grinned. “But here’s the question: I was the cause of the three: I instigated it by rolling the die, but did I choose the outcome?”

Ianto was quiet for a moment. “No.”

“Why not?”

“You didn’t make it land on a three,” Ianto pointed out. “You just predicted it.”

“*Exactly*,” stressed Kethan. “Actually, that’s what we call it: prediction versus causation. I didn’t make it land on a three because I wanted it to; I knew it landed on a three because I saw it. Just because I can go forward and see what will happen, doesn’t mean I can make a certain outcome happen.”

“So if you wanted to roll a six, say” Ianto said slowly. “You couldn’t do it. You could go and

see if you did, before you rolled it, but if it was a two, or a four, or anything else, you couldn't make it be a six. You can't control the future outcome."

"Bingo. Now, that's a really simple case, rolling a die. Simple enough that I could actually do it, and show you, if I wasn't on an Agency-imposed hiatus from vortex travel," Kethan said, rolling his eyes. "Now imagine something with far more variables, more chaotic elements, more randomness."

"Like, say, the galaxy?" Ianto said dryly.

"We could jump to that. I was thinking of a political system. If you wanted to win an election, you could go forward in time and see what happened. If you won, great. If you lost, what would you do?"

"Determine why you lost, and try not to do that."

"Precisely. But that's not feasible. Why someone loses an election is not a simple equation. You could try something; say, take a more pacifist response, if they voted for someone who had less military experience, for example. But a political system is way too complex to say 'yep, that'll do it' and be sure you will win. Maybe they'll decide you're coming off false, and vote for you even less. You can't know the outcome. You could try it, and go check again, but chances are it won't have turned out like you predicted. Before the Agency, people went mad trying to craft their perfect future."

"So the Agency doesn't mess with timelines to their advantage, simply because they can't compute all the variables?"

"Compute, yeah," Kethan said, nodding. "That's exactly it. There are simply too many details to keep track of, to know how to change the future, or the present."

"So all you can do is stop people from interfering with known timelines."

"Where the outcome is already known, and we're just preserving it, not creating a new chain of events. In a nutshell, that's my job. Was my job."

"Where does the TARDIS come into it, then?"

"Remember what you said about not being able to compute all the variables?" Ianto nodded. "*That's* where the TARDIS comes into it. I don't know exactly what it is, but what I do know is that it directly accesses the Time Vortex to get the complete data of a timeline. And it goes both ways: it can manipulate the Vortex itself."



“The Time Vortex?”

“You know how they talk about the fabric of space? You know, how gravity bends space, that sort of language? The Vortex is the fabric of time. It’s what I travel through when I use my vortex manipulator. Some people think of it in physics terms, other people just think of it as God. It *is* the beat of time, essentially.”

Kethan shifted around for a moment, rearranging his legs.

“If the time vortex is God, tying the strands of time together, a TARDIS is a guardian angel, with the power to break the rules. A TARDIS can do anything with time. Create a new timeline, design a particular chain of events, sustain a paradox, *anything*. This,” he said, holding up his arm, tapping his wristband, “is to the TARDIS like lighting a match compares to the energy put out by a star.”

“How do you know so much about it?” Ianto asked.

“I got a look at some research the Time Agency was doing on it.”

“And by ‘got a look’ ...?”

“I mean stole, yeah,” admitted Kethan. “About eighteen months ago, I heard a rumour. Just a flicker, but I got curious. And the more I found out, the deeper I dug, the more I realized that *this can’t happen*.”

“What do you mean?”

“If the Time Agency got a hold of a TARDIS, they would cease to be a benign force. Partly because, yes, there are some less than desirable people at the top, but mostly because the TARDIS is power in a way you can’t begin to comprehend.”

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Kethan nodded and leaned closer to Ianto, looking at him intently. “Unlike Zoanne, I have no problem with the Time Agency as is. But if they figure out how to use the TARDIS, we are fucked. Whoever controls that thing can control the flow of time itself. Nobody could stop them.”

Ianto leaned back and considered. He didn’t know exactly when Jack had met the Doctor, only that Jack had been thirty-five when he had been made immortal. Based on precisely nothing, Ianto didn’t believe Jack had traveled with the Doctor for very long, and certainly not anywhere near the seven years he would have if he met (meets) the Doctor soon, but Jack had surprised

him before. He set those thoughts aside and ran over Kethan's last piece of information.

"You said 'if they figure out how to use it'," Ianto said, looking back at Kethan. "Does that mean they already have it?"

Kethan gave him a grim look, the corners of his mouth turning down. "They do. That's the bad news."

"There's good news?" Ianto asked, skeptical.

"The good news," Kethan stressed, "is that I know where they're keeping it. Which means—"

"You can remove it from their possession?" Ianto finished for him.

Kethan shrugged. "Actually, I was going to go for the less subtle 'blow it up', but the ultimate effect would be the same."

"You can't blow it up!" said Ianto, startled. Jack would kill him if he let Kethan blow up the Doctor's ship. Not to mention Kethan would never meet the Doctor, and become immortal, and everything else that followed from that, if the TARDIS got destroyed, and Ianto already knew that Jack's immortality was a time sensitive issue.

"Why not?"

"Well, erm," Ianto stuttered, trying to come up with something convincing. "The Doctor won't be very happy if you blow up his ship."

Kethan looked skeptical. "And that's my problem, how? It's his fault for letting it get captured in the first place."

"No, really," said Ianto, desperation leaking through. "You can't destroy it. I swear, you'll break the timeline."

"How do you know it's from before you know it?" Kethan asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe it's done whatever it needs to do in your time. It could be a later version in its own timeline."

Ianto opened his mouth, and then closed it. Kethan did have a point, he had no way of proving the captured TARDIS didn't belong to a Doctor who had already met Jack and saved them at

Canary Wharf. But Kethan didn't have any proof that it wasn't, and he grimaced when Ianto pointed that out.

"True. But if destroying it is going to do any significant damage, I'll know before it happens. Snapping of time, remember? Really, you don't need to worry about it."

"Just have a back-up plan," Ianto cautioned, conceding the point for the moment. Perhaps he'd be able to persuade him not to destroy it later. The Doctor – what had happened to the Doctor anyway? The way Jack talked about him, he was invincible. How could the Time Agency have possibly gotten their hands on his ship?

Ianto was lost in thought and didn't notice Kethan had moved until he was on his knees between Ianto's legs, bracing his hands on Ianto's thighs.

"Satisfied?" he asked, a smirk on his lips.

"For now."

"Good," replied Kethan. "Because it really would be a shame to waste being trapped in a box with you."

Ianto rolled his eyes and gave Kethan his patented 'why do I put up with you' look, but brought his hands up to Kethan's shoulders anyway. "You're insatiable."

"Yup," said Kethan, nudging Ianto's legs further apart with his knees. "You love it."

Don't I just, Ianto thought as Kethan pressed a kiss to his lips and started on the buttons of his shirt.

~

This time, Ianto managed to preserve some of his dignity, and was as un-rumpled as anyone who'd spent an hour in a tiny room with Kethan could be expected to be when Ashild popped the hatch. Kethan let him climb out first, slapping him on the arse on the way out.

"Everything go fine?" Kethan asked, following Ianto out of the crate that disguised the trap-door.

"Peachy," replied Ashild, leading them up the stairs and then towards the bridge. "I don't think they had any idea you might be here, they seem to be stopping everyone who left Trell recently."

“They probably found Uno’s body,” Kethan suggested. “Are we wanted on the Bridge?”

“Yeah,” she replied, stepping through the hatch to the bridge. “Opal wants to go over the plans for picking up the explosives. We’ll be at the Deen outpost by twenty-five hundred.” The explosives must be the ones they mean to use to blow up the TARDIS, Ianto thought uneasily as he followed them onto the bridge, where Varelle and Soren were waiting.

“Twenty-six,” called Soren from his place at the helm. “That was a pre-patrol estimate.”

Brenneth came through the other entrance to the bridge. “Have you contacted Shurim to let her know?”

“No,” said Soren, spinning in his chair. “I thought we were letting Aharon do all the talking. I can contact her now if you want.”

“Do it,” nodded Varelle.

Soren turned back to the consol; most of it was a touch-screen, like the one down in the mainframe, but to his left there was a set of real, physical controls. *Manual controls*, Kareh had said on his tour, *if the mainframe goes down, you still want to be able to steer the ship*. Soren flicked through the screen and after a minute, a hologram of a motherly looking woman popped up in front of them.

“Shurim,” said Varelle, stepping forward, presumably towards some sort of a camera. “We wanted to let you know we’re running late.”

“Patrols?” Shurim said, her voice scratchy.

“Yes. Is it on the waves?”

The ‘waves’ was their network, Ianto recalled. A sort of fifty-first century inter-planetary internet.

“A little. Mostly static; too much. Something’s being kept down. Is Aharon around?”

“He is. Do you want me to forward you to him?”

“Please. Unless you wanted to change any other plans?”

“No,” replied Varelle. “Just push it back an hour.”

“Done.”

“Thank you.”

Soren tapped the controls and the hologram vanished.

“Static, huh,” frowned Ashild, pulling at a loose lock of hair.

“What’s that mean?” Ianto asked.

“That there’s a lot of encrypted data running through the waves,” she answered, looking thoughtful. “That hasn’t happened so far, Kethan. The Agency has kept it to themselves. Looks like they’re branching out.”

“I’m getting closer,” Kethan said grimly. “And they know it. I was hoping they weren’t so close behind me.”

“Count your blessings,” Brenneth said, clapping him on the shoulder. “At least they haven’t connected you with us. You’ve got a crew of nine to back you up, and they probably still think you’re working alone.”

“And a right hand man,” Kethan grinned, turning to Ianto. “Follow me into anything, won’t you?” Ianto just looked back at him, calmly. “Nice that I already did all the work to get your trust.”

“I thought you just met,” Ashild asked, curious.

“I just met Ianto,” Kethan clarified. “He knows me in the future.”

“Oh,” she said, lighting up. “That’s good! You survive this. Bit of a shock.”

“Ashild,” Varelle said firmly. Ashild looked like she was going to protest, but Varelle didn’t let her. “Believe it or not, I didn’t bring Kethan up here to gossip. Can you go prep the cargo bay?”

Ashild obeyed, sulkily, leaving Soren, Brenneth and Varelle on the bridge with Ianto and Kethan.

“We can’t trust Shurim, can we?” Kethan asked once Ashild was gone.

“What makes you say that?” Brenneth asked mildly.

Kethan rolled his eyes. “She’s a friend of Aharon’s?”

“She’s a businesswoman,” Varelle said firmly.

“Exactly. And if there isn’t a hefty price on my head out there, I’d be surprised.” Kethan paused at their silence. “There is, isn’t there?”

“Kareh found it,” Varelle admitted.

“Dead or alive?” She nodded. “Well, great. I always wanted to be wave-famous.”

“Not a laughing matter,” Brenneth scolded, shaking a finger.

“No,” agreed Varelle. “It makes you dangerous cargo.”

Kethan bit his lip. “I’m sorry to be putting you through this,” he started, but Varelle cut him off.

“*Don’t* even think it. You’re family, and what you’re doing is absolutely necessary. We will do everything we can. And,” she stressed, “you need to trust us to do that. No getting cold feet or trying to keep us safe, alright? We’re not yours to protect. We can’t do our job if you don’t let us.”

Kethan passed a hand through his hair and gave a weak smile. “I know. I just wish it hadn’t come to this. If I’d been able to get inside by using the Agency instead of going around them, this would have been a lot easier.”

“You tried,” Varelle said. “This is the next course of action. Shurim has the stock we need, and we can back you up in a firefight. Have you got the credits?”

Kethan nodded, tapping his wristband. “In the bank, ready for transfer. If she does decide to turn me over, it won’t be because we didn’t pay.”

“Good. With that thought in mind, I wanted to discuss Ianto’s role in the transfer.”

Ianto cleared his throat, and spoke when they turned to him. “I’m sorry, I’m not quite following.”

“We’re buying illegal explosives,” Kethan said. “Really illegal. The kind that will cause a temporal shockwaves, which, unless the research is off, is what the TARDIS will need to destroy it.”

“And I come into that, where?”

“We were hoping you’d do the pick-up,” Varelle said.

“What do I need to do, exactly?” Ianto asked, mentally shifting into work mode. He was used to being Jack’s right-hand man; this was comfortable, this was easy.

“Deen is a mining outpost in an asteroid field,” she explained. “They also have a population of munitions factories, for which Shurim works. It’s a reputable sort of place, and security is tight. Shurim has a system set in place, apparently. She works in their admin department, and has a few lackeys who will steal the explosives and bring them to a designated pick-up. What we need is someone who can go in and get it, who won’t be linked back to this ship.”

“Why can’t they be linked to this ship?” Ianto asked.

“According to Shurim, we only have a half-hour window between the time she gets a hold of the explosives and the company discovers it’s missing. That would give them plenty of time to stop us.”

“The rest of us,” Brenneth continued, “are known members of this crew. We may be smugglers, but the ship has to be registered in order for us to fly anywhere. If we stroll in, get captured on the security feed, and then leave with a large, unauthorized shipment, they’ll swoop in on us like bats on a bug. You aren’t connected to this ship—”

“Or on a most-wanted list,” Kethan added. “I’m guessing that’s why you want Ianto to do it, and not me as planned?”

Varelle nodded. “In fact, Ianto doesn’t exist at all, according to this time, which means they will have no idea where to look, and that should give us enough time to get away, without being suspicious about it.”

“Won’t they just check every ship that leaves?” Ianto asked. Brenneth laughed.

“Deen has about two hundred ships leaving every hour. It’s a big place.”

Ianto nodded, slowly. “Very well. Sounds like a plan.”

“We’ll brief you in detail of the transfer itself in a few hours, once we clarify everything with Shurim. Brenneth will go over the plans of the outpost with you so you know where to go,” said Varelle, beckoning him over to a console and bringing up a blueprint.

Brenneth and Ianto walked up to it, and Varelle left them to it, shooing Soren from the helm to get some work done. Kethan clapped Ianto on the shoulder and told him to find him when he was brought up to speed.

“I’ll be in the mess. Soren, you owe me a game of chess,” he said, shoving the dark-haired man over to the exit to the mess.

“No. You cheat,” Soren replied, heading out of the room.

“I lost!”

“You cheat badly,” he called back. Kethan winked at Ianto and followed Soren out.

Brenneth watched them go, amused. “Chess. Is that what the kids are calling it nowadays?” He laughed and turned to Ianto, who was still staring out the door, trying not to feel jealous of the easy camaraderie between the two men. “Shall we?” Brenneth asked, gesturing at the screen. Ianto shook himself and nodded.

“Please.” There was work to be done.

## **Chapter 10**

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Ianto spent twenty minutes with Brenneth, going over the symbols on the blueprint, sorting out features that had changed in the past three thousand years. Walls, windows and doors were pretty much the same, but the details of the hard-wired circuitry and computer systems, the lifts, security features; all that Ianto had to sort out before he could get to work memorizing escape routes. Once Ianto had committed it all to memory, he sent a copy of the blueprints to his own computer and headed for his quarters.

Opening the door, Ianto came to an abrupt halt. Soren was splayed out across the bed, his neck exposed and one hand pressing to the back of Kethan’s head, who was kneeling between Soren’s knees and sucking steadily on his—

Ianto choked. Kethan stopped at the noise and looked over, seeing Ianto and smiling.

“That was quick,” he said, bringing up a hand to pick up where his mouth had left off.

Ianto cleared his throat and tried not to look down. “I was going to finish in here.”

“Oh,” Kethan said, watching him with a vague look of concern. “Do you want us to go elsewhere?”

“No,” Ianto said, shaking his head. “I’ll just go to the mess.” And with that, he spun round,



stepping out of the way of the door as it slid shut. He took the long route back to the mess, into the cargo bay and down the stairs, rather than going back through the bridge. His mind stayed blissfully blank until he sank down onto one of the couches, vaguely noting that Ellis and Zoanne were chatting at one of the tables.

Ianto brought a hand up to his mouth and then lifted it to rub at his eyes. This should not be so shocking. He *knew* seeing others having sex wasn't taboo here, he *knew* Kethan had sexual relationships with most of the crew, he *knew* Kethan found Soren attractive. He also knew Kethan wasn't monogamous, but that didn't seem to make Ianto feel any better.

It wasn't that he had a monogamous relationship with Jack. He'd never asked for one, and as far as Ianto knew Jack slept with other people. He just never had to see it. Ianto, for the most part, kept it from bothering him by not thinking about it, and Jack was courteous enough never to mention it. All well and good, since Ianto could be – territorial – about the people he cared for.

The people he cared for – did Kethan really fit into that category? Ianto knew he was seeing everything Kethan did through his knowledge of Jack, but well over a century of living could change a person. When it came right down to it, he didn't really know Kethan. They were having sex, yes, but Ianto couldn't presume it was anything different from Kethan's usual activities. He liked Kethan, and Kethan seemed to enjoy his company, but Ianto was projecting too much of his relationship with Jack – with all its complicated history and emotional intensity – onto his primarily physical and more or less accidental one with Kethan. Clearly, some detachment was in order if he was feeling this jealous about a man he had only met a week ago.

“Hey,” said Kethan as he stepped through the hatch, disturbing Ianto's reverie. “You okay?”

Ianto blinked and sat up. “Yes, of course.”

Kethan came over and stood in front of him, “Are you sure? You looked a little startled.” His shirt was unbuttoned down the front, but he'd managed to put on trousers and boots.

“I was,” Ianto admitted. “It's fine. I just wasn't expecting to see that, that's all.”

Kethan pursed his lips. “It doesn't have to be fine, you know. You can tell me if it bothers you.”

Ianto gave him a wry smile and stood up. “Really, it's no bother. I don't expect anything from you. The sex is great and whatever else you do is none of my business.”

Kethan frowned, opening his mouth as if to say something and then closing it, looking confused.

“I don’t expect a relationship,” Ianto explained. “We’re not about that, and that’s fine. Anything I have with you in the future has nothing to do with this, and it’s unfair of me to expect anything from you now.” He paused and took a breath before giving Kethan a small smile. “I should go study the blueprints. Are you done with the room?”

At Kethan’s nod, Ianto gave him a smile and headed out of the mess, resolutely refusing to look back.

~

Ianto felt like he was at Torchwood again, except with everything reversed. He was the field agent heading out to perform some dangerous feat of endurance or wit, and Jack was staying behind at the base, accessible by comm., to guide him through the necessary steps. Only Jack wasn’t Jack, and Ianto’d had to leave his .45 behind.

*“It’s a munitions factory, they’re not about to let strangers in with weaponry,”* Kethan had said at Ianto’s protests. *“You’ll be safe, don’t worry. They’re not the shoot first, ask questions later type anyway. The worst that will happen is you’ll get arrested.”*

*“And if I get arrested?”*

*“We’ll bust you out,”* Ashild had chirped, looking delighted at the prospect.

*“We’ve got your back,”* Varelle had interrupted with a disapproving look at her daughter. *“Whatever happens, we won’t leave here without you.”*

Oddly enough, Ianto trusted them. Probably because Kethan did, and Kethan didn’t really seem the type to trust anyone who hadn’t earned it. Trust aside, Ianto was well aware there were many things that could go wrong with these sorts of excursions, and didn’t let himself feel entirely comfortable with the situation. That sort of thing led to sloppiness, and a sloppy mission was a failed mission. Even though Ianto didn’t approve of the whole ‘blow up the TARDIS’ plan in the first place, it was in everyone’s best interest if he succeeded at not getting captured.

The *Evening Star* docked at the expected time at a pre-designated docking bay in one section of the Deen outpost. Deen was enormous, at least according to Ianto’s personal scale of space stations. There were nearly three million occupants, most of them employees of the six mining and munitions manufacturing companies that held the rights to the asteroid field, as well as the necessary support personnel, which included, apparently, barmen.

Why was it always the barmen? Ianto mused as he made his way through the corridors of the

outpost to the designated pick-up: the *Orli Marilo* bar. His fish hadn't translated the name and when he'd asked Kethan what it meant, Kethan had simply laughed and told him some things couldn't be expressed in English. Ianto glanced down at the piece of paper on which Kethan had written the name of the bar in Galactic Standard (B), so that he could recognize it. If he was in this time for much longer, he'd have to start learning to read their languages; the fish translated audio signals, but didn't do anything for text unless he could plug it into the computer displaying it.

They had docked relatively near the *Orli Marilo*, so Ianto didn't have to take any intra-spaceport transit, but it was a good ten-minute stroll to the bar. Ianto took the opportunity to observe the people who passed him. At this point in history, humans had colonized a large swath of space surrounding Earth, and had formed accords with numerous sentient species along the way. The Galactic Accord (a self-centered sort of name, Kethan had pointed out; it was really a Terran document that accounted for Earth and their associated planets and colonies, covering an area of a few thousand square light years) regulated trade and traffic and immigration between the planets, and many alien species had signed it over the past centuries. The farther you got from Earth, the fewer humans you encountered, and Deen was far enough out that only about a quarter of the people passing Ianto were recognizably human.

Ianto found the bar, recognizing the strange swirl of letters that phonetically read *Orli Marilo* (he wondered if he could guess which shapes corresponded to which sounds) and ducked inside, looking around for a free seat at the bar.

This was how it was to go: Ianto was to take a seat at the bar and order something called a Vesprisian Ale, which, apparently, didn't exist. That was the barman's cue to invite him into the back room, where he was to be escorted to a location inside the actual munitions factory by an employee. Apparently, the front door was the only way in, and the only way through the front door was with a company employee. Once he was there, Shurim's people would remove the explosives from their usual storage and bring them to Ianto, where he would have, according to Varelle, ten minutes to leave by the main entrance and get back to the ship before the security noticed the breach.

*"It will take you longer than that, which means they'll be looking for you while you're still on the outpost, but since they don't know you're with us, they won't know where you went. That's why we need you to do this,"* Varelle had told him.

Ianto wasn't too worried about that part. He'd memorized the layout of the section of the base he would be in. The trip from the pick up back to the ship would probably take him about twenty minutes at a reasonable pace, but by the time they realized they'd been robbed, he could be anywhere in a significant portion of the warren of tunnels and levels and corridors that made up the outpost. What worried him most was Kethan's earlier comment of *"We can't trust Shurim, can we?"* Varelle had pointed out that she was hardly going to turn him over once in

the munitions factory, since that would implicate her as the inside woman, and since Ianto didn't have a price on his head she wouldn't get anything out of kidnapping him without proof of a crime.

Ianto ordered his drink and the bright red alien barman gave him what might have passed for a significant look in his culture, beckoning him into the back of the bar where a petite woman in professional looking clothing was waiting. She introduced herself as Ryla, giving him the once-over (Ianto was getting used to the blatant sexual sizing up all humans seemed to do upon meeting someone new) and walked with him out of the bar. He tried to introduce himself, but was cut off.

"It's not my job to know," she said, smiling and clasping her hands behind her back as they walked. Ianto nodded and followed a half-pace behind her. They wove through the crowds and up several levels – Ianto noted they were not taking the shortest route – and eventually stopped outside large glass doors that were the main entrance of the Fifth Deen Munitions Company.

"Won't they realize you got me in?" he asked Ryla as she pressed against a bio-lock to pass through a sort of security gate – not actually a physical gate, but an electrically charged gateway – and ushered him through.

She smiled at him, and it was a very pretty smile for someone who was currently organizing the illegal transfer of temporal explosives. "Oh, yes, but you're just here for a job interview. I'm going to go use the lav after showing you where you need to be, and that's your cue to leave me behind. Shurim is my boss, so she'll vouch for my ignorance."

"Convenient," Ianto said dryly, carefully tracking their movements through the office in case the blueprints were inaccurate. Apparently Torchwood wasn't the only organization with occasional personnel issues.

"Very," she said, baring her teeth in another grin.

They reached the far end of a corridor, where it split off to the left and to the right, with a door directly ahead. They turned right and didn't stop, but Ryla's eyes flicked to the door.

"That's where you need to go. Take the stairs up two levels, and turn right out the corridor. Three doors down on the left is the room Havi will meet you in. I suggest you leave as quickly as possible after that, since—"

"Since they'll notice the missing... items in short order. Got it."

Ryla stopped at another door. "This is the lav. Come in, will you? It will look less like I left you wandering around in the hall. You can leave once I'm in the toilet."

Ianto followed her in, feeling a little odd despite having already encountered unisex lavatories on the transport ship and Trell. Ryla handed him a small device shaped like a penlight.

“This is a universal key to the building. It will unlock the doors you come across. Drop it as soon as you’re out, or they might be able to track you with it,” she said, and then patted him on the shoulder before entering one of the stalls.

Ianto slipped the key up his shirtsleeve and left the lav, heading straight for the door Ryla had nodded at. The key worked perfectly, and he stepped into the stairwell as quickly as possible.

Two flights up, out the door, to the right and three doors down on the left, Ianto chanted to himself as he followed Ryla’s instructions, all the while keeping track of the various exit routes available to him, should they become necessary. He passed one person on the short route, but they paid him no attention, and Ianto unlocked the third door on the left without being held up.

A man, presumably Havi, though he didn’t introduce himself, was waiting on the other side.

“Here,” he said, thrusting a black, shiny briefcase at Ianto. “Shurim said your people made the bank transfer, so you’re free to go.”

A good thing, Ianto thought, observing the blaster at the man’s hip. Ianto nodded and grabbed the briefcase. It was heavy, as he expected it would be, if the twenty kilograms of explosives were indeed in it. Ianto had suggested he check the merchandise before leaving, but Varelle had told him there wasn’t any point. It’s not as if he could force them to get the real stuff if Shurim had decided to cheat them.

Ianto felt extremely conspicuous carrying the briefcase as he retraced his steps, but nobody paid him any attention. Ianto made it to the exit without trouble, remembering to drop the key into what might have been a bin, and began the too-long walk back to the *Evening Star*. Flipping open the wristband Kethan had provided to him – *not very fancy*, he’d said, *just an old one Ellis had lying around, but it’ll do the job* – he quickly sent the encoded *all clear* to the crew.

Ianto wasn’t surprised when he discovered he’d spoken too soon. Something about this mission had been far too easy and Torchwood had taught him that was usually a sign of impending doom. He was no more than five minutes from the ship when a man sidled up beside him and slipped an arm through his.

“This will be easier if you don’t make a fuss,” the man said casually, but Ianto could feel the butt of a gun pressed into his side. *Shit*.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked, not changing his trajectory towards the docks. If he could get close to the *Evening Star*, his chances of survival would improve dramatically.

“To my ship,” the man said jerking his head forward. “If you would be so kind.”

Ianto remembered, suddenly, Lisa, and a conversation they’d had about self-defense. She had always been very cautious of wandering around London at night, and had mentioned once that if anyone ever threatened her with a weapon to try and make her get in a car, she would put up a fight. *Better to die in public than be secreted away where no one will be able to find me*, she’d said, looking remarkably cheerful as she waved a forkful of lettuce. Ianto considered this for a moment – should he struggle? Somehow he doubted the man wouldn’t shoot at the first sign of trouble. More information was needed.

“Can I ask what you’re interested in? Perhaps we can settle this equitably,” Ianto inquired in his mildest voice.

The man snorted. “I didn’t know time agents were so polite. Shurim said you’d likely be a fighter, not a suit.”

“I’m sorry, a what?”

“Not interested in playing games, Agent.” Ah. This man thought he was Kethan.

“I think you’ve made a mistake.”

“Have I?” the man said, raising his eyebrows as he propelled Ianto forward with a tight grip on his arm. “Shame. Don’t care much, though, I’ll let Shurim sort it out.”

They were passing the *Evening Star* now. Ianto’s eyes flicked to the airlock as they passed, hoping someone was watching. Now would be the time to make a scene. Ianto breathed out, clearing his mind and quelling his nerves, and then made his move.

Ianto stopped walking abruptly. His companion ended up half a step in front of him, and Ianto used the momentum of his sudden stop to propel the heavy briefcase around in front of him. It connected heavily with the man’s gut and he doubled over.

At the same time, Ianto twisted his arm where it was in the man’s grasp, trying to press the gun down and away from his vital organs. Some part of his mind registered that it hadn’t been fast enough, and that the pain in his leg probably meant something, but he was too hyped on adrenaline to notice. He threw himself at the man and tackled him to the ground. They grappled for the gun. Their heads knocked together and an elbow connected with Ianto’s ribs. Ianto was trained, but so was this man, and he was stronger than Ianto.

“Ianto, out of the way!”

Ianto registered the voice and rolled off his attacker as quickly as possible, hoping the gun didn't track him. The sharp whine of laser fire was quick to follow, and before he could register anything else, Kethan was at his side, pulling him upright.

“Move, move, move,” he panted at Ianto, half dragging him back towards the ship. At the airlock, Ashild wrapped an arm around Ianto's waist and together, she and Kethan hauled Ianto into the ship. Brenneth was waiting on the other side, and Ianto could hear him shutting the hatch and sealing the doors, but the pain was starting to blur his vision.

“Wait, wait,” Ianto said as Ashild and Kethan kept moving. “I can't, I need to sit down.”

“No,” said Kethan sharply. “You need to go to the infirmary. Almost there, hold on.”

Ashild dropped her grip on him so Kethan could maneuver Ianto through the door to the infirmary, and Zoanne's cool hands took his on the other side. They guided him up onto the examination table in the middle of the room, but Ianto couldn't feel the bed beneath his body, just the sharp, searing pain, and he was beginning to black out.

“Don't go anywhere, Jones,” Kethan snapped at him, shaking his shoulder.

“Stop molesting my patient,” Zoanne said, “He needs...”

Ianto didn't hear what he needed, since the blissful dark swallowed him up.

~

Ianto woke easily, as if he'd just had a good night's sleep rather than passed out due to serious injury. The hum of the ship's engines reverberated through him, telling him that the *Evening Star* had left the Deen outpost. Voices were murmuring in the corner, but became louder as he opened his eyes.

“How's the leg feel?” Zoanne asked him, coming over to stand beside the bed.

Ianto blinked and sat up, looking down at the sheet covering his legs. He was still wearing his shirt, but unless he was very much mistaken, he wasn't wearing any trousers.

“The leg?” Zoanne repeated, pulling back the sheet and – yep, no trousers, no underpants either – running her hand along his right thigh, pressing firmly just below his hip.

“Fine,” Ianto said, fighting back a blush, and then actually considered the question. He wasn’t sure what had happened, but his best guess involved a bullet and his leg. By that assumption, his leg felt very good indeed. “What did you do?”

“Zoanne has all the latest painkillers,” said Kethan. “Far superior to your twenty-first century bottles of whiskey.”

“We’re not that primitive,” Ianto murmured, looking down at the wound on his leg. It wasn’t covered in any bandages, but Ianto recognized the faint glimmer of binding gel covering the circular puncture. The flesh around it was mottled yellow and green. “What happened?”

“He shot you in the leg,” Kethan said.

“Ah. I wasn’t sure,” he said, flexing the injured leg experimentally. “Got off pretty easy, then.”

“You almost bled out on the table,” Zoanne said as she pushed him back down onto the examination table. “It nicked an artery. Nothing easy about that. If this had been your time of medicine, you wouldn’t have made it. Lie back, I want to check the repair job.”

Ianto lay down and watched as she ran some sort of a scanner over his leg and then turned to the small screen at her side. Kethan came up to his head and pulled up a stool. He had a sort of pained look on his face.

“I’m sorry,” Kethan said, putting a hand on Ianto’s shoulder. Ianto craned his neck to look at him.

“What for?”

“I never should have let them send you. It was a stupid idea.”

“You couldn’t go,” Ianto pointed out. “And neither could anyone else.”

“I could have tried. If that man was the only thing up against me, I would have been fine.”

Zoanne moved away and Ianto struggled to sit up. “I don’t need you to protect me. My job back home isn’t exactly safe. Plenty of bullets and aliens involved.”

“You’re my responsibility,” Kethan insisted.

Ianto laughed. “How do you figure that? Because I’m from your future? Don’t worry about that. I’m not confusing you with Jack, really. I don’t expect anything.”



Kethan watched him for a long moment, and then nodded. “Sure. Zoanne, do you need any more help?”

“No,” she replied, waving him off. “I’ll get Ianto situated.”

Kethan hopped off the chair and left the room. Ianto watched him go, feeling like he’d missed something important.

“What was—”

“Hold still,” Zoanne interrupted him, and then stabbed a needle into his thigh.

“Ouch?” Ianto said, a little shocked. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Are all twenty-first century men emotionally obtuse?” she asked as she squeezed the syringe, emptying a clear liquid into Ianto’s body.

Ianto blinked. He’d definitely missed something. “It has been said, yes.”

“Then perhaps I won’t hold it against you,” she said, tossing the used syringe into a box and wiping up the spot of blood that leaked out of the puncture.

“Hold what against me?” Ianto asked.

“That’s twice today I’ve seen you blow off Kethan. Do you really have no idea?”

“I suppose saying ‘no idea about what?’ would only annoy you further?”

Zoanne harrumphed at him and crossed her arms. For a small woman, she could be remarkably intimidating. Ianto wished once more he were wearing trousers, and groped for the sheet, swinging his legs off the table so he could sit up properly as he wrapped himself in it.

“In the mess, this afternoon? You don’t expect a relationship? That’s all fine and dandy? Let’s just not talk about anything, I’m just going to blow you off and pretend you don’t mean anything to me?” she listed sarcastically. “Ring any bells?”

Ianto gaped. “I only met him a week ago. That’s hardly enough time to formulate any sort of a relationship.”

Zoanne rolled her eyes. “He does talk to us, you know. He told us you’re in a relationship with a future version of himself. Some relationship that must be, if you treat him like that.”

Ah – so that’s what she thought. “Doctor,” he said. “I’m sorry, but you don’t know anything about my relationship with Jack – that’s what Kethan goes by, when I know him – and Kethan doesn’t either. He must have given you the wrong impression.”

“What impression would that be?” she asked, hands on hips.

Ianto shrugged. “He’s not – we’re not in any sort of a committed relationship in the twenty-first century.”

“What kind of relationship are you in, then?”

Ianto thought for a moment. He didn’t really want to discuss his love-life with a near-stranger, but Zoanne didn’t seem the type to take no for an answer. Easy answers, then. “A sexual one, for the most part. We’re friends, but I’m not the love of his life, or anything.”

She pursed her lips and watched him. “You’re not in love with him? Or he’s not in love with you?”

No, he really didn’t want to be having this conversation. Ianto tried to wave it off. “Oh, he loves me in a way, sure. But he loves all his team. But it’s not romantic love, just loyalty and friendship. It’s enough. I know there are different kinds of love.”

“Different kinds of love?” she said, looking startled. “That’s absurd. Love is all the same.”

“I mean like how you love your daughter is different from how you love your partner,” Ianto explained.

“No it’s not,” she said.

“Pardon?” It was Ianto’s turn to look startled.

“Is that what they think in the twenty-first century?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. “How bizarre. Love is all the same, Ianto. What I feel for Kethan, for Opal, for Ashild. The feeling of love itself is just the same for all of them.”

“But,” Ianto stuttered. “That makes no sense. Your relationships with them all are so different.”

“But the love is the same,” she insisted, and then frowned, looking thoughtful. “How’s your biology?”

“I took it in school,” Ianto shrugged.

“Then imagine this. It’s like a cell in the human body,” she said, gesturing up and down his body. “Every cell in your body has the same genetic material. But they differentiate, they specialize, they perform different duties based on what type of tissue they belong to. A neuron doesn’t act at all the same as a muscle cell or a skin cell. Do you follow?”

Ianto nodded, and she continued.

“You tell them apart, not by their genetic material, but by what kinds of proteins they produce, or how they are shaped, or what kind of organelles they have. I don’t tell my relationships apart by how I love them; that would be crazy. It’s all the other feelings that determine what kind of relationship we have; infatuation, physical attraction, parental protection, respect, genetic bonds. But not love. How can you measure that? How can you compare the love you have for one person with the love you have for another person?”

It made some sense, but Ianto shook his head. “But my relationship with Jack, its not a great romance. We sleep together, spend time together, but I don’t expect him to stick around if he gets a better offer. It’s just convenient. Whether or not he loves me is irrelevant.”

Zoanne stepped up to him and put her hands on his legs, leaning forward into his space. “Ianto, if there is one thing I know about Kethan, it is that his loyalty knows no bounds. If he says he’s there for you, he won’t waver in it.”

Ianto looked down at his hands clasped in his lap. “Loyalty is one thing,” he said, shrugging. There was no doubt Jack was loyal to his people. To Torchwood, to the team. “And I do believe he loves me, but I’m just one of many.”

“Why wouldn’t he love many?” Zoanne demanded. “I don’t know what you do in the twenty-first century, but here, love is something to be given away as much as possible, and Kethan has love in droves.”

Ianto suddenly pictured this Jack, born in a time when affection and love was given away as much as possible, trapped in a life of loss. *I know you get lonely*, he had said. Maybe Zoanne was right, and Kethan could love him, given time, but Jack? Jack’s life was ruled by everybody’s time except his own and Ianto wasn’t surprised he found it easier to be enigmatic and solitary rather than commit to someone who’s life would be over before he blinked. None of which he could explain to Zoanne, who was watching him with a speculative eye.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he conceded instead. “But the fact remains, whatever I have with Jack has nothing to do with Kethan.”

“You can’t know him that far in the future,” Zoanne insisted. “Of course he feels responsible for you; he probably trusts his future self to choose a good lover. Stop telling him not to care

about you, to feel responsible for you. You're hurting him, every time."

"It's confusing," Ianto said sharply, wishing he could locate his trousers and leave the claustrophobic infirmary. "He might become Jack, but he isn't him now. The Jack I know doesn't have anyone else; Kethan is surrounded by other people who love him, I'm not exactly going to be top of the list."

Zoanne let out a snort of annoyance and stomped over to a drawer, pulling out a pair of drawstring trousers and throwing them at Ianto. "Put those on, and get out of here. You're impossible. If you can't see that Kethan cares about you, you don't deserve him."

Ianto ignored her and pulled on the trousers in relief, escaping the infirmary and the supremely frustrated doctor. She couldn't possibly understand what it was like to have Jack as a lover, and he couldn't possibly explain it, not without mentioning the little detail that was Jack's immortality.

Ianto made it halfway up the stairs to his quarters and then had to sit down, huffing in exertion. He watched as Zoanne came out of the infirmary and stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"Blood loss," she said. "You shouldn't over-exert yourself."

"Thanks for letting me know," Ianto gasped, pressing a hand to his spinning head.

"Get some sleep when you can get to your quarters. Come to me if the pain starts up. And for God's sake, talk to Kethan if you won't talk to me."

She left, this time for the mess, and Ianto shut his eyes, letting his head drop to his knees. It was nice to know Kethan had people watching out for him, but Ianto seriously wished they would at least wait until after he'd recovered from being shot to get so protective.

## **Chapter 11**

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After he had successfully made it to his quarters, Ianto crashed, hard. When he woke up, nearly eight hours had passed and he was sprawled across the whole bed, suggesting Kethan had never slept in it. Ianto carefully ignored the associated implications and dressed for the day. He wandered down to the mess where some of the crew were gathered drinking coffee and eating breakfast. Kethan wasn't there, and, much to Ianto's relief, neither was Zoanne.

"The man of the hour," bellowed Brenneth, waving Ianto over to a chair next to him. "What would you like as your reward?"

“A fresh cup of coffee?” Ianto asked as he sat down, feeling decidedly wrung out despite the solid night of sleep.

“Consider it done,” Brenneth said, standing up and heading to the kitchen area. “Sugar? Milk? Cream? Scotch?”

“Just a dash of milk, please,” Ianto said as Kareh passed him a plate.

Breakfast was a pick-and-choose sort of meal. Jotir piled much of the contents of the cupboards and fridge onto the table, and people grabbed what they wanted. The food was surprisingly good, mostly fresh fruits, all unrecognizable except for some apples and what looked like sliced mango, as well as a couple loaves of bread and some cheeses and spreads. Rations, Kethan had explained, were only for deep space travel, and they could preserve fresh food pretty well these days.

“I’m sorry, I could have helped in the kitchen this morning,” Ianto apologized as he selected a slice of bread and sniffed at a cheese. A little pungent, but his stomach didn’t object, so he cut a few slices. “I overslept.”

“Nonsense,” said Brenneth, putting a steaming mug down in front of him. “One of the ship rules is that if you have a near-death experience, you get at least the following morning off.”

“Brenneth just says that because he uses it all the time,” Ellis laughed, popping a small red fruit in his mouth. “He’s had more near-death experiences than the rest of the crew combined.”

“Really?” Ianto said, surprised. Brenneth looked like the kind of man who could take care of himself, built like a tank and probably as strong as an ox.

Brenneth shook his head. “I’m clumsy, what can I say? If I were your height, Ellis, I wouldn’t have to worry about getting in the way as much. Nobody can aim at you properly.” He ducked as Ellis spit out a pit in his direction.

Ianto drank his coffee and ate his breakfast, enjoying their banter. He was pleased that when Zoanne and Varelle climbed down from the bridge, Zoanne didn’t say anything to disturb his peace. Soren, Ashild, and Aharon were nowhere to be found, but apparently this was normal.

“Aharon and Soren are early-birds,” Kareh explained when he asked. “Breakfast is a bit of a casual thing, we only really sit down together on purpose for lunch, when Jotir goes all out. Ashild hates breakfast and is always late.”

“Where is Kethan?” Brenneth asked, overhearing. “He’s usually here.”

“On the bridge,” answered Varelle from the other end of the table. “He and Soren are sorting out landing sites on Celona.”

“Sorted,” called Kethan, and Ianto looked up to see him halfway down the ladder from the Bridge, twisting around and smiling at them before jumping the last few rungs. “We’re going to land in the Edgewise landing grounds. Harder to reserve a parking space but it’s closer to the target. I think that’ll be an advantage over the quicker getaway of a spacedock.”

Varelle nodded as Kethan came round to sit next to Ianto. “Good. Ellis, make sure we’re prepared to enter atmo. Brenneth, when you see Aharon, can you make sure he’s worked out Edgewise’s security features? If we need to leave fast, I don’t want them pinning us down with anti-spacecraft fire. If we have to take any artillery emplacements out, I want to know ahead of time.”

“Will do,” Brenneth said, brushing some crumbs off his front. “Once I’m done with my coffee.”

“Kareh, any luck with the static on the waves?” Varelle continued. She was good at this, Ianto could tell. She commanded their attention without effort, even over a breakfast table. He could see some of the way Jack led in her, though without any of his blatant innuendo and penchant for dramatics.

Kareh shook his head. “It’s deep, I could crack it eventually, but not before we land. I’m afraid we’ll have to do this blind.”

“Keep trying,” she ordered. “We’ll be there in three days, so you might get lucky. Don’t procrastinate people. I’d like all this done as soon as possible. We’ll brief closer to landing, so you have a couple of days to relax.”

There were nods and sounds of agreement all around the table, and those who had finished left, Kareh off to the mainframe, Brenneth to the bridge and Ellis, presumably, back to the engine room.

“Can I do anything?” Ianto asked, ignoring Kethan as he leaned into Ianto’s space, reaching across him to grab an apple.

“You’ve done enough,” Zoanne muttered. Varelle gave her an inscrutable look and Zoanne harrumphed, folding back into her chair with her coffee. “What? He has. Got shot and everything.” Varelle ignored her and turned back to Ianto.

“Has anyone shown you how to fire a blaster?” she asked. Ianto shook his head. “Find Ashild,

then.”

“I can do it,” Kethan protested, taking a bite out of his apple and chewing in that exaggerated, slightly disgusting way Jack was prone to. He slung an arm around the back of Ianto’s chair.

“I need you on the bridge,” she said. “I’m not happy with the plans, as they are, I’d like to go over them again.”

Kethan frowned around his mouthful. “You’re a perfectionist.”

“That’s why I’m still alive,” she responded. “Ianto, find Ashild, please. She’ll know what to show you.”

“No problem,” Ianto said, glad to finish his coffee and get out of the room. Between his uncertainty of what to say to Kethan, and Zoanne’s not-so-subtle glares, blaster practice was likely to be more relaxing.

~

Ashild wasn’t in her quarters, or on the bridge. Ianto finally found her in the cargo bay, tucked in the back corner and talking to Aharon in low, angry tones. Ianto stopped, waiting for the right moment to interrupt.

“...really great contact. I had to stop Kethan from tearing you apart,” she was whispering, leaning into Aharon’s space, hand on his arm. He brushed it off.

“Like he could,” he scoffed. “We still got the explosives, didn’t we? It all worked out in the end.”

“No thanks to your disreputable friends,” she hissed. “You could have at least mentioned it was a possibility.”

“The Captain’s not an idiot, ‘Shild,” he growled, crowding her against a crate. “And though he may act like one, neither is Kethan. They knew the risks, and they were perfectly willing to let Kethan’s new toy handle it. ”

Ashild flushed as he encroached on her space. “Kethan wouldn’t put him in danger like that.”

“Oh, aren’t you romantic,” Aharon mocked, drawing out the last word. “How sweet.”

Ianto wondered if he should step in; Aharon was rather intimidating, and Ashild didn’t look too comfortable at being cornered and...*oh*. Perhaps she wasn’t so uncomfortable after all. She

rather seemed to be enjoying Aharon's tongue down her throat. Ianto started to back away. He wasn't above eavesdropping on conversations, but current thoughts on indecent exposure aside, voyeurism wasn't in his repertoire.

He'd just about made a clean getaway when he tripped over a coil of wire and sent it scratching painfully across the metal of the deck. Aharon and Ashild sprang apart, and Ianto could see that both their hands went to their weapons as they turned to him. Ianto pulled all his butler reserve together and put on his best 'pardon me for interrupting' face.

"My apologies," he said, pulling his foot out of the coil of wire. "The captain sent me to find Ashild."

"Oh," said Ashild as she straightened out her shirt, looking oddly embarrassed. "Am I needed?"

"Just for me," Ianto said with an apologetic look. "I need to brush up on my fifty-first century firearms." Ashild nodded and started towards him, but Aharon caught her by the wrist and leaned down, whispering something in her ear. She gave him a sharp look and shook her head.

"Your choice," he shrugged, and then brushed past Ianto.

"Sorry about that," Ashild said, stepping out of the corner and looping an arm through Ianto's. "He's a bit of an tosser."

"No problem," replied Ianto as she steered him towards an open section of the cargo bay. "I'm sorry for interrupting."

"Not your fault, we weren't exactly behind locked doors," she said with a nervous laugh.

"Ianto, can I ask you not to say anything about that? To my mothers, and especially not to Kethan?" She looked very uncomfortable, worrying her lip in her mouth and giving Ianto a hooded sort of look.

"Of course," Ianto said with a sideways glance. "Though I'm a little surprised. I didn't think people kept sex much of a secret anymore."

Ashild made a face. "It's not about sex! If I was just sleeping with him, it wouldn't be a problem," she said, shrugging. "Kethan doesn't like Aharon, much. He'd think he was leading me astray."

"I won't say anything," Ianto assured her, and she tossed him a wide grin.

"Brilliant. Kethan likes to think he knows people, but if he's not going to stick around, I'm not about to let him nose into my life. Now, do you have any weapons of your own? Mine's a little



fancy, or we'd start with that."

"Kethan picked out a couple for me," Ianto said, nodding towards the upper levels and the personal quarters. "I can get them, if you like."

"Please."

Ianto fetched the two weapons, besides his .45, that Kethan had chosen for him. One was a laser blaster, and the other was a sonic blaster, but beyond that he didn't know anything about them, including how to use them. The laser blaster was quite slim, but long, and looked fairly straightforward. Ashild explained that the key to using laser blasters was to realize their range: like a bullet, they lost penetrating power over distances. Unlike a bullet, you could set the range on the laser by focusing the beam, but the distance over which you could focus depended on the length of the laser. Ianto's would work best between five and twenty meters; and it would focus automatically, the distance popping up on a small display at the butt of the blaster.

"Careful where you fire those. It won't go through the walls of a ship, but it will ignite anything flammable," Ashild cautioned, showing him how to manually change the focus, in case the auto focus failed.

"How good are you at judging distances? You can use this knob to scroll through the distances, but, here," she said, stepping up behind him and wrapping her fingers around his where they were holding the blaster. "That wall's two and a half meters away, so you can see it pops up, but if it weren't working, it wouldn't change if you did this," she swung their arm around so that they were facing the far wall. "Now it says twenty point six, so you know it's focused itself."

The sonic blaster, on the other hand, was short and fat, and had a screen and several sets of controls. They took a seat on one of the crates and Ashild went through all the functions with Ianto. It was tricky, because nothing was in English, so he had to memorize all the symbols to sort out the different functions.

"They couldn't just have a 'kill' and 'don't kill' button?" Ianto grumbled after mixing up two features for the third time. The small box that he was supposed to have vaporized had instead melted into a goopy puddle.

Ashild laughed and leaned over his arm, looking at the screen. "I see why you're mixing them up, they're spelled almost the same. Do you want me to ask Kareh if he can translate it? He can probably hack it."

"Might be best," Ianto admitted, sliding off the crate. Ashild had even less concept of personal space than Kethan, and her constant touches and nearness were affecting him. Jack or no Jack,

his body certainly still appreciated women, and she seemed to have the fifty-first century pheromone thing going for her as well.

She shot him a look. “You sure you don’t want to have sex?”

Ianto gaped at her for a moment. He was almost certain he hadn’t articulated that out loud. “I... sorry?”

“Pheromones,” she explained with a grin, standing up. “I think my sense of smell is better than yours.”

“Ah,” Ianto replied faintly. Of course, he knew Jack had a far superior sense of smell than anyone else Ianto had met, and Jack never had any difficulty detecting when Ianto was aroused. It somehow hadn’t occurred to him that the rest of the humans in this time would have equally sensitive noses. “I’m sorry.”

“No problem, but seriously, I’d love to have a go at you,” she said with a smile, stepping into his space again. “You’re rather my type. If gorgeous is a type, that is.”

“That’s, erm, very flattering,” Ianto managed, trying not to look down her shirt and failing. “But I couldn’t, really.”

“Not interested in me?”

In Ianto’s time, any woman who said that would have said it with a pout and expected a certain response, but Ashild’s face was neutral and her tone was serious.

“You’re very attractive,” Ianto admitted, leaning back against the crate. “But I couldn’t.”

“Do you only sleep with men, then?” she asked, looking curious.

“No,” Ianto laughed. “But I only sleep with one person at a time.”

“Ohhhh,” she said, her voice trailing off. She tilted her head to the side, looking pensive. “And that’s Kethan.”

“Sort of,” Ianto admitted. “In his future, not Kethan now.”

“Right,” Ashild said as she stepped back, crossing her arms under her breasts. Not that Ianto was looking.

“So, blaster,” he said hastily, holding it out in front of him like a shield. “Do you think Kareh

can hack it?”

“Yeah, probably. Take it down to him, and we’ll go over it later.”

“Sounds good,” Ianto replied, and picked up the laser blaster. “I hope I haven’t confused you too much.”

“Nah,” she said with a hand wave. “Besides, what’s the fun in meeting a man from another millennium if he *isn’t* a little mysterious and odd?”

“I’m glad I haven’t disappointed, then,” Ianto said, smiling. It was a little strange thinking about himself as the person out of time, rather than viewing himself as normal and everything around him as wrong. He wondered if that was how Jack felt, as if you’re the only sane person in a world gone mad with a different culture, different standards, different ways of thinking and acting. Then again, Jack was a time traveler, so he was probably used to it.

~

Kareh did manage to hack the blaster, and Ashild went over it again with Ianto to much greater success. When lunch was over, Ianto retreated to his quarters to read up on Celona. He’d managed to avoid Kethan for most of the day, probably with Kethan’s help, since he seemed to have been busy with one or another member of the crew all day. Ianto was fine with that; he had no idea what to say to Kethan. He wasn’t even sure anything needed to be said, but he couldn’t quite shake the feeling that some sort of a conversation was necessary. Zoanne apparently thought so.

Mid afternoon, there was a knock on his door and Ashild stuck her head in.

“So, if I don’t get to sleep with you,” she said with a leer, “can I get my hands all over you another way?”

“What other way would that be?” Ianto asked, swinging his legs off the bed and shutting off his computer.

“Come see,” she said, holding out a hand. Ianto gave her a skeptical look, but he stood up and took her hand. Ashild dragged him down to the mess, and Ianto stopped in surprise at the hatch.

“Dancing?” he said in disbelief.

“Dancing,” Ashild agreed. “Kethan likes to teach us all kinds of dances from history. Can you waltz?”

All the furniture had been shoved along the walls, and there was music playing from somewhere, a classic sounding waltz that Ianto thought he recognized. Opal was steering Ellis around – clearly leading – in steady steps, Kareh was towering over Zoanne as they followed them across the floor, and Kethan was standing on the side, apparently trying to get Brenneth to not step on his toes. Soren was sitting on the couch beside them, mocking Brenneth when he almost fell over.

“Weird,” Ianto said under his breath.

“Why?” Ashild asked, and Ianto shrugged.

“I guess I didn’t think there’d be dancing on a smuggler’s ship.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “It’s not all fighting, all the time. Sometimes it takes us weeks to get to a new planet. What do you think we do in between, polish our blasters? Please. You planet-dwellers have the most romanticized ideas about spaceflight.”

Ianto nodded absently, watching as Kethan succeeded in getting Brenneth to take more than two steps without heading off in the wrong direction.

“Oi,” Ashild called, “enough of this stodgy stuff. I want to hear some jazz.”

Kethan rolled his eyes. “Philistine. You always want to dance to jazz.”

“What can I say,” she said as she walked over to a console in the wall and tapped the screen. “I like it fast.”

Kethan let go of Brenneth and came over to Ashild, spinning her in his arms and dipping her back. “You’re young yet. Someday, you’ll be able to appreciate the beauty of taking things slow, reveling in the touch and sound of it all, rather than madly dashing about.”

She giggled and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Wise words, oh ancient one.”

The music that came over the radio was even more familiar. *Let’s fall in love, why shouldn’t we fall in love...*

“Ella Fitzgerald?” Ianto asked in disbelief. His mother had listened to her records obsessively, and her voice dragged him back to the twenty-first – no, twentieth – century.

“Yup,” said Kethan as he and Ashild danced around the room. Everyone else had taken a bit of a step back; the two of them seemed to know what they were doing, and Ashild spun and swayed as Kethan moved her around to the music. It was bizarre; Ianto knew Jack loved to

dance, he'd often lamented the lack of good dancing in Ianto's generation, but Ianto somehow had always assumed it was something Jack had picked up in his years in the twentieth century. Instead, it seemed Jack had always loved it. He certainly seemed happy now – but then, Jack usually was when he had a beautiful woman in his arms.

“Coffee?”

Ianto started. Jotir was beside him, steaming mug in hand.

“Thank you,” Ianto said, taking the mug in his own hands. Jotir nodded and walked over to the others, who'd gathered on the couches against the wall, handing out a tray full of coffees in a way that was very familiar to Ianto. He took a sip; it was a little sweet for his tastes. He preferred a dash of milk and nothing else; this tasted more like Jack's one cream one sugar.

Suddenly, watching Kethan laugh intimately with Ashild, tasting Jack's coffee, hearing Jack's favourite kind of music, Ianto missed him. So far, the business and newness of it all had kept him distracted; plotting to get Kethan to keep him around, stealing temporal explosives, exploring new planets, but now, with no certain goal, Ianto wondered when, if ever, he'd get back home. Kethan had the technology, but the risk of him being caught was too high.

*If this plan, if it works and I destroy the TARDIS, first thing I'll do is send you home, okay? Just hope I don't get captured or killed. Well, if I get killed, make sure to get my vortex manipulator. I'll show you how to use it.*

As the familiar music washed around Ianto, home seemed very far away. Ianto leaned against the frame of the hatch, trying to calm his stomach. The sensation of being so incredibly far away from home was nauseating; there was nothing here that was familiar, nothing but Jack, and even he was so different. He shut his eyes, breathing deeply and trying to centre himself, but the smell of coffee shoved him into his pas. Ianto associated coffee with so many people over his life: his mother, who made it for his father every morning, Lisa, who hated it and tried to convert him to tea, Jack, who would do so many things for one more cup. Ianto felt small and lost in the dark of space, on a ship filled with strangers, strangers who thought and felt and acted so differently from him, light years and millennia from home. Maybe if he clicked his heels three times...

Ianto smiled at that thought, and that was enough to bring him out of the falling sensation of loneliness. He opened his eyes and shook his head. No reason to be maudlin. He'd get home, Ianto was sure of it. He couldn't give you a rational explanation, but somehow, he knew he'd get there. Foolish hope, perhaps, but it wasn't as if Ianto had anything else to hold on to. He took a breath and then, bracingly, a sip of coffee. The present stayed with him, and Ianto turned his attention back to Kethan and Ashild.

The song ended and the crew clapped, laughing. Ianto sat in the loveseat that was crammed between the door and the dining table, watching as Ashild and Kethan argued over which song to put on next. Kethan certainly seemed to be losing, even after he tried to pull the parent card. Eventually, he threw up his hands in concession.

“Fine! Don’t listen to my superior knowledge. Don’t listen to the person who’s actually heard Louis Armstrong live. And that song is not fast, just because it’s jazzy. Jazz does not mean fast. Have I taught you nothing?”

“Whatever!” she called back at him as Kethan took the mug Jotir handed him and came over to where Ianto was sitting.

“May I?” he asked, gesturing. Ianto shifted over in response, and Kethan settled himself beside him.

“Are you okay?” Kethan asked. At Ianto’s curious look he continued. “You looked a little distressed there, for a moment.”

“Just... remembering, that’s all,” Ianto said into his mug.

“Home?”

“And Jack,” he muttered, not sure why he was admitting it.

“Ah. I, um...” he trailed off. “Did you want to dance?”

Ianto laughed. “No, that’s okay.”

“Do you dance with me?”

“Sometimes. When he insists,” Ianto grinned. “By which I mean, when he grabs me and won’t take no for an answer.”

“Good of you to indulge me, then,” Kethan said. They fell into silence, watching Zoanne and Ellis argue over who was leading. Ianto would have put money on Zoanne, but Ellis seemed to be holding his own.

“Are we okay?” Kethan blurted out, and then reached up to rub at his chin. “Well, clearly we’re not, but I’m not really sure why.”

Ianto let out a long breath. “No, we’re fine. I’m just adjusting. It doesn’t matter, I’ll get over it.”

“Of course it matters,” Kethan asserted, frowning. “Is it because of Soren? You didn’t seem too happy about that.”

“I was surprised, that’s all.”

“Liar,” Kethan shot back. Ianto raised his eyebrows at the challenge.

“Look, I just let my feelings get confused. You and I—”

“Don’t have anything, right. It’s just you and *Jack*,” Kethan said in disgust. “Why can’t we have something?”

He sounded almost petulant, Ianto mused. Exactly like Jack did when he was denied a new toy.

“You and I, Kethan...I don’t know. There’s a cultural gap between us,” he said, taking a drink of his coffee and leaning forward on his knees, fiddling with the mug. “Zoanne explained, well, she tried to explain it to me. That it’s okay to love anyone, now.”

“And it isn’t for you?”

“In the twenty-first century,” Ianto started, trying to figure out how to explain it, “if you’re with someone, falling in love with someone else is generally seen as a bad thing. A betrayal. So is sleeping with someone else.”

“My history’s better than Zoanne’s,” Kethan pointed out, matching Ianto’s pose on the couch. “I understand the anthropological significance of monogamy and the idea of soul mates and the concept of romantic love and all that, but tell me, did people actually never fall in love with someone else?”

Ianto let out a snort. ““It happens. It happens a lot, actually. A lot of heartbreak happens because people aren’t faithful.”

“*Faithful*,” Kethan said, as if he were trying out the how the word sounded. “God, it’s so strange. The idea that it’s ever bad to love somebody.”

“In a romantic sense,” Ianto clarified. “It’s generally considered at least inconvenient to be in love with more than one person. Bad if you have some sort of an agreement with one of them, if you’re in a relationship with someone. People can be very territorial. Jealousy is a big problem.”

“Academically, I get that. But in practice? The idea is absurd. I think what is really strange to

me is how conflated sex and love and exclusivity is. The fact that they all go together most of the time is very...”

“Primitive?” Ianto suggested with a small smile. *You people and your labels.*

“I was thinking ‘small minded’,” Kethan admitted. “But primitive will do. You’d think as soon as we evolved beyond the whole survival of the fittest thing, we would have gotten over it, but no, it took a few millennia.”

“Survival of the fittest?” Ianto asked, relaxing a little back into the couch.

“Sure. That’s the origin of the concept of jealousy,” Kethan said, matter-of-factly. “Especially with men, since unless their woman only ever had sex with them, they could never be assured their kids were really theirs. It’s genetically inefficient to provide for children that aren’t biologically yours.”

“I suppose,” Ianto said, considering. “In my time, I think, people generally get jealous because they’re afraid another person will replace them. That’s why we’re monogamous, really. People can’t handle jealousy.”

“Isn’t that circular logic?”

“How so?”

“You’re saying you’re monogamous because you can’t handle jealousy, but aren’t you jealous because you can’t handle monogamy?”

Ianto blinked, and Kethan let out a small laugh.

“You get jealous because somebody’s threatening your monogamous relationship, yeah?”

“Yes.”

“But someone threatens your relationship if they might take that person away from you if your partner falls in love with them, right?” Kethan asked, and continued at Ianto’s nod. “Well, if you weren’t monogamous in the first place, then just because your partner falls in love with someone else doesn’t mean they can’t be still in love with you. There’s no reason why they’d leave you, just because of that.”

“Here,” he continued, waving a hand to encompass the room, “jealousy has no meaning. You’re not expected to have more than one partner at a time, so being interested in someone else isn’t a threat.”



“But what if...” Ianto trailed off. Something didn’t quite work for him with that explanation. “Say, with the Captain and Zoanne. They’ve been together for at least twenty-five years, right?”

“Yes,” Kethan confirmed.

“What if one of them falls in love with someone else, and decides to leave? Say, if Zoanne fell in love with someone on a planet, and decided to stay behind. No matter how much you say someone can be with more than one person at a time, there’s still the practical difficulty that is actually physically being with all of them.”

“Ah. Well, I don’t know the details of their relationship, but I suspect that wouldn’t happen, because the history they’ve built together means Zoanne knows she can find a measure of happiness here she wouldn’t elsewhere.” He shrugged. “I can’t really see that happening.”

“But then how is it different from a relationship in my time?” Ianto pressed. “If you wouldn’t leave someone for someone else, isn’t that a monogamous relationship?”

“I think you’re confusing monogamy with commitment.”

Ianto frowned. “Pardon?”

“Just because you don’t promise not to love or have sex with other people, that doesn’t mean you can’t promise to stay in someone’s life.”

“Oh,” Ianto said, blinking. “I see.”

Kethan smirked. “You and your assumptions. Didn’t I already tell you I can do relationships?”

“Yes,” Ianto conceded. “But, you said it ended when you went different places in life. When you commit to someone in my world, you stay with them. For better or worse, and all that.”

“Do you really?” Kethan asked mildly. He elaborated at Ianto’s confused look. “I mean, do people never leave each other? For whatever reason.”

“No,” Ianto admitted. “People leave each other all the time. There’s just this... moral expectation that once you’re married, it’s not right to do so.”

“Ah,” Kethan said, sitting back. “I see.”

Ianto drained the last of his coffee, and Kethan reached over and plucked the empty mug from

his grasp, putting it and his own on the floor.

“Look, Ianto,” he said, his eyes sharp as he put a hand on Ianto’s shoulder. “I know you’re having a hard time with modern morals, but the way I see it, you’re not going to be here forever, at least, not if I have anything to say about it. I’d much rather spend that time getting to know you better, in all senses, rather than in awkward silence, trying to figure out what twenty-first century line I’ve crossed. Interested?”

“Yes,” Ianto said quickly, surprising himself, and, by the look on Kethan’s face, Kethan as well. He wasn’t sure exactly what to make of all this, but damn it, he was alone here, and Kethan was Jack, or as near as he’d get. The thought of isolating himself, of turning down Kethan’s companionship, only brought back the gut-clenching nausea of earlier. If Ianto could put up with Jack in the past, he could do it now. He’d just have to get used to a few things, that was all.

Ianto smiled self-deprecatingly at Kethan. “I’m not completely backwards, you know.”

“You are dating *me* in your time,” Kethan said, laughing, “So I rather doubted it.” He curled his legs up under him and leaned in, kissing Ianto briefly and dropping a hand on Ianto’s stomach, thumb stroking across the softness of his t-shirt.

“So, does this mean we’re committed?” Kethan teased.

“To an asylum, perhaps,” Ianto retorted, shifting under Kethan’s touch. He grabbed Kethan’s wrist, wrapping his fingers around it. “That tickles.”

Kethan laughed and swung a leg over Ianto’s, straddling him on the couch, resting his hands against Ianto’s chest. “That better?”

“Yup,” said Ianto, pressing his hips up. “Much better. But I think I’ve fulfilled my public sex quota for the week.”

“That’s alright,” Kethan said easily, pressing kisses down Ianto’s neck, making Ianto squirm under him. “I’m fine with some heavy petting.”

“Heavy petting?” Ianto gasped as Kethan bit at the junction of his shoulder and neck. “What kind of English did you *study*?”

“Hey, sexual slang is an important component to language study,” Kethan said, breaking off his abuse of Ianto’s neck and leaning back in a way that felt – oh – really nice.

“So you can fuck your way across the galaxy?” Ianto asked with a smirk, smoothing his hands

up Kethan's thighs until his thumbs pressed against his fly.

"Damn straight," Kethan said, moving his hips into Ianto's touch. "So many planets, so little time."

"You're a time traveler," Ianto retorted, letting his hands slip under Kethan's shirt, reveling in the smoothness of his skin, drawing little circles above his hipbones. "Can't you make the time?"

"Vortex manipulator or no – oh, that's nice – I won't live forever."

Ianto's fingers stopped their rhythm. He took a breath and twined his hands into Kethan's shirt, and then pulled him down and kissed him. There wasn't much else he could say to that.

## Chapter 12

~

Ianto watched, his arms folded across his chest, as Kethan strapped on his thigh holster in their quarters. He was dressed entirely in black for the first time since Ianto had met him; his pants were thick, jean-like material, fitting close to his legs so as to not interfere with the holster and the long-sleeve shirt that clung to his torso was covered by a thick, pocketed jacket. As much as Ianto privately appreciated the look, vocally, he was less than pleased.

"This is a terrible idea."

Kethan didn't look up from where he was fiddling with a strap. "Ianto..." he sighed, shifting the holster so it was precisely the right height. "There's nothing we can do. We can't fly it, for crying out loud, and we certainly can't walk out of a secret base with a timeship. It would be a little conspicuous."

Ianto just pursed his lips and shook his head. He'd brought his concerns to the Captain; the TARDIS was too valuable to destroy, the Doctor was a force for good and depended on his ship, the Doctor was a terrible enemy to have, but none of it had convinced her or Kethan not to attempt to blow it up. As far as Ianto could tell, the mission was going ahead as planned.

Kethan sighed and stood up straight. "Can you pass me the blasters?" Ianto did, and Kethan continued as he slid them into the holster, one on each leg. "You've never even met this Doctor, why do you care so much about his ship?"

"It's a valuable piece of technology, that's all. I'm not even sure you could blow it up; from all

accounts it's a remarkable ship. What will you do if it doesn't work?" Ianto demanded.

"If it doesn't work, it doesn't work," Kethan said placidly, tucking his handgun into its normal holster on his belt. "We won't be any worse off than before, assuming we make a clean getaway."

"Yes, you will," Ianto insisted. "They'll know you're onto them. It will be harder, next time."

"They already know I'm onto them," Kethan pointed out, slipping off his jacket and slinging it over an arm. "I'm just hoping I get lucky and they don't know how close I am. Coming?" He held out his free hand. Ianto ignored it and slid off the bed, walking to the door.

"Don't say I didn't tell you so," he muttered. Kethan poked him in the middle of his back.

"Pessimist."

"Foolhardy," Ianto returned, but the accompanying glare softened at Kethan's uncertain look. "Look, I just don't want you – don't want anyone getting hurt, when I could have stopped it."

"It wouldn't be your fault," Kethan said, following Ianto down the stairs in the cargo bay.

"No," Ianto agreed. "But I'm already feeling pretty useless. I wish I could convince you, or at least do something to help."

"You'll help Soren man the comms. No," Kethan headed off Ianto's interruption. "For the last time, you are not coming with us. Three teams of two are all that's needed, and I am not getting you shot again."

Ianto was tempted to argue, but the look on Kethan's face said the case was closed. He made a resigned sound and followed Kethan into the mess, where the rest of the crew had gathered, save Soren and Kareh. Varelle was standing at the far end of the table, and the others were scattered in the chairs or on the couches, some chatting in low voices and others focused on computers. Varelle nodded at them as they entered, and turned to the hatch that led to the mainframe.

"Kareh," she called through it. "We're set." She did the same to Soren up the ladder that led to the bridge, and after a moment, the two men joined them in the mess. Varelle cleared her throat, catching everyone's attention.

"Alright. We all know our jobs. Ellis and Aharon, get those armaments disabled. Their targeting scanners need to be offline, or we won't get out of the spaceport in one piece. Ashild, you're with me, with one set of explosives. Brenneth and Kethan are taking the shorter route in,

but if they don't make it, we're less likely to be detected. I don't want any idiotic decisions; nobody needs to die today. If you get caught, get caught. We can bust you out of jail but we can't bring you back to life." She shot Ashild a hard look. "Clear?"

There were nods all around, and Varelle turned to Kareh, who was leaning against the hatch to the mainframe.

"Still no luck?"

He shook his head, thumbs hooked through his belt loops. "I'm close. If you could give me one more day..."

"Sorry," she replied. "We need to run on our intel today. Now, in fact. We'll just have to hope there's nothing significant in it. Keep at it, and contact us immediately if you find anything relevant. You've secured our channels?" Kareh nodded and she dismissed him, turning to Soren. "We'll keep the lines closed, but stay ready in case we need to call for assistance. I want this ship ready to fly, too. Run through pre-flight now, so we can jump start when we're all back. Speaking of returning..."

She put her hands on the table in front of her and leaned down, catching the eyes of each of the teams' members in succession. "If we lose contact with you, and you don't return in four hours, we'll leave without you." There was a long moment of silence, as if Varelle was expecting to be challenged. Ianto glanced at Kethan; he just gave a sharp jerk of his chin, lines around his mouth drawn tight. It was rare to see him still; Kethan was normally even more of a bundle of nerves and energy than Jack, but something about this situation seemed to have centered him, and none of his usual laissez-faire attitude was showing through.

"From now, then?" Ashild asked, voice breezy. Her countenance was in marked contrast to Kethan's; her fingers were running silent scales along the edge of the table, and her lips twitched with a smile. "Or from departure?"

"Departure," the Captain replied. "Which is now. The weather is shit, but that should be to our advantage. Any last questions?"

Ianto considered leaving it, but decided one last-ditch effort was in order. "There's nothing I can say to convince you this is a bad idea?" he asked softly. Varelle stood up straight and met his eyes.

"I've taken everything you've said into consideration, and I understand your concerns," she said in a voice that convinced Ianto she was entirely serious. "But Kethan has asked for our help, and I frankly see no other way about it. This is the plan."

Ianto reluctantly nodded his compliance, a gnawing sensation building in the pit of his stomach prickling out along his skin. Kethan caught his eye and gave him a wide smile.

“It’ll be fine,” he said, sauntering over to Ianto’s side. “I promise you, this won’t be the last time you get to see this work of art.” He bumped his hip into Ianto’s for emphasis.

“Surprisingly, sir, I’m not thinking with my dick on this one,” Ianto snapped.

Kethan gave him a wide-eyed look. “And there you go with the sir again. If you want to role-play, you just have to ask.”

Ianto rolled his eyes and turned away, but Kethan caught his elbow.

“Ianto, hey. We know what we’re doing. These people?” he said, swinging an arm out to encircle the rest of the crew. “They break into super secret bases in their sleep. This’ll be a piece of cake.”

Ianto matched Kethan’s gaze, faintly embarrassed at being called out in front of the rest of the crew. “Of course,” was all he said, returning Kethan’s intense look with a bland one of his own. “I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Kethan watched him for a moment longer and then nodded, almost imperceptibly, before turning back to the Captain.

“Let’s do this.”

~

Ianto paced impatiently across the bridge, stopping every now and then to glance at the schematic of the base up on a screen. The storage facility that belonged to the Time Agency was at the edge of the Edgewise landing grounds, not more than a twenty minute walk away. The teams had been gone for nearly two hours, now; Ashild, Opal, Brenneth and Kethan to the storage facility, and Ellis and Aharon to the landing ground’s tactical facility. Kareh was still buried in the mainframe, and Zoanne had disappeared, muttering something about making sure the Infirmary was in order. Soren was waiting patiently at the helm, legs thrown up on a console as he tapped through screens absently.

Jotir poked his head up the hatch that led to the mess. “Can I get you anything?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” Soren responded, swinging his legs down (they were very nice legs, Ianto had to admit) and leaning forward on his knees. “Except, do you have any of those sweet biscuits made up?”

Jotir clucked his tongue (Ianto had determined this was the equivalent to a nod), before turning to Ianto. “And you? More coffee?”

Ianto glanced at the empty cup in his hand. It was tempting; a cup of coffee would at least give his hands something to do, but he suspected it would only make him more jittery. “No thank you,” he said, passing Jotir the mug. “I’m good.”

Jotir slid back down the ladder, returning a minute later with a plate of biscuits.

“No word yet?” he asked, setting the plate down on the console beside Soren.

Soren shook his head. “Nope. But no news is good news, right?”

“So it has been said,” Jotir replied, glancing at the blueprint on the wall. “Which route in was the Captain taking?”

Soren got up, grabbing a biscuit and walking over to the screen. “Ashild and Varelle were taking the service entrance in, here, preferably by stealth and if not, by force. The TARDIS is supposed to be stored here,” he tapped a central location on the map, “and this is the route they’d be taking. Kethan and Brenneth are taking the roof and dropping in here. It’s faster, but more risky.”

“In this weather?” Jotir asked, the dark ridges along his cheeks pulling in and then fanning out again.

Soren glanced out the window at the front of the bridge, and Ianto followed his look. It was miserable out: dark and windy and pouring buckets. The rain was so dense Ianto could only make out a few nearby ships, huddled on the flat of the landing ground, before the view disappeared behind sheets of water. There was no lighting or thunder, but the sound of the wind howling across the body of the ship could be heard even through the thick bulkheads. The teams had left out the airlock with muttered swear words, almost soaked through before they’d gone a few steps.

“It’s to our advantage,” Soren said eventually, running a hand along his jaw. “Hard to follow or hear someone in a storm like this.”

Jotir clucked again and glanced at Ianto. “You don’t enjoy waiting.”

Ianto bit back a ‘no shit’, and grimaced instead. “I do Soren’s job, sometimes, at home. But I’m usually in constant contact with the team. There isn’t this... uncertain waiting.”

“We will find out soon enough,” Jotir said, eyes narrowing briefly.

As if by magic, there was a crackle as Aharon’s voice came through the comm. “*-ron to the Evening Star, do you copy?*”

Soren dove for the console. “Yes, here.”

*“We’re done. We should be back in ten minutes. Word from the others?”*

“Nothing yet.”

*“It’s still early. Tell Jotir I want a hot drink when I get there. It’s fucking miserable out here.”*

“Copy,” Soren said, and then glanced over at them with a grin. “Hear that, Jotir?”

“Indeed. I’ll get right on it. Do you want me to open the airlock so you can stay at the helm?”

“Please. I’ll let you know when they’re here.”

Jotir left the bridge and once again, Ianto and Soren were alone. The past two hours hadn’t been entirely uncomfortable, but there was a definite uncertainty to the way Soren was talking to him. Ianto couldn’t exactly blame him; he was probably acting unpredictable and odd as far as the pilot was concerned. Ianto wondered exactly how involved he and Kethan were, trying to examine the issue from an academic light and ignore the twinge of jealousy he felt when remembering the two together. Soren seemed like a decent bloke; giving into his snarkier instincts would have been rude, and Ianto prided himself on his manners.

“Kethan says you’re monogamous.”

Ianto’s head snapped up. “Pardon?”

Soren stretched out in his chair, spinning back and forth ever so slightly. “My parents were, too.” He laughed a little. “They were a bit odd. I don’t think I’ve ever told Kethan, but, well, I just wanted to say I understand, and I’m sorry.”

Ianto blinked. That was unexpected. “I didn’t know people did that any more.”

“Most people don’t,” Soren shrugged. “But not everyone’s the same. Still, they definitely had a hard time explaining it to their friends, I think.”

“Not acceptable?” Ianto asked, intrigued. The impression he’d got from Kethan was that most people didn’t even know what the word monogamous meant anymore.



“Not so much that as just hard to understand why anyone would want to. My parents just said they never particularly wanted to be with anyone other than each other. I didn’t choose to follow in their footsteps, but they had a good relationship, so whatever works, you know?”

Ianto nodded slowly. “It might be hard to do, living on a ship this small.” He continued at Soren’s uncertain look. “Not a whole lot of people to interact with, I mean.”

“Ah. Yes, there is that. It’s always nice when Kethan shows up; he definitely adds a bit of variety,” he smirked. “He’s one of the better fucks I’ve had, if I’m honest. Don’t tell him that, though, he already has a bit of an ego.”

Ianto gave a faint smile and cast around for something to say to that, but was saved by the beep of the comm.

*“Open the damn door, would you?”*

Soren rolled his eyes and pressed the inter-ship comm. “Jotir? They’re here.”

*“Roger,”* came Jotir’s voice.

“Two down,” Soren muttered. “Four to go. What’s the clock at?”

Ianto glanced at the display. “Two hours and twenty-seven minutes.”

Soren let out a breath. “If we don’t hear from the rest of the team in the next half-hour, we’ll get in touch.”

“We need to get in touch *now*.”

Ianto and Soren spun around in surprise. Kareh was climbing into the bridge, his mouth drawn in a hard line.

“Do it, Soren.”

Soren looked like he wanted to ask why, but he just nodded and tapped the console.

“*Evening Star* to the away teams,” he called, and then gestured to Kareh. “It’s all yours.”

*“Varelle here.”*

*“Brenneth here.”*

“Captain, it’s Kareh. I decoded the static on the waves. It’s a trap. The TARDIS is gone. You need to get out, *now*.”

A jolt of fear flashed through Ianto at Kareh’s words, and he glanced over at the blueprint. That place was a maze; it was the perfect place to lure in unsuspecting enemies.

“*Are you sure, Kareh?*” That was Varelle, and even through the hiss of the comm, Ianto could here the icy steadiness in her voice.

“Positive. They moved it last week.”

“*I set the explosives, just before you contacted us,*” came Kethan’s voice. “*We’re just headed ou—*”

A sharp whine interrupted the transmission, and Ianto slapped his hands over his ears, watching as Kareh flicked through the console.

“Shit. Shit shit shit. They’ve damped us.”

Soren’s eyes widened, and he pressed up beside Kareh, getting a look at the screen. “You’re right. They’re onto us.”

There was a long silence, and Ianto watched, nails digging into the soft flesh of his hands as Kareh and Soren worked.

“Nothing doing,” Kareh sighed. “I can’t get us through.”

“What do we do?” Ianto asked, unable to stay quiet for another moment.

“Wait,” Kareh replied, stepping back from the comm. “They’ll get back.”

“It’s a trap,” Ianto pointed out, more calmly than he felt. “You don’t know that.”

“What do you propose we do?” Kareh asked levelly. “We can’t talk to them, we don’t know where they are, and we’ve already told them what we know.”

“Back-up, perhaps? We know roughly where they are, right? What if they get pinned down?” He made a frustrated sound at Kareh’s shaking head. “You’re okay with waiting until they get shot and killed?”

Kareh and Soren exchanged a glance, and then Kareh pushed off the console and came to stand

in front of Ianto. If Ianto were a lesser man, he would have taken a step back at the dark look in Kareh's eyes. Instead, he raised his chin and spread his hands by his sides.

"Well?"

"Look, Jones," Kareh said in a low voice. "I don't know what your little 'team' does back in ancient history, but these days, we tend to follow the plan. That has been, in our experience, the best way to walk away with everyone alive."

"Do you always?" Ianto challenged.

"No," said Soren, who'd turned back to the console, and didn't look up. "Do you?"

Ianto opened his mouth to say *yes*, they did all survive, but then he remembered Torchwood One, and Lisa, and Jasmine, and John, and Suzie, and every other body he'd quietly disposed of in the last two years. He swallowed his words and looked down at the floor. "Of course not."

"Then don't judge us, Ianto Jones," Kareh said fiercely, "Because I've got a good, what, ten years on you, and so does most everybody on this crew. This is not, by any measure, the worst situation we've been in. Varelle and Brenneth have been doing this kind of thing for decades, and they're really good."

Ianto nodded, slowly. "Fair enough. But..." He hesitated. "Shouldn't we at least have a back up plan?"

"Back up plan for what?" Ellis said, coming into the bridge through the hatch that led from the quarters. Aharon was right behind him, steaming mug of something that smelled absolutely nothing like coffee. Each of them had changed since Ianto had seen them last, presumably because they'd been drenched; their hair was soaked, plastered to their heads, and there was a faint sheen of moisture on their skin.

"Ah," said Soren, twisting in the helm chair. "We have a bit of a situation."

While he and Soren filled Aharon and Ellis in on the developments, Ianto studied the blueprint on the wall. He knew the intended route of both teams, and he knew that Kethan had just succeeded at planting the bomb, suggesting he was close to his target when they'd contacted them. If they made their exit cleanly, it would take them no more than half an hour to return to the ship, and that was – Ianto checked the chronometer – five minutes ago. He set his internal clock for twenty-five minutes. When that passed, he'd start worrying again.

"I don't see how Kethan's intel could have been wrong," Aharon was saying. "I saw his source material, it was verifiable."

“It wasn’t wrong,” Kareh explained wearily. “The TARDIS was here, as little as a week ago. They seemed to have realized Kethan was coming and moved it.”

Aharon frowned and walked over to the helm, scanning it over Soren’s shoulder. “If they knew he was coming, why haven’t they boarded us? We’re sitting ducks here.”

“I know,” grumped Soren. “I hate landing her.”

“The Time Agency doesn’t actually have an outpost here,” Kareh said, gesturing out at the rain. “They just rent the storage facility. Presumably, they don’t have a lot of manpower here. If we’re lucky, they don’t even know we’re landed yet. From the information I decoded, they just expected us to show up eventually. Besides, they seem more interested in capturing Kethan than killing him, so presumably they don’t care about the rest of us.”

“Why do they want him back?” Ianto asked, genuinely curious. “Even if they can erase his memories and re-instate him, why bother? Wouldn’t they want to punish him?”

Aharon gave him a long look. “You think losing your memories isn’t punishment?” He waved off Ianto’s response. “In answer to your question, they want him back because there aren’t many people who can do the job, and even fewer who want to.”

Ianto frowned. “Do you mean people who are able to detect time the way he can?”

“Yes,” Aharon said. “It’s pretty rare. And those who can, well, not all of them actually want to work for the Time Agency, especially these days.”

“But Kethan did?” Ianto was prying, and he knew it, but the opportunities to learn more about Jack were few and far between in his own time, and he wasn’t about to let this one slip by.

“He didn’t have much choice,” Soren said, his voice dark. “Remember how he said that a decade ago, Boeshane was one of the embargoed planets?”

“Yes,” Ianto said, nodding. “But they signed an accord.”

“Right. And one of the terms of the accord was that Earth got to conscript for the Time Agency from Boeshane’s population.”

Ianto blinked. “Against their will?”

“That is the general meaning behind the word ‘conscript,’” Aharon said with a grunt.

“Oh,” was all Ianto could think to say. He’d always assumed Kethan was happy to be a part of the Time Agency. He didn’t seem blind to its apparent flaws, but he did seem willing to defend it to Zoanne.

“Myself, I think it’s an awesome job,” said Ellis, shrugging. “He seems pretty chuffed with the time travel. Always rubbing it in our faces.”

“You think that,” said Soren, mildly.

Aharon just rolled his eyes. “Matter at hand, gentlemen. How worried are we?”

“We have four of our crew, cut off from communications, who walked into a trap. Potentially, I’d say very worried, but on the plus side, they do now know it’s a trap,” Kareh said. “We got through to them before they damped our communications.”

“Best case scenario?” Aharon said. He seemed to be assuming command; Ianto was a little surprised no one else was challenging him on it, but he was the ship’s tactical expert, as far as Ianto could tell.

“Best case scenario, they get out cleanly, and we see them in...”

“Twenty-five minutes,” Ianto supplied. Aharon gave him an appraising look, and Ianto gestured at the map. “Assuming Kethan was where I think he was. He said he’d just placed the explosives, when we lost contact.”

Aharon nodded. “So the worst case scenario would be they get captured. If the TARDIS isn’t there, who did they leave to guard the building? Do we know if all the initial staff and security is still there?”

“I don’t think so,” said Kareh, pulling up some unreadable text on a console. “It looks like they moved everyone out, including their own security. Whoever’s there isn’t an employee of the Agency.”

“So, mercenaries.”

There was a pause, and Ellis and Soren exchanged glances before looking back at Kareh and Aharon.

“Likely, yes.”

“That’s good for us,” Aharon mused. “If they just have a small force, they probably won’t try and take the *Evening Star* right away. Ellis, get to the engine room, I want to make sure we can

get off this planet no matter what.”

Ellis nodded and left, but came back before he'd been gone thirty seconds.

“The Captain's back!”

There was a moment of confusion as they all tried to follow Ellis out of the bridge, until Aharon pointed a finger at Soren and intoned “Stay”. The rest of them ran through the quarters section and down the stairs into the cargo bay. The three women of the ship were standing in the middle; Zoanne was holding Varelle's wrist clinically and being loudly disapproving.

“It's broken. You *know* this is your bad wrist, you couldn't choose to fall on your left one?”

Varelle gave her an exasperated look and turned to the group gathering at the bottom of the stairs. She nodded at Aharon and Ellis. “We're clear?”

“It's done,” said Ellis, glancing at Aharon. “I'm getting us prepped to depart. We've got an hour and fifteen minutes before take-off, right?”

Varelle glanced at her wristband – dislodging a disgruntled Zoanne – and nodded. “Make sure we're set. Aharon, get to the bridge and set up a perimeter. I want to know if anyone approaches, friend or foe.”

“Done,” he said, and he and Ellis left in opposite directions.

“Kareh, do you think we can get through the damping?”

“No, no chance. It's a good job. I might be able to sort out another channel, but...” he shrugged. “I wouldn't get your hopes up.”

“Alright. We leave in seventy-five minutes. Any contact we can make with Brenneth before then would be great.”

Kareh disappeared back to the mainframe, and Zoanne successfully dragged Varelle into the medical bay, leaving Ianto and a soaked-through Ashild in the cargo bay.

“Will we really leave if they don't get back in time?” Ianto wondered aloud.

Ashild sighed and rung out her hair, leaving small puddles on the floor. “That's procedure. She's done it before.”

“The Captain, you mean?”

“Yep. Twice, that I’ve been around. We do a lot of drops that are really time sensitive. The first time, we picked up the crewmember later – that was Brenneth, actually – but the second time...” She shook her head. “In the end, it wouldn’t have made a difference. Lirone was already dead before we left, but at the time, mum didn’t know that.”

Lirone. That was the man who’d built the mainframe, and, if Ianto recalled correctly, the Captain’s lover. Ianto’s stomach roiled; he couldn’t imagine leaving a lover behind. Good of the crew be damned, there was no way he could make that kind of a decision. He glanced at the doorway to the infirmary, trying to sort out what kind of a woman Captain Opal Varelle was.

Ashild followed his gaze. “She’s a good leader, Ianto. Not a bad mother, either, but she’s a really good leader.”

Ianto gave a tight smile and looked at Ashild properly. She was positively drenched, and shivering. “I’m sorry, I’m keeping you. You should get out of those clothes.”

“Is that an offer?” It was an attempt at a joke, but it fell flat to both their ears and she grimaced. “You’re right. Make me a cup of coffee and I’ll meet you in the mess, okay? Maybe we can sort out some way to find the boys.”

Ianto did so, even though he was pretty sure she was just trying to distract him. Now that he’d worked out how to use their coffee maker (which also made several other hot beverages, all unrecognizable to Ianto), he found the ritual of making other people coffee quite soothing. This time, however, his eyes kept flicking to the chronometer. Ianto couldn’t tell if time was crawling or flying by; every minute was painful to get through, but the time until departure seemed to be approaching rapidly.

Ashild returned and took her coffee from him, wrapping her fingers around the mug and sighing into the warmth. “I hate weather. Some people seem to think it’s marvelous, but me? I’ll take the controlled environment of a spaceship any day.”

Ianto made some unspecific noise of agreement, and she gave him a pitying look. “Let’s go over those blueprints, see where the boys might have gotten stalled. I have a pretty good idea of where the security was laid out, so we might be able to make a decent guess.”

Ianto retrieved his computer and the two of them sat at the table, going over possible routes and locations. Ianto glanced up at the door frequently, but neither Brenneth nor Kethan showed up. He was grateful for Ashild’s company, even as he was vaguely aware she was keeping him busy so he didn’t worry. The hour passed in fits and spurts, and when there were ten minutes to go, Kareh emerged from the mainframe, looking grim.

“No luck?” Ashild asked.

“No,” he responded, lips twisting into a frown. “They’ve cut communications entirely, I can’t even raise Edgewise. Nobody’s flying or landing because of it. It’s a complete blackout.”

“So, we’re fucked,” she summarized.

“Yup.”

Ashild sighed. “You going to tell Opal?”

“Tell me what?” Varelle asked, stepping through the hatch, closely followed by Aharon and Zoanne.

“I can’t raise them,” Kareh said, scratching at the back of his head. “I’m out of options.”

“Then we hope they come back in the next ten minutes,” she said placidly, getting a glass of water from the sink. Ianto twitched.

“Could somebody tell me why we haven’t sent anyone after them? Clearly, they need help, if they haven’t made it back by then.”

“In my experience, Mr. Jones,” Varelle responded icily, “sending more people into a trap is a sure way to increase your casualties.”

Ianto looked at her in disbelief. “So we’re just going to leave them on this godforsaken planet and fly off into the sunset? What are you people?”

“Practical,” snapped Zoanne. “But not merciless. We’ll be back, but right now? Without communications, completely expected by the enemy? A retreat is the *only* safe option.”

“It’s not safe for Kethan,” he said, shoving back from the table and standing up. He started to leave, but Ashild grabbed his arm.

“Where are you going?”

“To find him. To find both of them,” he said sharply, pulling his arm away and leaving the mess.

Ianto went to his quarters and slipped his holstered blaster onto his belt, then he made sure his .45 had ammo in it and tucked that in the back of his trousers. He pulled out his jacket and slipped that on as well – the not-quite-leather would probably keep at least some of the rain off



his skin. He strapped on the second-hand wristband; it wouldn't be any good for communications purposes, but he could at least track his position relative to the ship with it. The last hour spent going over the blueprints with Ashild meant Ianto wasn't worried about getting lost, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

When he came back down the stairs, the Captain and Zoanne were waiting by the airlock. Zoanne looked absolutely furious, but Varelle was impossible to read. Ianto stopped in front of them, defiant, but Varelle spoke before he could.

"We're leaving in ten minutes, whether you're on board or not."

"I don't care," Ianto said, but he wasn't angry. His voice was steady and determined as he continued. "Kethan is the only thing I have left of my life. He's also my only route home. Alive or dead, I need to find him."

"You're a fool," Zoanne snapped. "When I told you to sort things out with him, I didn't mean go on a hair-brained rescue mission for him."

Ianto ignored her and looked at Varelle. She was watching him steadily, but she no longer looked entirely composed. For a brief moment, Ianto thought he could name the look in her eyes as wistful, but it was gone before he could be sure.

"Alright," she said, as Zoanne spluttered beside her. "We'll look for you when we come back."

"You'll look for both of us."

Ianto looked over at the stairs; Ashild was stepping off them, wrapped in her own thigh holster and still-damp coat, knotting her curls up as she walked. She came over and stood in front of the three of them, dropping her hands to her hips.

"Sorry, folks, but Ianto's right. We're not leaving Brenneth and Kethan behind."

The Captain and doctor seemed to be struck speechless. If Ianto had been more relaxed, he might have laughed in relief. The sight of her, armed with blasters and a fierce look of determination that reminded Ianto of Toshiko in the field was the most beautiful thing Ianto had seen all day.

"Ashild," Varelle said, voice low and dangerous.

"*Mum*," she parroted, sticking up her chin. "You know it's the right thing to do."

"It's dangerous. The ship might get ambushed."

“Keep the doors locked, then,” she said simply. “Start the take-off sequence and be ready to go at the first sign of trouble. But Ianto and I are getting the boys back.”

Varelle and Ashild stared off, and Ianto could feel the underlying battle of wills, even as he was struck by how much the two women resembled each other. Ashild was smaller than Varelle, and had Zoanne’s flashing, dark eyes, but her bone structure was entirely the Captain’s, as was the tense line of her mouth. Varelle relaxed first, and she nodded, once.

“Go. We’ll wait as long as we can. Be *safe*.”

“I will,” Ashild said, gravely, and then followed it up with a smile. “I’m good, you know that. Between your tactical training, Zoanne’s medical training, and with Kethan’s good old ‘how to survive anything, from sex with a Chappatariali to an execution’ training, I’m sure to be fine.”

“Come on,” she continued after a moment, giving Ianto a small shove. “Let’s do this.”

Ianto started at the echo of Kethan’s earlier words; he could only hope their luck was better than his had been.

## Chapter 13

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A few steps out of the ship and Ianto was drenched and thoroughly grateful for his jacket. His hair was plastered to his forehead, his trousers soaked through, but the jacket cut the rain and the wind to a manageable degree. Ashild was a few steps in front of him, and she stopped beside a small vehicle.

“Get on,” she called, voice almost being carried away by the wind. Ianto came closer to hear properly. “We’ll get there faster on this.”

“Where’d you get it?” he asked, sliding in behind her. It most resembled one of those all-terrain vehicles they seemed fond of in America. It had four wheels, but one long seat and a hitch at the back that might have attached to a trailer.

“Stole it on the way back,” Ashild said over her shoulder, fiddling with the controls. Ianto expected the sound of an engine, but it started moving forward quietly. Not a combustion engine; something electrical, perhaps? Whatever it was, Ianto was grateful for the ride. They wove through other ships; some a little smaller than the Evening Star, many almost double the size. Nobody else was outside, and neither of them said anything in the five minutes it took them to reach the compound. Ianto’s fists were clenched on his knees, and he was trying

desperately not to think of what it would mean if they were too late. Vaguely, he was aware that Kethan had to survive this, for the sake of the timeline, but that didn't stop his stomach from twisting with anxiety. And it wouldn't keep any of the rest of them from dying.

The building on the perimeter of the landing field was behind a high fence, and Ashild pulled the cart up beside it, sliding off.

"And over we go," she said, tugging experimentally on one of the links in the fence.

"We can't just melt it?" Ianto asked skeptically.

"Nope. It's sonic proof. Wouldn't do much good as a fence if you could just blast through it." She brushed a wet lock of hair out of her face and scaled the fence easily, dropping the eight or so feet on the other side before turning and giving Ianto an expectant look.

Ianto couldn't see that the fence was doing a whole lot of good if you could just climb right over it, either, but at this point he wasn't complaining. He followed Ashild, grateful for the give in his trousers as he threw his legs over the top and dropped down beside her. Once there, Ashild gripped his elbow and pulled him in front of her.

"Before we go any farther, I need to know. Can I rely on you?" She pointed at his blasters. "You only just learned how to use those things. Are you going to forget when I most need you to remember?"

Ianto shook his head and pulled his .45 out of its holster. "I won't forget. And I can shoot this well enough. If things go wrong, it won't be because of me." He was deadly serious. . Checking the .45 competently, Ianto was suddenly thankful for all the hours he and Jack had spent on the shooting range. Hours Kethan was going to eventually get to live through, if Ianto had anything to say about it.

She nodded, and then flipped open her wristband. She pressed the small buttons, flipping through dense sets of illegible text and then looked over at the warehouse.

"Mum and I took out the sensors the first pass through. It looks like they haven't fixed them. Better yet, their sentries have moved."

Ianto peered through the rain at the warehouse. He could just make out the dark shadow of the near entrance. "How can you tell?"

She waved her wrist. "Proximity sensors. You're the nearest warm body around."

"Ah. So do we think they're gathered wherever they're holding Kethan and Brenneth?"

"That would be a safe guess."

Ianto hugged his arms to his body as they made their way from the perimeter to the warehouse. His jacket stopped much of the wind, but the rain seeped down his collar, trickling unpleasantly down his body and making him shiver. They reached the wall of the building, but that provided no relief; the wind seemed to be stronger there, funneling itself along the corrugated metal. A quick conversation lead them to decide to try the roof.

"We'll be able to do a faster sweep, this way," Ashild shouted back at him into the wind as they followed along the exterior. "Less likely to run into locked doors that we have to blast through."

Ianto nodded, though she couldn't see him, and ducked his head to keep the rain out of his eyes while he followed. When they reached the ladder, Ashild scaled it quickly, and he followed, hands gripping tight to the wet metal of the bars. The top of the roof was mostly flat and empty, save some pipes and vents and, here and there, low squares that jutted out of the surface. Those were entrances to the upper service level of the warehouse. One of them would take he and Ashild down to Kethan Brenneth and the mercenaries, and Ianto itched with the desire to go storming in.

"We'll see if we can find a probable location," Ashild said, head bent over her wristband. "And we'll take the nearest entrance."

They made their way across the roof, the wind and the rain making it difficult as they stepped across uneven, slippery metal and slick asphalt. Ianto tripped, once, catching himself at the last moment, the rain stinging across his neck as it fell harder and faster. He stopped for a moment, trying to centre himself; everything was moving too fast. He leaned forward, hands on his knees, going over the blueprints in his mind in an attempt to ground himself. Ashild noticed and came back beside him.

"If we don't get shot," he shouted over the wind, "we'll probably get blown off the roof."

She gave him a tense smile, and gripped his elbow. "I wouldn't let you. Wait here a moment, I'm getting a reading, let me see how strong I can make it."

Ianto wrapped his arms around himself, watching as she walked in zigzags across a small portion of the roof, stopping occasionally to brush wet locks of hair out of her eyes. Eventually, she wound her way back to a spot a little to Ianto's left.

"They're under here, as good as I can make out. How well do you remember the blueprints?"

Ianto considered and looked around, judging the distances of the nearest entrances and the edge of the roof.

“They’re probably in the secondary storage area. The large one on the north side?” Ianto guessed, continuing at her nod. “Then, that entrance,” he said as he pointed to his right, “should lead to a second stairwell on the north side from the main entrance, and we could get onto the maintenance catwalks from there.”

“Agreed.”

Ashild made quick work of the seal with her blaster – Ianto would have to ask, someday, what the point of locks were if you had weapons that would make such short work of them – and hauled open the trap-door. A set of steep stairs – more of a ladder, really, descended into darkness. They exchanged a quick glance, and then Ianto went first, gun in hand, held up and tight to his body as his other hand steadied him down the stairs. Ashild followed after him, leaving the heavy metal door open so that Ianto could see a square patch of the floor before he reached it.

“Leaving it open?” he asked, looking up and then back again as the rain fell against his face. Ianto couldn’t help but feel a little claustrophobic, knowing that he was walking into a trap, and a successful trap, at that. The weather seemed almost welcoming in comparison to the dark of the hall.

“We might want to get out quickly,” Ashild replied, tucking her sonic blaster back in its holster and pulling out a laser one instead. “I’m going first – if we have to shoot any guards, this’ll do the job quietly.”

Ianto nodded, looking around as his eyes adjusted to the dark. It wasn’t actually pitch black, he realized; there were dimly shining lines of light, a sickly shade of green, along the floor that edged the small hall they were standing in. As his vision adjusted, Ianto could see a door immediately across from the ladder they had descended.

“That should be the entrance to the stairwell.”

Ashild opened the door and went through it. The stairwell itself was lit, not with any light bulbs that Ianto could locate, but large strips along the wall that glowed like the lines in the roof access. Across from the door they had come in was another door, and between them, a stairwell that lead down. Ashild stepped quietly over to the door, and stood beside it, gesturing at Ianto for silence as she unlatched it and pulled it slowly open, blaster at the ready. Ianto realized he was holding his breath, unconsciously, and let it out slowly. Whatever was on the other side, they’d deal with it when they got there. Kethan would be alright – but that didn’t mean Ianto would see him again. A flicker of fear ran through Ianto at that thought; he’d been so focused

on the fact that Kethan would survive, it never occurred to him he might be taken by the Time Agency now. Ianto shut his eyes for barely a moment and steadied himself. He hoped they weren't too late.

No one came through it, or stopped them, so Ashild pulled it open enough to slip through, letting Ianto catch the door before she let go, and Ianto let it shut quietly behind him as he took in their position. They were on a catwalk above a large room that was mostly empty and lit by the same dull green light as the hall, only to one side, a brighter light on the wall threw the shapes of several people into sharp relief. Ashild twisted a hand towards them, tilting her head at Ianto, and he nodded in response. There was their mark, but they were too far away, and the room was too dark, to make out who was who, and part of their vision was obscured by what looked like a small ship.

Ashild motioned at Ianto to follow her, and he did, glad for the soft rubber of his boots that kept his steps silent. The catwalk trailed around the edge of the room; they could have taken the one stretched across it, as well, but that would have left them incredibly exposed. As they wound their way around to the group of people, Ianto could make out two figures in front of posts; they resolved into Brenneth and Kethan, and judging by the way their arms were wrenched back, they were tied in place. Ianto resisted the urge to let out a sigh of utter relief, but instead he swallowed, hoping his heartbeat was quieter than it sounded in his ears. He was sure that any moment now, one of the mercenaries would look up, and they would be caught. Realistically, the catwalk was so dim in comparison to the area where the mercenaries were standing that they probably wouldn't notice them even if they did look up.

They reached a position just over the group of men and women; low conversation from the group floated up, but Ianto couldn't make it out. Kethan and Brenneth were secured to support posts; both were gagged as well. Oh, Kethan would hate that; Jack had always despised having his mouth covered like that. There was a ladder here that would get them to the catwalk, tucked behind support beams between the ship and the group of people. Ashild slipped quickly down it, and when Ianto reached the bottom, she pulled him up against the ship. They could see Kethan and Brenneth from the shadows they stood in, but the mercenaries were out of view.

Ashild motioned to Ianto, and when he came near, she pressed her mouth to his ear.

"They're going to leave, in this ship," she said, voice barely audible, just a breath in his ear. "We need to take one by surprise from a secure position, but we'll have to wait until fewer of them are—" She broke off her sentence at the whine of laser fire with a choked sob, and Ianto was sure they would have been heard were it not for Kethan's furious, muffled scream.

"Oh God," Ashild said, bracing against the ship, and Ianto watched in horror as Brenneth's body sagged against the bonds, head lolling against his chest. There was no mistaking the weight of his body, nor the rage in Kethan's voice. At first, Ianto couldn't hear anything but

ringing in his ears, the shock of being *too late*, of there being no way to go back and no way they could undo what had just happened, but Ashild was frozen and Ianto, at least, could still think. He rested a hand against Ashild's forearm, grounding her, meeting her eyes steadily.

"Now," was all he said. Her eyes were unfocused for a moment, and then she seemed to come back to herself, and a mask of sheer determination fell over her face. She nodded, and whirled away. Before Ianto could say anything more, she'd moved out beyond the cover of the ship and had her laser blaster against the temple of one of the mercenaries and her sonic one pointed at a cluster to one side.

"This is set to a wide beam," Ashild said, voice terrifyingly calm. "Move, and I will take you all out."

Nobody moved.

"Ianto," she said as he stepped out from behind the ship. "Untie Kethan."

He nodded and walked over to Kethan, spine tingling with the knowledge that six mercenaries could shoot him at any time. Kethan was straining against his bonds, temple throbbing with effort, and Ianto had to murmur to him to relax so the bonds loosened enough to undo. Once he'd freed Kethan's hands, Kethan wrenched out the gag and pulled Ianto over to him. Ianto started as Kethan's hands slid down his thighs, and then, all of a sudden, Kethan had a blaster in each hand and was firing, taking out the group of five mercenaries before Ianto could blink.

"Kethan," he breathed, staring at the pile of bodies in the warehouse. Ashild still had her blaster pressed against the temple of the last mercenary. Kethan reached down and reholstered one of the blasters, the force almost tipping Ianto over in his shock.

"Ashild. Move," he demanded, striding over towards her. Ashild hesitated, before stepping back, and Kethan brought up his blaster, stopping a few feet in front of the mercenary. "Who hired you?"

The man looked at him, mouth pressed tight. "If I tell you, will you let me go?"

"Yes."

"Time Agency."

"Thank you," said Kethan, and then he fired, watching dispassionately as the man crumpled before him. Kethan stood still, though Ianto could see his arms were shaking minutely, before turning and walking over to where Brenneth's body was slouched against the post while Ianto watched in shock. Kethan put the blaster on the floor beside him, and slowly, methodically,

started undoing the bonds.

Ianto finally came to his senses and joined Kethan, kneeling on the other side of the body - *Brenneth* - and undoing the gag. The skin was still warm to the touch, and the gag was wet as Ianto undid it, and even though he'd done this before, even though dead bodies were no mystery to him, he wanted to be sick. The sight of Kethan, mowing down the mercenaries without a second thought... Ianto was pretty sure his mind wasn't able to process that image yet.

"Did you really—"

"Yes. And shut up."

Ianto started, looking at Kethan's face for the first time. It was twisted into the grimace of someone doing their best not to cry; his cheek bit between his teeth, his forehead furrowed as he fumbled with the knots. Ianto reached out and pushed his hands away, undoing the last of them and letting the rope fall away. *Rope*. Who would have thought they'd still use something so mundane to tie up their prisoners. For *execution*. Ianto thought, numbly.

"Why did they shoot him?" he asked, and this time, Kethan didn't interrupt him.

"They didn't need him," Kethan said dully. "They just wanted me. He was – *God* – dead weight." Kethan laughed at that, exactly the laugh of someone who'd seen just enough death to not be in shock but too little to be able to process it rationally.

"I've turned off the damping equipment," came Ashild's voice as she stepped out of the small ship. "And contacted the *Evening Star*. I told them..." she trailed off, letting a hand stretch out towards them and then fall away. She was pale and uncertain looking, a far cry from the previous, confident woman who'd gotten them here.

"Good," replied Kethan, head bent. He lifted it up and dragged a hand across his mouth before stooping and trying to get a grip on Brenneth's body. It was hard; Brenneth was perhaps six and a half feet tall, and thickly muscled. Ianto helped, and they ended up with Brenneth's body between them, arms slung around their shoulders, staggering under the awkward weight.

"I'll go get the cart," Ashild said, faintly, as she watched them struggle. "I'll meet you at the entrance."

Kethan grunted in affirmation, and he and Ianto followed her route out of the warehouse, eventually reaching the main entrance. They let the body rest against the wall, and Ianto leaned back, panting in exertion, watching as Kethan stood stock still in the rain for a long moment, before turning and driving his fist into the wall with an untranslated curse.



Ianto didn't move; he'd seen Jack in the throes of grief, before, but never like this. His Jack was restrained, more in grief than in anything else in his life. Kethan, on the other hand, had shot six people without hesitating in reaction, and Ianto didn't know quite how to fit that into his image of Kethan.

"Don't judge me," Kethan growled, as if reading Ianto's mind. The other man stepped in front of Ianto and put his hands on his shoulders, shaking him. "I didn't have a choice."

Ianto didn't say anything. He wanted to believe Kethan, but... He did have a choice.

Kethan's face twisted, and morphed into something that said he was willing to fight to prove it. "I couldn't leave them alive. They were mercs, they would have done the same thing, again and again. They could have lead the Agency right to us, right now, if they were in contact with them." He shook Ianto again, hard, and Ianto just let it happen. Kethan started to say something more, but he dropped back when the sound of the cart came through the wind.

Ashild drew up beside them and slid off, saying "We won't all fit. One in front and one behind?"

"I'll walk," Ianto offered, though he was reluctant to let Kethan out of his sight.

Ashild nodded, and the three of them maneuvered the body onto the cart, Ashild in front, driving, and Kethan behind, supporting the weight. Ashild gave Ianto a tight nod and then drove off, leaving Ianto to walk back to the ship on his own.

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Ianto finished stripping off his wet clothes, hanging them up on hooks attached to the wall, and rooted around for something clean. He was trying not to think about everything that had just happened. When he'd returned to the *Evening Star*, the body had already been put away, and Kethan had disappeared with Ashild and Varelle to debrief. Zoanne had stopped Ianto on his way to his quarters. Expecting a rant, Ianto had braced himself, but instead, she'd just said "*Thank you for trying,*" and left him alone, wet and dripping at the foot of the stairs.

Ianto had located a clean pair of pants and trousers. He was putting them on, wriggling to get the trousers over his damp skin, when the door slid open and Kethan came in, still dressed in his own wet clothes. He stopped in the doorway, watching Ianto as if he was trying to find something. Ianto looked back steadily, trying to project a calmness that he wasn't entirely feeling. Whatever Kethan was looking for, he must have found it, because he stepped past Ianto and sank down onto the bed, face in his hands. Ianto was quiet for a moment, and then he reached over, tugging at the collar of Kethan's jacket.

“You’re getting the bed wet,” he said softly. “You should get out of those clothes.”

Kethan just nodded, letting his hands drop loosely to his sides so Ianto could pull the jacket off. Ianto hung it on a hook and then came back over, tugging Kethan’s shirt out of his trousers and peeling it back from his skin.

“Arms up,” he said, and then pulled the shirt up when Kethan obeyed, before kneeling in front of him and starting to unlace his boots.

“You don’t need to do this,” Kethan said, without an ounce of feeling.

“I don’t mind,” Ianto replied matter-of-factly, pulling off one boot and then the other, and then tugging off wet socks. “Up,” he said, tapping his fingers to Kethan’s hips.

He undid the fastenings on Kethan’s trousers and then tugged them down. They stuck to his skin, and Kethan braced his hands on Ianto’s shoulders as he stepped out of them. Ianto picked them up and shook them out before hanging them up as well, and then turned back to the other man. Ianto moved forward, not sure if he meant to embrace Kethan or simply be closer, but Kethan flinched back, and then turned away to sort through his own clothes.

“Kethan...” Ianto said with a sigh.

“Should have warned you I was a murderer, huh?” Kethan said belligerently. He found a pair of trousers, loose cotton ones, and pulled them on.

“You’re not a murderer,” Ianto said, not stopping to worry about whether or not he believed it himself. Kethan needed to hear it, needed to believe it, and Ianto wasn’t going to let his own shock get in the way of that. “You’re a good man, Kethan. You did what you thought needed to be done.” When Kethan didn’t say anything, he continued. “I know you, don’t forget that.”

Kethan’s face twisted, and he grabbed Ianto’s forearm in an angry grip. “I’m not a good person Ianto. Don’t think you know me, just because you know who I become.”

“Goodness isn’t something you learn,” Ianto said, not moving.

“No, but it sure as hell can be denied.”

They stared off for a moment, and then Kethan dropped Ianto’s arm and turned away again, pulling on a shirt and buttoning it up. Ianto leaned back against the wall and watched him, uncertain.

“I didn’t need an excuse,” Kethan said eventually. “I couldn’t let them go, but even then, I would have killed them. Brenneth didn’t deserve to die, not like that.” His voice cracked on his friend’s name, and when he looked at Ianto, his eyes were dark and empty.

Ianto wasn’t a touchy-feely person; it was Jack who connected to others with physical contact, but knowing that made Ianto step forward. He came into Kethan’s personal space and placed his hands on Kethan’s shoulders, thumbing his collarbone in slow circles.

“You killed your enemies, enemies who killed your friend. It might not have been the most noble thing to do, but it’s not unthinkable,” he said, slowly, considering his words. “I almost destroyed so many innocent people, for one person I loved. You forgave me, then. I’m not going to judge you now. I couldn’t possibly.”

Kethan let his head drop against Ianto’s shoulder, and Ianto could feel his harsh breath through the thin shirt. Ianto slid his hands around so they pressed against the shifting muscles of Kethan’s back. They stood like that for several minutes, and then Kethan turned his head and pressed his lips to Ianto’s neck, once, and again, and then Ianto pulled back a little. Kethan took advantage of it, and kissed him. Ianto froze, uncertain, but Kethan didn’t let up and eventually Ianto parted his lips in acquiescence, letting the other man’s cool tongue slip into his mouth.

They stood there, just kissing, until Ianto realized that Kethan was trembling, and that he’d been in his wet clothes in the warehouse for over an hour, as well as some time for the debriefing.

“Bed,” he said, pushing Kethan back. “You’re too cold.”

“Gonna warm me up?” It would have been a joke but Kethan didn’t seem to be able to find the smile to go along with it.

Ianto just shrugged and pulled back the covers, slipping under them and holding them up for Kethan to follow. When they were both in bed, Kethan reached over and slid a hand under Ianto’s shirt, fingers tracing the lines of muscle present there.

“Opal said you disobeyed her to come after me. Us.”

Ianto made an affirmative noise, shivering under the other man’s light touch.

“Why? You know I survive.”

“You’re important to me,” Ianto said with a sigh. “And when I’m from, we tend to prefer the ‘leave no man behind’ philosophy. You certainly hold to it.”

“I do?” Kethan asked, scratching his nails against Ianto’s skin absently.

“Yes. And stop that, it’s distracting.”

“Maybe I need a distraction.”

Ianto propped himself up on his side and looked down at Kethan. Kethan was watching him with hooded eyes that were mired in pain, and when Ianto reached out and ran a hand down his cheek, they flickered shut.

“Please.”

Ianto let his hand trail down, skimming across the defined muscle of Kethan’s pecs, down the line of his stomach and to his hip, then traced along the waistband of his trousers. Kethan breathed out and arched up into the touch, eyes still clenched shut.

“Please,” he said again, and Ianto obliged, tugging the trousers down and gripping him. His heart felt like it was in his throat as he watched this man, this marvelous, fucked-up, hero of a man stretch and flex and murmur encouragement beneath him.

Kethan let him touch, moving minutely until his breathing became harsh and punctuated, and then sat up, pushing Ianto off him and rolling him onto his back.

“Can I—” he asked, running a hand along Ianto’s inner thigh.

“Yeah.”

Kethan got up and Ianto shimmied out of his clothes, tugging his shirt over his head as Kethan settled himself between Ianto’s legs, shifting up so Ianto’s thighs were over his.

“Thank you,” he said, and Ianto almost missed it as slick fingers prepared him.

“For what?” He said, putting an effort into watching Kethan’s face. The man looked wrecked, and Ianto desperately wished he could do something to fix it.

“For coming after me. You good?”

Ianto nodded and Kethan pressed into him, hands under his thighs, holding him up and back as Kethan set a slow, aching rhythm. Neither of them said anything more and Ianto let his eyes fall shut, the spreading physical sensations taking precedence over the heartwrenching pains of the day. Kethan shifted, pressing Ianto further back into the bed and Ianto opened his eyes, watching Kethan’s tight expression and the tremor in his arms. He reached up and thumbed a

line across Kethan's lower lip and then dropped the hand down, bringing himself off in time to Kethan's shallow, increasingly desperate strokes.

Kethan waited for him, Ianto could tell, and when he finally let himself go he let out a low groan that reverberated through his body, sending new shivers up Ianto's spine as he wrapped a hand around Kethan's neck and pulled him in, mumbling encouraging words into his ear.

"I'm sorry," Kethan breathed.

"It's okay," Ianto said, not sure if Kethan was apologizing for the sex or for Brenneth or for the mercenaries. Whichever way, it didn't matter, and Ianto just held him tight, pressing open-mouthed kisses to all the skin he could reach.

## Chapter 14

~

It was strange, watching the crew interact with each other the next day. Each of them seemed to feel they needed to treat the others delicately, like their pain at the loss of Brenneth wasn't as bad as someone else's. It was a heartwarming sort of thing, watching each member of the crew try to take care of the others. For the most part, the general consensus seemed to be that Ellis, and then Varelle, would be the most affected.

There wasn't much talk of plans the next morning. Ianto and Kethan had woken up early and spent the first hours of the day curled up together, not talking or doing much of anything, just touching and holding. Ianto had done this before, with Jack, after those missions that didn't go well, when too many people died. Jack portrayed himself as the cold-hearted leader of Torchwood; this was the image Gwen saw when she accused him of lacking humanity, but Ianto knew the man behind the image, the man who blamed himself for every death, every failure, every *not fast enough*.

When it was late enough to go for breakfast, Kethan and Ianto had rolled out of bed and made their preparations for the day. The clothes on the hooks had dried, and Ianto had put them aside to be washed as Kethan pulled on his boots, slow and methodical.

"If I leave, you should stay."

Ianto had looked over at Kethan, who was resolutely watching his own hands as they did up his boots. "Are you planning on leaving?" he had asked mildly.

"If it's for the best."

Ianto had expected this. Kethan was sure to think the crew, his friends, would be safer if he went and continued his mission on his own. Knowing them, however, Ianto had been skeptical they'd let him leave. They seemed to believe in this cause, as much as Kethan, if not more, and they also seemed to be prepared to die for it. If Ianto knew anything about Jack, though, it was that he would likely want to protect them from themselves.

“Bit of a cowardly thing to do, isn't that?”

Kethan's head had snapped up, and he had looked at Ianto as if he didn't quite believe what he'd heard. “Pardon?”

“One of your friends dies, and you just, what, run off? Leaving everyone else to deal with the fallout?” Ianto had asked, voice mild. He'd known he was being harsh, that the card he was playing bordered on unfair, but he had also known that short of smacking Kethan in the face with what leaving would mean to the crew, to his friends, he'd see leaving as the better option. The only option.

Kethan had stood still, eyes wide, as if he still couldn't believe what Ianto had said. Ianto had waited with bated breath until Kethan nodded, and then left the room, touching him on the arm as he had walked past.

He hadn't said anything more about leaving, and now, sitting around the table in the mess hall, Zoanne gave first Kethan, and then Ianto an inquisitive glance, before giving the barest hint of a nod to Ianto and turning back to face the Captain. She had apparently expected that Kethan would attempt to leave, and rightly assumed that Ianto had headed him off. Well, at least he seemed to be going up in the doctor's books, though Ianto would have gladly faced her wrath if it meant Brenneth got to survive. It was, in the end, not much of an equitable trade.

It was more of a remembrance than a funeral. There was no talk of afterlife, or this being *God's will*, as Ianto remembered from the funerals he'd attended on Earth. The Captain didn't read any ritual words, and there were no hymns. They simply went around the table in a circle, each talking about Brenneth; how they met him, things they loved about him, funny stories, heroic tales and tender moments. Some of them didn't say much; Aharon spoke only a couple sentences, and Ashild hadn't been able to get much out around her tears, but Ellis spoke for a good fifteen minutes, pulling laughter, then tears from the circle. Ianto hadn't realized he and Brenneth had been lovers, but by the end of Ellis' memories, it couldn't have been clearer. Ianto didn't speak long. He simply said that Brenneth had been kind to him, and had made him feel at ease on a ship full of strangers. Once Kethan had finished his outrageous tale of circuses and strange alien show horses that had them all laughing freely, the circle was complete. One by one they stood, some leaving, some getting drinks and staying to talk about nothing in particular. What they were going to do with the body, Ianto had no idea, but it didn't seem

important.

After drinking a cup of coffee while listening to Varelle and Ellis do a surprisingly comic routine – the Captain’s relaxed seriousness playing off Ellis’ bawdy sense of humour – recounting an adventure they’d had two decades ago, Zoanne dragged him off to the infirmary.

“You did say your organizational skills were second to none,” she said, hands on hips.

Ianto looked over at Kethan. He wasn’t precisely asking for permission, but for some reason he was wary of leaving Kethan alone. Kethan waved him off, however, so Ianto followed Zoanne to the infirmary, where they started sorting through boxes of supplies.

“You must think we have no compassion.”

Ianto looked up from the box of small bottles, labeled in incomprehensible text. “Why would I think that?”

“We didn’t go after them,” Zoanne said, reaching out and flipping a bottle around. “We left them to die.”

“You didn’t know that.”

“No,” she said. “But we knew it was likely.”

Ianto sat back on his haunches, bracing his hands on his knees as he considered what to say. On one hand, he wanted to say *yes, you should have done something*, but on the other hand, he sort of understood. It was how it was done here, and while it wasn’t what he was used to, it didn’t make it wrong. Just different.

“You placed the needs of the many over the needs of the few,” he said eventually. “It’s not a foreign concept; leaders need to do it. I wasn’t a leader.”

Zoanne nodded, sharp eyes glinting. She hadn’t cried that Ianto had seen; Varelle had, which had surprised him, but the doctor conformed to his expectations and had yet to shed a tear for her colleague. She reminded him a little of Suzie, all intense focus and sharp observation, only without the edge of darkness that had made him steer clear of his co-worker for the few months before she’d killed herself.

“Being responsible for others is a hard burden,” she said, pointing to one of the medicines.

“Those can all be put away together, in the top left cupboard. I know it weighs on Opal. Kethan has it easy, leading the vigilante life.”

“It must be lonely,” Ianto observed, collecting the bottles and finding the cabinet.

“He comes here when he can, and leaves when he can’t stand it anymore. Kethan doesn’t exactly take on a lot of responsibilities,” she said, watching him. “I’m surprised he’s still here.”

Ianto gave a small smile in acknowledgement of the question she wasn’t asking. “He’s young yet. He grows up.”

She snorted, folding bandages into a drawer. “Aren’t you younger than him?”

“Only chronologically.” She laughed at that, and he continued, thoughtfully. “I don’t know the kind of things he’s done with the Time Agency, not really, but it seems to me that this is the first time he’s stepping out of his comfort zone. Maybe he didn’t intend to join them in the first place, but I don’t think that means he hasn’t reveled in the opportunity. Me, well. I’ve been to the edge and back, more than once. It’s an aging process.”

Zoanne shut the door and turned back to him, leaning against the counter. “You know, Ianto Jones, I think I misjudged you.”

“Apology accepted,” he replied with a flourish of his hands, smirking at her overdone look of outrage. He started sorting the bottles into the cabinet, checking the labels as he went, and quickly realized the ones already there were in no sensible order.

“You know, I don’t know more than the order of the alphabet at this point, and I still think I can arrange these more rationally than they are now.”

She raised an eyebrow, and then came over to stand next to him, looking up at his face rather than at the supplies.

“This is why,” she said as she reached an arm up, and Ianto quickly realized what she was saying; she couldn’t have been much over five feet, and the cabinet was almost out of reach. “I can’t see to find anything in so-called alphabetical order. I fumble around by touch. Or Opal gets it.”

Ianto snickered. “Why don’t you get a stool?”

“Don’t test it, boy,” she growled, elbowing him in the stomach. “I know a few interesting concoctions that could easily end up in your coffee, if an accident were to happen.”

Ianto worked up a suitably indignant reply, relaxing into the easy bickering as they tidied the infirmary. Clearly, there was something with the medical profession and snarkiness, if Owen and Zoanne were anything to go by. Whether it was the familiarity or some newfound



confidence in the fifty-first century, born of his belief that he did the right thing yesterday, Ianto could feel himself relaxing into this time. Perhaps being stuck here wouldn't be the end of the world.

As long as he didn't lose Kethan, at least. Which, apparently, he would.

~

They met that afternoon to regroup, back in the mess. This time, the atmosphere was one of tense professionalism as they debriefed what they knew about the probable location of the TARDIS, and how likely it was that they would be able to track it.

Answer: not very.

"They clearly want me," Kethan said, tapping his fingers on the table.

"No."

Kethan gave Zoanne a wide-eyed look. "No, what?"

"No, you are not being bait. It's a ridiculous idea, *and*," she continued, threateningly, "it's not as if they're going to drag the TARDIS along to kidnap you."

Ianto liked her rather a lot, in that moment. He listened for a little while longer as they discussed tracking techniques, possible storage locations, infiltration and full-on bombings, until the conversation slowed under the lack of options. He coughed once, bringing the attention of the crew on himself.

"There is one possibility that hasn't been considered, as of yet." He looked around, eventually meeting Varelle's eyes. "The Doctor."

"Zoanne?" Ashild asked, puzzled.

"No," Kethan said slowly, cocking his head. "*The* Doctor, apparently. The being the ship belongs to."

Varelle was nodding as Kethan talked. "When Kethan mentioned that there's supposed to be a pilot, I had Kareh look for prisoner transfers that matched up. Kareh?"

"I found one really suspicious one," Kareh nodded, flipping open his wristband and flashing a hologram in the air. "This is the data I extracted from the static; I think I've sorted out where they're holding... him?"

Ianto shrugged. “By appearance. Do they refer to him by name?”

“No, just a prisoner code.”

“Then we can’t be sure.”

Kareh shut off the hologram. “I’m pretty certain. It could be a dummy trail, but I searched, and there isn’t any sign it’s covering anything else.”

“Where’s he being held?” Varelle asked.

Kareh hesitated. “Earth.”

There was a quiet beat, and Ianto wondered if that was a good sign or bad until Ashild broke the silence.

“Yes,” she crowed. “Finally!”

“Nothing’s been confirmed,” Zoanne said, with a wag of a finger, but Ianto caught the excited look on her face.

“You’ve never been to Earth?” he asked.

Heads shook around the table, only Kethan and Jotir not joining in.

“Embargo planets, remember?” Ellis said. “We work almost exclusively in that region. Earth is a long way to go for no reason.”

Ianto nodded, turning to Kethan. “You have?”

“The Time Agency is headquartered there,” Kethan replied, tipping back in his chair with a grin. “I was trained there. You guys are going to *love* it.”

“This is not going to be sightseeing,” Varelle chastised. “And before we get ahead of ourselves; Ianto, do you really think getting our hands on this Doctor would be an advantage?”

“Yes,” Ianto said, fervently. He didn’t need to know much about the Doctor to know that having the alien on your team meant you were probably going to win, even if the odds were impossible. “If he wants his ship back – which he will – the Time Agency won’t be able to stop him.”

“Alright. Kethan, do you agree that this is our best option, for the time being?”

Scrutinizing Ianto, Kethan nodded. “Yep. Best of all, it’s the last thing they’ll expect. I’ve never read anything on the pilot, so I doubt the Agency would think I’d go after him.”

“Then to Earth it is. Soren, plot a course. How long are we looking at?”

“If we go for a hard burn and stop to refuel a couple of times? Three weeks. Maybe a little more.” He stood up, heading for the bridge. “I’ll get the numbers to you right away.”

The absurd feeling of pride Ianto experienced as the crew broke up to execute their new plan made him smile, and when Kethan saw it, he grinned back and shoved him gently.

“What? You didn’t think I was just keeping you around for your pretty face, did you?”

Ianto smirked. “You were at first.”

“Nuh-uh,” said Kethan, shaking a finger. “I kept you around because you arrived by vortex manipulator, and therefore were a threat.”

“You keep telling yourself that, sir,” Ianto said with a grin, standing up.

“Someday, Ianto, you’re going to have to tell me why you keep calling me that.”

“Force of habit,” he replied over his shoulder, dropping his mug into the dishwasher and adding a few others from the counter.

“So we don’t do the kinky sex thing?”

Ianto didn’t answer, just laughed quietly to himself as he finished loading the dishwasher, leaving Kethan and the others – mostly Ellis and Ashild, though Kareh had some surprisingly creative suggestions – to make increasingly obscene speculations about his and Kethan’s future sex life.

~

Ashild had been right; space travel *was* rather boring, when that was all there was to do. Once the initial excitement over going to Earth had faded, the crew had settled into an anxious mood, alternating between trying to sort out what they were going to do once they reached Earth and passing the time frivolously. Tempers were a little thin, now that they were two weeks in.

Ianto, for his part, had discovered that Ashild had a fondness for chess – Kethan couldn’t stand

it, just like Jack, but Ianto was partial to a good game – so they took to passing the slow days over her chess set.

“I don’t have a clue how that’s supposed to look like a queen,” Ianto grouched, sitting cross-legged on one of the beds in the room Ashild shared with Soren. “It’s just an abstract blob.”

“It looks exactly like a queen,” she protested, picking up the piece and waving it in front of him. “If you’re a member of the Tench species.”

“You couldn’t have a human chess set?” he asked, waving at the rest of the pieces. He kept losing simply because he forgot which piece was which, and couldn’t grasp the layout of the board as quickly as he was used to.

“Don’t be prejudiced,” she chastised, setting the so-called queen down on a new space. “Check.”

Ianto opened his mouth to reply when the inter-ship comm beeped and Jotir’s voice came through. Ashild crawled by him – well, nearly over him – to tap the console.

“Yeah?”

*“You might want to come down to the mess.”*

“Why? Did you make bannock?” she asked as Ianto shifted out from under her.

*“No. I’m requesting...”* the alien trailed off, and Ianto could hear yelling in the background. *“I’m requesting your presence as security.”*

“Oh. I’ll be right there,” she hopped off the bed and gave Ianto a suspicious look. “You’re coming with me. I don’t believe you won’t cheat while I’m gone.”

Ianto gave her an affronted look, but followed her out the door anyway. They cut through the bridge to get to the mess, and when Ianto stepped off the ladder, he could see why Jotir had called them. Kethan had Aharon backed up against a wall, and if Ianto hadn’t been able to see the furious look on the older man’s face, he might have thought they were snogging. As it was, he could just barely hear Kethan’s hissed words.

“Fuck you,” he spit, shoving his hands into Aharon’s shoulders, hands twisted into the material of the other man’s shirt. “You don’t know a damn thing.”

“You think it isn’t true?” said Aharon, voice low and taunting. “As if you’d be this angry if it weren’t.”

The punch in the face didn't seem to catch him by surprise, and in an instant Aharon had the advantage, pressing Kethan's face into the wall and kicking his legs apart, unbalancing him as he leaned into his ear.

"Brenneth would still be alive if it weren't for you."

"Aharon!" said Ashild from beside him, though she seemed unwilling to step forward and separate the men. Kethan wasn't waiting for her, and twisted out from Aharon's grasp, elbowing him in the stomach, hard enough to make the man grunt.

"And how many people would be alive if it weren't for you, huh?" he said, shoving at Aharon challengingly. "I couldn't save Brenneth from the mercenaries. But I wasn't one of them. How far away are you from being Brenneth's murderer, Aharon?"

Aharon's fist connected with Kethan's jaw before either of them could move, but it spurred both of them into action, and before anything more could happen, Ashild was pushing Aharon back and Ianto was trying to keep Kethan from getting up off the floor.

"Get out of the way, Ianto," Kethan growled, swiping at his lip and trying to get his feet under him,

"No," Ianto said, pressing him down again, and looking over his shoulder to where Ashild was edging Aharon out of the mess. "He's leaving, anyway." When they had left, he turned back to Kethan. "You're bleeding."

"He pulled it," Kethan said, the fight in him seeming to disappear as Ianto watched. "He could have broken my jaw if he wanted to. A split lip is preferable."

"Infirmary?"

"No. But a drink would be nice."

Ianto nodded and, confident that Kethan wasn't going to go after Aharon for revenge, stood up and headed to the cupboard where the stiffer drinks were kept. He picked out one in a small, spherical bottle that tasted most like scotch, and poured a shallow glass. When he came back round the counter, Kethan had taken a seat on the couch and was licking blood off his thumb.

"Can I get you a cloth of some sort?" Ianto asked pointedly, taking a seat at Kethan's headshake.

"Thanks," Kethan said, taking the glass and downing half of it, wincing at the sting as it passed

over the broken skin. He dropped his hands down, fiddling with the glass between his knees, and looked over at the doorway. “I hope he doesn’t give her any trouble.”

“She can handle it,” Ianto said mildly, wondering if Kethan was as ignorant to their relationship as Ashild thought him to be. “Besides, she isn’t baiting him.”

“Was that what I was doing?” Kethan murmured, more to himself than Ianto. Ianto was burning with questions, about the argument, about Aharon, about what Kethan had meant when he’d taunted Aharon, but he waited. Jack, at least, didn’t respond well to interrogation, and though that could easily have developed over the years in-between, Ianto wasn’t one to press for personal details. Kethan finished his drink, and eventually settled back into the couch and began to talk.

“Aharon didn’t exactly join the *Evening Star* under the best circumstances. There was a whole thing,” he said, waving a hand expansively, “where he sort of hijacked the *Star* and threatened everyone and very nearly destroyed the ship.”

“Why?”

“For money. He was a mercenary. Got paid to kill people, defend people’s personal territory, fight illegal wars. That sort of thing. Like the men who killed Brenneth,” Kethan said, a hard edge to his voice. “The *Star* became useful to him once, so he used it. Didn’t give a damn about anyone on it.”

“What happened? How come he’s still here?”

“His deal went sour, so he made a deal with Opal. He’d be loyal to her, if she wouldn’t turn him over to some people who would have liked to have seen him incinerated.”

Ianto decided not to ask if Kethan literally meant incinerated, as he considered the explanation. It explained a few things he’d observed on the ship, but it also gave him more questions. Aharon seemed well enough trusted by everyone except Kethan, and even by Kethan, for the most part. They followed his orders without question when Varelle wasn’t around; if he were simply a mercenary who handled the guns for them, that was unlikely to be true.

“How long ago was this?” Ianto asked eventually.

“Ten years?” Kethan said, thinking for a moment. “No, twelve.”

“Ah. So he’s one of the crew now.”

Kethan nodded reluctantly. “Opal keeps telling me I need to let it go, that if I’d been here the

whole time, I'd trust him too. Mostly I do, because the Captain's got good judgment about people, but sometimes..." he shrugged. "He didn't have morals then. Maybe he does now, but I don't always believe he's any different from those mercenaries who killed Brenneth." He ducked his head, eyes clenching shut, and Ianto placed a hand on his knee.

"I don't know him very well," Ianto said, squeezing Kethan's knee, "So I'm not one to judge, but I can't see the Captain having someone on board whom she didn't trust completely to protect her team."

Kethan nodded, putting his hand on top of Ianto's. "You're right, you always are. Do you spend as much time talking sense into people – namely me – back home, as you do here?"

Ianto snorted. "Yep. I have no idea why. I try to project this air of silent aloofness, and still everybody comes to me with their problems." He spent a lot of time listening to his teammates – though he wasn't sure most of them even processed that it was him, a real person, sitting there listening while they talked about their weddings or crushes or one-night-stands. Except Jack: Jack listened as well as talked, and for that, Ianto was grateful. Working at Torchwood was isolating enough; before he'd known Jack well enough to be friends, it had been terrible to have no one to talk to.

"What would I do without you, huh?" He frowned. "I guess I am doing without you, now. Or maybe I'm not, maybe I get you back."

Ianto leaned back into the couch, looking up at the ceiling. "Confusing."

"Not once you're used to it, really. But it still kind of sucks that you leave, some way or another."

"Can you be sure?" Ianto asked, curious.

"Well, if I don't know you when I see you next, you can't stay around that long. How old am I when I know you?"

Ianto shrugged. "I don't know. You've never said." It was the most truthful answer he could give to that question, at least without causing some sort of a paradox.

"I can't be that much older," Kethan pressed, poking Ianto in the leg. "Ten years? Twenty? I thought people were more hung up on age, back then. How old do I look?" He frowned, looking anxious. "I hope I look younger than I am. I'd hate to age fast. Time travel can be hell on the complexion, if you're not careful."

"Late thirties? Early forties? It's kind of hard to tell," Ianto said, silently apologizing for the

sort-of-lie.

“So a decade, maybe a little more. Well,” he said, leaning back against the armrest and throwing his legs over Ianto’s lap as he leaned back. “I’ll sleep better knowing I get to see you in not too many years. I just better get you back to myself, huh?”

Ianto hoped the smile he gave Kethan wasn’t as strained as he felt. A decade, a century... however long before Kethan saw him again, it would mean nothing if Ianto never got home.

~

Home, at least in this millennium, was a bustling centre of commerce and trade, mostly due to the fact that humans are a self-centered sort of species and like to keep the books where they can see them. It took two days of waiting in far orbit before they were granted an airlock at one of the several spacedocks orbiting the planet, and almost a whole day before Ianto, Kethan, Ashild and Varelle reached the surface.

“Why Greenwich?” Ianto asked as they finally reached their destination, one shuttle flight, one spacelift, and one equator-to-Britain flight later.

“Historical significance.” Kethan answered, pulling him onto a moving sidewalk and ducking under the protruding trunk of a nearby alien. “Greenwich Mean Time, and all that. Also, a lot of the groundbreaking discoveries about time travel were done in London. Cardiff was pretty pissed, but they decided the instability of the rift meant it was a bad location.”

“Ah,” said Ianto, distracted as he looked around him. Like anyone who lived in London, he’d been in this neighborhood several times, first doing the usual touristy things and later on dates with Lisa. The majority of the people around were human, but well over a quarter were species Ianto hadn’t even seen out on Trell or the cruise ship. The streets, too, were filled with pedestrians, and the only vehicles were trolley-like buses that followed built-in tracks, tucked down below the sidewalks so the little bridges that joined the sides of the road didn’t have to go very high. It was very open, compared to the tube, but Ianto supposed if you didn’t have cars on the street, there was no reason to bury your trains.

“I really don’t like just walking into their territory,” Ashild muttered as they followed Kethan through the busy streets. “Couldn’t they just swoop down and pick you up?”

“Trust me, this is the last place they’re expecting me to be. Besides, we’re not actually going to their official headquarters. They don’t keep their high-risk cells beside the trainees and the bureaucrats.”

“And you have no doubts about your ability to break into their so-called ‘high-risk’ cells?”



Varelle asked.

“None whatsoever,” he said, glancing around as if checking for eavesdroppers. “See, there’s no official word out that I’ve gone rogue. The hit out on me that Kareh found is anonymous, and it’s only the people at the top who know I’m after them. Otherwise, they might have people asking why. It’s not as if Time Agents defect every day. So according to all the lowly guards and secretaries, I’m still a Time Agent, no questions asked.”

“Alright. As long as you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. Actually sure, this time,” Kethan replied with a smile, but it dropped away too soon. “It doesn’t mean the higher-ups won’t be looking for me, but they’re not going to be standing at the gate, waiting to arrest me. We’ll have some time.”

When they reached the large grey building that apparently housed the more secretive parts of the Time Agency – why you would put a secret base in the middle of an enormous city was beyond Ianto, though Torchwood One had, admittedly, been the same – Kethan stopped and turned to them all.

“So, we’re hoping my passcodes haven’t been revoked. They weren’t before I met up with you, and they knew I was working behind their back, so with any luck they haven’t gotten around to it. Ianto and I will go in first and disable their internal sensors so the ladies,” and here he nodded to Ashild and Varelle, “will be able to get in with the guns. Clear?”

At the mutter of agreement, he linked an arm in Ianto’s and walked into the building. It was bright inside, not at all like the warehouse they’d broken into almost a month ago, and there was a large round desk with a very small alien behind it, front and centre. Kethan ignored it and went around behind it, where a large oval wall separated the sparse entrance from the doors to the rest of the building, where several guards were waiting. They watched Kethan as he approached, but never moved or talked as Kethan pressed his wristband and the doors slid open. They continued nonchalantly down the hall for a minute, and then Kethan let go.

“Control room’s on the main floor, just this way. Let’s go,” he said, pointing down a hall on their right. Ianto followed him, feeling self-conscience, but no one stopped them on their way. They reached a heavy metal door – twice as wide as normal – and Kethan opened it. Inside were three people and dozens of screens, flicking between views like the CCTV did in the Hub. The man in the room turned to them as they came in.

“I’m sorry, authorized personnel only. Do you have identification?”

“Yes I do,” said Kethan, flashing the same hologram. Whatever it was, the man seemed to recognize it, and he nodded towards the screen.

“Are you looking for something? Is there a breach we should know about?”

“The Agency got wind of a temporal disturbance on level six,” Kethan said, lying baldly. Ianto couldn’t tell if he’d planned this, or if he was just making it up on the spot. “They’ve sent me here to investigate. Can you pull up the feeds from that level?”

“Certainly. Manya, level six?”

The alien nodded and pressed her control panel, and suddenly a section of the screens switched to display rows of cells; they looked disturbingly like the cells at Torchwood, something like Plexiglas with holes drilled in for air. Perhaps this was where Jack had gotten the idea.

“Play it back, last two hours, please. Not too fast, I need to see it all,” Kethan said, tossing himself into one of the chairs and giving the man a dismissive look. “Can I get a coffee for this? Might take a while. Ianto will go with you, if you need another set of hands.”

“Whatever you like,” the man said, and Ianto realized, suddenly, that he was being very deferential towards Kethan. Perhaps Time Agents didn’t deign to visit the cells very often. “This way, please.”

Ianto followed him out of the room, and down the hall to a small lounge, complete with a fifty-first century coffee maker. He made up drinks for all five of them – excellent, that made this easier – and Ianto dropped a pill in each when he wasn’t looking. This was his small part of the plan, and it was familiar enough. All the practice he’d had with administering retcon was paying off. The less weapons fire, the better, according to Kethan. At least, until they needed to shoot their way out of the place. They made tedious small talk on the walk back that continued in the rear of the control room while Kethan ostensibly watched the feeds from level six, but it didn’t take long before the two human’s passed out. Manya, on the other hand, just looked suspicious as her colleagues drooped to the floor.

“Wha—”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence, and Ianto watched in surprise as her thick body thunked to the floor.

“What happened?”

“Prenacapian,” Kethan said in response, his fingers already flying over the controls. “Immune to that drug. Fortunately, they have an exposed nerve that, if you know what you’re doing, can induce paralysis.”

Ianto looked at the body of the floor skeptically. “So you gave her a Vulcan nerve pinch?”

“A what?” Kethan asked, distractedly, working at the console. When he finished what he was doing, and the screens flickered before settling back into what they’d been showing initially. Nodding in approval, he contacted Ashild and Varelle.

“It’s done. See you at the meeting point,” he said into his wristband, and then left the control room, locking it behind him. “They won’t budge for at least half an hour. Someone will probably notice they’re not responding first, but not for a bit. Thank god for automation.”

They met the women as planned beyond the doors, and they handed over Kethan and Ianto’s blasters. The bright hallways seemed an awfully conspicuous place to be exchanging blasters, but Kethan didn’t seem concerned by it as they found the lift and ascended several levels.

“Aren’t dungeons supposed to be below ground?”

“Why?” asked Kethan as they watched the numbers go up – Galactic A, Ianto could now proudly identify.

“Harder to escape, isn’t it?”

“Not when there’s just as much development underground as there is overhead,” Kethan pointed out as the lift dinged – how come all of London was different but the ding of an elevator remained the same? – and they stepped out. “Level eight, home of this mysterious prisoner. I checked in the control room,” he added at Ashild’s look of curiosity.

The hallway here, too, was white and clean, and there were no cells along it, but Kethan pointed at the regularly spaced doors. “All of the cell blocks are through those doors. There are guards on the other side, so we’ll take them out and leave Ashild and Varelle to make sure nobody disturbs us as we break the good Doctor out.”

After they found the correct block, Kethan opened the door, motioning at Ianto to stay put. Ianto gave Varelle a confused look, but watched as the door slid shut. Not ten seconds passed before Kethan hauled it open with a grin. The body of a guard lay just behind him.

“That’s done. Come on, Jones, let’s find this Doctor of yours.”

“Which cell?”

“Sixty-six.”

Ianto nodded and he followed Kethan down the corridor between the rows of cells that twisted

around, winding back and forth. There was only one way out that Ianto could see; the block seemed to be designed to fit as many cells as possible behind one door. Kethan was chanting the numbers aloud as they got higher.

“...fifty-eight, sixty, sixty-two,” he said, watching the even side of the hall. “sixty-four, sixty—”

He came to a halt in front of cell sixty-six, and Ianto caught up to him, peering into the dark cell through the clear plastic. When his eyes focused, he felt the bottom of his stomach drop out. The man chained to the far wall was not wearing a pinstripe suit, wasn't far too skinny and was certainly not the Doctor. For a moment, Ianto couldn't speak at all, too terrified he was wrong, or right, but then the man looked up, his eyes – *god, his eyes* – meeting Ianto's in certain recognition.

“Jack?” said Ianto, pressing a palm to the glass, either to get closer and be sure or to steady himself.

“Me?” said Kethan.

## Chapter 15

~

"Oh my God," Ianto breathed, staring into the cell. It was Jack; there was no question about that. Older than Kethan, but more than that he couldn't tell from here. He looked around frantically for the lock. "Open it. Now."

Kethan nodded, apparently speechless, and pulled him back by the arm before tapping his wristband. The door slid open with a hiss and Ianto rushed in.

"Jack," he said again, his mind racing. Ianto knelt down beside him and tugged at the cuffs where they were bolted to the wall. "Kethan, can you--"

"Yep," said Kethan, pushing him away from the wall, and starting in on the cuffs, leaving Ianto kneeling in front of Jack.

"Do you--" he started, staring at Jack's face. He looked older, but not a lot. Maybe forty-five, if he had to guess, but of course, that didn't mean anything. Not with Jack.

"Hello, Ianto," Jack said, and if Ianto hadn't been standing he might have crumpled with relief. Jack *knew* him. Jack smiled and looked over to where Kethan was unlocking the second cuff.

"What is it with people and bondage, seriously? It's really ruining the kink for me."

Ianto laughed, more out of hysteria than humour, and touched a hand to Jack's face, running it through the sweat and grime. "How are you here? *Why* are you here?"

"Later. Right now, Kethan needs to go back to Opal."

Kethan sat back on his haunches with a frown. "Why?"

"Because," Jack said, not moving from where he was propped against the wall, "They're about to be ambushed, and they could really use some back-up."

Ianto half-expected Kethan to protest, but he didn't, just gave Jack a hard look and then a sharp nod. He stood up, unholstered his blaster, and exited the cell, leaving Ianto alone with Jack. Ianto took a deep breath and turned back to Jack, his mind racing with the impossibility of it all. *Two* Jacks. Any other time and he might have thought he was asleep and having a very good dream.

"How old are you?"

"Pass me your blaster."

Ianto blinked. "That wasn't an answer."

"No, it wasn't, and I'll make it an order if it needs to be, but please, just do it," Jack said, his voice level as he reached out a hand. Ianto shuffled back, just out of reach. Something wasn't right.

"Why?" he asked, suspicious.

Jack rolled his eyes. "Because my legs are broken, and the only way I'm going to walk out of here is if I shoot myself. I don't think you want to do it, so *pass me your blaster*."

"What?" Ianto said sharply. He knew Jack healed fastest when dead, but killing himself seemed awfully drastic. "Can't we just help you out of here?"

"No, not if what I remember is right," Jack said, shaking his head. His hair was too long, and he blew it out of his eyes. "Ianto, Kethan can't know I'm immortal. He's going to come back in five minutes, really annoyed because I lied to him. If I'm not alive again by then, time will go to hell. Please don't let your scruples destroy the fabric of the universe."

Ianto was silent, watching Jack's outstretched hand. Logically, Ianto knew Jack's plan was a

rational one, and that it would be hard to move him out of here, but he had always made a point of not treating Jack's life (lives) as expendable. He looked out of the cell, into the bright corridor, and considered his options. If Jack remembered himself walking out of here, well...

The blaster was cool and sleek in his hand as he eased it out of his holster and passed it to Jack. Jack smiled, and turned the barrel on himself. Ianto barely shut his eyes before hearing the whine that followed. When he opened them again, Jack was slumped against the wall, blaster slipping from the hand on his lap. Ianto reached over and unwound the warm fingers from the trigger and put it away, before finding a comfortable seat on the floor. Waiting would always be the worst part.

Ianto spent the next two minutes examining Jack. His hair was longer than his own Jack's, much longer than Kethan's, and he spared a moment to brush it back from Jack's face. He was dressed in a grey jumpsuit that looked to be prison issue and black boots. His face was grimy, covered in sweat and flecks of blood, and his eyes - Ianto couldn't bear to reach out and shut them - were the same bright blue. How old was he? He could be any age over a couple of centuries, Ianto presumed, but that hardly narrowed it down. He remembered Ianto, at least, so he couldn't be millions of years old; for all his age, Ianto knew that he had a better memory than Jack.

The minutes crawled by, Ianto keeping nervous watch for Kethan until he remembered what Jack had said about his legs being broken. If his body was trying to heal them, it would be easier if the bones were aligned. He reached out and pressed his hands on either side of Jack's outstretched legs, making sure they weren't bent at any odd angles. He was partway up the second leg when it twitched under him, and hands came up to his shoulders.

"That was quieter than normal," Ianto observed, feeling irrationally relieved that Jack hadn't chosen that death as his final one.

"Practice makes perfect," Jack said with a grin as he hauled himself up. "Oh, standing. Very nice, I like this."

"Been a while?" Ianto asked, amused.

"I wouldn't tell them how to fly the TARDIS," Jack said, shrugging as he strolled out of the cell. "Their interrogator was a bit old-fashioned."

"I suppose they didn't anticipate you rescuing yourself," Ianto said, following Jack down the corridor.

Jack stopped and turned to him. "If I recall correctly - and I might not - it was your idea to come for me."

"I thought you were the Doctor," Ianto said, slipping into a grin as they rounded a corner. "If I'd known it was you, I might have warned them away."

"Should I be worried?" said Kethan, who was standing in the corridor, arms crossed. "My future self isn't above lying to me, apparently."

Jack walked over and clapped Kethan - himself - on the shoulder. "Sorry, kiddo. I needed a few minutes alone with Ianto. Timelines and all that, you know the deal."

"Did you just call me 'kiddo'?" Kethan asked, looking skeptical. "And what do I call you? Me? Kethan age... whatever age you are?"

"Jack will do fine," Jack said. "It's how Ianto knows me and I'll answer to it. Calling you Kethan will be strange, but it's straightforward enough."

"You've never met yourself before?" Ianto asked, mostly of Kethan. "Doesn't that happen sometimes?"

"Nope. It's generally considered a bad thing to cross your own timeline." He pointed a finger at Jack. "Which makes me wonder exactly what you're doing here."

Jack shrugged, and urged them onward. "Bit inevitable, really. Besides, I was locked up. Not as if I could run away from myself."

Kethan nodded, considering. "So you must be having major déjà-vu, right now. You've had all these conversations before, only from the other side. Unless..." he trailed off, looking thoughtful. "Unless I do lose these memories and you don't have them back?"

"I don't remember the details of every conversation," Jack admitted. "But I do remember what happens. And what happens right now, is you stop asking me questions and we go up to the roof."

Ianto started. "The roof?"

"Yep. I'm good on roofs, remember?" He flashed Ianto a broad grin, and Ianto resisted the urge to kiss him. If he remembered that, he couldn't be too old.

"And, do tell, what are we going to do once we're on the roof?" Kethan asked. Ianto could tell he wasn't completely at ease, that he was still uncertain about how much to trust Jack.

"You'll see," Jack replied, stepping around his younger self and heading for the exit. Kethan

and Ianto trailed after him, exchanging a skeptical glance.

“Are you sure we can trust him?” Kethan whispered to Ianto.

“He’s you!” Ianto hissed back.

“That doesn’t mean anything!”

Ianto rolled his eyes and pushed Kethan forward. “You can trust him. Besides, you get out of this alive no matter what, so what have you got to lose?”

Kethan shot him a look, but before he could say anything, Jack reached the cellblock exit and called back to them.

“Gentlemen! Stop gossiping about me and get your blasters out.”

“Am I actually going to need it this time?” Kethan grumped, but did as he was told. The three of them left the cellblock, where Opal and Ashild were waiting, tense and ready, on the other side. Ashild gave Jack a long look.

“Guess you weren’t lying,” she said slowly. Opal had a sort of funny look on her face, but she quickly schooled her features back into an impassive, professional mask.

“Out?”

“Up,” Jack said, shaking his head. “With any luck, we’ve got a ride waiting for us.”

Opal nodded, shrugging. “If you say so.”

They went back to the lift and waited for it to arrive in silence, Jack leaning nonchalantly against the wall, watching the numbers count up while the rest of them exchanged surreptitious glances with each other. Ianto wished he knew how old this Jack was; he had absolutely no idea how much he could assume he knew about this man. He had told Kethan that this Jack could be trusted, but could he even be sure? *It’s how Ianto knows me.* Did that mean that wasn’t what he went by anymore? He’d changed his name once; there was no reason to assume he wouldn’t do it again.

The lift dinged, and they got on, Jack asking aloud for the roof as the doors slid shut. They’d made it to the forty-eighth floor when the car shuddered to a halt.

“That’s not good,” Ashild said, after twice requesting that the doors open.



“Nope,” said Jack, reaching over and grabbing Kethan’s hand, pulling it towards him. Kethan protested for a moment, before realizing that Jack was accessing his wristband.

“Where’s yours?”

“Storage, probably,” Jack muttered, and then the door to the lift slid open. They weren’t quite aligned with either floor, and a couple inches of what Ianto presumed was the forty-ninth floor was visible at the top of the lift. They ducked under the ceiling and jumped to the forty-eighth, looking down the empty hall.

“No guards, yet?”

“This isn’t a prison floor,” Kethan said, breaking into a jog. “It’ll take them a moment—”

The sound of weapons’ fire cut him off, and they threw themselves against the wall, weapons ready.

“Thanks for the warning,” Kethan breathed at Jack, who was pressed shoulder-to-shoulder, next to him. It was a bit bizarre, seeing their identical builds and faces side-by-side, but Ianto focused down the hall instead. Ashild and Opal were already firing in opposite directions, towards the turns in the hall, and Ianto picked a direction and aimed his blaster, firing when a uniformed guard stepped around a corner. The man dropped.

“Both sides,” Opal said in the sudden quiet. “We’re cornered.”

“Which way?” Kethan asked Jack.

“I don’t know!” Jack said with a – really, too cheerful for the situation – laugh. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“You’ve been here before!” Kethan protested, flipping open his wristband and calling up the building blueprints anyway. There was a shot as Ashild and Opal took out another guard.

“It’s been a while,” Jack said, pointing to an area on the three-dimensional map. “There are the nearest stairs – to the left, then?”

“Fine,” Kethan grumbled, turning off the blueprint and shooting the next guard to brave the corner. “If I didn’t know that they’d just keep sending people, I’d say we could stay here until we’ve taken them all out. Us first? I’m not going to die, apparently.”

“Apparently. Stand *down* if you feel the timeline bending,” Jack insisted as they moved towards the left.

“Yes sir,” Kethan drawled, falling into position just behind Jack’s shoulder. Ianto followed the two of them, and Ashild and Opal brought up the rear. When they reached the corner, Jack motioned for silence and made some gestures at the group that Ianto couldn’t quite make sense of. The others, apparently, understood fine, and they moved up beside Jack and Kethan, pushing Ianto back. He started to protest, but Ashild elbowed him in the side, glaring at him.

At Jack’s nod, Opal tossed something out into the hall and Ashild slapped her hand over Ianto’s eyes. When she uncovered them, the four of them had moved around the corner, firing their blasters.

“Photonic grenade,” Ashild explained as they moved quickly through the corridor. “Blinds anyone foolish enough to keep their eyes open.”

“Lessons later, here’s the stairs,” Jack called, skidding to a stop in front of a door. “Kethan?”

Kethan had opened his wristband, but he looked up and shook his head. “I’m locked out.”

Varelle drew her blaster and fired at the door. It melted down the middle, leaving a hole just large enough for them to fit through. “Not locked out anymore.”

Jack laughed and clapped her on the shoulder. “Good to see you again, Opal.”

“I’d say likewise, she said, stepping through the hole in the door, “but I have to say I wasn’t really missing you.”

“No,” Jack said, ushering the rest of them through and then following them. “I would hope not – ack!” He dove through the wall just as blaster fire flew past him. “I don’t suppose you can seal that up?”

“Not if I want to be able to fire this again,” she said, holding up the sonic blaster that had made the hole. “How many floors do we have to go up?”

“Twelve,” answered Kethan, leaning over the rail in the middle of the square staircase. “About ten too many, I’d say.” Ashild and Jack were holding off the guards outside their floor, but Ianto could hear voices shouting above, and feet on the stairs.

“Not if you have a grappling gun,” Ashild said.

“Yes, but we don’t,” Kethan said impatiently, sniping off a guard coming up the stairs below.

“You don’t,” she said, dropping her rucksack onto the floor and kicking it towards him. “But I

do. Jotir suggested I take it, and I've learned to trust his whims. Five zip ties, too, because I can count."

Kethan looked at her with wide eyes, and then laughed. "Have I mentioned I love you recently?" He dug into the rucksack and pulled out a weapon of some sort, turning it over in his hands. "Oh, invisible line, nice."

"Considering there are five of us, we'll need it," Ashild said.

Kethan nodded and turned to Varelle. "Cover me, I'm going to try and get it in the centre."

Varelle leaned over the banister and started firing up and down, alternating. Ianto caught on and joined her, firing down to the lower floors so she could focus on up. Kethan, meanwhile, leaned as far out into the centre of the staircase as possible and shot the grappling gun straight up. There was a faint whirr, and Ianto could just barely make out a shimmering line heading up from the gun to the ceiling, twelve floors away. After wrapping the gun around the banister, Kethan dug back into the rucksack, tossing each of them a small grey handle-shaped object.

"I'm guessing we're going up?" Ianto said, wrapping his fingers through the handhold and trying to focus on the shimmering line.

"Yep. Opal, you first." Opal nodded, and stepped over, bringing her handle up and somehow attaching it to the line. She swung her feet over the banister and let go. Before Ianto could process anything, she was flying up the line towards the ceiling.

"Go, Ianto, now. They know we're coming, so I suggest you shoot the whole way up. Here," Kethan said, taking his hand, still wrapped in the handle-thing – zip tie – and brought it over to the line out of the gun. There was a faint hiss and Ianto could feel the zip tie latch onto the line. He gave it an experimental tug – it didn't move.

"As soon as you put any weight on it, you'll go up. It'll slow down enough for you not to crash into the ceiling, but I suggest you get off it as quickly as possible, since we'll be following. And for God's sake, don't let go."

Ianto nodded and, taking a deep breath, jumped over the banister. For a second, Ianto thought it hadn't worked, that he was going to fall forty-eight floors to his death, but then there was a sharp tug and he was zipping upwards. Blaster at hip, he held down on the trigger, but he went by the other floors so fast he could barely register the occasional guard. He came to a halt just before the ceiling, and then hands gripped his waist and pulled him over to the floor.

"Gotcha," Varelle said, making sure he was steady. She didn't have a chance to say anything more before Ashild appeared and Varelle was pulling her over as well.

“Won’t they just shoot the line?” Ianto asked, watching as Kethan, and then Jack appeared.

“It’s not physical. Just energy,” Ashild explained, finding the door. “Hard to shoot. Guys, here’s the roof exit.” She brought out her blaster and fired, melting another hole in the door and climbing through. Ianto followed her out, and they were on the roof. Buildings rose up around them still – apparently sixty stories wasn’t very high, for London. The flat expanse of the roof stretched out before them, broken only by a few entrances to the other staircases and lifts. The other three stepped onto the roof, and Jack reached over for Kethan’s wristband again.

“You really need your own,” Kethan grumped, but Jack ignored him, tapping dramatically on the wristband before closing it.

“Watch the exits, our ride should be here in a minute.”

“Who’s our ride?” Ashild asked. “And how do they know they need to come here?”

Jack just shook his head, taking up a position beside the staircase and waiting for guards. Ashild shrugged, and trained her blaster on another exit, taking out several guards who stepped out of it. They were silent for the next five minutes, and then there was a low rumbling overhead. Ianto spotted what looked like a small shuttle coming down from the sky. Varelle let out a low noise.

“Kethan – Jack – whomever you are – is that my shuttle?”

“Yep,” Jack said with a grin, watching the shuttle land in the middle of the roof. “Sure is.”

“Who’s flying it?” Ashild demanded. Jack didn’t answer, just ran across the tarmac. Ashild and Kethan exchanged glances, and then ran after him, Varelle and Ianto trailing behind. The hatch to the shuttle had lifted up, and Ianto followed them inside just soon enough to hear Kethan’s exclamation of “You bastard.”

“If you’d close the hatch, Captain, we can get out of here,” Jotir said calmly from the helm, not turning around. Ianto watched in surprise as Varelle stood, motionless, for a few seconds before turning to a control panel and closing the hatch.

“How did you know?” Ashild demanded as they squished into the bench seats at the back of the shuttle.

“Let’s just say Jotir’s known me a lot longer than he’s known Kethan,” Jack said smugly, legs stretched out, taking up most of the floor space as he sprawled on the bench next to Ianto and across from Ashild and Kethan.

“That makes no sense,” Ashild grumbled, giving him a sideways look.

“Well, it does,” Kethan admitted, looking thoughtful. “Did you tell him that he needed to come get us, before he ever joined the *Evening Star*?”

“Yes,” Jotir said, stepping back to join them; Varelle had taken the helm. “Actually he told me the first time we met that we would meet again and before in a couple decades.”

Ianto blinked. “The English language really isn’t designed to properly explain time travel, is it?”

Kethan gave him an odd look, “We’re not speaking English – oh. Well, Galactic A accommodates it fine, but the fish is probably doing the best it can, translation wise.” He shrugged. “Anyway, why didn’t Jotir just tell us we’d find you?”

“You didn’t know,” Jack said placidly. “Besides, you might have been suspicious, what with him feeding you the data trail.”

Varelle made a noise of surprise and turned back from the helm. “Kareh did tell me he couldn’t trace the static properly. You planted it?” she asked Jotir, who shook his head.

“No, I just found it, because I knew what I was looking for. I just made it a little easier for Kareh to locate.”

Ashild shook her head. “But – you don’t like Kethan!”

“No, I don’t,” Jotir said over Kethan’s noise of protest, ridges fanning out and then bunching in as he took a seat. “I like – are we calling you Jack?” Jack nodded. “I like Jack just fine.”

“He’s me!” Kethan pouted, but he didn’t seem interested in arguing the point, just slouched back in the chair, eerily matching Jack’s pose.

Ianto observed the two of them. He still had no idea what to think about Jack’s age – one moment he thought that maybe, just maybe he wasn’t far from his own Jack, and the next he was convinced he was unthinkably older. The conversation was odd on the return to the *Evening Star*, the crew trying to determine exactly how planned Jotir’s actions were – not that planned, apparently he’d joined the crew by accident, not because Jack had asked him to – and Jack and Kethan having bizarre ‘remember the – yes – when I – and then – exactly’ conversations that generally ended with the two of them grinning like maniacs.

“So weird,” Ashild muttered, watching the Kethan and his older, dirtier version.

“Yep,” Ianto agreed.

She shot him a look. “I dunno. If I were you, I’d be pretty thrilled. Isn’t he almost your Kethan? Two versions of your lover? Not bad.”

“Um,” Ianto said noncommittally. “Yeah, I guess. But wouldn’t that be, I don’t know, like incest?”

“More like masturbation,” Kethan injected, turning from his conversation with himself. “Except, you know, with two dicks and four hands.”

Ianto blushed, and sunk back into the bench, trying to make himself invisible as the rest of them – Jotir excluded – discussed what they’d do with themselves, given the opportunity.

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According to Kethan, they broke several transport laws getting off the planet surface, so when they reached the station the *Evening Star* was docked at, they abandoned the shuttle and snuck past security to get to the ship. Apparently, traffic around Earth was so bad they had a hard time tracking individuals who broke the law, and as long as they left the shuttle behind, authorities wouldn’t be able to – or at least be interested in – tracking them.

“But the Time Agency? Won’t they want Jack back?” Ianto had asked.

“Yeah, but it’s not like the Ministry of Interplanetary Transport and the Time Agency get along.” Jack had explained.

Jack had given Varelle some coordinates, and the *Evening Star* had left Earth behind, much to Ashild’s annoyance; she’d wanted to see a little more of the mother planet, but as Varelle pointed out again, this hadn’t been a sightseeing mission.

Eventually, Varelle shooed Jack off to the showers, and Kethan and Ianto returned to their quarters to change and stow their weapons. Jack joined them, wrapped in a towel, his still too-long hair plastered to his head, and Kethan tossed him some clothes.

“I’m getting sort of tired of sharing my clothes,” Kethan pointed out, slipping a new shirt over his head.

Jack grimaced. “Sorry. At least I won’t stretch them out. No middle-age pudg here.” He wasn’t lying; his stomach was as toned as ever, and Ianto wanted to touch it, just to make sure he was real. “I sort of wanted to talk to Ianto alone. But take your time, please,” he said, taking

a seat on the bed and wiggling into a pair of trousers.

Kethan stood in the middle of the room for a moment, and then shrugged, taking Ianto by the wrist and giving him a firm kiss before stepping out of the room. Ianto watched him go before turning back to Jack.

“How old are you?”

Jack sighed. “You’re not going to let that one go, are you?”

Ianto shook his head and folded his arms across his chest. Jack scrubbed a hand across his face.

“I – mostly – haven’t left linear time since I landed on Earth in the 1860’s.”

Ianto’s stomach dropped as he did the math. “So, that makes you... Thirty-five and three thousand and...”

“Well, just under two hundred years,” Jack finished. “I’ve missed a decade here or there, so I tend to round to thirty-two hundred.”

Ianto didn’t know what to say to that. He started to say something a couple of times; what, he wasn’t exactly sure, before eventually settling on; “but you have a TARDIS; why stay in linear time?”

Jack shrugged. “I have forever. It’s still going to be forever if I jump around. Besides,” he continued, gesturing around. “It’s hard to make friends if you don’t stick around.”

“You make friends?” Ianto asked, skeptically. The Jack he knew didn’t seem to be too interested in long-term attachments, Torchwood Three or no. They seemed to be more accidental than anything.

“Yep. Best way to pass the time, really – and no,” he said with a grin, “I don’t just mean sex.”

“Good,” Ianto said, faintly, trying to process everything. He shook his head and took a seat next to Jack on the bed.

“I’m surprised you remember me,” he said quietly, not looking at Jack. “Three millennia is a long time.”

Jack reached out and took his hand. “Do you want the truth?”

“Yep,” Ianto said in a low voice, not sure if he was being entirely honest.

“I *have* forgotten a lot. I could have told someone you looked Welsh, but I didn’t remember how tall you were, or what colour your eyes were, or those things. I have pictures, somewhere, but I haven’t taken them out in a couple of centuries.”

“Easier to forget?”

“Easier not to dwell,” Jack said, and it sort of hurt, except Ianto knew he was right.

“You remembered the roof thing,” Ianto said after a bit, trying to resist tracing patterns on the back of Jack’s hand with his thumb. This *wasn’t* his Jack, and he needed to remember that.

Jack shrugged. “Some things stick with you. That conversation was... a turning point, for me. I have a lot of strong memories from that time, I just forget a lot of the in-between details.”

They sat in awkward silence until Jack let go of his hand and twisted to face him, bringing up his own hand to touch Ianto’s face and running his thumb down Ianto’s jaw, calluses catching on Ianto’s stubble.

“It’s good to see you,” Jack said, smiling at him fondly. “Really, you have no idea. You get...” he trailed off, touching Ianto’s lips and then tracing down his throat. Ianto shivered as Jack continued. “You get used to it, after a while. Losing people. I didn’t think I would, at first, but I guess you can adapt to anything, in the end. But that doesn’t mean I’m not absolutely thrilled to get to see you again.” He said the last bit fiercely, and he pressed his hand to Ianto’s heart, his other one coming up to grip Ianto’s knee.

Neither of them moved. Ianto stared at Jack, looking everywhere but his eyes. *Not his Jack, not his Jack* he chanted to himself, but in a way, he was. Unlike Kethan, to whom Ianto was a stranger, this Jack knew him, remembered him, however faintly. Ianto didn’t know what to do, until Jack started to pull away, and Ianto grabbed his hand and pulled him in, kissing him hard. Jack didn’t respond for a moment, but then his hand wrapped around Ianto’s neck, pulling him in tighter until he was almost in Jack’s lap.

“Oh, god,” Jack groaned as they pulled apart to breathe. “I haven’t kissed anyone in two years.”

Ianto pressed a kiss to his jaw and slipped a hand under his shirt. “You were in prison that long?”

“Yep,” Jack said, arching into his touch and pressing a palm against the small of Ianto’s back. Ianto pushed against him, urging him back against the wall.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” Ianto breathed, pulling Jack’s shirt over his head. Jack raised his



arms obligingly, smiling when he emerged, his hair sticking up at odd angles.

“Why?”

“Because – ugh,” he grunted as Jack ran the tips of his fingers up Ianto’s sides under his shirt, tugging it over his head as well. “Kethan.”

“I won’t care,” Jack said, pressing his hand to the bulge in Ianto’s trousers and squeezing wickedly. “Well, he won’t care once he finds out he has to go two years without sex. I might be a little annoyed at first.” He looked a little apologetic. “I don’t really remember.”

“Okay, whatever,” Ianto said, lifting his hips up to encourage Jack to move. “Jack, Kethan, you, you’re all the same person. Fine. Not cheating. *Touch me.*”

“As responsive as ever, I see,” Jack smirked, pushing Ianto off him and onto his back.

“You remember *that*?” Ianto asked, faking a scandalized tone, or as scandalized as he could manage with Jack running his hands up his legs and to his belt.

“All the important things,” Jack laughed, leaning down to tongue at Ianto’s naval. “Funny what you remember in the right situation. Like, I just remembered that you loved it when I did this.” He licked a wet stripe across Ianto’s hipbone, and Ianto jerked up in response.

“And I remember that you loved it when I did this,” he said, pressing his fingers into Ianto’s thighs, pushing them apart as he mouthed Ianto’s cock through his trousers.

“Fuck,” Ianto yelped, twisting his hands into Jack’s hair. “How about you stop telling me what I used to love and just do it?”

Jack crawled back up and rested his weight on his elbows, watching Ianto with a serious expression.

“I’m not Jack,” he said, and for a confused moment Ianto thought he was saying he was somebody else entirely.

“I know,” Ianto replied, just as seriously. “Should I call you something else in case I forget?”

Jack considered, and then shook his head. “No, Jack’s fine. I still use it often enough. I just don’t want to confuse you.”

Ianto laughed and gripped Jack’s hips. “I’m in the fifty-first century, sleeping with a man who will be my lover, about to have sex with a man who used to be my lover, trying to get back to

the man who is. And they're all the same man. I think a little confusion is inevitable." He ground his hips into Jack's, who dropped his head into Ianto's neck, breathing hotly against sensitive skin. "Unless you aren't interested, that is."

Jack bit his neck in response. "I'm game if you are."

"Good," said Ianto, flipping them over so he was on top. He sat up and started in on Jack's trousers before looking up at Jack with a grin. Jack was watching him steadily, and at first Ianto thought he caught a glimpse of something like pain in Jack's eyes, but it was gone before he could be sure.

## Chapter 16

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Jack's head was pillowed on his chest, his hand splayed across Ianto's stomach as Ianto toyed with his hair. The silence was warm and companionable, if a little bittersweet, and Ianto was loath to break it, so Jack spoke first.

"How are you liking the fifty-first century?"

Ianto cocked an eyebrow, even though Jack couldn't see. "Fine," he said, archly, and then laughed. "It makes you make a little more sense, if nothing else."

"That it would," Jack responded, propping himself up on an elbow and looking down. Ianto reached a hand up to his face, tracing the fine crow's feet at the corner of his eyes, touching the faint hint of grey at his temples. It wasn't much, but it was enough to remind Ianto just how old this man, this being, this whatever-he-was, was.

"It *is* good to see you, you know," Jack said, startling Ianto out of his consideration of Jack's face. The look he was giving Ianto scared him a little; it was focused and intense, and though Ianto had seen it before, he'd rarely seen it directed at him, except in anger. He flushed slightly and sat up, feeling less awkward once he was level with Jack.

"I'm sure you've met plenty of people over the years." He waved off whatever Jack started to say to that, and pushed on. "Doesn't it get boring?"

Jack blinked, but he didn't pretend not to know what Ianto was asking. He tilted his head and gave Ianto a thoughtful look, glancing down his naked body and then back up to his face.

"No, not really. I mean, it's awful hard for anyone to surprise me with the actual motions,

anymore, but that's never been why I enjoy sex." He smiled at Ianto's frown. "It's not about the pleasure, Ianto, although there still is that, and it's still a pretty damn good way to pass the time. Really, it's about the connection."

Ianto gave him a skeptical look and Jack laughed.

"You don't believe it?"

"Oh, I believe in *connecting* with people," Ianto said, tugging the sheet over his lap and bringing up his knees. "I'm just not sure that's what you were interested in, back in 2008. Not at first, at least."

Jack shrugged. "Like I said, it was a turning point for me. It wasn't so much that I didn't believe in the connection as that I was *scared* of it."

"I see," Ianto said, unsurprised. He knew this, or at least, had guessed it. For all Jack's experience, his hesitancy when it came to forming relationships that went outside the normal chain of command had told him that much.

"And like I said," Jack continued. "It's not all about the sex. People in general, knowing them, they're always different, even if the galaxy on a whole stays the same. Keeps the monotony at bay."

"So you're not the leader of the known world?" Ianto joked. "Not using your powers for the benefit of mankind?"

"Mankind?" Jack said, looking scandalized. "God, no, that leaves out all the interesting species." He shook his head. "No, politics have never been my thing. It's just the, what's that old expression? Same shit, different day?"

"That's the one," Ianto said with a smile. "But people aren't?"

"Well," Jack said, lifting a hand and waving it back and forth. "Sometimes. But not if you actually get to know them."

Ianto nodded. "So you're not lonely."

Jack shook his head. "Not constantly, no. No more than anyone else."

"Good," Ianto said decidedly. "I was worried you would be."

"Ah," Jack said with a soft smile. "Honestly? So was I."

You were, then. Ianto thought. He'd seen Jack, alone in his office, or standing off to the side, watching his team. He'd seen him once, watching a group of young women eating chips in the Plass, laughing and joking, and for a minute he'd thought Jack was checking them out, but when he got closer he recognized the look on Jack's face as wistfulness, not lust. He'd stopped walking, then, and waited until Jack took the invisible lift back down to the Hub before crossing the Plass to the tourist office. There were some questions he had no idea how to ask his own Jack.

"Tell me something," Ianto said eventually. Jack nodded, and he continued. "Why were you piloting the TARDIS? Where's the Doctor?"

"Ah," Jack said with a laugh, leaning back against the headrest. "I was piloting the TARDIS because it's mine."

Ianto frowned. "You got a TARDIS?"

"I *built* a TARDIS," Jack corrected. "Took me a while, but it's not like I didn't have the time. In fact," he said, looking thoughtful. "You've seen the beginnings of it. The coral, on my desk? It's a baby TARDIS, if you will."

Ianto did recall. He'd even dusted it, but it had never occurred to him that it was anything valuable.

"And here I thought you had just visited the Great Barrier Reef, sir," he said with a smile. Jack chuckled, and Ianto asked his previous question. "But what about the Doctor? Where is he?"

Jack shrugged. "Which one?"

"Ah," Ianto started, and then bit his cheek as he thought. "I, er, I don't know."

"Well," Jack said, taking pity on Ianto's temporal confusion. "I haven't seen him in a couple centuries, if that's what you mean. He's around." He waved his hand, vaguely.

Ianto nodded and, wisely, left it at that.

"If you have a TARDIS," he asked after a minute, "Why do you live in linear time?"

"Oh. Well," Jack started, looking thoughtful. "Because it doesn't really matter if I do it all in one go, or break it up into pieces. I'm still going to live through it all."

"Until when?" Ianto asked, curious. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know the answer, but

it popped out before he could stop it.

“Until the end of time,” Jack sighed, intoning it in a way that suggested he’d said it, or at least thought it many times before.

“What’s the end of time, though?” Ianto pressed. “Is there a Big Crunch, and that’s it for you?”

“No,” Jack said, shaking his head. “No, it’s entropy all the way. Heat death of the universe, and all that. Just cold, black space as far as you can go.”

“Well,” Ianto said, casting around for an appropriate response. “Sounds charming.”

Jack laughed. “Doesn’t it? It’s a good few hundred trillion years off, so I try not to think about it. But really, that’s what the TARDIS is for.”

“How so?”

“If I ever get to a time when no one else is left, I’ll just go back to the beginning and start all over again.”

Ianto considered it. It made sense, in a way, but for some reason it didn’t seem plausible.

“You’re three thousand years old, right?”

“Or so. Yeah.”

“Not that old at all, compared to a trillion years.”

“Nope,” Jack said, looking down at his hands and then back up with a grin Ianto knew perfectly well was forced. “And far to go before I sleep, right?”

“But you get older. You are older.”

“Yes, but,” Jack said, “it’s slowing down. I get older slower. If that makes any sense.”

Ianto nodded thoughtfully, trying to sort out the logic of it all, until something clicked.

“Have you met older versions of yourself?”

Jack shook his head. “No, it’s a bad idea to cross your own timeline. This one works, it’s part of history as long as we’re careful, and I’m a bit of a unique case because I’m technically a fixed point so I can interact with myself, but—”

“But you should have,” Ianto interrupted, stretching out his legs and shifting to face Jack. Jack looked confused, but he pressed on. “No, listen. Every time you make it to the end of the universe and come back to the beginning, there’d be another one of you floating around. If you really lived forever, then there would be *infinitely* many of you floating around now. Which means, logically speaking, you’d run into yourself.”

Jack just stared at him, mouth open and eyes wide, before breaking into loud, startling laughter and swinging his legs over Ianto’s, hands pressed to either side of his face.

“Ianto Jones, you—”

But whatever Ianto Jones was, he didn’t get to find out, because the door slid open and Kethan stepped in, stopping just inside the doorway as it slid shut. He looked at the two of them, mouth pressed in a hard line.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said, hands on hips, “but we need to sort out what’s happening next.”

Ianto was flushing furiously under Jack, trying to push him off to go find some trousers. Jack was having none of it, and pressed his hands to his shoulders, effectively pinning him to the bed.

“Alright,” Jack said easily, leaning over and kissing Ianto on the forehead before letting up and rolling off the bed, unashamed as always in his nakedness. He threw his clothes on and stepped past Kethan, spinning in the doorway to face them.

“See you down there,” Jack said with a grin and a wink, and then stepped back and disappeared down the hall. Ianto watched him go with a sort of nervous apprehension before looking up to meet Kethan’s eyes.

“Didn’t make *him* wait very long, did you?”

Ianto rolled his eyes and got up, searching the floor for his shirt and trousers.

“So much for ‘no such thing as jealousy’,” he muttered, finding underpants and slipping them on, trousers following. He managed a glance over at Kethan, feeling a little less like he’d been caught with his trousers down now that... well, now that his trousers weren’t down.

“I’m not jealous,” Kethan said, his mouth twisting into a pout at Ianto’s skeptical look. “Well, I wouldn’t be if he were someone random, like Ashild or something. But he’s... he’s me!”

“Really?” Ianto asked archly. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Kethan growled and stepped in front of him, shoving him gently in the chest. “Don’t play dumb, Ianto. It doesn’t suit you.”

Ianto slipped around Kethan and found his socks, sitting down on the bed to do them up. “He’s *you*,” he said, a little less sarcastically. “How can you be jealous of yourself?”

“Because, oh, I don’t know. How am I supposed to compete with myself? Me – but better!” Kethan said, sounding frustrated. When Ianto looked up from tying his boots, Kethan had a distressed look on his face – not angry, but actually worried, and Ianto suddenly felt guilty. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, trying to neaten it. It was longer than he liked, he’d only gotten it cut once since he’d left, and it never sat neatly after sex without some convincing.

“You don’t have to compete with him *because* he’s you,” Ianto said, standing up at Kethan’s snort. “No, look. You, Jack, him, I can’t... you all mean different things to me, but I couldn’t.... care for one of you and not the other.”

“Love, you mean,” Kethan said, face impassive.

Ianto shrugged. “Sure. Anyway,” he continued hastily. “If he’s you in the future than I just had sex with you. In the future. Your future.” He trailed off, confused. Kethan stared at him for a moment before barking out a harsh laugh.

“I suppose if you put it that way,” he said with a shrug. “I still don’t like it. If anything, he’ll wear you out for me. He gets you again! I don’t, for, well, years. Apparently.”

“How do you know he gets me again?” Ianto asked.

Kethan gave him a look. “You get back, don’t you?” Silence. “You didn’t ask?”

“I...” Ianto trailed off. He hadn’t asked. He’d forgotten, really, forgotten his own Jack in the face of this new one, this ancient one. His own Jack, millennia away, probably *frantic* with worry, if nothing else. Ianto felt horribly guilty, more so that he did towards Kethan for sleeping with older-Jack, by far. “I forgot,” he said in a low voice, pushing past Kethan and out to the hall.

“Huh,” Kethan said, following. “I would have thought that was your first question.”

Ianto didn’t answer; he couldn’t very well explain that there had been other things on his mind, like, oh, how Jack was *three thousand bloody years old*. He’d been thinking about it non-stop since they’d rescued him, and his brain still hadn’t managed to sort out exactly what that meant

When Ianto stepped into the mess, he looked around for Jack, who was in the kitchen, leaning on the counter and talking to Jotir. He watched them, observing the casual way Jack touched Jotir on the arm or the shoulder, and how Jotir seemed less interested in running away than normal, and realized that Jotir had been serious when he said he liked Jack. As he shook off the faint clamouring of jealousy, Ianto realized he couldn't understand what they were saying.

“My fish isn't translating,” Ianto said to Kethan, reaching up and touching the device where it lay on his collarbone under his shirt. “Is yours?”

“I don't have it on,” Kethan said, distractedly, his head cocked towards the conversing man and alien. “I'm actually, um, not familiar with the language.” He looked a little startled.

“As in, you don't speak it, or you've never heard of it?”

“Never heard of it,” he said, frowning for a moment before shrugging and taking a seat. “Guess I learn a few things in the next twenty years.”

Ianto sat back in his chair, tipping it onto its hind legs, as he watched Jack and Jotir talk, the mellifluous cadence of the language floating through the room, their heads bent together as Jack laughed and tugged Jotir in. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Kethan watching him, so he pointedly kept his gaze steady and indifferent. It didn't matter if Jotir meant... something to Jack; it was a *good* thing, if he did. Ianto was determined not to make things complicated for Jack; Kethan was going to be the only jealous person in the room, tonight.

Opal came down the hatch from the upper deck, Aharon following and stopping a couple feet away from the table, feet planted and arms crossed over his chest as he watched Jack with clear suspicion. Jack finished whatever he was saying to Jotir and looked up, smiling at Opal and then turning to take in Aharon's posture. The smile dropped off his face, but only for a second, and then it was back and he was moving over, hand outstretched.

“Aharon.”

“Kethan,” Aharon said, shaking Jack's hand once and then letting go, not relaxing one bit.

“Jack, actually. Save everyone a few headaches.” He glanced at Opal, and then back. “Are you her second, now?”

“Yep,” Aharon said with a nod and a look that said ‘do you have a problem with that?’

Jack gave a small smile and took a seat at the table, taking in the others seated at it. “I'm sorry about Brenneeth.”



“You were there,” Aharon pointed out, sitting across from him.

Jack shrugged. “But it’s new for the rest of you.”

“Thank you, then,” Opal interrupted, smoothly, as she sat at the head of the table. “Aharon was the logical choice.”

“Only because Ellis hates being in charge of anything with a pulse,” Kethan muttered. Opal shot him a look and he continued, hastily. “Right, the TARDIS.”

“The TARDIS,” Opal echoed, fixing her gaze on Jack. “It was your ship? Not this Doctor’s?”

“Yes,” Jack said. “We – me and the ship – were kidnapped two years ago. I haven’t seen her since.” He looked a little pained at the thought. If he’d grown the ship from – a baby, he’d called it? That seemed a little anthropomorphic for Ianto – a coral, he had good enough reason to be attached to it.

“I suppose you know we’ve been trying to get it back,” Kethan said, and continued at Jack’s nod of agreement. “Well, we’ve lost it, now.”

“Fortunately, I know exactly where it is,” Jack said with a grin.

“Because you’ve been there?” Ianto asked.

“Yes?” Jack said, giving him a curious look.

“But you go there because you tell Kethan where to go. Isn’t that—”

“Let’s not go there,” Opal interrupted. “Please. I don’t want to get derailed discussing temporal mechanics. Bottom line: Kethan – Jack – knows where the TARDIS is, and he can fly it, so how do we get him to it?” She folded her hands on the table and leaned back, giving Jack a considering look. “The coordinates you gave Soren...”

“Yes?”

“They lead to the military outpost off Zeta Ophiuchi.”

“Correct.”

“Which implies,” she continued, voice level, “that the TARDIS is on the military outpost.”

“In one,” Jack said with a smile.

“Well, that’s great,” Kethan grouched. Ianto looked over at him, and then back at Opal and Aharon. They all looked distinctly unimpressed.

“What’s wrong with that?”

Kethan raised his eyebrows. “A planetary base I can break in to. An on-world Time Agency prison I’m good for. An isolated military starbase on the scale of Zeta Oh?” He shook his head. “Not happening. It’s impossible. You can’t get near those things without permission. Which they are *not* granting to the *Evening Star*.”

Opal and Aharon were nodding along with Kethan’s assessment, but Jack just smiled.

“No, you’re right. It would be impossible. That’s why we’re going to call a friend of mine who owes me a favour.”

Ianto frowned, wondering if Jack meant the Doctor; but no, he’d already said he didn’t know where the Doctor was. Perhaps – oh, *no*.

“You don’t mean John Hart,” Ianto blurted out.

Jack frowned. “Who?”

“Er,” Ianto stuttered. “Captain John Hart? Time Agent? Carries a sword and tried to kill Gwen by kissing her?”

“Oh!” Jack said. “You mean Adias.”

“Adias?” Kethan said, leaning forwards. “Adias wouldn’t help, are you kidding?”

“No, no,” Jack said with a laugh. “No, definitely not Adias. You’re right; he wouldn’t give a damn. My friend isn’t a Time Agent. He’s a military captain, which is exactly what we’ll need to get into Zeta Oh.”

“And you think he’ll help you, why? He’d be risking his career,” Aharon asked.

“He’ll do it,” Jack said serenely, and turned to Opal. “It’ll be a simple gambit; we’ll play dead, I’ll send him a static, he’ll pick us up and tow us to Zeta Oh. Once we’re there, it’s ground tactics per usual, but we don’t have to worry about getting out – just getting in. I can fly the TARDIS from there.”

“Unless they’ve damaged it,” Ianto pointed out.

“They haven’t.”

“Everything goes according to plan, then?” Opal asked. “If you’re alive and have your memories, it must have worked.”

“It did. But we are dealing with a timeship – things can get messy. If we screw it up, the timeline could break.”

“And then what?” Aharon asked, impatiently. “You Time Agents always say that like it’s a horrible thing. So the timeline breaks, what’s wrong with that?”

“Depends on what you do,” Kethan injected lazily, thrumming his fingers on the tabletop. “Time loops, temporal shockwaves, annihilation, on the complicated end. On the simple end, the end of life as we know it. That’s always a party.”

“Right,” Aharon said, looking skeptical.

There was a pause, everyone lost in thought, and then Opal cleared her throat.

“So I need to get Ellis to set up an engine failure, Kareh to find some blueprints to the base – I assume you’ll know where the ship is – and you’ll contact this – friend?”

Jack nodded. “Sounds about right. Once you have the blueprints, we can set up an attack plan.”

“Sounds good,” she said, standing up. Her gaze flickered between Jack and Kethan for a moment, and then she shook her head and left the mess towards the cargo bay. Aharon, still looking suspicious, stood up and went back to the bridge, leaving Ianto alone with his two Jacks. The older one opened his mouth to say something, but before he could finish, Ashild stepped through the hatch and let out an abbreviated laugh.

“Ianto, you look *hilarious*,” she said, coming over to sit next to Jack. “Like you swallowed a lemon, or something.”

“I do not,” Ianto protested.

“Well, maybe not swallowed a lemon, but like, say, you can’t decide between them?” she said, gesturing at the pair. “Monogamy is *so* not going to come in handy right about now.”

“I don’t think it counts,” Ianto said, thoughtfully. “They’re really the same person. Just at different points in their lives.”

“Hello?” Kethan interrupted with a wave. ““They’ are sitting right here.” He stood up and went over to the coffee machine, grabbing a few mugs. “Usual, all of you?”

“Black, please,” Jack said, and Kethan looked scandalized.

“Really?”

“Yep,” Jack said with a grin. “Tastes change.” Apparently, they did. Ianto’s Jack took his the same way as Kethan, with a hint of cream. He looked at Jack thoughtfully, who was currently staring at Ashild indecisively. He could see the moment Jack made up his mind, just before he leaned over and gave her a one armed hug. Ashild looked surprised, and then turned into it, making it a proper hug and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“What was that for?” she asked when they pulled apart.

“I haven’t see you in a while,” Jack said, nodding at Kethan as he passed him his coffee. “How’s life?”

“Don’t you know?” she quipped, waving at Kethan. “You were here.”

“Yes, but I was an idiot who didn’t pay you nearly enough attention, so. How’s life? Aharon treating you fine?”

“Pardon?” Kethan spluttered, and Ashild flushed. Ianto took his coffee and sat back to enjoy the scene unfolding around him.

“Uh, yeah. I guess everyone finds out about that?”

“Finds out about *what*?”

“Well, yes. I’m a little hurt you didn’t tell me, to be honest,” Jack said, ignoring Kethan’s spluttering.

“Only because you beat me to it!” she said, pointing to Kethan. “He only found out because you said something.”

“Were you planning on telling me? On telling anyone?” Kethan asked, eyebrows raised.

“Ianto knows,” she said sulkily. Kethan spun round to glare at him, and Ianto raised his hands in self-defense.

“Don’t look at me! This is clearly a family issue.” Kethan rolled his eyes and turned back to

Ashild.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me!” he said, voice raised. “And, seriously, *Aharon*?”

“You’ve shagged him!”

“*Shagged* him, yes, of course, have you seen his pecs?” Kethan blustered. “But somehow I don’t think that’s all your doing, or you wouldn’t be crawling under the table right now.”

“It’s none of your business, Kethan,” she snapped, slapping her hands down on the table. “I know you don’t like him—”

“It’s nothing to do with like! I don’t *trust* him.”

“—but guess what? He’s around a lot fucking more than you are, so you don’t get a say.”

She shoved her chair back and stalked out of the room. It was probably a good thing the hatch door slid shut, rather than swung shut, or it might have gotten torn off its hinges.

“Nice.”

Kethan scowled at Jack. “You *do not* get to say that.”

Jack shrugged. “I can see you’re being a fool. That means I get to call you on it.”

“I’m not wrong,” Kethan grumbled. “He’s no good for her.”

Ianto looked at Jack, feeling like he was watching a tennis match between twins, expecting Jack to protest. Instead, a flicker of emotion, too quick to identify, crossed Jack’s features, and he didn’t say anything. The awkward silence stretched out until Ianto put his mug down with a thunk, drawing both of their attentions. He cast around quickly for something to say.

“Are you and Jotir... um,” he hesitated, unsure of how to ask what he meant.

“Are we what?” Jack asked, wide-eyed.

“Ah, well,” Ianto stuttered, embarrassed that he’d asked. It was Jack’s business, not his, after all. Jack suddenly laughed and shook his head.

“Shagging, no. I don’t smell at all like a mate, to him. Bit of a shame, but no. We’ve just been friends for, well, a while.” He smirked over his coffee. “Didn’t I tell you? Not all relationships are about sex.”

“Does Ianto meet him?” Kethan asked, curious. “Because he didn’t seem too surprised to see him on board. I thought maybe that was just Jotir, but...”

“No,” Jack answered. “He hasn’t met Ianto before.”

Kethan narrowed his eyes, glancing to Ianto and back to Jack.

“They don’t overlap, in your life?”

“No,” Jack said, but Ianto could see what Kethan was getting at. He looked down at his coffee and took another long drink, delaying the question Kethan would probably ask for him, if he didn’t ask soon. Kethan coughed, unsubtly, and Ianto sighed and looked up.

“Do I get back?” he asked.

“Oh,” Jack huffed, leaning back. “Yes.”

“Oh,” Ianto echoed. He wasn’t sure he could say anything else, at that moment. The relief was almost terrifying, running up his body and into his mouth. He pursed his lips together, biting down on his cheek to stop from saying something ridiculous. He got back. To home, to the twenty-first century, to Torchwood and the team and *Jack*. To the wet days of Cardiff and the comforting hisses and clinks of his own coffee machine. To the dusky smell of the archives and the screech of the pterodactyl. *Home*.

“Breathe, Ianto,” Jack said, tone humourous.

Ianto obeyed, letting out a slow breath and finding his tongue. “How long am I gone? Your time. Torchwood time,” he elaborated.

“A week. A fucking miserable week,” he said with a smile. Jack drowned his coffee and dropped the mug to the table. “Of course, that’s all dependant on us not screwing up saving the TARDIS. Everything hinges on that.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t gotten it stolen in the first place,” Kethan muttered into his drink.

“Pardon?” Jack said mockingly. “I couldn’t quite hear that.”

“I said, if you hadn’t been stupid and gotten us into this mess, I’d never have had to go rogue in the first place!”

“And that would mean...” Jack trailed off pointedly.

Kethan scowled. “What, that nothing happens the same way? What happens to me after they catch me? Because they do catch me, don’t they?”

He was standing now, and Jack was getting up, too, as Kethan rounded the table and came up to him, hands balled into fists by his sides. Ianto discretely shoved back his chair.

“I’m not stupid, *Jack*. I sorted out pretty quickly that if I don’t know Ianto, the Time Agency must get my memories. Do I sacrifice myself? Get stuck behind?” He shoved Jack in the chest, forcing him back a pace. “How much do I forget? Tell me!”

He reached out to shove Jack again, but Jack caught his wrists instead and pulled him in, using his momentum against him so that Kethan fell hard against his body, panting with anger and what Ianto recognized as fear. Kethan was terrified – of what, Ianto wasn’t exactly sure, but it was there, plain as day, and Jack saw it too and he was wrapping his arms around his double, pulling him in and whispering in Kethan’s ear.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he was saying, again and again, staring up at the ceiling and running his hands over Kethan’s shaking back. “I wish I could make it all not happen. You have no idea how much I wish that.” He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, running his hands across Kethan’s shaking back until the younger man wrenched out of his grasp, his face red and damp with tears.

“I don’t want to forget,” Kethan said, surprising Ianto with the evenness of his voice. “But I guess I don’t have much choice, huh?” He laughed, a dark, bitter thing. “First rule of time travel.”

“Linear time is freedom,” Jack quoted, not looking away from Kethan. “It’s the price.”

“We didn’t have much of a choice,” Kethan said sharply, but Jack shook his head.

“We could have left. But you like it too much. It’s a powerful thing, time travel. Don’t fool yourself into thinking you’re a martyr.”

Kethan snorted and stepped away, scrubbing at his face. “I’ll work on that. Just,” he started, looking over at Ianto and then back at Jack. “Am I happy? Whenever I end up, am I happy?”

Jack looked over at Ianto, their eyes meeting, and Ianto stared back evenly, trying to see what Jack was thinking. Jack’s lips twitched into a small, quiet smile, and he nodded, turning back to Kethan.

“Yes. It’s not always easy, but – yes.”





## Interlude

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Kethan looked over to Ianto, and then back at Jack, nodding. “I’ll leave you guys alone, then,” he said, waving a hand at Ianto’s halfhearted protest. “It’s fine. It’s late and I’m exhausted. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He turned and left through the hatch, leaving Ianto and Jack standing the in the middle of the empty mess. It *was* late; Ianto wasn’t certain of the hour but most everyone would have gone to bed by now. He should have been tired as well, but the events of the day had him wired, had his mind racing. He couldn’t have slept even if he were drugged.

Jack reached out a hand and beckoned him over, moving to sit on one of the couches. Ianto complied, sitting a respectable distance away, but Jack just pulled him in, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and tugging him close.

“Tell me a story.”

“What kind of a story?” Ianto asked, amused.

“One I’ve forgotten.”

Ianto was quiet, thinking. “Do you remember Gwen’s wedding?” That was a recent one, for him, and he could tell that with a certain degree of amusement, unlike most work-related tales.

“Vaguely,” Jack said, shifting under him. “She was pregnant? But not with one of her kids, right?”

“Kids?” Ianto asked, giving Jack a suspicious look. Well, Rhys did seem the dad type, and Gwen’s mother instincts could use someone other than the team to work on. “No, she doesn’t have any kids yet. It was a Nostrovite.”

“Right. They’re nasty. Did Owen operate?”

“No, Rhys did. With the singularity scalpel, or at least, that’s what he called it.”

“Right, Rhys,” Jack said, nodding against Ianto’s head. “I liked him. Good man, brave sort. At the wedding?”

“Yep. You blew up the mother with this big gun – no jokes, thank you – and saved the day.

Very dashing hero of you.”

“I am very dashing.”

“Mm-hm. You also punched Rhys’ mother.”

“What! Why?”

“You thought she was the Nostrovite. They’re—”

“Shapeshifters, of course. And Rhys wasn’t at all pleased, I’ll bet.”

“Nope. Good right hook, on him.”

“Not to sorry I’ve forgotten that, then,” Jack said, pulling back and looking Ianto in the eye. “You don’t mind telling me this, do you? It’s not freaking you out?”

Ianto shrugged, or at least, tried to, difficult as it was wrapped in Jack’s arms. “It’s fine. You really don’t remember this?”

“Do you remember your grade school days?”

Ianto thought, trying to recall the details of his classmates and teachers. “Some of the kids whom I was friends with. My teachers, yes.”

“But the events?” Jack prodded.

“No,” Ianto conceded. “A flash here, a moment there, not a lot of it. But I was a kid.”

“But it was, what, ten, fifteen years ago? Are you really surprised I’ve forgotten this?”

“You remembered some of the things about me,” Ianto argued. It *was* a little frightening, the idea of all these memories that should have been shared memories, but were only his. The idea that something that happened just over a month ago for him was just a fragment, a flicker in Jack’s mind made him feel uncomfortable in a way he couldn’t quite grasp.

“Emotional memories are easier to hold on to. Especially those that played a role in defining who I am, today.”

They were silent, and Ianto tightened his fingers on Jack’s waist, resting his head on Jack’s shoulder as he considered. In a way, he was lucky, he supposed. If you lived on in the memories of others; well, most people would die when everyone who knew them had died.

Jack knew him, and Jack was going to live forever. Or at least, something resembling forever. Even if he did forget the details, it was more than most people had.

“Dancing,” Jack said, suddenly.

“What?”

“There was dancing. A wedding tradition, people dance at the party afterwards. You and I, we danced.”

“We did,” Ianto confirmed, “To ‘You Do Something To Me’ by Paul Weller, if I recall correctly.”

“Well,” Jack said, pushing Ianto over and standing up, “I doubt the computer database has that in it, but maybe something else...” He went over to the panel on the wall and opened up the interface, skipping through menus and screens. The lights went dim, and then slow music started playing. Jack nodded, looking satisfied, and came back over to Ianto, hand outstretched and grin on his face. “Dance?”

“I don’t know,” Ianto said playfully, taking Jack’s hand anyway. “Last time I danced with you, it got a little hot and heavy.”

Jack’s face screwed up in concentration as Ianto slipped into his arms, falling into the same position they’d taken up so many weeks – or years - ago, and Ianto took pity on him.

“At the club, on Trell. The music was a little louder,” Ianto said, pressing his fingers into the small of Jack’s back as they swayed in time to the music.

“And you were a little less inhibited,” Jack said with a grin. “Oh yes, I remember that.” He leaned in, breath heavy against Ianto’s ear. “You were gorgeous. All loose and heavy-limbed in my arms.” A lick against the curve of his ear, and Ianto shuddered, fingers twisting into Jack’s shirt.

“It was... an experience.”

“Mm,” Jack hummed, nuzzling into Ianto’s neck. “But not a repeat one?”

“There are other things I’d rather be doing,” Ianto said huskily, sliding his hand down to cup Jack’s arse and pull him in. Jack bit at the soft skin below his ear and Ianto let out a short breath, just shy of a groan. “You’ll wear me out.”

“What, this old man?” Jack laughed, pulling back so Ianto could see his smile. He kissed Ianto,

slow and firm and full of promise, and Ianto groaned outright this time, letting go of Jack's hand to wrap it around Jack's neck, fingers teasing the fine hairs at the nape of his neck. Jack let his freed hand sweep down Ianto's chest and stomach, touch delicate through the fine, soft fabric of Ianto's shirt, making Ianto's muscles jump and twitch.

"Somehow, I don't think your age has slowed you down," Ianto said when they broke for air, but Jack just smirked and came back in again, wrapping his hands around Ianto's waist and pulling him in. The kiss was fiercer, now, and Ianto breathed heavily through his nose as he licked into Jack's mouth, tasting coffee and *Jack* and savouring it. He ran his hand up through the too-long hair, scraping his nails gently across Jack's scalp, and Jack let out an abbreviated noise that was swallowed by Ianto's mouth, Jack's hands clenched on his waist, dipping lower to his hips to pull him in.

"I love," Jack said, breaking momentarily and then biting Ianto's lower lip, gently, before releasing it, "your mouth. It's," bite, lick, "a mouth to be worshipped."

"Or to worship with?" Ianto laughed, breathless, grinding his hips forward and feeling the answering press of Jack's erection against his.

"Definitely," Jack breathed, pushing Ianto back until his legs brushed the couch. "Absolutely. Without a doubt."

"Wait," Ianto said, pressing his hands to Jack's chest and almost getting distracted as he scratched his nails over Jack's nipples, entranced by the minute shudder that followed. "Bed. But," he paused. "Where are you sleeping?" He blinked. "Where am I sleeping?"

Jack bit his lip, thumbs drawing distracting circles on Ianto's hips. "Where do you want to sleep? I've got Brenneth's old quarters, if necessary."

"I..." Ianto trailed off, uncertain. The look on Kethan's face, the worried sort of sadness that spoke of loss, came back to him, unbidden. He didn't want to leave him alone, but this was *Jack*, a Jack who, despite Kethan's assumptions, would probably never see him again. "Kethan thinks I go back to you." He didn't need to explain which *you* he meant.

Jack nodded, looking solemn. "I did, yeah."

"He's jealous of you," Ianto pointed out. "I don't want to – that is –"

"Ianto," Jack interrupted. "It's okay. In this case, I'd say you can eat your cake and have it too."

Ianto blinked. "Because you're him, so I'm not really cheating?"

Jack gave him an exasperated look, and pulled back, tugging him by his elbow. “Come with me.”

Ianto followed, confused and still uncomfortably turned on, as Jack wound his way to the upper deck, stopping outside Kethan’s quarters and opening the door, gesturing that Ianto go in first. Ianto gave him a look and stepped inside.

Kethan was sitting on the floor, legs stretched out in front of him, computer discarded in his lap. He looked up at Ianto as he stepped in, eyes flickering from the redness of his mouth to the bulge in his trousers.

“Do you need the room?” Kethan asked, voice even enough, but not enough to fool Ianto. “I can go to the mess.”

Ianto froze, unable to figure out what to say, until Jack pushed by him with a muttered ‘for the love of-’ and pulled Kethan up.

“What did I tell you about not playing the martyr?” Jack demanded.

“Uh...” Kethan trailed off, looking bewildered. “I’m sorry?”

“For fuck’s sake,” Jack breathed, and then wrapped a hand around Kethan’s head and kissed him, short and hard, before pulling back and knocking his forehead against Kethan’s. “I’m not going to take Ianto away from myself, clear? We’re all in this together.”

Kethan and Ianto looked at each other, and Ianto finally got his voice working again.

“I, er, I thought you were joking when you said it was like masturbation,” he said, gesturing feebly at the pair of Jacks.

“I hate to side against myself,” Kethan added, “But so did I.”

Jack rolled his eyes and pushed Kethan back against the wall, standing between them. “You,” he said, pointing to Ianto, “I can forgive, but *you*, I expected you to be more open minded to the possibility of sex.”

Kethan quirked an eyebrow. “I’m guessing this happens, then? So I don’t really have a choice?”

“I’m offended,” Jack drawled, shooting a look back at Ianto, who was leaning against the wall, uncertain, before turning back to Kethan and putting a hand on his shoulder. “You were

thinking of saying no?”

“Well –“ Kethan started, but was cut off by Jack’s mouth on his, again, and Ianto inhaled sharply as Jack pinned his younger self against the wall, hands on his shoulders and chests pressed together. Kethan’s hands hung loose for a moment, and then they crept up, grasping Jack’s sides, moving minutely against his shirt. When they broke apart, Ianto could see that both of them were breathing hard.

“I’m good,” Kethan said, head thunking back against the wall.

“Yep,” Jack grinned, and started unbuttoning Kethan’s shirt with one hand, turning slightly to lean against the wall beside Kethan and look at Ianto. “You want to watch? Or play?”

Ianto made what was definitely *not* a coherent answer before shaking his head, as if clearing the water out of his ears. “Yeah, um. No, I’ll watch. I’m good.” He made his point by backing up and taking a seat on the bed, legs spread open in front of him to ease the pressure on his decidedly interested cock. This was weird, this was downright bizarre, but it was Jack, times two, and he wasn’t about to turn down the opportunity. “Carry on.”

Jack laughed and finished unbuttoning Kethan’s shirt, tugging it open but not off, and sliding a broad hand down the smooth plane of muscle and skin, not stopping at the trousers. Jack palmed Kethan’s crotch, and Ianto’s eyes flickered between his hand and Kethan’s face, eyes shut and head back as Jack stroked firmly.

“Shall we give him a show?” Jack said in a low voice, leaning in to press his cheek to Kethan’s, looking over at Ianto. Ianto’s stomach jumped at their faces, so close and so similar, only what *looked* like the span of twenty years, at most, between them, but otherwise identical.

“We would if you got a move on,” Kethan growled, jerking his hips forward into Jack’s hand.

“Patience, young one,” Jack intoned, and Ianto let out a hysterical giggle before chomping down on his lower lip. He needed to get a grip, get a hold of himself before he did something dumb and *oh* it was hot watching Jack tug the loose trousers over Kethan’s hips. Ianto shifted on the bed, rubbing the base of his hand over the line of his cock as Jack pulled Kethan’s free.

Kethan let out a satisfied noise as Jack twisted his hand over him. “Fuck,” he groaned, jerking his hips forward in short motions. “You know what you’re doing.”

“I know what I like,” Jack replied, settling against the wall and licking up Kethan’s neck, ending with his mouth against Kethan’s ear. “But you’re awful tense.”

“No shit,” Kethan said, opening his eyes. He had one hand pressed back against the wall,

flexing in time with Jack's strokes, and the other disappeared behind Jack. "You would be too if you were in my position – oh wait," he drawled, "You were."

Jack let out an amused snort and let go, pulling him off the wall and spinning him towards the bed. "Better do something about that, then." He gave Kethan an encouraging shove backwards, and Kethan obliged, falling back against the bed next to Ianto. Jack looked up at Ianto, and nodded towards Kethan's hands. "Can you hold him down?"

A flicker of lust swept through Ianto, and he nodded wordlessly, shifting to sit above Kethan's head. He leaned over him and took each of Kethan's, wrapping them in his own hands and pressing them to the bed. Their eyes met, and Kethan nodded quietly in response to Ianto's unasked question. *Go ahead.*

"Good," Jack said, and the teasing tone had left his voice. It was all rumbling seriousness now, and Ianto shivered, remembering how his own Jack could switch between playful lust and unwavering desire in the blink of an eye. He watched as Jack shrugged off his own shirt, tossing it to the side, before dropping to his knees between Kethan's legs.

"Shit," Kethan said, shutting his eyes and then opening them again, arching his neck to look down as Jack leaned forward and breathed on his hard cock. He tried to arch up, seeking more contact, but Jack's firm hands on his thighs held him down. Ianto could feel Kethan trembling under him, like a live wire suspended between his hands and Jack's, tingling with the current of anticipation.

"Just fucking do –" Kethan's snarl was cut off in a yelp as Jack swallowed him down, and Ianto bit his lip, suddenly sorry he hadn't undone his trousers before kneeling above Kethan's head. Jack wasn't teasing anymore, and Ianto watched, hypnotized, as Jack sucked in, lips slick and shiny around his younger self's cock, one hand coming up to expose the reddened head. Kethan was panting, arms flexing as Ianto held them down, leaning forward now to hold Kethan with his full weight. Kethan's eyes opened, wide with lust and pleasure, and he breathed out Ianto's name.

Ianto leaned over and kissed him, sloppy and upside down and awkward, noses bumping chins and hands braced between his legs, holding Kethan's, but he caught Kethan's moan as he shuddered, flexing his hands under Ianto's grip as he came into Jack's mouth.

"You bastard," Kethan gasped as Jack pulled off and gave him a triumphant grin.

"That was fast," Jack commented, shifting up onto his heels and then standing, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Urgh," Kethan said, head flopping back between Ianto's knees. "Don't you look so smug," he

said to Ianto, watching him through half-lidded eyes, murky with sex and relaxation. “You didn’t do anything.”

“I’m not smug,” Ianto protested, letting go of Kethan’s hands and settling back against the wall

“Sure,” Kethan said, taking a breath and then pulling himself upright. He struggled with his trousers before kicking them right off, his shirt following, and then he crawled back onto the bed. Jack was still fully dressed, but he joined them as well, urging Ianto down in between them.

“So now that Mr. Impatient here is taken care of—“

“Hey!”

“—the *real* fun begins,” Jack smirked, leaning over to kiss Ianto. His hands were on Ianto’s chest, or at least, Ianto assumed they were Jack’s hands, because another pair were running up his legs, urging them apart.

“Okay,” Ianto breathed out as Jack pulled back, moving to nuzzle his neck. Hands moved over him, touching everywhere but his cock, which was pressed against his fly and demanding attention, and he felt like he was drowning in warmth and sensation. The warm slide of Jack’s cheek across his, the fingers working their way up his chest under his shirt sliding it up to expose his skin, and then tongue pressing flat against his stomach, teasing the hairs there, made Ianto’s focus waver and time stretch. Jack pulled back to tug Ianto’s shirt over his head, and those must have been Kethan’s hands at his fly, unbuttoning and pulling down the zipper.

Jack ran the flat of his hand down Ianto’s chest, meeting Kethan’s to pull his trousers down, Ianto arching his hips to ease their passage.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said softly, leaning to pluck a kiss from Ianto’s lips. “What do you want?”

“Uhh…” Ianto said, trailing off into a laugh. Kethan’s fingers wrapped around his cock and stroked loosely, his eyes crinkled with a smile. “Too many choices?”

“I could fuck you,” Kethan said conversationally, “while Jack sucks you off.”

“Oh,” Ianto said, as Kethan pressed his free hand to one thigh, urging them apart.

“Or he could ride you while I jerk him off,” Kethan continued. “That’d be a fine picture. *Or*, you could fuck me, while he takes you.”



“*Ah*,” Ianto breathed, eyes falling shut as he pictured the three of them, at the idea of fucking and being fucked at the same time. Kethan’s thumb pressed into the slit of his cock, spreading the moisture there across the head.

“I think he likes that one,” Jack said, leaning down to lick and bite at his nipples, flickers of pleasure flashing through Ianto’s body.

“I think *he*,” Ianto managed, “thinks you’re wearing too many clothes.”

“Better help me with that, then,” Jack murmured, sitting up. Ianto reached over and grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling Jack over top of him with a sharp jerk. Jack grunted in surprise, landing on Ianto’s chest and straightening out. The rub of his clothing felt fantastic on Ianto’s naked body, but skin would feel even better, so Ianto fumbled with the hem of his shirt, pulling it up over Jack’s head, who lifted his arms obligingly, canting his hips down into Ianto’s.

Kethan laughed and reached between them, forcing Jack to put some of his weight on his knees so he could undo Jack’s fly, slipping his hands under the waistband and pulling them down, tugging awkwardly until they slipped down Jack’s legs. Ianto groaned as Jack thrust against him, smooth heat of his cock pressing next to his, moving against his skin. Jack’s eyes were wide as he looked down at him, arms flexing on either side of Ianto as he slowed his movements and slid his length, too slowly, far too slowly, along Ianto’s.

“Kethan?” Ianto asked, voice hoarse, not breaking eye contact with Jack.

“Here,” Kethan called from behind Jack, and Jack froze, head dropping down to rest in the crook of Ianto’s neck.

“Fuck,” Jack breathed. “I thought I was on top.”

“You will be,” Kethan said, and Ianto watched over Jack’s shoulder as Kethan leaned over Jack’s back, one hand stroking his spine and the other invisible, but by the shudders running through Jack, teasing against and into his arse.

Jack made a small noise of pleasure and moved against Ianto, biting into his neck. He permitted it for a moment and then pushed Kethan off, sitting up. Ianto laughed and squirmed out of the way of the ensuing wrestling match, enjoying the sight of two naked, entwined Jacks, as each tried to get the advantage over the other. Jack won, pinning Kethan face-first into the bed.

“Give up,” Jack purred into Kethan’s ear, pinning Kethan’s legs down with his own knees.

“Never,” came Kethan’s muffled response. Jack grinned up at Ianto and nodded at the lube, which had fallen to the floor in the struggle.

“You know you want to,” he said, tone conversational, but then it deepened and took on an forceful, serious edge. “All the stress of the last year, no time to stop running, to relax, to stop worrying. *I’m here*. That’s my job now. Give it up.”

Kethan stopped struggling under Jack, and Ianto watched, uncertain, as the younger man turned his head to the side and took deep, gulping breaths.

“I don’t know if I can.”

“I believe in you,” Jack said quietly, and Ianto would have laughed at the inanity of the statement, except it was so sincere, so heartfelt, that he found he couldn’t. Jack rolled off Kethan, who pulled himself up onto his knees, and beckoned Ianto over.

“Open him. I want to watch.”

Ianto nodded, unable to speak, and crawled back onto the bed, kneeling behind Kethan and placing one soothing hand in the middle of his back. Kethan shuddered, and Ianto was sure it was with more than anticipation. Ianto ran his fingers down Kethan’s spine, tracing the cleft of his arse as Kethan trembled underneath him. On impulse, Ianto leant down and licked the smooth skin at the base of Kethan’s spine, tracing the tip of his tongue down as he spread Kethan’s cheeks with both hands. He flicked his tongue across the tight ring of muscle, reveling in the musky, heady taste, and Kethan jerked under him.

“Ianto...” he groaned, low, and Ianto obliged him, thrusting his tongue against Kethan’s arsehole, squeezing and rubbing his cheeks as he played against him. “More, please, more,” Kethan panted, pressing back to Ianto’s face, and Ianto pulled back, groping for the lube he’d dropped on the bed.

Fingers slicked, Ianto urged Kethan’s legs further apart, one hand stroking his balls lightly, ignoring the renewed interest of Kethan’s cock. He traced the circle of Kethan’s opening, and then pressed the tip of one finger in, only capitulating when Kethan thrust back against him urgently. Ianto pushed one finger, then two, into the smooth heat, feeling the clench and release of wound-up muscles around them as he moved them in and out, mesmerized by the sight of Kethan’s arse swallowing his fingers.

Ianto curved his fingers, easily finding the spot that made Jack and Kethan and Jack arch painfully and hiss, hands clenched tight into bed sheets as Ianto pressed and stroked and twisted. He waited until he had Kethan squirming and swearing under him, Ianto’s own cock painfully impatient, bobbing obscenely in between them, before looking over at Jack for... for what? Permission? Instructions?

Whatever he was looking for, Jack knew, because he nodded and shuffled over beside them and picked up the lube, squeezing it into his palm and stroking Ianto once, twice. The silky friction had Ianto biting his lip in pleasure, but it ended too quickly, Jack wiping his hand on the sheets and gripping Kethan's hip in one hand. He took Ianto's in the other before kissing Ianto wetly, tongue thrusting in an imitation of Ianto's earlier actions.

"Do it," Jack said roughly, against Ianto's mouth. Ianto nodded unsteadily, pulling out his fingers and hooking a thumb around the base of his cock. Jack's hands on their hips guided him forward, bringing him and Kethan together in an slow, drawn-out motion, Ianto's mouth falling open as Kethan's arse opened around the head of his cock, first resisting and then pulling him in with an irresistible pressure and heat.

"God, oh god," Ianto panted, legs trembling in an effort not to thrust, not to dislodge Jack's hand from where it was burning into his hip.

"Hold on," Jack said unsteadily, letting go of Ianto's hip and bringing the hand on Kethan around to trace the junction where Ianto and Kethan met, slick with lube and spit. He moved around behind Ianto, pushing him down over Kethan. Ianto pressed his lips to Kethan's spine, murmuring something unintelligible that included the words *soon* and *wait* and *love you*. Kethan shifted underneath him, but kept quiet.

Ianto jerked, the thrill of the motion seeping down his spine, when Jack first pressed his fingers to his arsehole, massaging the muscle.

"Good thing you had me earlier," Jack murmured, mostly to himself, it seemed, "or else we might be pushing you."

"Um," was all Ianto could say in agreement as the fingers sunk into him, stretching him through that first uncomfortable resistance before the muscle relaxed and pleasure overtook everything else. He was impatient, but it seemed Jack was too, because after only a minimum of preparation he drew his fingers out, Ianto's hole clenching tightly at their exit, and the next thing Ianto felt was the blunt head of Jack's cock, pressing in.

It was slow and wretched and Ianto moaned, pulling out of Kethan to meet Jack, but Jack's hands on his hips jerked him forward, Ianto panting with the exquisite sensation of Kethan around him and Jack in him.

"Fuck fuck fuck," Ianto chanted in a low voice, Jack letting out a strangled laugh as he came up flush against Ianto's arse, fingers digging into the muscle. "Jack – Kethan – I –"

"Shhh," Jack urged, horribly, painfully *not moving*. Ianto gulped for air, suspended between the two of them, flickers of pleasure at every minute shift, every little movement holding him

hostage. “Sit up a little.”

Ianto obeyed, shuddering at the change in angle as he brought himself up, bracing his hands on Kethan’s hips. Kethan shifted under him, arms stretching out so that his arse lifted further up, giving Ianto a better angle as Ianto pulled back, Jack letting him, moving with him, and thrust in.

“You done this before?” Jack murmured in his ear, and Ianto was so over sensitized he shivered at the brush of lips as he shook his head. “Alright. You pick a pace, and I’ll work around it, mm-kay?”

“Kay,” Ianto managed, finding and setting a pace, and after a few delicious, aching strokes in, Jack started to move in counterpoint, pressing forward when Ianto moved back, hard cock pressing against his prostate, the rushing pleasure of that urging Ianto forward, into Kethan’s tight heat as Jack pulled nearly out.

Kethan was moaning below him, though Ianto was almost too lost in his own pleasure to notice anything but the feel of muscle claiming his cock, and the fullness claiming him as he rocked, bracing himself on Kethan’s hips. One of Jack’s hands snaked around to his chest and brushed a tight nipple, still slick with lube. Each of the points of contact drew Ianto’s attention, competing in his mind, and Ianto felt like he was being broken into pieces, attention shattering and nothing but the press of skin, the warmth of the bodies cocooning him, the harsh breathing of his lovers, *god, his lovers*, around him being relevant, being real.

It couldn’t last, and as Jack pressed a hand to his stomach and Kethan clenched around him, Ianto came hard, fingers digging into Kethan’s hips as Jack hit his prostate again, wringing a shout from Ianto’s lips. Jack pushed him forward and gripped his hips, rhythm failing as Jack snapped his hips forward in a short, jerky rhythm until he, too, collapsed forward, mouthing mindlessly against Ianto’s shoulders and neck.

After a heavy moment, Ianto wiggled a little and pushed Jack back, and Jack pulled out, rolling sideways to lean against the wall as Ianto pulled out of Kethan and urged him onto his back. Kethan smiled up at him, cock jutting out over his stomach, and pulled Ianto down for a wet, needy kiss. Ianto let out a low moan as fingers pressed between into the cleft of his arse and fingered the sensitive, softened ring of muscle.

“Can I fuck you?” Kethan asked, pulling back.

“Yeah,” Ianto said, “but you’re on top.”

“Wore you out, huh?” Kethan teased as they switched places, him kneeling between Ianto’s legs. Jack lay down beside them, head pillowed on one arm as he watched Kethan pull Ianto’s

legs up and out, resting them on his shoulders, before sinking in with ease.

“Mm, wet,” Kethan moaned, leaning forward and anchoring himself. “Nice of me to get you ready for me.”

“Shut up,” Ianto said, resisting a post-orgasmic yawn. “No temporal mechanics in bed. Headache.”

“Fair – oh – enough,” Kethan grunted, setting a pace. Jack scooted up beside them and ran one hand down Kethan’s flank, pressing kisses to Ianto’s shoulder.

“You two are beautiful,” he said after a bit.

“Ego,” Ianto berated, before he sucked in a breath as Kethan’s cock brushed past his over-sensitized prostate.

“Yep,” Kethan and Jack said in unison, but Kethan’s ensuing laughter was broken off by a grunt as his hips stuttered, fucking hard for a few moments before he stilled, weight leaning uneasily, but not unpleasantly, against the back of Ianto’s thighs.

“Urg,” Kethan said, dropping back and letting Ianto’s legs fall on either side. “Way to make me laugh while coming.”

“Fun, though,” Jack said, shifting back towards the wall and pulling Ianto with him. Kethan took the hint and lay down on Ianto’s other side, one leg thrown over Ianto’s. They lay there, not saying anything, just breathing, and Ianto marveled at his luck. A month ago he would have said this was no joy ride, that this trip, though enlightening, had been a headache, his fear of never returning outweighing any instinctive curiosity. But now, knowing he got home, and moreover, knowing Jack would be okay, even when Ianto died, he could do what Jack asked of Kethan – give it up. Not forever, probably only for the night, and come tomorrow, he was sure he’d be worrying all over again, but for now? Nestled between Jack and Kethan, he was pretty sure the only place in all of existence that he’d rather be was back at home, with his own Jack.

Here was second best, but it was a hard second to complain about.

## Chapter 17

~

It took them a week to reach to location Jack had agreed on with his Captain – Captain Iro Westlin. The days passed quickly compared to the previous long-distance trips, because the days were busy enough with arguments and plans and weapons practice (Kethan insisted) and the nights, well. One Jack had enough of a libido to keep Ianto more than satisfied, two kept him busier than probably was medically advisable. Ianto ended up sleeping, as usual, with Kethan in their quarters, and Jack would come and go. Officially, he was sleeping in Brenneth's quarters because the bed in Kethan's really wasn't big enough for three grown men, but when Ianto inquired in private, Jack admitted he still didn't sleep much, and he didn't want Kethan asking questions.

“What do you do at night, then?” Ianto asked, curious. He wasn't entirely sure what Jack had done at Torchwood, with literally twenty-four hours to burn every day, but there he'd had Torchwood business to keep him occupied.

“Read. Meditate, sometimes. And talk to Jotir – he doesn't sleep a whole lot, either, so we can keep each other company.”

“How'd you meet him?”

“His mother works for me,” Jack said. “I've known him since he was born.”

“Works for you?” Ianto asked, curious. “What do you do?”

“Not much, for the last two years,” Jack pointed out. “She's my housekeeper, you could say.”

Ianto blinked. “You have a housekeeper?”

“In a practical sense, yes. I keep a house, but I sometimes leave for long periods of time. Jotir's family lives there and makes sure it's there when I come back.”

“I see.”

Some of the crew found Jack's presence quite amusing – Soren and Ellis in particular thought it was hysterical and took every opportunity to crack jokes, especially once they clued in that Ianto had, in fact, managed to get both of them in bed at once. Ellis' humour, however, reached an endpoint over what Jack was asking him to do to the engines.

“No. Just no.”

“Ellis,” Jack said patiently. “It’s the only way.”

“Do you understand what that means? Look,” he demanded, dragging Jack over to the schematics up on the screen in the bridge. “I do that much damage to the *Star*, and we are not moving until I’ve had a week in a spaceport.”

“Exactly.”

“Exactly?” Ellis threw up his hands. “There’s no exactly about it! We’d be defenseless, a fish stranded out of water. We’d have *no escape route*.”

Jack’s glance flickered over Ianto and to Opal, who was watching impassively from the helm.

“I say exactly,” Jack explained, “because that’s precisely what we need to be – stranded. If we just do some minor damage and call Iro, what do you think he’ll have to do? Send his mechanics on board, who will find the problem and fix it. We need to be badly enough damaged to give him a good enough reason to tow us to Zeta Oh.”

“It won’t matter if we get there and can’t leave,” Ellis growled, looking pleadingly at Opal. “Captain, there has got to be another way.”

“I don’t see one,” she said with a shrug. “I agree it’s far from optimal, but if that’s what Jack says we need to do...”

“How’s this ‘Captain Westlin’ know about this, anyway?” Ellis demanded, rounding on Jack and stepping into his space. He barely came up to Jack’s chin, but his clear frustration was enough to make Jack step back a pace. “What were the chances he was near Zeta Oh to being with? Isn’t this all a bit coincidentally easy?”

“Ellis—” Opal began, but Jack cut him off.

“It’s fine, Opal,” he waved a hand, and then leaned back on the console, considering Ellis. “He’s there because he’s known for twenty years he needed to be there, and pulled all the right strings.”

“How did he know?” Ellis asked, clearly not yet convinced.

“Because I told him. Straightforward enough for you?”

Ellis pursed his lips and gave a short nod. “How do you know him?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes!” Ellis cried. “We’ve already dealt with one shoddy outsider. *Who almost killed Ianto*, in case you’ve forgotten. Unless you have a good reason to trust this Captain—”

“He’s my son.”

Ianto, and everybody else in the room, looked startled.

“You have a son?” Ianto asked, and immediately felt dumb. Jack had been around for long enough to have more than one son.

“I have a son?” Kethan asked, eyes wide.

“He’s our biological son, yes,” Jack said with a nod.

“He’s too old,” Opal said, thoughtfully. “Of course, that hasn’t stopped Kethan before.”

“Time travel is a wonderful thing,” Jack said with a grin. “Iro’s nearly fifty, but that’s no problem for a TARDIS. Now,” he said, and Ianto could see the switch back to business mode, “is that good enough for you, Ellis? I guarantee this is what happened, and that it goes – more or less – to plan.”

“It’s the more or less part I don’t like,” Ellis grumbled, but otherwise he acquiesced. Ianto watched him leave, dragging Opal along to help, and then looked over at Jack with a questioning glance.

“You know,” Kethan said, interrupting Ianto and Jack’s unspoken conversation. “I fit a hell of a lot into the next twenty years, don’t I?”

Ianto looked at him warily, hoping he wasn’t suspecting any more than just that. Jack just smiled easily.

“We never were one to lay back and do nothing. Are you surprised?”

“No. But a kid? That’s awful busy. And not in my cards.”

Jack clapped him on the shoulder and headed for the exit to the quarters section. “Trust me – most of what’s to come? Definitely not in your cards.”

He gave Ianto a look as he passed him, and Ianto took the hint and, after shooting a bewildered



Kethan an apologetic look, followed Jack out into the corridor.

“So. He’s your son,” Ianto said, hands in his pockets. Jack turned back to him, expression open but attentive.

“Yep.”

“How many kids do you have? Because that’s two I’ve been surprised with recently,” Ianto snipped, and then cut himself off. Where did that come from?

Jack looked a little startled, but just opened his door and gestured inside. Ianto followed him in and let the door shut behind him.

“Are you jealous?” Jack asked, sounding a little incredulous.

“No!” Ianto said, shaking his head. “Or, well. I don’t think so. What would I be jealous of anyway?”

Jack’s lips twitched, like he was surprising a grin, and he pulled the chair out from under the small desk and twirled it around, sitting so that his arms were leaning against the backrest.

“You tell me.”

Ianto was silent, considered. He couldn’t be jealous – what was there to be jealous of? So Jack had a kid. He wasn’t jealous of Ashild. But Ashild wasn’t even really Kethan’s kid.

“Is... does he have a mother?” Ianto asked, realized he didn’t even know exactly how this Iro Westlin was related to Jack. *Biological kid* was less descriptive than it used to be.

“Yes. A beautiful, fabulous woman named Nella Westlin.”

“So you were – together.”

“For about fifteen years, yes. She was a historian doing research on me – or the man who I was back in the twenty-first century – and unlike most other people, followed the data trail and realized I was Jack Harkness. She came demanding answers,” Jack said, a fond smile on his face, “and ended up sticking around a little longer than I planned.”

“You would be pretty interesting to a historian,” Ianto said, not without a hint of distain.

Jack raised his eyebrows but didn’t comment. “Yep.”

“Why’d she leave?” Ianto asked, not sure why he was assuming she left him, and not the other way around. If it had been his Jack, he would have guessed it was his doing, but this man wasn’t the same.

“Job offer at a prestigious university, based on her work on me. Even if I wanted to follow her, it would have been tricky explaining how her partner happened to be genetically identical to the man she was researching. Even if the lore does say Captain Jack never got older.”

“It’s all lore, then?” Ianto asked, trying to move the conversation away from the topic that, for some reason, left him itchy with resentment.

“It was general knowledge, for a few centuries, but enough happened to bury the truth. Only I know it, now. And Nella, and you, I suppose.” Jack shrugged. “But it’s not important – and you *are* jealous.”

“Not of her,” Ianto insisted, and then he took a seat on the bed with a sigh. “Not of her for being loved by you. But maybe of her for having you.”

Jack watched him, giving him time to sort through his tumultuous thoughts.

“I can’t imagine you being interested in... creating a life with me. Not kids, I don’t want kids –” not with Jack, anyway, not working at Torchwood “– but just...” he trailed off, glancing down at his hands. “I miss what I had with Lisa, some days. I miss Lisa for herself, of course, but I miss the boring relationship bits as well. Waking up with someone in the morning. Getting angry about clogged drains. Buying groceries – cooking meals – for two. For all that I’m with you, then, we’re not really together. Not in any significant way.”

“I know.”

Ianto’s head snapped up, and he met Jack’s eyes. The last thing he expected was for Jack to *agree* with him. Jack gave him a wan smile.

“I’m not him. I’m not going to defend him. Because you’re absolutely right. As you know me, back then, I’m in no place to embark on any sort of real relationship.”

“Oh,” Ianto said. Well, it was at least nice to know he was right. He stood up and started for the door, but Jack moved quickly and caught him by the wrist.

“Ianto. Stop. I’m not telling you that to dash all your hopes—”

“I don’t have any,” Ianto protested. He didn’t expect anything of Jack, really. He just sometimes wished he could... have Jack and have more, all at once. But if he could only have

one, he could be content with Jack. Or at least, he thought so. A month of waking up beside Kethan, taking meals with him, playing games and having real, honest conversations about something other than work had reminded him precisely of what his relationship with Jack *wasn't*, and how much he wanted it.

“Yes you do. And you should, because I’m an *idiot*. An immature, unthinking idiot not to realize how unfair I’m being to you.”

Ianto let out a snort of laughter. “I know what I signed on for.”

“And it was good of you to humour me,” Jack insisted, “but know this: I will change. That’s not how it has to be, and you need to stop putting up with me and stop making excuses for me.”

Ianto gave Jack a wide-eyed stare. “You’re telling me to—”

“To ask for more. Because you deserve it, Ianto.” Jack pressed his hands to Ianto’s shoulders. “You don’t have forever to figure it out. I did, but I shouldn’t be wasting *your* life trying to do that. Don’t let me.”

“I, um...” Ianto shrugged, at a loss for words. “I’ll, well.” He cast around for something to say. “How about you get me back, and I’ll see what I can do?”

Jack grinned and leaned forward, pressing a chaste kiss to Ianto’s lips and then hauling him in. “God, I love you, Ianto Jones.”

Ianto’s heart leapt, and he hid his blush by burying his face in Jack’s shoulder. “Do you now?” he muttered, muffled by Jack’s shirt.

“You know it.”

“Even after three thousand years?”

“It takes more than time to dull those feelings, believe me,” Jack replied, resting his cheek against Ianto’s head. “You never forget the ones you love. Or at least, I haven’t yet, and I’ve got a bit more authority on that than anyone else.”

“You remember them all?”

“You. Everyone on this ship. Estelle. The Doctor. Rose. Toshiko and Owen. Gwen. Martha. Suzie.” Ianto could feel Jack’s shrug against under his head. “I forgot Gwen’s name once, and I spent a panicked three days trying to recall it. But I never forgot that I loved her.”

“You’re a big old romantic, aren’t you?” Ianto asked, pulling back and giving Jack a teasing grin.

“You betcha,” Jack said, not letting go. “Always was. Just forgot for a while.” He pulled Ianto back in, this time resting his chin on Ianto’s shoulder. “Don’t be jealous of the fact that I have relationships after you. Take it as reassurance that I am, against all plausibility, capable.”

“Alright,” Ianto said quietly, slipping his arms through Jack’s and clasping them behind his back, content just to stand there. There was no point in worrying about home until he got there. For now, Jack was here and that was good enough.

After a minute or two of silence, Jack spoke again. “I need your help.”

“With what?”

Jack pulled back and met Ianto’s eyes. “I need to show you how to fly the TARDIS.”

Ianto let go and ran a hand through his hair. “Is that possible? And why?”

“Yes, it’s possible, and I need a back-up.” Jack nodded over to the desk and computer console. “I’m drawn up plans, but I set up an emergency autopilot years ago, just for this. You hit the right buttons in the right order and you’ll be back in your own time.” He made a face. “Well, more or less. It’s hard to accurately pre-plan a TARDIS trip. But I erred on the side of later, so you should at least be able to find me.”

Ianto didn’t move. “Why can’t you do it? I thought this all succeeded.” Silence. “You said this worked,” Ianto accused. “I get back and Kethan lives and we get the TARDIS.”

Jack twitched a smile. “I know you get back. Clearly, Kethan survives. Me?” He shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“You can’t die,” Ianto pointed out, flatly.

“No, but that doesn’t mean I can’t get captured, or killed long enough that I’m out of action. Ianto,” he stressed, pointing at the screen. “Please? Someone else has to know how to fly the TARDIS.”

Ianto let out a breath. “Okay. Okay.”

“Thank you.” Jack smiled and beckoned him over. “Alright, so, the buttons are colour coded, and the first rule is, *don’t touch the mauve ones...*”

~

Iro Westlin looked, well, nothing like Jack. He was built on the same scale but that's about where the similarities ended. His dark skin and corkscrew hair, cut close to his head had Ianto doing a mental comparison, trying to see if he could find anything of Jack in the comfortable, authoritative features of the Captain. The men greeted each other with comfortable familiarity and first names – whatever Westlin called Jack in private, he used Jack here – apparently unconcerned about what other people might say of this coincidental meeting.

The meeting in the cargo bay was brief, and Westlin sent his chief engineer off with Ellis to see what could be done, as Jack predicted. Ellis's foul glance at Jack as he left belied his annoyance and being shown up, but he acquiesced. Aimless chatter, comprised mostly of discussion of local activity and a nearby alien war and a few lies about the *Evening Star*'s recent activity followed until the engineers returned to the bay and confirmed what the crew of the *Star* already knew.

“Needs new parts and a serious overhaul,” the alien said, clapping her hands together twice before dropping them. “Can't leave 'em here, they'll lose the back-up power before they can get the engine restarted.”

“Towing it is, then. Zeta Oh is nearest,” he glanced at Opal. “Will that do?”

“Certainly, if we can buy the parts there. They don't have much of a market, from what I recall.”

“I'll make it happen,” Westlin promised. “Co'hola, get the docking bay set, the rest of you,” he nodded at the crew, “need to pack your bags and join me on my ship. We'll put you up in the guest quarters, though I'm afraid the rest of the ship will be off limits.”

“How long to Zeta Oh?”

“Forty-eight hours or so. Pack an overnight bag and you should be fine. Is ten minutes fine?”

“Yes,” Opal turned to the crew. “You heard the man, pack up, anything you need to keep entertained for the next day or so. Back here in ten.”

~

“Bored now.”

“Are you twelve?”

Kethan stuck out his tongue at Soren and dropped his head back onto the arm of the couch.

“That doesn’t exactly help your case,” Jack pointed out from the desk across the room. Kethan ignored him and continued staring at the ceiling.

“Go play cards with the others,” Ianto suggested. It was just the four of them in this wing of what, to Ianto, seemed to be ambassadorial suits, or at least something designed for guests and not military. Soren had pulled a chair up in front of him and was currently losing the game of chess he was playing with Ianto. “You’re fine on the *Star*,” he pointed out from his seat at the other end of the couch. “How’s this different?”

“It’s different because I can’t even go tinker with the engines, or shoot some targets, or talk about nefarious plans I may or may not have.” He poked Ianto with a foot. “There’s only so long I can sit still and wait.”

“He also,” Jack interrupted, “doesn’t like feeling trapped. What?” he said at Kethan’s glare. “I just spent two years in a cell. I think I’m qualified to speak on our claustrophobic tendencies.”

“Two *years*,” Kethan sighed, staring up at the ceiling. “That’s forever. How could you stand it?”

“No choice. Kethan.” Jack hesitated and then went on. “Something I told myself – it’s always worth it.”

Kethan made a face. “I know. I’m here and doing this, aren’t I?”

Jack shrugged. “No, I know. Just remember it, alright?”

“I don’t,” Kethan pointed out, not angry, from what Ianto could tell. He seemed to have resigned himself to his fate, whatever that was.

“You get them back. Trust me, there are going to be days...” Jack trailed off.

“I get them back? Entirely?” Kethan sat up and swung his legs off the couch. “But you don’t remember everything.”

“You get them back,” Jack insisted, dropping his computer to the side table and stretching out his legs. Soren kicked Ianto under the table and Ianto’s attention went back to the game, ears still attuned to Jack and Kethan’s conversation.

“When?”

Jack made a face.

“Well, I won’t know until I get them!” Kethan exclaimed, throwing out his hands. “Obviously.”

Jack glanced over at Ianto and back at his younger self. “Well, in theory, Ianto’s going to bring them back to me.” He stood up and pulled what was shaped like a wallet, only a little smaller, out of his back pocket. Snapping the case open, he walked over to Kethan and dropped it into his outstretched hand.

“Okay,” Soren breathed out, looking a little on edge.

“What is that?” Ianto asked, curious. Kethan was looking disturbed, as if Jack had just dropped a dead baby mouse into his hand.

Kethan bit his lip and held it out for Ianto to see. The inside was mostly lined with something soft and black, like a jewelry box, except for a thin, shiny hexagon settled in an indent in the middle. Ianto reached out to touch it, to see if it felt as slick as it looked, but Kethan jerked the case away.

“Don’t – it’s delicate,” he snapped it shut and gave it back to Jack, hurriedly.

“It’s my memories,” Jack said calmly, slipping it back into his pocket. “The ones he – ” he gestured at Kethan “ – is about to lose, and the ones I got back. The one missing them currently, in the loosest sense of the word, is your Jack.”

Ianto glanced at Soren, trying to get a grasp on the sudden tension in the room. Soren just shook his head and looked back down at the chessboard.

“How are your memories on there?” he asked, pointing to Jack’s pocket. “Retcon doesn’t store them anywhere.”

Kethan frowned. “You know about Retcon?”

“I use it all the time. Used it, back at Torchwood.”

There was a heavy silence and Ianto’s skin prickled.

“What is it?”

“Memory tampering is illegal,” Soren said flatly. “Mental adjustments, without explicit permission from the party, is highly illegal.”

“Not where I’m from,” Ianto said. “Jack – you – we use Retcon all the time. It’s how Torchwood stays secret.”

Jack sighed and took a seat between him and Kethan, elbows on knees.

“Ianto, Retcon is something I brought back from the fifty-first century with me. Here it’s... akin to a date-rape drug. Using it on another sentient being is highly illegal. It’s also imprecise, like painting over an oil canvas with watercolours. It’s a backwater drug, but it was all I could create from memory. This,” he tapped his pocket, “is what the big boys use. What the Time Agency uses. They don’t try to hide the memories in your mind, they take them out, entirely.”

“I thought you said it was illegal.”

“Only if you’re not above the law,” Soren muttered darkly as he moved a knight.

“Only if you don’t sign a contract with the Agency giving them explicit ownership over your memories,” Kethan said, voice defiantly level. His hands were gripped tight in his lap.

“That doesn’t make it any less disgusting,” Soren spat, shaking the table with a fist. Ianto plucked up two fallen pieces and put them back on their squares.

“I didn’t realize there was such a taboo against tampering with memories,” he said softly, not looking anyone in the eye.

“How could you not?” Soren exclaimed. “Who is anyone but their memories? Take those away and there’s *nothing* left.”

Kethan stood up suddenly, and the other three watched as he muttered an excuse and left the room. Soren glared at Ianto, though Jack was giving him a similar look.

“Very nice,” Jack rolled his eyes, settling back in the couch.

“Should I...” Ianto looked at the door Kethan had left out of.

“No,” Jack said, shaking his head. “He just needs to collect himself. It’s only two years, after all, it’s not his whole life.”

“Two years is a long time when you’re twenty-eight,” Ianto muttered. “I’m sorry it didn’t click that it was such a horrible thing. I was sort of thinking he got off easy.”

“He does,” Jack said mildly. “But it sure as hell doesn’t look like that from his perspective. He’ll be okay, especially knowing he gets them back in short order.”



“How? How’d you get it here? You couldn’t have had it in the prison.”

Jack grinned, a little grimly. “A little time-travelling trickery. I went forward ten years ago and stole the memory chip from the Agency after it – well, when its archive security goes way downhill, shall we say. I gave it to Jotir to look after, and he gave it back to me my first night here. As soon as we split up, I’ll give it to you. That way, as long as you get to the TARDIS and get back to Earth, I’ll get them back.”

“And the circle completes,” Ianto said thoughtfully, trying to see if that all actually made sense.

“Yep.”

“So your future self is sending memories stolen from your past self to your present self?”

Jack blinked. “Yes?”

Soren let out a snort. “Ianto, I appreciate that chess isn’t very interesting in comparison, so do you want to just finish the game later?”

“Oh, um. Yeah, maybe. I actually,” he glanced at Jack and then back at the door. “I’m going to go find Kethan, is that all right? I’m not breaking any timelines?”

Jack waved him off. “Go. Tell him to buck up. It’s not that bad. I’ll finish your game for you.”

“Right.” Ianto apologized to Soren again and left them behind.

~

“Kethan?” Ianto stuck his head through a doorway. This was the dining room, and it was almost empty, but Ianto could see a figure standing in the dark by the expansive floor to ceiling window at the back. It was the only view they had of space from their series of rooms on the military ship.

Ianto maneuvered his way through the tables and came up beside Kethan, stopping a few feet away and taking in the sight of the man, illuminated by the strange glow of the engines he could just see outside. He had one hand pressed up against the glass (plastic? Super futuristic see-through compound?) and Ianto had a strange urge to reach over and put his on top. Jack’s hands had always made him feel safe, in their strength and absolute certainty over what he was doing them, but now he looked lost with one splayed out on the glass. Ianto reached up, instead, and touched his shoulder.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Kethan echoed back, not taking his eyes off the rushing space. “Sorry for storming out. I needed – ”

“S’fine,” Ianto said softly, stepping up beside him. “I didn’t... I never thought about it. What losing your memories really means. I guess I got used to it, at Torchwood.”

“Drugging people with Retcon?”

“We prefer ‘administering’,” Ianto joked, but it fell flat. “Yeah. It’s not much, usually, unless they’re criminals or something. Mostly just a few hours here or there. And it’s written into my contract, for if I need to leave.”

“What?” Kethan turned and made eye contact for the first time. “They’ll take your memories if you quit?”

“So it says.” Ianto stuck his hands in his pocket. “When I say I work for a secret organization, I’m not being stuck up.”

“No,” Kethan drawled. “I guess not. And I’m your boss?”

“Yeah.”

Kethan frowned.

“I can’t imagine ever ‘administering’ someone Retcon, let alone approving it as a standard mode of operation.” He tilted his head. “I’m pretty different, aren’t I?”

“Yes,” Ianto said, honestly. “You’re – you. But after more stuff.” He made a face. “Not the most eloquent of explanations.”

“Yeah, well, since you can’t tell me this stuff...” Kethan managed a smile and leaned gently against Ianto. Ianto took the hint and wrapped an arm around his waist, pulling him up against him as Kethan mirrored him and dropped a head on his shoulder.

“Six hours and we’re there,” he said quietly.

Ianto pressed a kiss to his hair. “Six hours till D-day.”

“World War Two,” Kethan muttered. “I’m good with that time period. Liked it.”

“It was a war,” Ianto pointed out. “What’s there to like?”

“People fighting for their beliefs. Their lives, their countries. Acts of bravery and foolishness, often the same thing. Coming up against the worst of humanity to see if there’s really anything to you.”

“The worst of humanity is what sticks in most people’s minds, when I’m from.”

“Too near, I guess.”

“I guess. Have you seen it?” Ianto asked, curiously. Jack had lived through it, and he’d been stuck there for a few hours, and, apparently, he’d been there when he met the Doctor. If he’d been there a fourth time, that would have been a bit of the ultimate crossing of timelines.

“Nope. It’s a bit of a prize period, if we ever need to go there, I’m not senior enough.”

“Oh,” Ianto said, pressing his fingers into Kethan’s side, slipping a thumb under the edge of his shirt to touch the soft skin underneath. “Would you like to know that you do get to see it?”

Kethan turned to look at him, a real smile on his face. “Really?”

“Yep. Uniform and everything. You still have the coat.”

“Wicked,” Kethan said, pressing a kiss to Ianto’s jaw line before settling back against his shoulder. “It’s funny, a lot of people think the future would be the really cool thing, if you could travel through time. I’ve always liked the past best. It shows where we come from, who we are, so much better.”

“Explains why you like me,” Ianto teased. “I’m just an artifact from the past, aren’t I?”

“Absolutely,” Kethan deadpanned. “Completely a historical curiosity. Nothing else to it.”

Ianto laughed but Kethan came round to stand in front of him, hands on his hips and a serious look on his face.

“You know that’s not true, right?” he asked, looking anxious. “I know you haven’t been sure about all this, but…” He touched a hand to Ianto’s chest before letting it fall away. His eyes were bright with sincerity and determination as he leaned forward and dropped a kiss on Ianto’s lips. “I couldn’t have done this without your help. Literally, but more than that, too. When Brenneth was killed, if you hadn’t been there.”

Ianto stopped him with a hand to his cheek. “You would have been fine. But I know.” He ran

his thumb down to rub across Kethan's lips. "I'm glad I was here. As terrifying as it's been, I wouldn't trade it for anything."

"I wish I didn't have to give you up."

"You don't."

"Still feels like it."

Ianto leaned forward and kissed him gently. "You won't even notice the time pass. You'll forget me, and then you'll find me, and then I'll almost get everyone killed and eventually we'll stop hating each other long enough to realize there are better things to be doing with our time." He grinned. "It'll work out. Eventually. I think."

"Even though you don't think I love you," Kethan said.

"I..." Ianto trailed off, unable to give an honest answer.

"Well, that's stupid," Kethan said firmly. "Because I love you now, and even if I forget it, it's still there, on that stupid chip, and I'll get it back." He squeezed his palms on Ianto's sides. "Okay?"

"Okay," Ianto said. "Kethan, I –"

"I know," Kethan cut in with a smile. "Even if you are – what did Zoanne call you? A under-evolved example of a human male."

Ianto put on an affronted face. "She called me that?"

"She did," Kethan laughed. "It's alright, she doesn't know what she's talking about. You may think you're going to get burned, but you still walk right into the fire, Ianto Jones, whether you can admit it or not."

He dragged his hands up to Ianto's shoulders and pushed him back against the glass, coming forward to press up against him and meet his mouth with his own. Ianto let his hands fall to the small of Kethan's back, bunching up the shirt to slide underneath as Kethan's tongue slid against his own in an unhurried kiss. There wasn't any tension, or urgency, just the comfortable warmth of someone else who mattered, and Ianto tried to forget that this was probably goodbye.

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“They’re not *done*.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Captain,” Ellis said, turning to Opal. “We have to wait. Another day and the engines will be repaired. Any other way is suicide.”

“I’m sorry, Ellis,” Jack said, leaning across the table. “We have to move now. The *Star* – ”

“Don’t tell me she’ll be fine,” Ellis snapped. “Even if she is, we won’t get her back.”

Jack didn’t say anything, and Ianto cleared his throat. As the least interested party in this particular debate, he might be able to calm Ellis down.

“Are you sure this is the day we did it, Jack?” he asked.

“I even know the minute we depart, Ianto,” Jack said, exasperated. “It wasn’t something I wanted to forget. Please, believe me,” he looked at the crew, gathered around the table. “I want this to work as much as anyone else. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“No, of course not,” Opal said with a small smile. “Today it is – in three hours?”

“And thirteen minutes, yes.”

“Right. Aharon, Ashild, you’ll take up the rear with Ianto. He needs to stay safe, since he’s our second pilot, should we lose Jack. Kethan and I will go ahead with Jack. Kareh, is the virus – ”

“ – done and ready to be released. We won’t have more than ten minutes before their system’s antibodies kick in, but it’ll be enough to give you a head start.” Kareh leaned back in his chair. “It’ll just affect the sensors, though. They’ll still have communications. It’s not much.”

“It’s enough,” Jack cut in. “Those who are staying behind – Soren, Jotir, Kareh, Zoanne, Ellis – wait in the cargo bay. You’ll need to protect the airlock, because once they know we’re out of the ship, they’ll try and swarm the *Star*.”

A decisive nod followed from Opal, and Ellis acquiesced reluctantly. On one hand, Ianto could see that none of them were quite sure they trusted Jack, himself aside, but they also projected the same fearsome confidence that Torchwood had before going out on a mission. Ianto recognized it – the belief in yourself, in the probability of success, that was necessary to go forward with what was a mission of almost suicidal danger.

Opal stood up and waved off the crew. “Three hours. Do what you need to do.”

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Jack was in the cargo bay when Ianto finished getting his gear – or rather, arsenal – on. Kethan passed him on his way out of their quarters, giving his hand a squeeze before letting him go and going to change as well. Ianto tried not to clang down the metal steps, not so much sneaking up on Jack as letting him finish whatever he was doing by the docking bay doors. Ianto stopped a couple meters behind him, watching quietly. Jack had a panel open and a toolbox by his side, doing something with the internal circuitry.

“Need a hand?” he asked after a minute.

“Mm-mm,” Jack mumbled, holding wires between his teeth. A spark flashed and he stepped back, closing it up and snatching the wires out of his mouth. “All done. You – ” He cut himself off as he turned around and caught sight of Ianto for the first time. Ianto watched, uncertain, as Jack’s gaze dropped from his face down to the various holsters and weapons strapped to his belt and thighs and even one small weapon at his ankle.

Ianto glanced down. “Too much? Ashild said I’d need them all.”

“Uh,” Jack said, tearing his gaze away from Ianto’s legs and meeting his eyes. “I wasn’t looking at the guns.”

Ianto looked down again, and flushed. “They’re a bit tight,” he muttered. If they weren’t, the thigh holsters would tug awkwardly. “And you picked them out.” Or at least, Kethan did, which was really the same thing.

“Oh, I’m not complaining,” Jack drawled, voice dropping into what Ianto thought of as his ‘sex voice’. Jack sidled forward and slid a hand around Ianto’s waist, coming to rest on the small of his back underneath the M-16 look-alike, sliding across the smooth black fabric of the t-shirt. A sharp tug and Ianto was up against Jack, his hands up on Jack’s chest and Jack’s mouth against his ear.

“You, Ianto Jones, look entirely dangerous, and incredibly edible.”

Ianto huffed a laugh, pressing his face into Jack’s neck – no collar, they seemed to be out of style this decade – and let his hands wander around Jack’s sides to rest on his hips. “I feel ridiculous,” he admitted. “I mean, I’ve done field-work, but Torchwood doesn’t quite compare to this.”

“Not yet,” Jack muttered, and Ianto pulled back sharply to look him in the eyes. Jack shook his head, heading off the question Ianto wanted to ask. “Do me a favour: when you get home? Dress up like this, sometime.” He gave Ianto a smug leer. “It’ll be worth your while, trust me.”

“Home,” Ianto said, tasting the word on his lips. “You’re sure I get there?” He meant the question to be playful, but it ended up a little desperate.

“Don’t believe me?” Jack asked, a wry smile touching his lips.

“You could be lying,” Ianto pointed out, trying to pull back, but Jack’s hands held him in place.

“And if I was, would you want to know?”

“Yes,” Ianto answered, without hesitation. “I don’t want you to coddle me. If this is goodbye...” he shrugged. “I want to say it properly.”

A dark look crossed Jack’s face, and he hauled Ianto in, squeezing him tight. “It’s not,” he insisted, voice cracking. “I promise, it’s not. And if something goes wrong, and it is...” he trailed off, and Ianto could feel him literally shake himself against him. “It’s not,” he whispered.

Ianto let Jack hold him, rubbing his thumbs against the taut muscles along Jack’s spine, until Jack eased his grip and stepped back.

“Sorry,” he said with an uneasy smile. “I just – I’m looking forward to getting you back. Oh – ” he reached into a pocket and pulled out the little black case that held his memories “ – here’s proof that I believe you’re getting back.”

Ianto looked at the box, uneasy, and held out his hand, palm up. Jack pressed the box into his hand and folded his fingers over it, covering Ianto’s cold hands with his own broad, warm ones. Ianto had the profound feeling that being given those memories was a remarkable sort of gift, and he slid it into a pocket that zipped closed.

“I would hardly give it to you if I didn’t think you’d make it home,” Jack pointed out, leaning back against the wall with his hands in his pockets.

“You could always take them off my body,” Ianto said without thinking, and then snapped his mouth shut at the horrified look on Jack’s face. “Sorry, sorry. I – ” he shook his head. “That was rather morbid, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jack said firmly, and then laughed. “Fine then, don’t believe me. You’ll find out for yourself soon enough.”

“No goodbye sex, then?” Ianto said petulantly, though he was mostly joking.

Jack snorted. “Kids these days. Or those days. Or – ” he laughed again, and Ianto absently considered that even though his own Jack laughed frequently, it always seemed to be covering something else up. This Jack and Kethan, at this time, laughed with real joy. Ianto could only hope that he’d get to hear that in his own some day.

“Okay,” Jack said, and started dragging Ianto towards the stairs.

“What?” Ianto said, startled. “I was kidding! Do you have any idea how long it took to get dressed?”

“Yes,” Jack said, stopping and kissing him until Ianto was panting. “And I know all the good ways to get around it. You won’t have to remove a single weapon.” His smile was all kinds of suggestive, and Ianto swallowed compulsively as he trailed his hand down Ianto’s stomach, tracing the muscles and skipping over the belt to rest on his groin. “Come on.”

Ianto went.

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## **Chapter 18**

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Ianto stepped over the body of a guard in the airlock, coming up beside Aharon and watching as Kethan worked his wristband to unlock the heavy door that separated the docking room from the rest of the station. The first three – Opal, Jack and Kethan – would take the corridor to the left and follow a route that was a compromise between speed and the less-populated parts of the base. They would clear the route. The last three – Aharon, Ashild, and Ianto himself, would follow a few minutes behind, making sure no one caught up to them and ready to take a new route if – god forbid – anything happened to the front line.

“Got it,” Kethan said, glancing back at them and then forward again as the door slid open. Blaster-fire immediately came through, and they flattened themselves to the walls. Kethan gave Ianto a sharp grin and then nodded at Opal and Jack. “See you at the TARDIS.” Blaster in hand, he threw himself through the door, the others following close behind.

“I don’t like this,” Ianto muttered, sidling up and listening to the weapons’ fire move further down the corridor outside.



“Better in groups than all at once,” Ashild murmured, tapping her blaster against her thigh nervously.

After a couple minutes of tense waiting, their comms blipped.

“*We’re to the first checkpoint,*” came Jack or Kethan, Ianto couldn’t tell. “*You’re clear to follow.*”

“Roger,” Aharon replied, and gestured to the door. “Let’s move.”

The corridor was clear, and along the way to the first checkpoint they encountered only one other contingent of soldiers. They were quickly taken care of, and Ianto could feel himself relaxing into the role, the part of gun-slinging action-hero, and embraced it, shoving his compulsive worrying off to the side and letting the excitement bubble up to the surface, adrenaline pumping as he shot – *killed*, but he ignored that voice – the soldiers who threatened them.

They reached the first checkpoint – a lift. They needed to get to the right floor quickly, before the base could go into lock-down. Kareh’s virus gave them an edge, but not much of one. Aharon called for the lift as Ashild and Ianto each guarded a corner, holding back the soldiers, who were quickly gathering on either side.

“They won’t know we can take the lift,” Aharon said to them, waiting impatiently. The others had already gone, probably still in the lift, if the wait was any indication. “But as soon as you stop firing, they’ll – Ianto that one’s *dead*.”

Ianto cursed and dropped the laser blaster, pulling out the second one – a borrowed one – from under his jacket and resumed firing, ducking back quickly as his hair was nearly singed off. “Sorry, forgot,” he gasped, sending Aharon an apologetic look.

“Never mind that,” Ashild called from the other end of the corridor. “The lift’s here.”

The ding they all heard was followed by the whoosh of the doors, and Aharon dove inside, beckoning for the others to follow. Ianto fired off one last volley before racing inside, grabbing Ashild and pulling her in after him.

“Doors doors doors,” she chanted, and Ianto saw laser fire fly past as they slid shut.

He slumped against the wall, panting, more from the rush than physical exertion.

“Wow,” he said, dropping his head back on the wall.

“I thought you did this kind of stuff back home,” Ashild said, her eyes not leaving the numbers as they dropped.

“Weevils don’t fight back with guns,” he laughed, and she grinned back, though the sentence probably made no sense to her.

“Five, four, three,” Aharon started chanting, warningly. Ianto straightened and leveled his blaster at the door, while Ashild leaned over to the lift controls. “Two, *one*.”

The door opened, just barely, and Ianto fired through the crack as Aharon tossed out a small grenade. The door shut again, and after a moment the force of the explosion rattled the lift.

“Nice,” Ashild said, letting the door fall open and swinging her blaster around the corridor, strewn with bodies. She paused and pulled up her comm. “We’re on the floor, Captain.”

*“Good. We’re about to breach the security layer outside the secure area.”*

“See you soon.” She jerked her head down the corridor. “Ianto, watch our backs.”

Ianto nodded and together they inched down the hall, Ianto moving backwards and firing occasionally to keep anyone interested in coming up from behind from approaching too quickly.

They weren’t far from the next checkpoint when Aharon’s comm came to life.

*“Aharon, do you read?”*

Opal. The three of them pulled off to the side, Ashild and Ianto tucking in on either side of Aharon to protect him as he lowered his guard and answered.

*“We’ve lost Kethan. They’ve got him in the corridor between the zones.”*

Ianto shot three guards in a row and dropped his now-dead laser blaster on the floor, pulling out the sonic one and adjusting the setting for accuracy. “He can’t die,” he hissed at Aharon. “We need to – ”

“I know,” Aharon said sharply, and responded to Opal. “We’ll get him out. Are you in a secure position?”

*“For now. There are a lot of them, though. We’re going to try and take the control room, 337A on the other side. Jack thinks we should wait for you there.”*

“Alright. We’ll get him out.”

“*Good.*”

“This is why we follow behind,” Ashild muttered, tugging Aharon along. The corridors were suspiciously clear, and they came up to the door that separated their zone from the secure zone of this floor’s storage facilities. There was a small window in it, and a control panel on the right. Ashild glanced inside, quickly, and then flattened herself against the door, finger curled tight around the blaster.

“They’ve got him all right,” she said, breathlessly.

Ianto leaned over and peeked through – sure enough, Kethan was kneeling on the floor, facing away from him. There were some twenty soldiers in the room, the one who looked to be in charge standing, arms crossed, in front of Kethan.

“That’s a lot of soldiers,” he said, pulling back and letting Aharon take a look.

“And no cover,” Ashild added, but before they could go on there was a beep and a voice came out of the control panel.

*“Well, hello there,”* it said. *“Seems to me you’re missing a crewman.”*

Aharon pulled Ianto back alongside him, out of the line of sight of the small window, and made the chopping motion that seemed to be universal for “shut up”.

*“If you want your man back alive, you probably should give up this foolish endeavour of yours. It is a little pointless – do you really think so few of you could get by so many of us?”*

“We need to help him,” Ashild hissed.

“Too many,” Aharon said gruffly. “Besides, don’t we know he doesn’t die?”

*“You have thirty seconds before I order my soldiers to shoot.”*

“He doesn’t die because of us!” Ianto said sharply. “You can’t sit back and let the future happen, or else it *won’t*.”

“Expert time-traveler now, are you?” Aharon said bitingly.

“He’s right,” Ashild said, and Ianto jerked his head up, taking in the faraway expression on her face.

*“Twenty seconds.”*

“What do you mean, he’s right?” Aharon asked, bewildered.

“I’m going in,” she said, unholstering another blaster and pushing past them to the controls. “Kethan’s good, he just needs a distraction. If I can attract their attention long enough, he should be able to get out the back, go after mum.”

“It’s suicide.”

Ianto pressed a hand to Ashild’s arm, trying to catch her eye as she thumbed the controls. “He’s right.”

*“Ten seconds.”*

“Then help me,” she said, meeting his eyes with the same determination Ianto had seen when she came with him to find Kethan and Brenneth. In it, Ianto could see the reflection of all the woman he’d known who came through hell for the people they loved – his mother, Lisa, Tosh, Gwen... None of them ever gave up, ever stopped trying, and Ianto knew he had to help, for her, and for Kethan.

“Of course,” he said, pulling out his M-16 and squaring his shoulders.

*“Three... two...”*

The door slid open and Ashild dove through. Ianto moved to follow, but was hauled back, breath knocked out of him as he was thrown back against the wall.

“No!” he gasped, reaching for the door as it slid shut. “What?” He struggled against the arms holding him back, trying to get to her, trying to get in, but the grip was too strong.

“Come on,” Aharon said gruffly, in his ear. “There’s another entrance this way.”

Ianto stood his ground as Aharon tried to pull him down the hall.

“You – she needed our help!”

“One person or three, it was still *suicide*,” Aharon growled, not looking back. Ianto glanced between him and the door, trying to loosen the man’s grasp on his wrist.

“We need to help her,” he pleaded, a sick feeling bubbling up through him. *Too late too late*

*too late.*

“We can’t.”

“You – you love her!” Ianto cried, at last wrenching his arm from Aharon’s grip. “You’re going to let her die?”

“She’s probably already dead,” Aharon said through his teeth. “And so will we be, if you don’t *move, now.*”

There was a blip and Aharon finally met Ianto’s eyes. They were cold and blank as he lifted his wristband to his mouth.

“Aharon.”

“*What the fuck did you let her do?*” came Kethan’s more than a little hysterical voice through the comm. Ianto couldn’t even feel relieved that he was still alive, that Ashild’s sacrifice hadn’t been in vain, so stricken was he with what Aharon had – or hadn’t – done.

“Meet us at the control room, 337A,” Aharon said, and then dropped his hand to grab Ianto’s elbow. Ianto let himself be dragged along, ducking against the wall to avoid fire several times before he could find the breath to speak.

“Why didn’t you let me go?” he asked, tucked in an alcove along the wall. “You may be a coward but *I’m not.*”

“You need to live,” Aharon said, ignoring the insult and moving away, down the hall. Ianto had to run to hear what he said. “You bring Kethan his memories, you know how to fly the TARDIS.”

He stepped around a corner and fired six times, precise and even, and the soldiers dropped to the ground. “You were more important.”

Ianto didn’t know what to say, couldn’t find the words, just followed Aharon until they found the secondary entrance to the storage facilities. Aharon seemed to be working on some sort of mindless energy, hardly pausing to take cover and simply blowing his way through line of soldier after line of soldier. Ianto knew, in the back of his mind, he was supposed to be protecting their sixes, but for the most part they were moving too quickly for him to do any more than follow at a jog.

They came around a corner and there was a sudden eruption of yelling. Aharon reeled back, raising his blaster and shooting at the ceiling. Ianto skidded to a halt. Opal and Kethan were on

the other side, and between them was a body – Jack’s.

“Control room?” Aharon barked.

“Here,” Opal said, thumbing over her shoulder. “We haven’t had a chance to unlock it.”

“Do it,” Aharon said to Kethan, taking his position and providing cover. Ianto turned back and peeked around the corner they came from, protecting that route.

After a moment, the door hissed and slid open. Opal, Kethan, and Aharon dove in, but Ianto held back and dropped his guns, looping his arms under Jack and pulling him through before the doors could close and seal with a hiss.

“What are you doing?” Opal said, looking confused. “I’m sorry Ianto – he’s dead.”

“I know,” Ianto said shortly, not explaining, just letting Jack drop in a corner and straightening up. “I just – never mind.”

Kethan couldn’t know. Or maybe he could – Ianto didn’t know. Maybe the time for whatever decision Kethan would have made that changed things was past, and it didn’t matter any more. At the moment, Kethan looked stricken, though he seemed to be watching Opal more than the body of his future self. Ianto looked down – Jack still looked dead, at least, and the burn across his cheek hadn’t healed.

Opal nodded, and then looked between him and Aharon. She tensed, and opened her mouth, but before she could say anything Aharon broke in.

“Opal – I’m sorry.”

Kethan clenched his eyes shut and looked away, hand on his mouth like he was fighting the urge to throw up. Ianto was shaking, he realized suddenly, and his legs gave out from under him as he sagged against the wall.

“Later,” Opal said, but it was barely a whisper. Ianto couldn’t look her in the face, so he watched Jack, instead. The burn was gone.

The others started to talk in their quick, slang-filled language about movements and plans and angles of attack, but they hadn’t settled on anything when a screen that had been dark flared to life, and a sickeningly familiar face filled its pixels.

He was younger, a lot younger, but the thin mouth, the sharp eyes, the hard line of his jaw and prominent cheekbones; all were the same.

Captain John Hart.

“Adias,” Kethan said, letting out a shaky sigh. “We’ve got Time Agents.”

*“Hello hello, welcome to Zeta Oh, I hope you are very much enjoying your stay,”* Hart – Adias – drawled, cocking his head in a way that made Ianto want to punch him, but that Adias himself probably thought was attractive. *“We wouldn’t want you to be disappointed with the facilities, but we’re afraid the vacation will have to end rather abruptly.”*

“He can’t see us,” Kethan muttered, hands flying over the consoles. “They’ve got communications, but their internal sensors are still offline.”

*“Kethan, Kethan, Kethan,”* Adias tsked. *“Must be a bit of a shock to see yourself dead, hmm? The lovely soldiers told me the older you didn’t quite make it. Shame – there’s a party I would accept an invite to.”*

Hatred coursed through Ianto as he looked between the screen and Kethan, whose hands were fisted at his sides. Adias didn’t know Jack was immortal, Ianto suddenly realized. There was a flicker of movement beside him and he looked down to catch Jack casting him a look and then closing his eyes again, playing dead.

*“So, here’s the deal. I’ve wired the base with enough temporal explosives to destroy you and your timeship, and keep you from being able to jump to now to mess with anything for a good long time. I don’t see you at the main control room in five minutes, it all goes boom.”*

“Shit,” muttered Opal.

Adias leaned forward, close enough that Ianto could see where his breath condensed on the screen. *“On the other hand, you show up, and I get to take you back to the playpen, where you belong. I might even be nice enough to let your friends go – those of whom are left, at least.”* A grin, a wide, maniacal grin, and Ianto wondered – not for the first time – what the hiring policies of the Time Agency were. *“See you in five. I’ll tell the soldiers to stand down, since I’d rather see you in one piece.”*

The screen flickered off, and there was silence for ten seconds before Kethan twitched and stepped over to the door.

“Kethan – ”

“No, Opal,” he interrupted, running a hand through his hair. “It’s done. It’s done and Adias knows it. I’m not sacrificing the rest of you on the off-chance we get there in time.”

“I know how to fly it,” Ianto pointed out, pulling himself up off the floor.

“Fast enough? Before they can blow this place up?” Kethan shook his head. “Too many people have died because of me.”

“And more will if the Agency keeps the TARDIS,” Ianto pointed out.

“Four and a half minutes,” was Aharon’s only contribution, but Kethan nodded at him, and reached for the door.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” he said, and after taking one last look at his – at Jack’s – body in the corner, he met Ianto’s eyes and gave him a smile. “Thanks.”

He took off at a run, and Opal put a hand on Ianto’s shoulder, as if she thought he might run off after him.

If he’d been the only Jack left, Ianto would have.

“Right, we need to go.”

Opal let out a small scream – in any other circumstances, Ianto might have found it amusingly out of character – and Aharon had his blaster trained on Jack before he’d gotten completely to his feet.

“You were dead,” she said faintly.

Jack didn’t smile, just nodded. “Yes, and we don’t have time to explain. We need to move while the soldiers are standing down.”

Opal looked between Jack and Ianto, her face ashen, but Ianto could see her steeling herself, drawing out of whatever reserves of strength she had left, and she nodded. “Okay. But I want answers later.”

Jack nodded, and opened the door. They ran down the corridor at full speed, stopping only to get through locked doors and to kill anyone they saw, with blasters set to the quietest setting so as to not alert anyone to their presence. Time was ticking away, and the five minute mark passed before they reached the storage bay where the TARDIS was being held.

“Not blown up,” Aharon said, standing guard as Jack worked at the controls to the entrance of the bay.



“Kethan got there in time,” Opal observed, watching Jack uneasily.

“Yep,” Jack muttered. “And here we are.”

The door slid open, finally and they filed inside. Ianto saw three soldiers on a ramp on the far side, and with steady aim he took down the first and second while Aharon managed the third. Opal was locking the door behind them, but Jack – he’d let his blaster fall to his side as he sprinted across the bay, coming to a halt in front of... a storage container? Ianto squinted at it – it had the same markings as every other one in the bay, presumably government identifiers, as well as numbers, which he could now read.

“That’s her?” he asked as he came up beside Jack. “A little different from a Police box,” he observed.

Jack laughed. “Her chameleon circuitry works just fine, thank you.” He reached out a hand and touched it to the latch on the hatch to the container. It opened itself with a mysterious *click*, and Jack leaned his weight back as he hauled open the door. Jack smiled – really smiled, like he was seeing an old friend for the first time – and stepped in. Ianto hesitated, and then followed him in, Aharon and Opal close behind.

“Well – ” Ianto breathed out, looking around the room. It was definitely larger inside than outside, and though Ianto had been expecting it, it was still disorienting to see. The bright blue pillar anchored the room, and the shining silver panels around it were covered in buttons and levers and screens. Pale yellow, organic-shaped columns formed the structure of the room, and they reminded Ianto most of bones, or of ancient African trees, twisted and wound together in pleasing shapes.

Ianto’s contemplation of the TARDIS interior was interrupted by a shout and the sound of blaster fire.

“Shut the door, please,” Jack called, and as Aharon and Ianto hauled the heavy door inwards, Opal’s comm blipped and Adias’s face popped up. He did not exactly look happy, but Ianto noted with trepidation that he also didn’t look entirely pissed off.

*“Oh, dear, this could have been so much more pleasant,”* he drawled. *“But as you seem to have broken our little deal, I’m afraid I’ll have to break mine. Goodbye!”*

“Hold on!” Jack hollered, and suddenly Ianto was flung across the room, head bashing against one of the bone-like structures before he could fling his arms around a railing and hold on.

“What’s going on?” Opal yelled from the floor, hands wrapped around a post as the TARDIS jerked and shook with ferocity.

“He set off the explosives,” Jack shouted back, dancing around the console like a madman.

“The *Star*!” Aharon said, dragging himself up to the console and reaching out for Jack, who darted out of the way. Ianto had no idea how he was keeping his balance.

“I know,” Jack snapped, and shoved him out of the way to reach the panel in front of him. “We’re going to get them back.”

“But – ” Opal gasped, pulling herself up, “ – I thought temporal explosives make it impossible to time travel anywhere nearby.”

“Normally, yes,” Jack said, bracing himself on the console and pulling several levers in quick succession. “Because it warps time around the location and you can’t find the right route. But before I left, I wired a beacon into the *Evening Star*, so as long as we’re quick, we should be able to make one in-and-out trip.”

“Ashild,” Opal breathed out, working her way over to the console. “Can you – ”

“I’m sorry,” Jack said, finally pausing in his frantic movements to look her in the eye. “I’m so, so sorry, but I can’t get then, or there. I would if I could, but...”

She nodded, looking down to where her hands were wrapped around the railing; her eyes clenched shut, shoulders tensed. Jack dropped a hand on her shoulder and waited until she sucked in a breath and straightened up.

“Get my crew.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The three of them stood back as Jack kept working, until the shaking stopped and the TARDIS, presumably, came to a halt. Jack nodded at the door.

“Three minutes. No more. Just get everybody in.”

Ianto was over at the door first, pulling it open, only to face a line of four blasters.

“Woah,” he pulled back. “It’s us, it’s fine.”

Zoanne dropped her gun an inch and peered at him, suspiciously. “You just left. Just!”

“Time travel,” Jack said, giving him a little push between the shoulder blades. “We need to go

in less than three minutes, so unless you would like to be blown up, please come into my TARDIS.”

“That’s a TARDIS?” Ellis said, skeptical. “Looks like a shipping container to me.”

Ianto looked up – it did, but now it matched the others in the *Evening Star*’s cargo bay, and had lost the military insignia.

“Chameleon circuitry,” Ianto said, stepping out of the way so the others – Zoanne, Soren, Ellis, Kareh, and Jotir, who was unarmed – could come in. As Zoanne passed him, he bit his lip. She didn’t know yet, she didn’t know what had – what would? Was Ashild still alive now, beside him and Aharon somewhere? – happened.

“Wait,” Opal said, pushing back past them. “Wait.”

She ran across the cargo bay and took the stairs two at a time, disappearing through the door to the crew quarters.

“Ianto,” Jack said sharply. “Go after her. Make sure she comes back in time.”

Ianto nodded and followed Opal, looking inside Ashild’s quarters – empty – and then Opal’s. She was sitting on the bed, staring at her hands, and Ianto paused in the doorway, uncertain of what to say.

“She was twenty-four,” she said quietly, and Ianto realized she was actually looking at a small storage device. He watched quietly for a moment as she turned it in her hands.

“My girlfriend was twenty-six when she died,” he said, startled to hear his own voice, but he continued when she looked up at him, eyes red. “Lisa. Ashild reminded me of her. They were both...” he trailed off, struggling to find the words. “Full of life. Beautiful. Brilliant.”

“Brave,” Opal said hoarsely. “Brave and stupid.”

“Just brave,” Ianto said, holding out a hand. “Just brave.”

Opal nodded and, after taking in breath, stood. “We need to go.”

Ianto followed her back through the hall, down the stairs, and past Jack, who ushered them into the TARDIS and pulled the door shut behind them.

“Hold on,” Ianto said loudly enough for everyone to hear, since Jack probably wouldn’t remember, and then wrapped an arm around a pillar himself.

The TARDIS whirred to life and Ianto shut his eyes, finally, finally sure he would be going home, and not at all sure it was worth it.

## Chapter 19

~

Ianto sat against the console and watched out of the corner of his eye as Jack harrumphed and stared at the small screen embedded into it.

“Trouble?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

“Oh, not really, just trying to locate a good date for Opal and Zoanne,” he said distractedly. “I’d rather not drop them in the middle of a catastrophe if I can help it.”

“Why are you sending them forward in time at all?”

“Force of the temporal explosion,” Jack said, waving a hand and pulling a few toggles. “Makes it very difficult to hit any spatial location with accuracy for about a decade around it. I could guess and check, but if location’s more important than time, the future’s the best bet.”

They’d already dropped Soren, Kareh and Aharon off at a busy spaceport ten years in the future – all had the skills to get a job as quickly as they liked. Ianto had hugged the first two goodbye, but hadn’t managed more than a stiff nod to Aharon. He figured he’d be able to forgive him at some point, but since he’d never see him again, it was rather academic.

“Ellis is going with them?” Ianto asked, looking across the room to where Zoanne and Ellis were sitting against the wall. Ianto had half-expected him to throw a fit at the loss of the *Evening Star*, but he seemed resigned to its fate, perhaps aware that in the face of Opal and Zoanne’s loss, a ship wasn’t much to complain about.

“Yes – he and Opal are from the same planet. I’m going to drop them all there.”

Ianto nodded absently, watching as Opal came back into the main room and slid down next to Zoanne, who dropped her head on Opal’s shoulder. Neither of them looked like they’d had any decent sleep in the last twenty-four hours, though Jack had ushered them all into the back rooms of the TARDIS for that purpose before making any plans.

“Jack,” he asked, thinking back to Ellis and the *Star*. “What happened to the ship? I saw its mainframe at one point, and it – ”

“Looked kind of like the Hub’s mainframe?” Jack finished for him, working some controls.

“Yes,” Ianto said, leaning over. “Not a coincidence, then?”

“Not at all. It got blown back through time, and ended up on Earth in the, oh, I don’t know, early eighteen hundreds. Torchwood eventually found it and I got it running for them.”

“Isn’t that a bit of a coincidence?” That the *Star* had ended up on Earth, of all places...

“No such thing,” Jack said, meeting his eyes with a wink. “It’s actually your fault.”

“Oh?”

“Yep. You left some clothes on the ship that were out of time, and they drew the surrounding material back to their location, and towards their time.”

“Oh.” Ianto thought for a moment. “So Torchwood owes its technological advances to... my shirt and trousers? And possibly my boxers?”

“Uh-huh,” Jack muttered, leaning over to yank on a lever, and then lifted his head to announce, “Landing in five, ladies and gentlemen. Grab a hold of somebody or something.”

Five minutes later, the TARDIS jerked to a halt and Ianto let go of the railing. Jotir emerged from the back – Ianto kept forgetting about him – and said goodbye to the remaining crew. Ianto came up behind him quietly, trying not to interrupt.

“ – for your loss,” he was saying, and the ridges along his face were taught and parallel.

“Thank you,” Zoanne managed, and Opal reached out to take his outstretched hand, pulling him in for a bear hug. Jotir gave in to the physical contact, but looked relieved when she let him go.

“Take care of him,” Opal said, jerking her head towards Jack, who’d come up behind Ianto. “God knows he needs a keeper.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said seriously, over Jack’s halfhearted protest.

Jack put a hand on Ianto’s shoulder and leaned in. “Year 5069, Lurei Prime, city – if you can call it a city – of the Red River.” He cocked his head. “You sure about this? It’s not exactly civilization.”

“It’s home,” Opal sighed. “It’s what – it’s where I should be, now. Where we should be.”

Zoanne nodded. “The supplies you’ve given me should make it easy to set up a medical practice – that’ll give us income for the meantime. And skilled labour is always needed, so Ellis will be fine. We’ll make do.”

Jack smiled. “I have no doubt – I’m certain I could drop any of you in a desert on Kuresh and you’d make do.” He let go of Ianto’s shoulder and stepped up, offering each of the women an elbow. “Shall we?”

The planet outside was nothing like Ianto had expected – he’d imagined something out of a Wild West movie, all dry and barren, but instead they stepped out into thick foliage and heavy, soggy air.

“Where the hell have you parked us?” Zoanne grumped, pushing back a large leaf.

“This is *not* Lurei,” Opal said with a frown. “It’s not this – this *wet*.”

Ianto swore and tried to move, realizing his foot was sinking into the muck. The sudden movement had him falling over on the unstable ground, and only Jack’s arm around his waist kept him from face-planting into the mud.

“Whoa there,” he said, grinning at Ianto and setting him upright. “This is Lurei all right – there was a bit of an environmental disaster about six years ago. I would have dropped you earlier, except you might not have appreciated the constant thunderstorms. It’s settled down a bit more.”

“Great,” Opal said, stepping up onto the trunk of a felled tree to escape the mud. “And the village?”

“About thirty paces thataway,” Jack said, pointing.

“Come with us?” Ellis asked, tilting his head. “You always have a home with us, Kethan.”

Ianto flinched, but didn’t say anything. They had no idea how much the man beside them *wasn’t* Kethan. If they expected ever to see him again, they were going to be sorely disappointed.

Jack shook his head. “Sorry – I have to get Ianto home. But how about I swing round for Solstice?”

Ianto shot Jack a startled look. Jack ignored him and smiled at the three of them. “Hey, I’ve

been waiting a good few years to see you all again – you think I’ll just walk away now?”

“Oh – ” Opal cut in, as if she’d suddenly remembered something. “You never told me – I forgot – how did you survive, earlier?”

There was a sudden rumble overhead that grew and expanded into an earth-shattering *crack*, and before any of them could move rain was pouring down on them.

“I’ll tell you at Solstice!” Jack yelled over the crash of rain on foliage. “You better get going or you’ll get rained into the mud.”

Opal pointed a finger at him. “I’m holding you to that, Elariu! Wait – one moment.” She reached into her jacket and pulled out the little device she’d taken from her room, handing it to Jack.

Jack gripped it and looked up at her. “You sure?”

“I’ve copied them into my wristband. Take them.”

Jack slipped it into his pocket and reached over, pulling them each into a hug. Opal leaned over to kiss Ianto on the cheek, gripping his shoulders firmly and looking him in the eyes. “You’re a fine young man, Ianto Jones, and I was proud to have you serve on the *Star*.”

“Thank you ma’am,” Ianto said, managing a smile.

Zoanne wrapped her arms around his middle – and yes, she did only come up to his shoulders, he could now confirm – and squeezed tight before pulling back to look up. “Get home safe, kiddo. And don’t forget us.”

“Never,” Ianto swore solemnly. “Thanks for patching me up. And straightening me out,” he added with a wry grin.

“Anytime,” she smirked, but Ianto could see it was halfhearted, and lacked the previous bite.

“I’m – ” he started, but she cut him off.

“Hush. No more apologizing from people who aren’t to blame, y’hear?” She tapped a finger to his chest. “You did good.”

Ianto nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and shivered as the rain soaked through his clothes, reaching skin. The initial downpour hadn’t lightened up one bit, and Ianto shifted to keep from becoming permanently imbedded into this planet. Jack gave a pointed jerk of his head, and

Ianto nodded, leaning over to shake Ellis' hand, who rolled his eyes and wrapped a hand around the back of Ianto's neck, pulling him in for a firm kiss before stepping back.

"Fly safe."

"Will do," Jack said solemnly, gently pushing Ianto into the TARDIS. Jack followed him and stepped through the threshold before turning to the three people standing in the rain. Ianto watched as he saluted, posture stiffening, and then reached out to pull the door shut.

Ianto shivered, water dripping down the back of his neck, and Jack stepped past him with a smile. "Home?"

"Not yet," Ianto blurted.

Jack stopped and frowned. "Ianto – "

"I don't mean not ever." Ianto sighed. He was wet and cold and exhausted, and only just beginning to face what had happened. Ashild. *Kethan*. Gone, forever, and the thought of stepping from here into Cardiff was overwhelming. "Just – can I see your home?"

Jack shifted his shoulders, and looked from Ianto to Jotir, who was hovering over the controls of the TARDIS, and then back at Ianto. "All right. Just a night, and then home."

"Deal."

~

"It's a village," Ianto said stupidly, standing on the flagstone where Jack had parked the TARDIS.

"What were you picturing?" Jack asked, sounding amused as he shut the TARDIS doors behind them.

"I – I don't know." Ianto looked around at the collection of small houses, maybe twenty all told – was that a barn back there? – connected by pathways and surrounded by trees and fields. "A big sci-fi city. Or a mansion. I don't know. Which one is yours?"

"This one," Jack said, waving to the bungalow he'd parked next to. "Jotir, can you see if Nannerl is around? I want to know who's here."

Jotir nodded and headed off down a path. Ianto looked around, wide-eyed.



“What is this place?”

“My home. Or, well, it was my home. But I kept picking people up along the way, and some of them came here, built homes, moved in.” Jack looked around at the little community with pride. “Jotir’s grandparents came here when they were young, and his family’s been here ever since. I think there are maybe a hundred people living here now, although it’s been twelve years since I’ve been home.

“Right,” Ianto said. “Who’s Nannerl?”

“Jotir’s mother. She’s a bit of an unofficial mayor, head of the clan, so to speak – hey, Danka!” Ianto started at Jack’s sudden yell, and a man who’d been walking in the distance suddenly started running towards them, skidding to a stop in front of Jack. He embraced him and rattled off something unintelligible that Ianto recognized as the language Jack had spoken to Jotir on occasion.

“Galactic, please, Danka,” Jack said after saying something in – his own language? – Ianto wondered. “For my guest. But – I’m not going to be available tonight, could you spread the word? I’ll tell my stories tomorrow evening, but I don’t want to be disturbed until then.”

“We’ve waited twelve years,” Danka pointed out with a grin. “We can wait another day. Nannerl will come looking for you, though.”

“I know – I sent Jotir to get her.” Jack squeezed his arm and then took Ianto by the hand. “Come on – you said you wanted to see my home. Let’s see if the rascals haven’t trashed it.”

“Wouldn’t think of it!” Danka called after them.

Ianto let himself be pulled through a doorway – no door, oddly enough – and into the white stone house Jack had pointed out as his own. The inside was bright and fresh, with wide windows and open spaces, wood floors and whitewashed walls. The space inside wasn’t divided into rooms, Ianto realized, and an area that looked like a kitchen, a sitting area, and a bed at the far end were all visible. It was a tiny house, really, but Jack looked pleased as he tossed off his coat and ran a hand along the back of a couch.

“They’ve kept it clean,” he said, flicking the fabric and then sprawling across it. “Oh, I’ve missed this place.”

“What is it?” Ianto asked again, coming round and standing in front of the couch. “Why are all these people here?”

“Like I said, they sort of... followed me home. And some of them stayed, had kids.” Jack

shrugged and sat up, inviting Ianto to join him. “Didn’t I tell you I wasn’t afraid to care for people anymore? Well – these are the people I care for. And they care back.”

“They’re your companions?” Ianto said, hazarding a guess.

Jack laughed. “You could say that. Only unlike the Doctor, I’m not afraid to have them stick around. *And* I don’t get them in as much trouble.”

“Don’t listen to him – he gives us plenty of trouble.”

Jack twisted round on the couch as Ianto looked over to the door to see an alien like Jotir, and Jotir himself, coming through the doorway. Jack leapt up.

“Nannerl!” And he was off in the other language, whatever he had said to Danka about using Galactic for Ianto’s sake, her hands in his and his face alight. She had all of Jotir’s composure, but Ianto could tell from the gentle fanning of her ridges that she was well pleased. He wondered for a moment if any of the alien words were whatever name Jack went by here, and for a moment he wanted to know what it was, but then decided that no, he’d rather keep Jack *Jack* to him.

As he came to that conclusion, Jack pulled Nannerl over and introduced her to Ianto, switching easily into what Ianto presumed was Galactic, since his fish handled it. She inquired how long he was staying, and nodded when he said only for the night, and then left to bring them food.

“Don’t cook anything!” Jack called after her. “But bring stuff to make the *Tarapi* if you have it.”

~

*Tarapi* turned out to be a dense white fish, pan-fried in a dry yellow curry, and the whole house smelled of spice when Jack turned off the stove and served out generous portions of that and the cooked vegetables and something that was like rice only darker and rounder. The round table had four seats, and Ianto sat next to Jack, placing down the glasses of water.

“I didn’t know you liked to cook,” Ianto observed, taking a bite of the fish and finding it to be delicious. “You just subsist on take-out at the Hub.”

“The kitchen facilities aren’t great there,” Jack pointed out, digging in as well. “Besides, I was usually pretty busy at mealtimes. And as for subsisting on take-out, I don’t recall you were any better.”

“Hey,” Ianto protested. “I was trying to add more vegetables to my diet.” To prove his point, he

speared a dark green leafy thing and ate it with gusto. “The fish is really good,” he added.

“Ask me to make it when you get back. If you don’t mind letting me loose in your kitchen.”

“Yeah,” Ianto said with a shrug, trying to figure out how to scoop up the grains with his chopsticks.

There was a moment of silence as they ate together, until Jack took a drink and set the glass down with a thunk.

“You don’t seem too thrilled to be going home.”

Ianto blinked. He hadn’t meant to be that transparent, but he supposed he wasn’t exactly subtle. He shook his head and tried to figure out how to explain it.

“It’s a bit of a let-down, in some ways, isn’t it?” he tried, stabbing at the fish. “Flying through space, saving the day, being part of a team – a team that actually cares about you.”

“They care about you,” Jack interrupted quietly.

“I know – but this future, it’s a remarkable opportunity. In some ways it seems to be throwing a lot away to go back.”

“So don’t.” Jack looked at him levelly, setting a chopstick down. Had Ianto not spent the last few weeks with him, it would have seemed like a plea, but Ianto harboured no illusions, especially after seeing Jack’s rather remarkable home. Whatever Jack had felt for him in the past, this Jack wasn’t pining for him. It hurt, sort of, but it also was relieving in a way Ianto couldn’t explain.

And as for the suggestion – Ianto snorted. “I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

“Sure you do,” Jack said easily.

“You said I go back,” Ianto pointed out, as if explaining something to a small child.

“So?” Jack leaned back in his chair.

“Then it’s not much of a choice, is it?” Ianto said, patience wearing thin.

“I don’t know about that,” Jack said thoughtfully, drumming his fingers on the tabletop. “I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about free will and fate, and in the end, it seems to me that just because someone knows you make a choice, doesn’t mean don’t still have to make that choice.

The only reason I know you get back is because, sometime around now, you made the choice to return.”

“Yeah – and I make it because I know I do.”

“Really?” Jack raised an eyebrow and leaned forward. “Step back a little and think – what would you choose to do, if you didn’t know?”

“Isn’t that the point, though?” Ianto questioned, food forgotten. “I do know, so... the systems been disturbed. Observed. Like Schrödinger’s cat, I know it’s dead. I can’t go back and make it an unknown.”

“I’m not sure what to make of the fact that you chose ‘dead’, right there.”

Ianto waved his chopstick. “That’s not the point – didn’t you say to Kethan – or he said to you, I can’t remember – that linear time is freedom? Well, I’m not in it – in linear time – any more. Haven’t I given up some freedom of choice over that?”

Jack tapped his chopstick thoughtfully on the side of his plate. His eyes glinted, and he looked like he was enjoying himself as he responded. “That’s what they teach you at the agency, and I suppose to some extent it’s true. I reminded Kethan of it because he needed to be thinking that way, then, but I sometimes wonder. The Agency teaches us that we have to follow the future, stay in line, keep everything from falling apart, but I wonder, sometimes, if that’s not a load of hooey.”

“Hooey?” Ianto echoed, amused.

“Hooey,” Jack repeated solemnly. “The universe is still here, despite ridiculous amounts of time travel. Maybe all that means is every choice – including the out-of-time ones – has already been made, and you can’t fuck with the universe.”

“That only reinforces my point,” Ianto pointed out. “It’s decided. Done. Finito. No choice about it.”

“Yes, but,” Jack crowed, apparently reaching his point, “then it means it doesn’t matter if you know the future or not. It’s still going to happen the way it does.”

“So?”

“So, forget it. Throw it away. Ignore the fact that I’ve told you you go back and think about what you actually want to do. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“I make the wrong choice.”

“Wrong for who?” Jack demanded.

“The stability of the universe.”

“Exactly – exactly what I’m saying won’t happen.” Jack said, thumping on the table with some violence. “You can’t make the wrong choice – the one you make will be what the universe expects. But it’s still just as important that you make the choice.”

“I...” Ianto trailed off, lost in thought. “So if I stay?”

“I won’t stop you.”

“Even though your own memory tells you I went home?”

“Even though – maybe my memory’s faulty. Or maybe it will change and not matter. Or maybe you went back after a year, or something, and just never told me. But, Ianto...” and here Jack looked apprehensive, as if there was something other than the potential destruction of the universe that bothered him.

“Yes?”

“I need you, then.”

“You don’t now,” Ianto said, finishing the sentence that hung in the air.

“No.”

Ianto didn’t move for a moment, and then went back to his food, eating another piece of fish and shoving the vegetables around his plate.

“Ianto?” Jack asked cautiously. “I don’t mean to sound callous.”

“No – no.” Ianto sighed. “It’s not that, I know you’re a different person, that I’m just a memory and all that. You don’t need me, but... what if I need you?”

Jack frowned. “I don’t follow.”

Ianto flushed. “It’s stupid. I get you either way but you now, you’re so much...”

“Better?” Jack finished with a wry grin.

“More open,” Ianto said firmly. “And Kethan too – going back to you then, I don’t know how I’m going to do it.”

“Just like I said you would,” Jack said easily. “You’re going to tell me I need to shape up, and I’m going to do it. Well,” he grinned, “I’m going to try. You get to decide if I do a good enough job.”

“But with you, I’ve already done all the work,” Ianto said, but he was joking now, and Jack laughed back.

“Where’s the fun in that? You know you want to straighten me out, Ianto Jones, I can see you’re just itching to do it – you just need permission. So, I’m giving it to you.”

“I don’t want to change you,” Ianto protested. “I just want... to have something real. Meaningful.”

Jack paused, and then carefully placed his chopsticks on his plate before standing up and coming round to Ianto’s side, taking hold of Ianto’s chin and tilting it up. He leaned over and kissed him, and after a moment of surprise, Ianto kissed back, one hand coming up to grip Jack’s hip as Jack wound his fingers through Ianto’s hair. He kissed curiously, trying to figure out what Jack was trying to say – it wasn’t a sexual kiss, really, open and easy but not dirty, and all of a sudden he felt a flare in his mind that shuddered down through his body. He wrenched back, breathing hard in surprise.

“What was that?” he asked, startled. It was – it was – intense, he settled on. A deep current of something unmistakable, and now that he wasn’t feeling it any more, he missed it acutely.

“A weak psychic link,” Jack said with a smile, taking his seat. “Amplified by a little ‘me power’, as it were. But basically – it was a memory of what you meant to me. Of what you mean to me.”

Ianto stared, wide-eyed and uncertain. Jack laughed and tucked into his fish.

“Don’t *worry*, Ianto. It’s not going to be easy, but believe me when I say it’s going to be worth it.”

Ianto couldn’t figure out how to respond to that, he was too busy trying to sort out what that sensation was, precisely, and he fell silent as he finished his meal. Jack didn’t seem perturbed by the silence, and spoke up as they were clearing the table.

“How long have we been in a relationship, when you’re from?”

“That depends on how you count,” Ianto answered warily.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, what are you counting as a relationship. When we fucked? When we actually had a date? When you first left a shirt at my flat?”

“How about when we first met?” Jack suggested, leaning against the counter with an open expression.

Ianto laughed.

“I’m not kidding,” Jack chastised, smiling. “When you’re me, when you’re looking back at all of time, relationships don’t begin with a date or a fuck – they begin when there’s that first connection, when you first realize the other person exists.”

“And they end when?”

“When you die.”

“You don’t die.”

“No. I’ve begun a whole lot of relationships, Ianto, but until I die, none of them are over.”

Ianto opened his mouth to respond, but realized he really didn’t have anything to say. What did one say to something like that? Instead, he started on the washing up.

“Why did you ask that? How long I’ve been with you, I mean.”

“I was curious how you defined it, really,” Jack said, finding a towel and picking up a dripping, clean plate. “The formality of it always was important to you.”

“The formality?” Ianto questioned, thinking back. “We weren’t exactly big on the first date, second date, etc., thing.”

“No, but you liked things you could define. Things that had recognizable order and boundaries.”

“So, not you,” Ianto said with a grin.

Jack laughed. “Right. But you did okay with Kethan – which, in hindsight, I find surprising. He

was even less pulled in than Jack was.”

Ianto ignored the confusion that set in when Jack started talking about himself in third person, and considered the analysis. “Yes and no. I guess I had a hard time with his openness, but that’s also what I liked - that he wasn’t hiding things. I could handle that even though it meant he was a little... more generous with his time than sat comfortably with me.”

“Makes sense. And I did back off the others for you.”

“Very considerate.”

“Not very. I liked you a lot and decided it was worth it.”

“But now – then – my time?” Ianto asked, trying to keep anything aggressive from his tone. It was interesting, talking to Jack about himself, with all the time in between meaning he could be somewhat impartial. “Monogamy doesn’t seem to be in the cards.”

“Have you asked?” Jack pointed out mildly.

“No,” Ianto admitted. “But I’m not sure I could. Especially now that I know where you’re coming from. It seems like it would be ignorant to ask that. I didn’t ask Kethan to, he just did. And if I’d been there for a longer time, it probably wouldn’t have been permanent.”

“Probably not,” Jack conceded. “I wasn’t fond of boundaries. Still aren’t, really.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” Ianto said after a moment, scrubbing absently at a glass.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I don’t think I could do what you do. Not that you have a choice, but still. Like you said, monogamy suits me. I *like* the idea of committing to one person, of giving everything I have to them. I did that with Lisa – God knows that made it all the worse when I lost her, but even knowing that I don’t think I could do it any other way. And I want the same with you.” He paused, and then laughed a little bitterly. “I suppose I don’t have to worry about losing you the same way.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re with me,” Jack suggested, plucking the well-cleaned glass from his hand and drying it off. “You don’t have to be afraid of me dying.”

Ianto blinked. “Are you psychoanalyzing my attraction to you?”

Jack laughed. “No, sorry, I’ll stop. You were saying?”



“I was saying,” Ianto continued, flicking the wet cloth at Jack, “that if I was stuck how you are, I think I’d go mad. But you’re a lot more flexible – and no, I’m not making innuendos here – the way you were raised, the way you approach relationships, it doesn’t make it easy to lose people, per se, but at least you’re not stuck in the same old-fashioned mindset as I am.”

“It’s not a ridiculous thought,” Jack said, scrubbing at his chin with the back of his hand. “Except I think I took it too far. I *know* I took it too far – trying not to connect at all, for a while. But some of that was the Doctor’s fault.”

“Waiting for him?”

“Yep. Didn’t seem worth it to form any new relationships when I was waiting for that one ideal one to resume.” He rolled his eyes, finishing with the drying. “But that’s enough morose talk. And I don’t want to completely spoil you for everything. A lot of this you’ll work out then, on your own. Tonight, let’s forget about me, okay?”

Ianto laughed. “Okay. What shall we do, then?”

“I don’t think I ever got that dance,” Jack said with a smirk. “Not properly, anyway.”

~

“You were much better at this back then.”

“I don’t see how,” Ianto grumped, trying to settle into the rhythm of the waltz. Ballroom was *not* his forte, however much Jack enjoyed it.

“I do believe you let me teach you.”

Ianto eyed Jack suspiciously. “Are you saying that so I’ll let you teach me to dance?”

“How do you know I’m not saying that because you did?” Jack grinned impishly and spun them around, setting Ianto off balance.

“Blast,” Ianto muttered, tripping. “You’re a menace.”

“You love it,” Jack said, and pulled him in for a kiss.

~

“Tell me another story I’ve forgotten.”

“How about the time Owen started dissecting an Alecro alien?”

The look on Jack’s face suggested he at least remembered that Alecro aliens take part in a deep hibernation.

“That must have gone well.”

“Let’s just say I had to requisition a lot of new equipment for the medical bay.”

~

“How many kids do you have?”

“Depends on what you mean by kids,” Jack asked, sprawled across the bed and running a hand down Ianto’s chest.

“How about – biological and ones you’ve actually given birth to.”

“Um – fourteen.”

“Not a lot.”

“No. It’s the hardest thing, watching your kids grow old and die.”

“I’m sorry. About Ashild, and the rest.”

Jack sighed and closed his eyes. “Thanks.”

~

“You said you’d go back and see Opal and the others – did you mean that?”

“You betcha.”

“Definitely different.”

“Me?”

“Definitely. I never thought I’d see you hanging on so hard.”

“I hung on to Torchwood.”

“You left.”

“I don’t mean those first hundred years.”

“The hundred years after?”

“Spoilers!”

~

“So there Nella was, demanding to know exactly how I’d survived all those years...”

“And the Czar is trying to kill you.”

“Exactly. So I suggested we continue the conversation another time.”

“And then he killed you?”

“How’d you guess?”

“Seemed like the logical outcome. He had his revenge, she had her answer.”

“And I had a colossal headache when I woke up, but she stayed.”

~

“You should sleep.”

“Don’t want to.”

“You’re falling asleep. Mere mortals like you can’t stay awake forever. The adrenaline could only last so long.”

“But if I sleep, I’ll wake up and have to leave.”

“Shh. I won’t kick you out right away. We can have brunch first.”

“Pancakes?”

“Remind me what they are?”

“Deliciousness. Just like you. We had syrup once, and it got everywhere. I think I had to take three showers. But it tasted good.”

“You’re babbling. Sleep.”

“Stay?”

“Of course.”

~

An extended, drawn-out waking up, followed by a shower and a rather shameful approximation of pancakes later, and Ianto and Jack were standing in front of the TARDIS. The air was fresh and the sun was up in the sky, signaling high noon. There were people milling about, and though most of them waved and called out to Jack, none of them approached.

“It’s a nice place.”

“It is,” Jack agreed, leaning against the side of the TARDIS and waiting for Ianto to step inside with admirable patience. Ianto was well aware he’d been drawing this out, and made a guilty face.

“Is it strange to say I wish I could stay?”

“It’s nice of you to say, but you shouldn’t.” They’d talked this through, a little, and whatever Jack said about it being a choice, Ianto knew there was only one, in the end. Whether or not that was because of what he wanted, or because of the nature of the universe, he wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to say.

“I’m not being nice, I’m being truthful. I’m... I’m glad I got to meet you. Again. You don’t think I could be happy here, with you?”

“Ah, but if you don’t go back,” Jack said, smiling, “you’ll deny me knowing you then. I want to be able to love you in the twenty-first century.”

“And if I do go back, I deny you getting to love me now, don’t I?” Ianto said with a wry smile back.

Jack laughed. “I always said immortality was a win-lose situation,” he said, shaking his head. “You need to go back, Ianto. Besides, I’m not the man you fell in love with.”

“You’re not that different. You’re too stubborn to change much, I expect.”

“Probably.”

“I can’t even stay for a little bit? A month? A year, even? I’m young. I have time,” Ianto said, even though he knew the decision was already made. This place, this world, this *Jack*. A machine to travel through time and space – how insane was it to want to give that up?

“Never enough,” Jack said seriously, taking Ianto’s hand, but not forcing him anywhere. “I don’t want to resent myself for keeping you. You need to go back, to remind me how to love again.”

“And who will remind you here?” Ianto asked pointedly.

“You already have. I learn a lot faster, now.”

Ianto stared at Jack, looking from his eyes to their hands, and then stepped into the TARDIS, pulling Jack along.

“Home it is.”

~

## Chapter 20

~

“Cardiff, Wales, at your gloomy, damp, rift-loving service,” Jack announced as the TARDIS jerked to a stop. “Seventeen degrees and cloudy with a sixty percent chance of showers.” He strolled over to the door, yanked it open, and jumped outside.

And then jumped back in. “Whoa. Make that a hundred percent.” He shook the water from his hair and grinned at Ianto. “I hope you have an umbrella.”

Ianto snorted and spread his arms, leaning back on the console. “And where do you think I would have hidden that? *Don’t*,” he said warningly at the glint in Jack’s eye. “All I have left is my wallet. I don’t even have my keys,” he said with a put-on whine. He’d been able to fit his wallet in his pocket, but his ring of keys had been deemed ‘too jingly’ by several parties and had been left behind on the now-obiterated *Evening Star*.

“Then I’ll find you one,” Jack said agreeably, crossing the floor of the TARDIS towards one of the doors at the back where Ianto knew he had some rather extensive closets – the jeans and t-shirt he was currently sporting were from there. He hadn’t been able to find a suit that fit. And

wasn't yellow, which really wasn't his colour.

As Jack passed him, Ianto reached out and caught him by the elbow.

"I don't need an umbrella," he said quietly, pulling Jack in front of him. "I can wait out the worst of it."

"It's Wales," Jack pointed out doubtfully. "There's never any best of it." But he let Ianto reel him in, and slid his hands around Ianto's ribs until his fingers traced the line of his spine.

Ianto, settled back against the console as he was, had to reach up and wrap a hand around Jack's neck to bring him down into a kiss, but Jack followed willingly, hands gripping tighter and hips resting against Ianto's. The kiss lasted what felt a lifetime for Ianto, and he relaxed into it, enjoying the familiar taste and pressure. Jack leaned back a little, fingers clenching compulsively, twisting the fabric of Ianto's t-shirt. Ianto started to grin and say something when he finally processed the look on Jack's face.

"Jack?" he said, uncertain, taking in the harshly etched sorrow across his features, and what was a definite glimmer of moisture in the corners of his eyes.

"Shit," Jack said in a choked laugh, bringing up a hand and wiping at his eyes. "You're gorgeous, I – shit. I swore I wouldn't do this."

"Wouldn't do what?" Ianto asked cautiously, hands rubbing steady circles on Jack's shoulders.

"Think about this too much." Jack shut his eyes fiercely for a moment, and then opened them again, as if Ianto might be gone when he looked again. "Guilt-trip you."

"I..." Ianto trailed off, feeling a little lost. "I thought you didn't – I don't know, I thought you'd moved on. Learned to move on."

"I'm not made of *stone*," Jack rebuked, pulling Ianto to his feet and wrapping his arms around him, squeezing him tight. "This is still the last time I'm going to see you, ever. It's not exactly fun." Ianto could feel him shaking his head, chin rubbing against his shoulder. "I was trying not to influence you. Shitty job of it."

"Yeah, well," Ianto said awkwardly, dropping a kiss against Jack's neck and breathing in the scent of him. "I've already made up my mind, right? No harm in it."

Jack made a muffled sound into his shoulder and squeezed tight for a moment, before pulling back and taking Ianto in, as if he was trying to commit every detail to memory. He placed a feather-light kiss to Ianto's brow, and then cheek, and nose, and chin, and finally his lips.

“You’re gorgeous. And forget what I said before, I’m going to miss you horribly.”

Ianto hesitated for the barest moment, and then spun them around, pressing Jack back against the console and slipping a thigh between his. He kissed him fiercely and slipped his hands under his shirt. “Five more minutes then?”

Jack’s eyes fluttered shut as Ianto pressed against him, but when he opened them they’d cleared a little, and he laughed as he gripped Ianto’s arse. “Yeah, alright. Five more minutes.”

~

Walking away from the TARDIS was probably one of the hardest things Ianto had ever had to do. Keeping up a mental chant of *don’t look back, don’t look back*, Ianto hurried through the rain – now a light drizzle – across the Plass. Jack had parked to the far side of it, up against one of the warehouses, and it wasn’t more than a five-minute walk from there to the Tourist Office. The outer door was unlocked, and Ianto let himself in, pulling the door tight behind him and shaking the water out of his hair.

The room smelled of familiarity, and Ianto took a deep breath, taking in everything and wondering if anyone was watching the CCTV installed in the corner of the room. Jack had said a week, but there wasn’t any way to be sure, except... He stepped around behind the counter, and as he’d suspected there was a pile of newspapers against the wall, unopened. He scooped them up and started checking the dates – sure enough, the latest one was for seven days after the day he disappeared.

There was a creak, and the hidden door swung open. Ianto froze, watching as Gwen came through and headed straight for the exit. She was halfway out the door before he managed a cough.

“God!” she yelped, jumping and flattening herself against the wall, hand at her hip where Ianto could see very clearly she was *not* wearing a weapon. Her eyes went wide, and after a tense moment, she sagged against the wall.

“You bastard,” she breathed, and then threw herself around the counter to wrap him in a hug, muttering what seemed to be a combination of insults and endearments as she tried to squeeze the life out of him.

“Sorry, sorry,” Ianto murmured, hugging her back until she seemed ready to let go. She backed up a little and looked him in the face, expression a combination of relief and anger. “Sorry,” he repeated. “It’s been a week, right?”

“Yeah,” she said, shaking her head. “Where the *hell* have you been? And how did you get

back? Jack said – ” and here she cut herself off, hand flying to her Bluetooth. “Does Jack know you’re back?”

“No,” he said, watching her uneasily. “I just got back.”

“Right. Jack?” There was a pause, and Ianto could almost hear Jack’s voice, though it was probably wishful thinking on his part. “Ianto’s back. Yeah. Yeah, I know, I just came up to the Tourist – he was just here. No, he’s fine. He says he just got back.”

Ianto shifted uncomfortably, trying to imagine what Jack’s response would be. There were procedures for this sort of thing – Torchwood had procedures for everything imaginable, including alien abduction or unexplained disappearances – but Jack was notorious for not following procedure, so it was anyone’s guess what he’d do.

“Sure, I can do that. How long will you be? Yeah, the one by the bay, Ianto’s favourite. Tosh can handle that. Okay, see you then.”

She dropped her hand and gave Ianto a friendly smile. “How about we go get a cuppa, and you can tell me where you’ve been, yeah?”

“He doesn’t want me in the Hub, does he?” Ianto asked wryly, reaching for his mack, which was, unsurprisingly, hanging on the coat hook where he’d left it. Gwen bit her lip and looked worried, but Ianto just came round the desk and offered her an arm. “It’s fine, I know it’s procedure. Who’s he out with? How long’s he going to be?”

She shot him a grateful look and took his arm. “He and Owen are at a hospital – odd attacks going around.”

“Weevil?”

“No, more like bee stings, only the effects are strange. But they should be back in half an hour or so. We’ll get some coffee, which is what I was going out for, anyway.”

“And Tosh?” Ianto asked.

“She’s in the Hub. Oh! Should I tell her you’re back?” Gwen said, reaching for her earpiece, but Ianto shook his head.

“More fun as a surprise. Besides, Jack will want to make sure I’m not an alien first.” It was a joke, but it fell flat as Gwen gave him a startled look. So Jack had mentioned that part to her. “It’s all right, it’s procedure. I’d probably berate him if he decided not to follow it.”



“Well, you sound like you,” she announced brightly. “Should I ask you some questions only you would know the answer to?”

“Like what?” Ianto asked. Might as well humour her.

“Like... what do we all take in our coffee?” He looked over at her, and she was grinning. Teasing him, then, which was good. He didn’t really have any way to prove he was Ianto Jones except for his wallet in his pocket and his DNA and his memories, but a good enough impersonator could handle that, he was sure.

But he could try to convince Gwen. So he launched into a detailed description of the team’s beverage and eating habits, complete with scorn for Owen’s diet and sly comments on Gwen’s own sweet tooth. Jack would ask him the real questions, the ones about what he’d said to him after Lisa, or the ones about what was kept in room 107 of the secure archives.

They were enjoying the last of their drinks – Gwen’s a vanilla latte, Ianto his first cappuccino in two months – when the door swung open, and Jack stepped through. Ianto’s stomach flipped, but he didn’t move, just nodded towards him. He looked – glorious, really, Ianto thought without embarrassment. Not too young, not too old, and if Ianto let himself get any more poetic he’d end up as Goldilocks.

Jack strolled over, grabbing a free chair and swinging it around to take a seat at the little table. Gwen was tearing her napkin into tiny white squares, but she smiled broadly.

“Ianto, this is Jack,” she said in a teasing voice. “Jack, Ianto. At least, I’m pretty certain.”

“Good,” Jack said, giving Gwen an unreadable look. “I can take it from here, Gwen. I’ll see you back at the Hub.”

“But – ”

“Please.”

Gwen frowned, but stood up and collected her rubbish and dishes. “Call me if you need anything.” She leaned over and gave Ianto a peck on the cheek. “Glad you’re back, love. I can’t wait to hear where you’ve been.”

Jack and Ianto waited in silence as Gwen left the coffee shop, and when Jack didn’t open the conversation, Ianto looked up at him.

“So...” he started awkwardly. For some reason, he had no idea what to say. Two months ago – a week ago – he hardly knew this man. Now he knew him so much better, except he didn’t

know what to say.

“Password to the secure archives,” Jack said flatly.

“6A9FL025,” Ianto reeled off.

“Tosh’s favourite biscuits.”

“Gingersnaps.”

“Number of people we’ve retconned.”

“As of a week ago? Two thousand, two hundred and thirty-one.”

“Number of times you’ve replaced a button on my coat.”

Ianto narrowed his eyes. “Jack, I rather doubt you have any idea.”

A grin ghosted Jack’s lips for the first time. “True,” he admitted, and stood up. Ianto leaned back as he came over beside him, and suddenly Jack’s hand was on his chin and Jack’s tongue was in his mouth. Ianto made a soft sound of surprise, but kissed back. When Jack pulled away, Ianto struggled to keep from following him, from standing up and sliding his hands under his coat. Jack sat down and tilted his head, considering.

“Cappuccino?” he asked vaguely. “But otherwise you. If you’re a plant, you’re a damn good one. Don’t do anything to make me suspicious in the next couple of weeks, and we should be fine.”

“You might have to do a more thorough taste-test,” Ianto deadpanned, leaning back in his chair more than a little relieved he’d passed Jack’s test.

“I might,” Jack said with a cheeky grin, but after a moment it wavered and disappeared, and he leaned across the table to speak in urgent tones. “Ianto – how the hell did you get back? How long have you been gone? When and where did you go?”

Ianto glanced around, lifting a hand to rub at his mouth wearily. “It’s a bit of a tale. And it’ll be easier to tell after you get this.” He stood up and reached into his pocket, wiggling a bit to get the little case out from them.

“Nice jeans,” Jack observed. “And not what you left in. What’s this?”

Ianto had placed the little black case on the table between them and taken his seat again.

“Open it,” he said. Kethan – Jack – had known what it was on sight. Presumably, so would Jack.

Jack glanced at him, and then slid the case closer, easily popping the latch. The glimmering little disk shone in the lights of the coffee shop, and Ianto could see the tension form in Jack’s shoulders.

“Is this...?” he said hoarsely, trailing off.

“Yep,” Ianto said, leaning back in the chair. “Yours. I do believe you’re missing them.”

Jack looked up sharply. “How *long* were you gone for?” he demanded.

“Just two months,” Ianto assured him. “But there should be about two years on there.”

Jack nodded, the lines around his mouth still tense. “How did you get them? Do you know what they are?”

“Your memories. The ones the Time Agency took from you. I got them – well, how I got them is on there. It’s too complicated to explain everything. Can you, I don’t know, read them? Put them back in?”

“I can,” Jack said, staring down at the little box. He shut it with a snap and slipped it into an inside pocket. “I’ll have to wait, though. Still have work to do today. Ianto, when – ”

“Please,” Ianto said, standing. “Don’t ask, yet. It’d take forever to explain, and if you ask me after it will be a lot easier. You won’t have so many questions.”

Jack didn’t move, just looked at him with a frown, as if he was deciding whether or not to press for more. Ianto waited patiently until Jack nodded and stood, putting a hand on the small of Ianto’s back and guiding him to the door. “Right then. Work first, explanations later. Have I ever told you you’re a very mysterious man, Ianto Jones?”

“That would be *Jones*, Ianto Jones,” Ianto said with a smile he didn’t quite feel. This was it? He’d been missing for a week, and Jack just asks him for a few codes, kisses him to taste him, and goes back to work? It was... anticlimactic.

They made their way back to the Tourist Office in silence – Jack probably wondering what exactly was in that chip, and Ianto starting to wonder if he’d made the right decision.

He was about to press the button to open the entrance to the stairs when Jack reached out and

grabbed his fist, fingers looping around to ensnare him. Ianto looked down, and then up, meeting Jack's eyes in confusion.

"I'm glad you're back," Jack said, voice pitched low but not at all seductive. Ianto shivered at it – so much and yet so *little*, and was that really all Jack could give him? I'm *glad* you're back? Ianto nodded stiffly, trying to extract his wrist, but Jack just gripped tighter, thumb pressing into the sharp point of his wrist bone.

"I thought – well," Jack started, and then stopped. He flashed Ianto a self-deprecating grin. "Never mind what I thought. See me in my office, after, if nothing's gone to hell?"

"Yeah, sure," Ianto said, and he could see the skeptical look that didn't quite make Jack's face. For all they were together, at work and in the Hub, Ianto never failed to address Jack professionally, though the 'sir' was designated for more formal moments. Ianto flushed – weeks spent with a Jack he didn't address as his superior had clearly changed his viewpoint. "Of course," he added, lamely, pulling away entirely and opening the secret door. "I'll make a tour of the hub, and see what you've done to the archives in my absence, shall I? Unless you had anything else that needed attending to right away?"

"No, that sounds fine," Jack said, backing up to let Ianto pass, an unreadable expression on his face. "We've got this one almost wrapped up. It'd be more work to fill you in at this point."

"I'll talk to you later, then," Ianto said, managing a smile before slipping into the stairwell and down to the hub, feeling somewhat like a fleeing rabbit, more than a little guilty, and entirely cowardly. But until Jack got his memories back, what was there to say?

Except – the question gave Ianto pause, for some reason, and as he greeted Tosh, who greeted him with tears and a ferocious hug that belied her small stature, and started cleaning up the disaster zone that was the autopsy bay, it distracted him. As he sorted through the archives, moving Tosh's piles of trinkets, Gwen's reports and Owen's cryogenically preserved alien body parts to their appropriate storage facilities, it followed him. Because once Jack knew – once Jack and Kethan merged into one person again – *nothing* would be the same.

~

If the Tourist Office had smelled familiar, it was nothing to the warm, woody smell of Jack's office. The antique furniture and the oil lamps Jack kept and lit - for what Ianto could only presume were nostalgic reasons - kept the concrete, muddy smell of the rest of the hub out of the cave-like space that was Jack's office. Ianto trailed a finger along the dust that had accumulated on the unused corner of the desk, and followed the edge to the twisted, spongy mass of coral on other side. It looked unassuming, harmless – almost childlike, though Ianto couldn't say why. He wasn't one to anthropomorphize technology.

“You cause a lot of trouble when you grow up,” he whispered to it, stroking one arm of it lightly. “Think I should get rid of you now?”

Ianto frowned, pulling his hand back as an uneasy, skittish feeling ran through him. He looked around the office, starting when he noticed Jack standing in the doorway, hands in pockets.

“Talking to yourself, are you?” Jack said by way of hello, not moving into the room until Ianto smiled and backed away from his desk, pulling up one of the wooden chairs to the desk and taking a seat. Jack came around and sat in his own chair, leaning back and giving Ianto a look of consideration. “Find everything okay?”

“If by ‘okay’ you mean ‘a wreck’, then yes,” Ianto replied snappily, punctuating the sentence with a roll of his eyes. Jack smiled back, looking pleased at the typical response, but it felt like a costume. He’d always been playing a role, but it was no longer satisfying, as if knowing who Jack was made him wonder who he was, as well.

“I’m sure you’ll straighten it out in no time,” Jack said, and then shifted from relaxed to urgent as he slid reached into a pocket and drew out the memory case. “Now, about this,” he waved it once through the air and then deposited it on the desk between them, “are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell me before I restore the memories?”

Ianto shook his head. “No. Nothing about what’s on there. I did...” he faltered, losing his courage. “No. Like I said, it’ll be easier after.”

“I’ll bet,” said Jack, giving him a quizzical glance. “You said you were gone two months?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” The accompanying scrutinizing look made Ianto clear his throat. “All right. But I want you in early, tomorrow. I’m sure we’ll have things to discuss.”

“Of course,” Ianto said, refraining from pointing out that he was always in early, because, well, maybe he wouldn’t be, now. What had changed? What *hadn’t*?

He stood up, feeling a little awkward and brushing imaginary dust off his trousers. “Do you want me to stay?” he asked, and then waved at the case. “I’m guessing that’s not a pleasant process, regaining all those memories at once.”

Jack snorted. “No. It’s not. But that’s fine, it wouldn’t be pleasant for you to watch.”

“I don’t mind. I’ve seen – ” *you in worse shape*. “I’ve been through worse.”

Jack waved him off. “Nah, go home, make sure your flat’s in one piece.”

“Right.”

Ianto didn’t move. Jack raised an eyebrow.

“What made you decide to come back?”

“Pardon?” Jack look puzzled. “Didn’t you just come back, or am I in some weird alternate universe?”

“No,” Ianto said with a laugh. “At least, I hope not. No, I meant, back in May, after you were with the Doctor. Why’d you choose to come back here instead of stay out there?”

“I told you,” Jack said, leaning back in his chair with calm confidence. “I came back for you guys – for Torchwood. Why? Is that why you came back?”

Ianto frowned, recalling a slightly different conversation upon Jack’s return, but nodded. “Yes, of course,” he said, drumming his fingers on the desktop, and then stopping abruptly. “No. No, I didn’t come back for Torchwood.”

“No?”

“No. I had... I had a better offer.”

“Are you asking for a pay raise?” Jack asked with a grin.

Ianto let out a snort of laughter, shaking his head. “Although, if you insist...”

“Well, if you are in financial need, just put in a request for the overtime you never track. I’ll put it through.”

“Right, thanks.”

“But...” Jack said pointedly. “Not what you meant. You were thinking of not coming back?”

“I – no. Not really, just...” Ianto sighed and pulled his hand into his lap. “I met people, where I was. They became important to me. Leaving them was hard, but in the end there never was any question about it.”

“Can’t leave Torchwood, huh?”

“Of course I could,” Ianto said, setting his hands flat on the desk and meeting Jack’s eyes. “I couldn’t leave you.”

Ianto watched Jack’s response with bated breath. Jack, on the other hand, took a deep breath and smiled, standing up with a stretch and coming around to perch on the desk in front of Ianto.

“So, tell me,” he said, leaning in as if he were sharing a secret. “Is it my skill as a leader or a lover that you couldn’t leave behind?”

It was, really, classic Jack. Take something heartfelt and real, and mix in bravado and seduction to turn it into something cheap. Three months ago, Ianto would have fallen for it, snapped back ‘neither’ and tossed out an insult, and then blown Jack off. Jack, pouting, would have groveled and pawed at him until Ianto, revved up and willing, let Jack lead him down to his bed.

Not anymore. Ianto pushed back his chair and started for the door.

“Whoa,” Jack said, jumping up and heading him off. “Where are you going?”

Ianto pushed Jack’s hands off him, shaking his head. “I’m not going to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Tell you my honest-to-god feelings just to have you blow them off,” Ianto replied flatly.

“Hey, hey,” Jack said, holding up his hands in surrender. “I’m sorry, I’m not trying to blow you off. Look, just sit down, tell me what’s up, okay?” He went over to couch and sat down, patting the empty space beside him.

Ianto bit his lip, considering, and then came round to sit tentatively beside Jack.

“So. You, ah, ‘came back for me’ as it were?” Jack said with a self-deprecating half-smile.

“Yes. Only I can actually say it to your face.”

The smile left Jack’s face, and he sat up a little straighter. “Okay, now that’s unnecessary. What in god’s name have I done to piss you off so much?”

“I – ” Ianto cut himself off, and scrubbed a hand over his face. Jack had done plenty, except... could he really blame Jack for being caught off guard? Jack was missing so many pieces of the puzzle he’d probably throw it out as a lost cause if Ianto wasn’t careful. Reorganizing, and calming his annoyance, Ianto tried again.

“After Lisa died,” he started slowly, ignoring Jack’s twitch at his side, “I didn’t have anything left. I’d put everything I had into her survival, and all of a sudden that was gone. I’m a... an obsessive person. I’ll admit that,” he sent Jack a sideways smile. “Going from an all-consuming existence to an empty one was probably even harder than losing Lisa herself. Except, I didn’t have to. You threw me a lifeline – my job. Torchwood. It wasn’t what I wanted, but considering I couldn’t have that anymore, it was the next best thing. You have no idea how grateful I was.” Ianto bent his head, looking down at his folded hands.

“Maybe it was because of that, or maybe I’m just telling a story and I was really screwed the moment I met you, but somewhere along the line I’ve gone from being grateful you didn’t shoot me in the basement to in love with you.”

He paused for a moment to take a breath, seeing if Jack would say anything. He didn’t, so Ianto pushed on.

“It’s not the healthiest of things, I know. I think it happening that way messed me up for a while, made me think I had to earn your respect not only as your employee, but as your lover, and those lines got blurred. But I’ve had two months to think about it, and I’ve un-blurred them a little.”

“You’re my boss. You always will be my boss – and I am, as ever, indebted to you for my job. But *just* my job.”

“Ianto,” Jack interrupted. “I thought I made it clear that I’d *never* expect your professional obligations to me to slip over into the bedroom.”

“I know,” Ianto said with a nod. “It wasn’t the obligations – it was the attitude. On the clock, you say jump, I ask how high. Privately? Maybe not so much orders, but I didn’t want to rock the boat. To ask for more than was my due, which wasn’t much, given my past actions.”

“I don’t get it,” Jack said flatly, leaning against the armrest to look more directly at Ianto.

“This. Us. It’s all me giving, and you taking. Your needs, not mine. I spent so much time serving you I forgot to ask for anything back.”

“So, what, you want to be on top more?” Jack joked.

Ianto rolled his eyes. “Do you really think that’s what I mean?”

The straightforward question seemed to take Jack by surprise, and he furrowed his brow.



“I don’t know what I can tell you that you don’t already know. The fact is – I *am* your boss. Whatever we like to pretend, this relationship isn’t based on anything equitable. Forget job titles – I’m talking age and experience, here.” He slapped a hand to his chest, resting it across his collarbone, and leaned in a little. “I’m not relationship material, Ianto. I’m an old bastard who’s seen too many things and been screwed over too many times to be a good partner, a good lover.”

“Right,” Ianto said, rolling his shoulders uncomfortably. It was a little like déjà vu – he’d heard this before, from the same mouth, but it felt like (was, really) eons ago.

Jack reached out and squeezed Ianto’s shoulder with his hand, rubbing the muscles with his thumb.

“I’d say – go out there, find somebody else. Someone young and available, who you can marry and have a life with. Except, god knows that’s near impossible in this job.” He squeezed a little harder, holding still. “I’m here for you, Ianto. I probably always will be, whether that’s in a professional category or not, but I’ll understand if you want to find someone else.”

Ianto shut his eyes, trying to ward off the urge to grab Jack by the collar, and shake him, and yell ‘you just don’t *get* it, do you?’ It wasn’t easy. All he wanted was a ‘you do matter to me’, or an ‘I’m sorry, I haven’t really been available to you’, and instead he got the ‘maybe you should see someone else’?

“I don’t *want* anyone else,” Ianto said tightly, pulling out from under Jack’s grasp and tugging his shirt down as he stood. “I want something of you.”

Jack leaned back against the couch, arms outstretched along the back of it.

“You *have* me.”

“No, I don’t. Not when I have to resort to secret files to learn anything about you. Not when I don’t know your birthday. Not when I don’t know anything, *anything* about your past.”

Jack threw out his hands, exasperated. “You don’t want to know those things, Ianto! None of it’s relevant. It’s the past, dry and boring and nothing to do with me, now.”

“So *tell me*,” Ianto cried, fisting his hands by his side. “If it’s so unimportant, tell me about it!”

“No!” Jack yelled, standing up suddenly. Ianto stepped back, his own expression mirroring Jack’s startled one. “I mean...” Jack took a breath, putting his hands on his hips and giving Ianto a pleading look. “See what I mean? I can’t be what it is you want me to be. Get over it, or find someone who can, alright?”

Ianto folded his arms across his chest and looked away, worrying the soft skin under his arms with the sharp lines of his thumbnails.

“Hey,” Jack said more quietly after a moment, stepping into Ianto’s space and cupping his jaw. “We don’t have to decide anything tonight. You just got back – I’m sure you’re tired, and I have some memories to get back. Tomorrow, we’ll talk. Dinner, maybe?”

“Maybe,” Ianto relented, pulling away. Tomorrow would be more than another day. It’d be another lifetime. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He hated himself for doing it, but halfway out the door Ianto paused and turned back. “If you need anything, with the memories. Please call.”

Jack nodded solemnly. “I will.”

“Good.”

~

His flat was mostly untouched, except for a pile of bills and newspapers stacked neatly on the kitchen counter, and a thin film of dust that spoke of a weeks worth of disuse. The garbage had been emptied, so after cracking the windows and sorting the post into ‘junk’, ‘must pay tomorrow’, and ‘don’t have to but will pay tomorrow anyway’, Ianto made a cup of chamomile tea and collapsed with the newspapers. A week’s worth of rabid dog sightings and other mysterious news reports would keep him busy for tonight and much of tomorrow.

He’d made it halfway through Tuesday when his eyes started drooping and he had to give in to biology, putting the mug in the sink and changing into his pyjamas. His own bed was both a welcome familiarity and depressingly empty after two months of Kethan’s body constantly taking up his space. Ianto would gladly put up with elbows in his ribs if he could just have him back.

~

He’d been dreaming that the Star had been taken over by weevils, and that Owen and Zoanne had somehow taken control of the ship by force, tying the rest of the crew up in the medbay. Shifting against the covers, he took in the bright squares of yellow from the streetlights outside, and was confused as to why he was awake. It couldn’t have been morning yet.

The knock that echoed softly from the main room of his flat answered his question, and Ianto rolled quickly out of bed, checking the clock and tightening the drawstring on his trousers as he

padded across the living room to the front door, pulling it open with some reservation.

Jack was on the other side, unsurprisingly. Only the other tenants in the building had keys to the front door, and none of them were likely to knock at 3:10 in the morning. Ianto didn't have any time to consider much beyond this, since Jack wasted no time in sweeping in past him and pushing him up against the wall, shutting the door with one hand as the other took the back of Ianto's neck and pulled him into a kiss that had Ianto scrabbling at the wall for support.

Jack's hands were everywhere, running over his body and under his shirt, skimming hardening nipples and squeezing down his arms, as if Jack were trying to make sure he was all there. Ianto submitted to the search without complaint, trying to tamp down on the easy excitement that was building up as Jack kissed down his neck, until thumbs slipped into his trousers and made to pull them down.

"Jack," he gasped in protest, finding Jack's shoulders with his hands and pushing back warningly. "Please don't."

"I just need to *see*," Jack said, voice rough and eyes desperate. He slid his hand down Ianto's flannel-clad leg, stopping over his thigh, squeezing rhythmically.

Ianto got it, and nodded warily, pressing his hands back against the wall and letting Jack undo the knot of his trousers and pull them down, following to his knees. Ianto drew in a breath and watched as Jack trailed his fingertips through the rough hair on his thigh, stopping midway to thumb the pale pink circle that marked him.

"It's healed fine," Ianto managed.

Jack nodded wordlessly, leaning in to press his lips to the scar and then rest his cheek against it, hot breath sending tingles up Ianto's spine until he pushed gently at Jack's jaw, urging him back so he could reach down and pull up his trousers.

"You okay?" he asked.

Jack stayed knelt on the floor, bringing his hands up and burying his face into them so that Ianto had to ask again to hear his reply.

"I didn't know if you'd survived."

"What?" Ianto said, confused. "Zoanne fixed this fine."

Jack shook his head. "Not that," he insisted. "After – the station."

“Zeta-Oh?”

“Yeah,” Jack nodded. “I thought... I thought it wasn’t enough. Adias – John – ” he broke off for a hysterical giggle, wiping at his eyes, “that *bastard* blew up the base anyway. I didn’t know if you’d gotten away.” He fumbled in a pocket for a handkerchief, rubbing at his face before pushing himself to his feet. “Not that I remembered for long.”

Ianto looked at him for a long moment, taking in the paleness of his lips, the sheen of sweat along his brow, and the shake of his hands as he tried to fold the handkerchief back into his pocket. Ianto plucked it from his grasp and moved past him into the kitchen.

“You look awful. Take a shower. Should you eat?”

“Probably.”

“I’ll make something up. There are clean towels on the door.” Jack gave him a skeptical look. “You’ll feel better. I’ll be right here.”

Jack nodded, compliant, and disappeared into the toilet. Ianto took a moment to drop his head against the kitchen counter and will his entirely ill timed erection away, before straightening and opening the fridge. Two eggs for Jack, and on reflection, another for himself, and a tomato from the produce bin would do for something to keep Jack from falling over.

By the time Jack came out of the toilet, bare-footed and down a few layers to his t-shirt and trousers, Ianto was adding the toast to the plates of eggs and sliced tomato.

“Water?”

“Please.”

Jack took a seat across from the kitchen at one of the barstools, and Ianto slid his plate and glass over to him, arranging himself opposite Jack, who dug in like a man possessed – which really, wasn’t that far from how Jack normally ate. Ianto slid his egg onto his toast and added a bit of the tomato, cutting it into pieces to eat neatly with his knife and fork, waiting for Jack to start speaking.

The first thing was predictable, and easily the most painful.

“Ashild?”

Ianto looked down at his plate, shaking his head.

“Right.” Jack moved the remaining slice of tomato around his plate with a finger. “And Brenneth too. *Fuck*.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Jack replied miserably. “Damnit, this sucks. I never really got to process Ashild, but with Brenneth, it’s like the same thing all over again. All the shit that comes with it, I have to do it again.”

Ianto swallowed, remembering how broken Kethan – *Jack* – was after Brenneth was killed, and how much he needed Ianto then. Part of Ianto wanted to do the same thing, leave the dishes and pull Jack into his bedroom, but it wasn’t the same. It couldn’t be.

“I always wondered what happened to them,” Jack went on, voice pitched low, as if he were talking mostly to himself. “I never could find them again, it was so strange. Like the *Star* had disappeared from existence.”

“She did,” Ianto said. “She was caught in the blast. But the crew, most of the crew, they’re fine. Just a decade forward in time from where they left.”

Jack nodded absently. “Makes sense.”

“It was your idea,” Ianto said, managing a smile.

Jack frowned, pushing his empty plate to the side and leaning forward urgently. “The other me – how old was I?”

Ianto hesitated.

“*Please*,” Jack begged. “I don’t need an exact number, just – ”

“Three thousand. Or so. Older.”

Jack froze. Ianto’s gut twisted as he watched Jack process, and fail to process, and try again, and then give up, flying off the chair and back into the toilet. Ianto followed, flicking on the light switch as he stepped in to see Jack hunched over, retching the contents of the late-night meal into the toilet bowl.

Ianto ran a glass of water and then sat awkwardly on the edge of the tub, reaching out to stroke at Jack’s damp hair until he sat up, and then offering the glass warily.

“I’m sorry,” he said helplessly, watching as Jack gargled and spat, and then pulled the handle.

“I didn’t think.”

“I asked,” Jack rasped, sitting back against the counter, eyes shut. “My fault.”

“It’s not that bad,” Ianto tried, his words sounding lame even to his own words. “You’re already a hundred and seventy-five.”

“I’d ask how you knew that, but I guess I know, huh?” Jack said with a weak laugh. Ianto waited quietly, listening to Jack’s heavy breathing.

“I thought... he said it was forever. I didn’t want to believe him. I ignored it, and most of the time? The only way I get through every day without going absolutely fucking *insane* is to believe he was lying. That maybe next time I die, it’ll stick.” He opened his eyes to meet Ianto’s. “I can’t do another three-thousand years of this, Ianto. I *can’t*.”

“Then don’t do it like this,” Ianto replied. “Embrace it. Stop being so afraid.”

“I can’t,” Jack whispered.

“You’re just saying that,” Ianto said sharply. “It’s just what you’ve always said, isn’t it? It’s why you said ‘no’, yesterday. It’s why I had to find out your name by going back – forward – and meeting you. It’s why when I say ‘I love you’, you flinch.”

Jack shut his eyes.

“See?” Ianto said, voice softening as he touched Jack’s cheek gently. “The world’s not going to disappear if you shut your eyes. You can’t stop yourself from existing. Stop trying anyway.”

Jack turned away from Ianto’s touch, bringing up a hand to rub at his mouth. “Ianto, Do you have any idea how many people have fallen in love with me?”

“No.”

Jack looked back at Ianto. “How many of them do you think are alive today?”

Ianto said nothing.

“I’m never going to be what you want, Ianto,” he said in a low voice. “I can’t be – I can’t be the Rhys to your Gwen. Or vice versa, or whatever. I can’t love you back because I can’t risk it I can’t handle it.”

“I don’t want a Rhys,” Ianto said, pulling back a little. “I want *you*. And you can handle it, if

you try.”

“I thought you were gone.”

“What?”

“Last week. When you disappeared,” Jack explained. “I assumed you weren’t ever coming back. And you know what? I handled it. It sucked, believe me when I tell you it sucked, but I handled it, because...”

“Because you’d never let me be that important.”

Jack didn’t dispute it.

Ianto swallowed, and then pulled back, standing up and wiping off his hands on his trousers.

“All right. If that’s what you want.” He rubbed at the back of his neck, looking unhappily down at Jack until he made a decision. “You can sleep on the couch, if you want.”

He was at his bedroom door before Jack caught up with him, wrapping a hand around his wrist and pulling up flush against him, mouth at his ear. “Ianto, no. I do want you. I need – right now, can’t we...”

Ianto shook him off. “Don’t make me say no to you,” he pleaded, hand on the doorframe.

There was a moment of silence, and then Jack sighed and stepped back. “I’ll go back to the Hub.”

“You can have the couch.”

“No, it’d be better if I went.”

Jack collected his boots and clothes, and Ianto just stood and watched until he slipped out the door, shutting it softly behind him. Ianto raised a hand to his mouth, touching his lips, wishing that Kethan had never shown him what he was missing, and that the Jack of the future had never told him to ask for it.

## **Epilogue**

~

The facts return right away when a memory chip’s contents are restored. It’s one thing,

however, to *know* the past; it's an entirely different thing to integrate it into your day-to-day life.

Six weeks later, Jack was only just losing the schizophrenic feeling that resulted from memories popping up where they hadn't before. Ashild when Gwen pushed particularly hard for something she believed in. A flash of Brenneth, tied to the post, when they rescued a kidnapping victim; a vision that sent him reeling in a way that confused everyone but Ianto. Repeatedly, two visions of Ianto himself, spliced across time.

Some of it was contrast: Ianto then, Ianto now, even though it was all the same Ianto, and Jack was the one who had changed. More of it was astonishment that Jack had missed so much of who Ianto was the second time he met him. Most of all was the growing impression that he had made a serious mistake. Before, after – it didn't matter. But the more Jack owned the memories of those two years, and most importantly, of those two months, the more he honestly *missed* Ianto's company.

Losing him had been a shock – but not one he hadn't insulated himself from. Now, he had the sneaking suspicion that any boundary he'd hoped to construct between himself and Ianto, in the hopes of saving himself the eventual, inevitable pain of loss, was a moot point. His old self had screwed him over, fallen for Ianto without even knowing who he was, and Jack couldn't take back the past. Not again.

Ianto, for his part, seemed to be sticking to his guns. He'd treated Jack with professional courtesy, but that was it. Every now and then his demeanor slipped, reminding both of them how much better Ianto knew him, but he'd resisted Jack's flirtation and initial attempts to move past the outbursts that followed his return.

*"I meant what I said, Jack,"* Ianto had repeated after Jack cornered him in the Tourist Office. *"I'm not going back to that. Talk to me when you're ready for something more."*

He'd declined to explain what exactly the 'more' was, and Jack had moved through those requisite stages of grief. The shock had passed into denial, and Ianto had rebuffed his attempts to renegotiate until Jack was too angry to consider it. Now, enough time had passed for Jack to look back on those initial discussions.

*It's why when I say 'I love you', you flinch.*

Jack stood at the glass wall of his office, the lights off behind him, arms folded across his chest as he watched his team. Tosh was swinging in her chair, tips of her toes pushing off the floor in an easy rhythm. Gwen and Owen were on the couch, bickering, as per usual. And Ianto – Ianto was laughing, coming up behind Tosh to force her to a stop, and leaning over her shoulder to whisper something in her ear, grinning at Owen's glare and Tosh's laugh.



Jack shut his eyes, trying to tell the twisting of his heart to just *go away*. He'd done so well at not getting too wrapped up in any of these people, all the people he'd known here. Some of them never knew him at all, just a flash of his life, sailing by before they got too old – or rather, before he didn't. Estelle was one of those. His wife, another. Those who had known, who'd seen him die and live and die and live; they'd been privy to that secret, but they had been Torchwood. Even the best of them hadn't known Jack outside of that.

But now, *Ianto*. Who knew his past, his future, and his present, to an alarming degree. The thought of it made Jack itch with worry.

“What am I going to do with you?” he murmured, turning around to lean against the glass and stare back into the darkness of his office.

*Because I love you now, and even if I forget it, it's still there, on that stupid chip, and I'll get it back.*

He shut his eyes, willing his younger self to get the hell out of his mind.

*Why? Because you've become an under-evolved excuse for a human male? Gone native?*

Jack laughed at himself. He was not going to have mental arguments with his twenty-eight year-old self.

But he had a point. How long had it been since Jack had let go of his own cowardice and let someone love him, without conditions and qualifications and little fences built out of omissions and distance and sex first? Jack shook his shoulders loose and rounded his desk, flopping down in his chair in defeat. Ianto loved him, that wasn't what was in question. The ball was in his court.

And he was frozen. Part of him wanted to let go, fall into Ianto's waiting grasp and tell him it was okay, it would all work out, they'd make it work. Tell him to screw the future, all that mattered was now. Jack exhaled sharply and focused on the TARDIS coral on his desk.

Maybe once upon a time he'd been naïve enough to assume now was all that mattered.

*God, it's so strange. The idea that it's ever bad to love somebody.*

What had he promised Ianto, back then? More than he could give him now, certainly. And who could blame him? A hundred and fifty years was enough to excuse anyone of a promise made, even in earnest. Too much had changed – Kethan was long, long dead.

*Embrace it. Stop being so afraid.*

“...from the mainframe.”

Jack’s eyes snapped open, meeting Ianto’s amused expression across his desk. “What? Sorry, I missed that.”

“Lost in thought?”

“You have no idea,” Jack said ruefully, pulling up to his desk. “What were you saying?”

“I wanted to show you something I retrieved from the mainframe,” Ianto repeated, coming around Jack’s desk to stand at the terminal, typing in a few commands. “I figured, if it was once the Star’s mainframe, maybe some of the original data was still in it.”

“I looked years ago,” Jack said dismissively, turning to watch Ianto anyway.

“Yeah, you looked for star charts, and temporal data, and whatnot. That’s all gone. I looked for personal storage.”

Jack frowned, and stood up to look over Ianto’s shoulder.

“They’re rendered in 2D, but you have the tech to project them, if you want,” Ianto continued, nodding his head at Jack’s wristband. Jack looked down at it, and then back up at the screen.

He sucked in a startled breath, reaching out to touch the image floating against the black of the mainframe’s desktop.

“There aren’t too many. Most are corrupt, but there are twenty-two that aren’t. She’s in about half of them. Breneth too.”

Jack nodded wordlessly, taking in the cheerful grin in the picture, the open tilt of her head, the wild mess of her hair. Ashild’s eyes met his, through time and tech and death.

“I was a terrible father to her,” he said roughly.

Ianto had slipped away, but he paused in his exit. “No, you weren’t. She loved you. And you loved her. Remember that first.”

Jack nodded slowly, still entranced by the photo, and by the time he looked over at the door, Ianto was long gone.

~

“Sir, I have work to do,” Ianto protested as Jack ushered him into his office. “I still have two hours of filing to finish before I can go home, and I hardly got any sleep last night as it is.”

“It can wait,” Jack said unreasonably, pushing Ianto towards the couch and heading to the manhole, climbing down it. He popped back up briefly, giving Ianto a warning glare. “Don’t leave.”

Ianto rolled his eyes and settled back into the couch defiantly. Jack grinned, but he found he couldn’t quite work up the normal disingenuous smirk.

He climbed back up with a low, rectangular box under one arm, and came around to sit a space over from Ianto, balancing the box on his knees.

“What’s this?” Ianto asked skeptically.

“Hush.” Jack took off the lid, and started unloading things onto the couch between them.

“Jack – ” Ianto cut himself off and picked up the manila folder Jack had placed between them. “This is your file.”

“Yes.”

“The one you told me to gather and delete all evidence of.”

“Yes.”

Ianto frowned. “Why is it here?”

“I’m showing it to you.”

Ianto gave him an exasperated look. “I already have all this memorized.”

“Of course you do. It’s a *gesture*.”

“It’s not much of one,” Ianto said, but a smile was playing at the corner of his lips. “And these?”

“Photos from my past.”

Ianto pried open the tin box, and carefully lifted out the stack of old photos. He went through

the first ones slowly, taking in the aged images of an un-aged man, both in uniform and out. Jack watched with trepidation as he revealed the wedding photo, fingers hovering over their faces.

“Is this...?”

“Yes.”

Ianto stared down at it for a long moment, thumbing the edges, and then looked up at Jack.

“Tell me about her?”

Jack took a deep breath, and Ianto settled back into the couch, sending him a reassuring smile.

“Okay. I met her in a – don’t laugh – in a church. I was freelancing for Torchwood and there was a strange...”

~

It was nice, lying like this, with his head in Ianto’s lap, telling stories. Or rather, making encouraging noises as Ianto dragged his fingers through his hair, teasing his scalp. The words themselves had died away a while ago, leaving them in peaceable silence. Jack was vaguely aware that they’d have to break the silence at some point to talk about now, after all that about the past. Not that he’d told Ianto everything, though he’d worked chronologically through the important bits of three decades, right up ‘til he’d joined Torchwood, but somewhere the stories themselves had ceased to matter.

“Hey,” he said lazily, looking up at Ianto.

“Hey,” Ianto said back, imitating his accent back at him.

Jack laughed and reached up to thumb Ianto’s bottom lip, pressing hard when Ianto opened his mouth to speak.

“Shh.”

“Why shh?” Ianto said around his thumb, tongue flicking against it.

“I want to revel in the not-having-to-discuss-things moment.”

“Oh. I wasn’t going to discuss things.”

“No?” Jack considered sitting up, and then decided he was really too comfortable, and that being that comfortable would probably make the ensuing conversation less stressful.

“No. I was going to ask what you’re doing tomorrow night.”

At this, Jack did sit up, swinging his legs off the couch and twisting around to face Ianto.

“Same thing we do every night, Pinky,” he said with a grin. “Try to stop evil monsters from taking over the world.”

“I am definitely the Brain,” Ianto scoffed, and then shook his head. “Seriously.”

“Seriously?” Jack echoed, thinking about it. “Uh, actually, that sort of is serious.”

Ianto laughed. An honest-to-god, full-belly laugh. It made Jack’s insides twist in a way he’d almost forgotten.

“Right then. Well, assuming no monsters actually schedule a world-taking-over event tomorrow night, I have two tickets to the opera and nobody to take.”

Jack blinked. “The opera?”

“Yep.”

Jack bit his lip and peered at Ianto. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t the WNO putting on *La Traviata* right now?”

“No need to correct you,” Ianto said solemnly.

“Oh,” Jack said faintly. “You have tickets for tomorrow?” Ianto nodded. “How did you know I would – that we’d sort things out before then?”

Ianto shrugged. “Somebody told me things would work out. I was just... guessing with the timeline, is all.” He shook a finger at Jack. “You cut it close.”

“Oh,” Jack repeated, thinking back over the last six weeks. “So you never thought that was it? You knew from the start I’d come around?”

“I had it on good authority, yes.”

“I see,” Jack said slowly. “Does that mean we can just *not* talk about anything, then? If you already know everything?”

Ianto frowned. “No.”

“Succinct as always, I see,” Jack said with a laugh, and then reached out to pull Ianto into his arms. “I promise, we’ll talk about it. For as long as you want. You don’t want the old way, and I don’t think I do either.”

Ianto buried his face into Jack’s shoulder, arms wrapping around his torso. Jack pulled him back until they were lying down, Ianto half on top of Jack, long limbs winding together comfortably.

“What changed your mind?” Ianto asked, voice muffled by Jack’s shirt.

Jack shut his eyes, breathing in the scent of Ianto’s shampoo and aftershave. “You did, when you showed me the photos from the *Star*. It made me realize – Ashild is dead. Or gone, at least, beyond my temporal reach. And the only thing I regret is that I wasn’t a bigger part of her life. I don’t want the same thing with you.”

Ianto propped himself up on an elbow, blue eyes meeting Jack’s, full of shared sorrow and remembrance, but also hope, and purpose, and *love*.

“You won’t,” he said fiercely, free hand pressing into Jack’s chest for emphasis. “I won’t let you.”

“I won’t be perfect.”

“I know.”

“I’ll make mistakes.”

“Yes.”

“I’m still, at heart, a fifty-first century kind of guy,” he warned.

Ianto laughed, and kissed him.

“I *know*. I don’t need monogamy, although I think I’ll always prefer it. But you taught me that monogamy and commitment aren’t the same thing. As long as I have the latter, I’ll be fine.”

“You deserve – ”

“Jack,” Ianto said sharply. Jack shut his mouth. “I want this. So do you. For now, that’s more

than enough.”

And for the first time in longer than Jack could remember – it was.