The Other Side of Forever
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Summary

It's 2018 and Jack gets taken by the rift, ending up in the alternate reality that the Doctor had previously closed off during the Battle of Canary Wharf. With two of him -- two fixed points in time -- in one universe, it could cause the very fabric of reality to start unravelling. And who turns up just when Jack realises he's going to need help getting back to his own reality? Ianto Jones.

Notes

This is technically set after the events of the Big Finish Audio Aliens Among Us or season 5. You don't need to have listened to the audio to read this. However, some background if you want it aka SPOILERS -- Yvonne Hartman turns up having crossed over from an alternate reality during the battle of Canary Wharf when the walls between realities were down. Her other self was obviously killed in the battle, but the alternate reality Yvonne escapes and goes to ground for years. Present day and Yvonne manages to take control of Torchwood Three from Jack. He then works out that Gwen had been inhabited by an alien for weeks and no one noticed. When they separate the two, Gwen tells Jack she had a lot of time to think (she was aware the whole time, seeing everything happening but not in control of her body) and that she's done with Torchwood.
She quits and leaves, then moments later, the rift opens. Which is where our story picks up. The opening few paragraphs are taken from the audio itself (no copyright intended, all characters and sundries are the property of BBC and Big Finish productions)
Chapter 1

Jack stood staring at the cog wheel door that had just rolled closed behind Gwen Cooper for the last time. She’d quit. Just like that. No fanfare, no emotional outburst like she’d been so prone to in her first few years with Torchwood. Just a simple explanation of all the time she’d had to think while trapped inside her own body after it’d been taken over by some unknown alien entity, leaving Gwen watching, but unable to do anything. The pair of them had separated, and now there was a woman lying unconscious on the floor of the hub who looked a lot like Gwen, but not Gwen.

He gave a sad laugh, forcing himself to cover up the way his heart was breaking, even though no one else was there.

“Gwen Cooper,” he murmured. She’d given him, given Torchwood over ten years. She was lucky to have survived it and not ended up dead like Susie. Like Owen. Like Tosh. Like Ianto—

His heart clenched in his chest in a way it hadn’t done for years. Those first few months—heck, the first few years—he hadn’t ever thought he was going to get over the heartbreak of losing Ianto. That he’d forever feel the physical ache that clenched his entire body when he thought about it too closely. He hadn’t gotten over it, not really. Still thought about him way too often. Still got that sick pang in his stomach at the senseless way he’d died. Damn it, after losing control of Torchwood Three and with everything going to hell around him, he hadn’t even been able to stop himself from asking bloody Yvonne Hartman if Ianto had existed in the universe she’d come from, if she remembered him from Torchwood One in London.

Ianto Jones. There was no getting over him. And Ianto’s final words had been nothing but the fear that Jack would forget him. Jack remembered everyone he’d loved and lost over his long years of life. Sure, some of them had become a distant echo and he could remember them fondly. But Ianto would forever be a painful scar on his heart that never allowed him to forget.

A sudden surge of energy rippled up from the base of the water tower with a low whine.

“What the hell?”

The ground beneath his feet began trembling as the energy blasted brighter and stronger.

“The rift!” It was opening. Energy arced out in all directions, smashing through the hub. No. This was wrong. Not just the rift. It had never happened like this before. Something else was going on. There was a wrench through his middle, and he could feel time and space. Feel the time vortex he knew was within him, but it had never made its presence so felt before. The energy struck him, connecting him to whatever was happening, sucking him in. The pain was indescribable and he yelled his fury and fear because all of time and space and the very fabric of reality was tearing and reforming and ripping and reshaping around him. He was hurtling through everything and nothing. And something was coming. Something emerged. But like some kind of cosmic exchange, as he got flung through eternity, whatever it was went snapping back in the other direction.

To Earth. To Cardiff. To an unsuspecting 21st century where he knew he no longer was.

He squeezed his eyes shut and waited to die. Except maybe he wouldn’t. Maybe this was it. His forever. In the rift. Or the oblivion between worlds. Somewhere there was no escaping from.
He felt another rush, another jolt and he collapsed forward, landing on his hands and knees on the same metal walkway he’d been standing on moments earlier, before the rift had exploded open. At least he assumed it was moments earlier. His limbs gave out and he sank down to lay on his stomach, panting, trying to catch his breath. The pain was still rippling through his body in receding waves, and he forced himself to remain conscious through sheer force of will. Because something had come through when the rift had opened, and he was going to have to deal with it.

With a groan, he rolled onto his back and made his bleary eyes focus. The hub was dim, like it was night or something and the lights had powered down. Letting his head fall to the side, he looked to where Not Gwen had been laying unconscious on the floor, but she wasn’t there any longer.

Clenching his jaw, because he knew it was going to hurt like hell, he forced himself to sit up. His head throbbed, and it was all he could do to swallow down the bile rising in the back of his throat. He felt like he’d time travelled on an unstable vortex manipulator.

He focused on his wrist strap to ground himself, wanting to check the time and work out how long he’d been missing. Except all the information in the display was scrambled. It took him a few moments to clear up what must have been some kind of temporal interference, but when he finally got the thing to make sense, his stomach dropped into his feet.

“Oh no,” he uttered, forgetting about his aching head and scrambling to his feet. “No, no. No way.”

According to his vortex manipulator, he had travelled. Not through time. Through realities. He was in an alternate reality. The same alternate reality Yvonne Hartman had left when she’d come through the rip between dimensions created on the day the Battle of Canary Warf had taken place. Which meant Rose Tyler and the Metacrisis Doctor were here somewhere.

Which meant—

Ianto.

His heart flipped over in his chest and he gulped a breath. No. He didn’t know that for sure. The Ianto Jones in this reality could have died at Canary Warf. Or Lisa could have survived and they’d gone on to get married, have kids and live a normal life. Or he’d died exactly the same way, at the hands of the 456 aliens, trying to save the children of Earth. He couldn’t assume anything about the Ianto in this reality. He had no right.

The best thing he could do, the only thing he could do, was go find Rose and The Doctor right away so they could start working on a fix, because this wasn’t something he’d be able to handle on his own.

Flipping the cover closed on his wrist strap, he hurried up the few steps to the workstations, but
when he stopped in front of what had once been Tosh’s workstation, he found all the screens blank. Why the hell wasn’t the rift monitor up and running? They never switched these computers off. Ever. Hell, he didn’t even know how.

He searched around until he found some unplugged cables and connected them together, hoping for a miracle. Thankfully the screens flashed and the familiar warbling hum of the advance alien Torchwood computer systems came to life.

It took a few long moments to boot up properly and reconfigure itself like it hadn’t been used for a long time. Which he couldn’t understand. What had happened to Torchwood Three in this reality? Wasn’t anyone monitoring the rift?

The cog wheel behind him jolted out of place with the usual alarm and flash of lights. Jack glanced at the screen in frustration as the program was finally ready for him to use, but he muttered a curse and ducked down the steps and around the base of the water tower to the entrance of the archives, hiding in an alcove.

He couldn’t let anyone see him. Especially if that anyone was his other self. He didn’t fancy being the source of some inter-dimensional explosion. Several voices echoed. Sharp. Military sounding, the way orders were snapped and others responded with yes sir.

He shifted out a little, risking a glance. A couple of UNIT soldiers were fanning out around the hub, while the one who looked to be in charge approached the workstation where the screen was flashing. Had switching on the computers somehow alerted them to his presence?

For half a second he considered outing himself. Surely UNIT would have the resources to help him. But he’d never quite been able to decide if he trusted UNIT all that much in his own timeline, let alone this one. They could just as easily lock him up, or contain him, to make sure he didn’t accidentally bring about the destruction of all reality.

With another muttered curse, he retreated, heading down into the maze that was the archives. UNIT could send twenty men down there to search for a week straight, and they probably wouldn’t find him. Besides, if he was lucky, he might be able to find one or two useful things. Usually he’d think twice about taking anything out of the archives, but these were extenuating circumstances.

He found the record room stuffed full of filing cabinets from the years before Torchwood had a computer system. It would have been much easier to scan the archives on the computers, but with UNIT searching the place, he would have to do it the old-fashioned way.

He glanced balefully at the dusty draws, debating where to start. Ianto would have known. Ianto always knew.

With a sigh, he picked a random draw and pulled it open, coughing and waving his hand in the air at the cloud of dust that erupted.

_Torchwood 1967 Personnel Files._ Not what he needed, but out of curiosity, he pulled it out and flipped it open to see if he recognised any of the names. Some, but not all. Curiously, it didn’t mention him. With a shrug, he returned the file and then picked another draw to open.

_Torchwood Alien Acquisitions 1983._ Now he was getting somewhere. He began searching, looking for mentions of advanced tech Torchwood Three had stashed away in the archives that might be able to help him. He got so absorbed in it, he actually almost forgot about the UNIT soldiers searching the hub above.
Until he heard the scuff of a boot behind him, that was. He froze, sensing he was no longer alone. He slowly lowered the folder he was holding to rest on the open drawer of files in front of him, debating whether to draw his gun right away.

“Put your hands out where I can see them. Slowly.”

The familiar Welsh voice hit him like a physical blow. Pain and pleasure suffusing him in a single ragged breath. For a second he couldn't move, unable to believe it, sure his mind was playing tricks on him.

“I said hold out your hands!” This time it was more of a hard demand, the military training coming through loud and clear.

Jack did as he was told, holding out his shaking hands to his sides and then slowly turning around.

Military issue assault rifle trained on him. Black UNIT uniform. Red cap. And a pair of gorgeous blue eyes that Jack hadn’t ever thought he’d see again.

“Ianto,” he uttered, hearing every atom of heartbreak and disbelief in the way his voice caught over the single word.

“Do I know you?” The barrel of the gun dipped just slightly as Ianto’s brow creased in that adorable way it always had when he’d been confused about something. The sight broke Jack’s heart all over again. Despite the weapon pointed at him, he used a hand to quickly swipe away the tears threatening to fall. Well, obviously this Ianto hadn’t met the version of himself in this reality. He couldn’t decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“No, you don’t,” he finally managed to reply, surprised at how calm his voice sounded.

Ianto frowned and repositioned his aim, before reaching up to the comm in his ear.

Jack quickly flicked open the cover on his wrist strap and hit a button to block signals coming in and out.

“Sir, I’ve found the intruder,” Ianto said into the comm. He tapped it a second time. “Sir, do you copy?”

“I’ve blocked your comms.” Jack lowered his arm again as Ianto’s expression hardened and he stepped closer.

“Why?”

“I need you to answer some questions before you take me in.” He was taking a huge gamble, assuming the Ianto in this reality was a good man at heart, despite the fact that he’d apparently gone to work for UNIT after Canary Warf. He could use that, get Ianto to give him a little information and then work out some way to escape him.

Except escaping him was the last thing Jack wanted to do. It was taking every ounce of self-control he had not to reach out and touch him.

“You’re in no position to make demands.” Ianto’s expression was formidable, a side Jack had only witnessed a handful of times when something had pushed Ianto to taking decisive action he normally wouldn’t. This Ianto, however, had been honed by the military might of UNIT.

“It’s not a demand,” Jack returned in an even voice, striving to keep the situation low-key. “It’s a
“request. I need help. That’s why I’m here.”

“What kind of help could you possibly be looking for in the old Torchwood Three base?”

Now, Ianto just looked suspicious. Apparently asking for help had been the wrong tact to take.

“Do you know much about the rift?” He probably didn’t if he hadn’t ever come to work for Torchwood Three.

“It’s a tear in time and space that runs through Cardiff,” he answered as if reciting something he’d read, without any inflection of personal knowledge.

“And you know that sometimes things fall out of the rift, right?”

Ianto gave a single nod.

“That’s what happened to me. I fell out of the rift. I’m just looking for a way to get back to where I belong.”

Ianto finally lowered the gun. “That spike in rift activity we picked up, that was you?”

“Yes, that was me.” Jack let the relief he was feeling that Ianto was actually listening to him colour his words.

“How did you do it?” The gun might not have been on him any longer, but Ianto still had that unreadable expression on his features. “The rift was closed years ago. After Canary Warf. It was deemed too dangerous.”

“I didn’t do it.” But then Ianto’s words sunk in. “Wait. UNIT found a way to close the rift? For good?”

“Obviously not, since you just came through it,” Ianto returned with a hint of sarcasm, that dry wit Jack had missed so much peeking through.

Jack couldn’t help a grin as he held up both hands again. “I promise, I didn’t do it on purpose. Believe me, this is the last place I wanted to end up.”

His voice faltered over the words, because it wasn’t entirely true. No, he hadn’t planned to travel to an alternate reality. But he had, and the first thing he’d done was stumble across Ianto Jones. Or, Ianto had stumbled across him. And right in that moment, he didn’t want to be anywhere else, even if Ianto had no idea who he was.

He cleared his throat before continuing. “I can’t stay here, because if I do, it’s going to cause problems. End of the universe type problems. I need to find a way to get back to my own timeline. The sooner the better.”

“Your own timeline?” Ianto repeated, and Jack could all but see his mind turning this fact over. He debated for half a second, but old habits died hard. He’d gotten used to telling Ianto—well, not everything. But a lot more than he’d shared with anyone else in a long time.

“I’m from an alternate reality. That’s why I don’t belong here. There’s another version of me walking around out there somewhere, and if I stay in this universe for too long, it’s going to start causing the fabric of reality to tear itself apart.”

No point explaining about the fixed-point-in-time thing. It’d take too long and over complicate
“Well, then, that does sound like it might be a small problem.”

It was so understated and so Ianto. He couldn’t help an affectionate laugh that left Ianto arching an eyebrow at him.

“So, will you help me?”

Ianto stared at him for a long moment. “What’s your name?”

“Captain Jack Harkness.” He waited for some kind of flicker of recognition, because even if Ianto hadn’t met the other him personally, there was still a chance he’d heard of him. But Ianto didn’t have the slightest reaction, simply sent him a sharp nod of recognition at his title.

“Captain Ianto Jones.”

“Captain? Really?” Jack couldn’t help grinning. They were both captains, and he wasn’t sure why Ianto earning the military title made him proud.

Ianto simply studied him curiously, obviously not understanding the source of Jack’s amusement.

“So, you didn’t answer my question.” He slid his hands into the pockets of his greatcoat, the urge to reach out for him returning full force. And he knew there’d been a flirty, intimate tone to his words, but he couldn’t help himself. “Will you help me?”

Ianto sighed and glanced down, rubbing the back of his neck in a gesture so familiar, it left Jack’s body aching.

“I shouldn’t. It goes against all of my training. I should be handing you over to my squadron commander right now.” Ianto brought his head up again, and as he looked at Jack now, his expression was much more open.

“But you’re not.” Jack found himself drifting nearer, closing the distance between them.

“No, I’m not,” Ianto murmured. “I have no idea why though.”

“Oh, I think I have some idea,” Jack returned with a grin.

Ianto didn’t seem very impressed with that remark.

“I can give you an hour. It’ll take us that long to search the rest of the archives and the vaults. Then I have to tell my commanding officer about you.”

“An hour is all I need.” Actually, it was probably far less than he needed, but he’d take whatever he could get and then give Ianto and the rest of the UNIT soldiers the slip.

“I’ll stand guard to make sure no one else finds you.”

Ianto started to step toward the door, but Jack reached out and stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Thank you, Ianto.” The words were heartfelt, back-loaded with things Jack had never been able to say, not that he’d intended it to come out that way. Beneath his hand, he felt Ianto’s arm tense, saw the way he became flustered all of a sudden, giving a quick nod and ducking his head, colour blooming on his cheeks.
Jack grinned as he watched him hurry out of the room. Seemed this Ianto wasn’t so different after all.

With a deep breath to re-centre himself, Jack turned to look back at the filing cabinets. One hour to find something useful for his trip across realities.
Ianto stood at the doorway, neither in nor out of the room. He’d intended to stand out in the corridor, but there was something intriguing—or more like suspicious—about the man searching intently through the dusty draws, and Ianto got the feeling that he shouldn’t let Captain Jack Harkness out of his sight… whoever he might be.

The man knew him, had said his name when he’d first turned around in a voice that had made Ianto's stomach flip over for some weird reason. And he hadn’t missed the emotion in his expression, or the way he’d wiped away the dampness of his eyes.

Technically, he supposed it wasn’t him that the captain knew. If he believed the captain’s story and the man had fallen through the rift from another reality, then it was a different Ianto Jones the captain was familiar with. His curiosity was getting the better of him, which was why he hadn’t insisted on taking the captain straight up to hand over to his squadron leader. His curiosity and thirst for knowledge was what had made him so successful at Torchwood One, resulting in him quickly moving from junior research to field agent. After Canary Warf, Torchwood had been shut down by UNIT. His choice had been retcon or the military. He didn’t think he’d be cut out for UNIT, but once he’d forced himself to stop thinking for himself so much and simply followed orders, he’d actually excelled at it and worked his way up the ranks.

But meeting the captain, it had brought everything rushing back and reminded him of how much he’d loved working for Torchwood. Reminded him of how he craved a good mystery to solve. The excitement of not knowing what he was going to face day to day or how it would be fixed. The rush of thinking on his feet and figuring out a solution while the stakes were high enough to make a lesser person crumble. And Captain Jack Harkness was nothing if not a mystery. So here he stood, keeping half an eye out on the deserted corridor, and the rest of his attention wandering over the man moving around the small room, the greatcoat swinging around his legs and giving him a commanding, but somehow timeless air.

The captain gathered several files and hurried over to the desk in the corner, caked with dust. He found a blank piece of paper and then searched the draws, muttering under his breath. Ianto left his post—he didn’t think anyone would come across them, the rest of his team had moved on to search in the lower archives and vaults.

“Something wrong?” he asked as he stepped closer to the desk.

“I need a pen or something to write down these archive designations.”

“Let me see.” He held out his hand and the captain paused to eye him warily. Ianto flicked his fingers with impatience and the captain reluctantly handed over the files. “Why do you need to write these down?”

“So I can find them when I go down into the archives.”

He looked up from pursuing the files—which mostly looked to be random alien junk—to catch the captain’s grey-blue gaze.

“You’re planning on taking things from the archives?”

A brief smile flitted over the man’s lips. “Don’t mess with the archives, huh?”

Ianto simply stared at him. If the captain was making some kind of joke, he didn’t get it.
“Normally I wouldn’t, but I don’t have much of a choice if I ever want to get back to my timeline.”

Ianto looked down and read the designations silently to himself. He had no idea how any of this stuff was going to help the captain, but it all seemed harmless enough and he didn’t work for Torchwood any longer, so it wasn’t like anything here was his responsibility. Plus UNIT had come and taken all the good stuff when they’d shut down Torchwood Three.

He put the files on the desk. “Let’s go get it all then.”

“But—” The captain started to reach for the files, but Ianto intercepted him. As soon as his fingers made contact with the warm skin of the captain’s hand, it was like a tingle shot up his arm. He snatched his hand back and subtly rubbed his palm on his thigh, trying to dispel the weird feeling.

“I’ve memorised them.” His voice came out a little rough and he swallowed, but the captain didn’t seem to notice.

“You’re going to help me?” The captain looked highly suspicious of this, but also somehow hopeful.

“We’ll get what you need, then you can explain it all to my squadron commander. I’m sure UNIT can help you get back to your own timeline.”

“Right.” The captain’s expression closed up somewhat, and Ianto got the feeling that he didn’t like the idea of UNIT helping him for some reason.

“If you unblock my comm, I’ll have an easier time making sure we avoid the other members of my squad for the moment.” He pointed to his ear where the currently-useless comm was attached.

The captain stared at him for a long moment before slowly bringing up his arm and flipping open the cover on some kind of device he wore on a strap at his wrist.

“I’m taking a leap of faith here. I don’t know you, but I’m trusting you.”

“I don’t have an ulterior motive.” Well, not really. Not if he didn’t count his insatiable curiosity.

After Canary Warf, he’d done a little research into alternate realities. It’d been comforting and helped him get over Lisa being killed that day, to know there was another version of her out there somewhere, living the life he’d wished they’d had together. He hadn’t even had a body to bury. Like all the other converted cybermen, she’d been inexplicably sucked into the void. That day when the Cybermen and Daleks had arrived, it’d seemed like the whole world was going to end, and then everything had just stopped.

He had a theory that whatever alternate reality they’d temporarily been connected to, had figured out a way to stop what was happening and close the doorway between worlds. But not before Yvonne Hartman had escaped through. He’d seen her go himself. Instead of staying to answer for her part in the disaster, she’d gotten away. Ianto had half a mind to ask this Captain Harkness if he’d met or knew Yvonne, if she’d turned up in his reality. But what were the chances of that happening?

The captain pressed a button on his wrist strap and chatter filled his ear as his comm came back online. He listened for a moment, gauging where the team were up to in their search.

“They’re in the lower vaults. We should be clear in the archives.”

The captain nodded and then stepped past him, almost close enough to brush his chest. His next
breath was laced with whatever cologne the man was wearing. Something he’d never smelled before than inexplicably made his stomach flip over. What the hell? It was the same kind of sensation he’d felt the first day he’d met Lisa. Except just one problem, the captain was a man and he’d never experienced that sort of feeling toward someone of his own sex before.

Shaking his head, he forced the thought from his mind, putting it down to some weird anomaly, before following after the captain.

“So you like it, working for UNIT?” the captain asked as they entered the dim stairs and started going down.

“It has its moments. Some good, most are boring,” he answered, for some reason finding it too easy to be honest with this man who he didn’t know from a bar of soap.

“You don’t find it too restrictive? Although, I suppose the structure and routine would be good.”

“You say that like you know me.” He studied the captain closely for his reaction. The more time he spent with the man, the more he was convinced Captain Harkness knew a version of himself in this other reality he’d come from. And he was dying to know what kind of life that Ianto Jones was living. If Lisa had survived. If they’d stayed together and got married. If he was happy.

The captain seemed to gather himself and then shook his head, tossing him an easy smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Just making conversation.”

“The first item you’re after is on this level.” He stepped over and pulled open the door, leaving things for now. He didn’t know why he was so reluctant to ask the captain outright whether or not he did know another version of him. Only that he felt like the captain wouldn’t want to tell him. And there was a part of him that didn’t want to know. Maybe it would be too painful to hear the captain knew another him who was living his dream. Or worse, that the other Ianto had died at Canary Warf and had no life there at all.

He led the captain through various rooms and levels until the man had collected all the items he wanted—six in total, now secured in the pockets of his long coat.

“Well, it’s probably about time we went back up to the hub and spoke to my squadron leader.” His words came out sounding reluctant, even to his own ears. He’d been enjoying himself, sneaking around down here, exploring the legendary Torchwood Cardiff archives that seemed to go on forever. And the company had been interesting, to say the least.

The captain nodded and they started heading back up. However, when they reached one of the upper levels, the captain suddenly detoured into a nearby room without a word. Ianto followed him, curious, like everything about this man had made him so far, and found him standing in the middle of the room staring at a cluttered desk. There was a bookshelf stuffed full of junk to one side and a few pieces of broken furniture shoved in a corner.

“Something wrong?”

It was impossible to miss the emotion playing across the captain’s features.

“Sorry, just memories.” He wiped a hand across his face, heaving a deep sigh that sounded lost and sadder than anything Ianto had ever heard.

“Not good memories, obviously.”
The captain smiled, the expression radiant for half a moment, before he shook his head.

“Oh, they are. Most of them are great memories. They hurt too much, though.”

Something drew Ianto closer, shifting around so he could look directly at the man. He recognised that particular pain. It was the same expression he’d seen in the mirror for months after Lisa had died.

“You lost someone. Someone you loved.”

The captain gave a sad laugh. “Am I that transparent?”

“No, I just know a thing or two about it.”

The other man stared at him, a question in his gaze that he didn’t seem to want to put into words.

“It was my girlfriend, Lisa. She died during the Battle of Canary Warf. Converted and then sucked into the void.”

A flicker or surprise seem to cross the captain's features, before he returned his attention to the desk.

“This was his office. In my reality, Torchwood Three continued after Canary Warf. He spent half his life down here in the archives. I mean, he complained about the state of it all, but he secretly enjoyed organising it all.”

“He?” Ianto clarified, not sure why that detail made his heart jump. It didn’t bother him if people were gay, straight or bi. One of his friends from high school had come out a few years after they’d finished school. It wasn’t like he found it distasteful. Actually, he’d never really given it all that much thought, it just hadn’t been relevant to him.

“Yeah,” the captain said, obviously lost in his memories. “He made the most amazing coffee. I have no idea what he did to it, only that it was like a little cup of bliss almost every time. Unless he was pissed off with you. Then you got decaf or instant.”

“He sounds like he was one of a kind. I’m sorry you lost him.”

The captain looked over at him, a gleam in his eyes that Ianto couldn’t decipher. Only that it made a slight shiver track down his spine.

“We should keep moving,” he said to break the strange moment. "My team is nearly finished searching the lower vaults and eventually someone is going to notice I’m missing.”

The captain gave a single nod. “Thank you, Ianto, for helping me. I know you didn’t have to do that and I— I appreciate it.”

“It wasn’t any trouble.” The captain’s sincere thanks made him a little flustered for some reason—the second time since he’d come across the man. He had no idea what it was about the captain that made all of the carefully polished edges he’d achieved in UNIT fall away, leaving him closer to the Ianto Jones who’d barely survived Torchwood.

“Lead the way, I’ll be right behind you.” The captain indicated toward the door, so Ianto went ahead of him, stepping out into the corridor and heading toward the lift. Except as he pushed the button and glanced over his shoulder, the captain didn’t emerge from the room.
Ianto stared at the door for nearly a full minute before he realised he’d been played. He rushed back into the room, but of course it was empty. He cursed, hurrying around the perimeter. There had to be a secret door here somewhere, because the captain hadn’t come out.

In the end, it was the scrape marks in the dust on the floor that told him where the secret passage was located. He wasted another few precious seconds finding the release before he pulled open the panel and hurried into the corridor on the other side. It was lit with old fashioned bulbs in small cages at regular intervals. Distantly ahead, he could hear the fading pound of running footsteps.

Ianto ducked out of the strap of his gun that’d been resting over his shoulder and then unclipped his utility vest—it’d all just slow him down and he could come back for it later. Lastly, he snatched the red hat off his head and tossed it. The stupid thing was itchy and he’d always felt ridiculous wearing it anyway.

Without the restrictive weight of his usual kit, he launched into a sprint down the dim passageway. He told himself he was chasing the man down simply because it was his job and he couldn’t let someone from another reality roam freely around, especially if what the captain had said was true and it could cause reality to collapse. But even he didn’t fully believe himself.

The footsteps stopped abruptly and Ianto increased his pace, eventually coming to a rusted ladder leading up to a sort of manhole. He scaled it quickly and found himself in the backroom of some kind of shop. The door leading outside was just swinging closed—he couldn’t have been that far behind the captain. He rushed out, exploding into the alleyway and making the door bang into the wall. But he hadn’t even taken two steps when he was grabbed and roughly shoved up against the brickwork.

“Damn it, Ianto. Why did you follow me?” The captain held him in a tight grip, expression angry. He made a half-hearted attempt to get free, but then gave up. “I can’t just let you leave. Not if what you said about realities collapsing is true. I have to take you in.”

The captain leaned in closer and Ianto got a lungful of his cologne again, sending a strange thrill through him.

“Why? Because you’re a good little UNIT soldier and that’s what they trained you to do?”

He couldn’t answer that, because it was exactly the reason he’d given himself, but it sounded hollow at best.

“You know what they’ll do to me if you hand me in,” the captain continued heatedly. “I’ll be lucky to ever see daylight again.”

He shook his head. “You don’t know that. They might help you—”

“Think, Ianto. If you were still Torchwood, what would you do in this situation?”

He stared at the captain, heart thudding slowly in his chest. “I’m not Torchwood anymore, that man is gone. He died at Canary Warf.”

The captain gentled his hold on him, shifting closer until their bodies were lightly brushing and the next breath Ianto took caught in his chest.

“I don’t believe that. I know he’s still in there somewhere. He has to be.” The captain’s gaze searched his, as if looking for something.
He was right. Since the first moment Ianto had stepped into the archives and seen Captain Jack Harkness standing there, everything that was Torchwood within him, everything he’d thought was buried for good had been rushing to the surface. He wanted to be that person again. UNIT might have been the better alternative to getting retconned, but it definitely hadn’t made him happy. It hadn’t given him the same sense of knowing his place in the world, of being where he belonged like Torchwood had.

“If I was still Torchwood, I’d try to help you,” he said slowly, heart skipping at the relief that crossed the captain’s face. “I’d do everything in my power to get you back to where you belong.”

The captain lowered his head for a second, releasing an uneven breath. “The best thing you can do, Ianto, is pretend you never saw me. Go back to your post, make up some excuse about where you were and forget about me.”

“Somehow, I get the feeling you’re not the sort of person one forgets all that easily,” he murmured. He didn’t think he’d ever met anyone like Captain Jack Harkness. There was something inscrutable and mesmerising about him.

The captain inhaled sharply and then pushed away from him suddenly, putting several steps between them.

“Go, Ianto. I don’t want you to get yourself in trouble over me.” The captain half turned away from him, as if he couldn’t bear to look at him.

He stayed where he was leaning against the brick wall. Because suddenly going back to UNIT sounded like the worst thing he could possibly do. He’d been thinking for a while that he needed to get out. But someone operating at his level, who knew what he knew? It wasn’t a job you could just quit. Death or retcon, but not retirement.

Running probably wasn’t the intelligent answer. But something about Captain Jack Harkness made him want to be reckless.

“What if I don’t want to go?”

The captain’s gaze snapped back to him with disbelief and something else…something like anticipation.

“It’s the smart thing to do,” the captain insisted, even though his tone wasn't all that convincing.

“Smart, yes. But is it right?”

The captain shook his head slowly. “I can’t answer that.”

“Where are you going now?” Ianto finally pushed off from the wall and cautiously stepped closer.

“Actually, I don’t know. I’m kind of making this up as I go along.” The captain grinned, as if he was actually enjoying that fact. “I figured I’d work it out once I ditched you.”

He sent the captain a short smile. “Well, I have to say, you’ve done a terrible job at ditching me so far.”

“What can I say, you’re persistent.” The captain shrugged, studying him closely. “And maybe part of me didn’t want to ditch you.”

Ianto took a slow breath, his stomach flipping yet again, especially as he got another hit of that
cologne. God, it smelled so good. It was enough to make his toes clench in his boots.

“You know, even if you’d tried really hard to get rid of me, I probably could have tracked you by scent alone. You really need to tone it down with the cologne.”

“It’s not cologne.” The captain aimed a wide grin at him.

“It’s not?” Well, what else could it possibly be?

“51st century pheromones. And before you can ask if I smell like this naturally, let me assure you that this conversation has already happened before.” The captain glanced up and down the alley. “Come on, let’s move.”

Ianto added that comment to his store on enigmatic hints the captain had dropped. Eventually, he was planning on asking him about it all, but for now he fell into step beside him.

“So, then, Captain, where are we headed?”

“If you’re really intent on tagging along, call me Jack. Captain doesn’t work for me, especially coming from you.”

“It doesn’t?” Coming from him? That was rather specific.

The captain—Jack sent him a smile that was nothing short of suggestive. “You could always call me sir. I’d definitely enjoy that.”

“Since we’re technically equal in rank, I can assure you I won’t be doing that.”

“Pity,” Jack murmured, the suggestive glint still in his gaze.

They reached the end of the alley, about a block down from the Plass where the UNIT SUVs had converged when the rift activity had registered.

Jack touched his elbow without looking at him, the action somehow familiar as if he’d done it a million times. “Come on, I think we should head this way.”

Ianto paused for a moment as Jack set off down the street. This was it. If he followed after the enigmatic captain now, there would be no going back. He’d be AWOL and once UNIT found out what he’d been doing, he’d be considered a traitor and tried accordingly. He’d seen the UNIT prisons, he knew exactly the kind of hell awaited him if he got caught. Yet none of those facts were enough to stop him. The lure, the temptation, the mystery of Captain Jack Harkness and his 51st century pheromones that smelled good enough to melt his entire body sent him hurrying after the man without a second thought.
Jack kept up a fast pace as he walked in the opposite direction to the Plass where UNIT had taken up temporary residence. If it were him leading the investigation into the rift activity, he wouldn’t have only sent men down to search the hub, he would have ordered several teams to canvas the local area as well. Which was why he wanted to leave the vicinity as soon as possible.

Ianto might have made the admittedly surprising, and arguably stupid decision to abandon his post and follow after him, but Jack couldn’t be sure what his reaction would be if they came across a team of his fellow UNIT soldiers. Up until a few minutes ago, his loyalty had been to UNIT and everything it entailed. Jack couldn’t expect Ianto not to turn on him if they found themselves cornered.

Of course, he liked to think his charismatic charm and the definite spark that was already obvious between them meant this Ianto Jones would automatically trust him and go along with any plan he came up with—crazy or otherwise. But since Ianto didn’t know a thing about him and they’d met just over an hour ago, it was probably an unrealistic expectation.

Though he’d spent half his life dealing with multiple timelines and met several versions of the same people both in the future and past—like the Doctor—he was having trouble getting his head around dealing with Ianto. Because it was easy to forget that this wasn’t his Ianto. That their in-jokes didn’t mean anything. That this man had several different life experiences—Lisa dying at Canary Warf and going to work for UNIT being the two most obvious. Who knew what other subtle differences had shaped him?

He couldn’t let his feelings for the Ianto who’d lived and died in his own reality cloud his dealings with this Ianto. He had to treat him like a completely different person, even if his mannerism, the way he spoke and smiled were all so achingly familiar.

“Don’t mean to tell you how to deal with this situation,” Ianto said after they’d been walking for a few minutes. “But maybe getting off the street would be a good idea.”

He touched Jack on the shoulder and then pointed out a contingent of four UNIT soldiers who’d come around the end of the block.

Jack quickly switched directions, taking them into an alleyway. It was a dead end, so he quickly flattened himself up against the wall behind a stack of barrels, pulling Ianto with him.

They ended up pressed shoulder to shoulder, and Jack took a moment to catch his breath and settle his thoughts. Making things up as he went was all well and good, but he really needed to figure out a next step. Ianto was right, though, being on the street was too dangerous. Plus, he needed somewhere to sit down and attempt to fix some of the functions on his vortex manipulator—least of all the teleport if he could manage it.

“You have a suggestion?” he asked in a low voice, turning his head to look at Ianto. They were so close, he couldn’t help noticing Ianto’s thick eyelashes, making his blood run a little warmer.

“We could go to mine.” Ianto added a casual shrug to the end of the words.

“No offense, but when UNIT realises you’ve gone AWOL, won’t that be the first place they look for you?”

“I’ve got a second flat, somewhere UNIT doesn’t know about.”
“Really?” Jack arched an eyebrow at him with a grin. “Sneaky. I have to say, I’m impressed.”

Ianto glanced away, a hint of colour on his cheeks. “You know UNIT bug their employee’s houses, right? I just needed somewhere that was nothing to do with anyone else.”

“Well then, by all means. Lead the way. I’m intrigued to see your secret hideout,” Jack murmured.

Ianto lifted his gaze to stare at him, questions in his eyes. For a second, he swore Ianto was going to ask something, while Jack was sternly reminding himself why he couldn’t kiss him. Except then Ianto’s eyes dropped to his mouth. Jack’s heart skipped in his chest as Ianto took a short breath and his lips parted just a little. It was almost exactly the way Ianto had often looked at him right before he kissed him.

No matter how much he wanted to feel that again, to kiss him and pretend like Ianto wasn’t gone forever, he couldn’t, shouldn’t let it happen. It’d just complicate things and probably make it that much harder when he had to leave this reality and say goodbye to Ianto yet again. Somehow, he had to find the strength to keep his distance, even though Ianto had proven over and over to be his greatest weakness and the kind of temptation he could never resist.

However, in the end it didn’t matter. Ianto suddenly pushed off from the wall and rounded the barrels, going to look out the end of the alleyway, presumably to check if the team of UNIT soldiers had moved on.

He heard Ianto hailing a taxi, and shifted off the wall, tugging his coat straight and taking a steadying breath. Maybe he should have refused Ianto’s help. Maybe he should have tried harder to ditch him. Going to his secret hideout was definitely a bad idea, but he couldn’t get back to his timeline on his own. Apart from Rose and the Metacrisis Doctor, he didn’t know anyone in this reality, couldn’t trust any of the contacts he’d usually go to because in this timeline, they probably didn’t owe him the same favours—might not even know him the same as Ianto hadn’t. Until he managed to get in contact with Rose and the Metacrisis Doctor, he was on his own. And even though he hated to admit it, being alone was his biggest fear. Was it any wonder he’d latched onto Ianto and was letting him help, despite the fact he knew he was already making a mess out of Ianto’s life even though he’d been in this reality for not much more than an hour?

He supposed somethings never changed.

Joining Ianto in the taxi, neither of them spoke, apart from Ianto giving the driver directions. Once they were a few blocks from the Plass, he relaxed a little, not as concerned about getting caught any longer. They went out past Cardiff University and ended up outside a small flat in Cathays.

Ianto led him inside, kicking aside a small pile of mail as though he hadn’t been here for a while. Jack noticed one of the letters had Ifan Jonah on it. Obviously, the alias Ianto had used for renting the flat. Downstairs was basically empty, and upstairs turned out to kind of be one large open space. There was a small kitchen to the left, a round dining table with only two chairs, a sitting area with a single couch and on the far side a king-sized bed, dresser and free-standing wardrobe. The place was neat as a pin, nothing out of place and not a speck of dust on any surface—very Ianto-like.

As Ianto went and adjusted the thermostat, since it was a little chilly, Jack did a lap of the room. On the dresser were a few pictures. A couple of Ianto and Lisa. One in particular caught his attention, because it was identical to a picture his Ianto had kept of Lisa and him in his flat. After Ianto had died, Jack had taken it, along with a picture of himself and Ianto, and put them away in the tin he kept the rest of his memories in. He wasn’t sure why he’d taken the picture of him and Lisa, only that in it, Ianto had looked so happy and relaxed. Living the life he should have had, if
not for Torchwood.

There were a couple of other pictures of a woman he didn’t recognize. He picked one up to examine it. She had mahogany coloured hair and green eyes—strikingly beautiful. She wore a UNIT uniform and had an arm slung around Ianto, but her body language wasn’t quite as affectionate as the pictures he had of Lisa.

“That’s Carly,” Ianto said over his shoulder. Jack hadn’t even heard him come up behind him, but suddenly he was very aware how close Ianto stood to his shoulder. “We’ve had an on-again, off-again thing going for a few years now. We get together whenever she happens to be in the country. She likes taking the international UNIT assignments. Think she’s in Shanghai at the moment. At least she was, last time I spoke to her.”

Jack set the picture down and tried not to think that his Ianto wouldn’t ever have been happy with such an arrangement. Except for one, he had to stop comparing the two of them, and two, wasn’t that kind of what Jack himself had done to Ianto? They might have spent all of their time together—both during business hours and after-hours—but he’d known it sometimes got to Ianto that they didn’t have any kind of official designation for their relationship. Those labels people were so fond of just didn’t mean anything to him. He’d loved Ianto. More deeply than he’d loved anyone in a very, very long time. Maybe more than he’d ever loved anyone.

And maybe he hadn’t said the words properly until it’d been too late, but surely Ianto had known. Actions were worth far more than words. What did it matter if they called themselves partners, or boyfriends, or a couple, or de-facto, or any other number of pointless words?

Except in the weeks leading up to Ianto’s death, it’d started bugging him a little, how Ianto suddenly seemed intent on mentioning it every time someone referred to them as a couple, as if trying to make a point. He’d gotten short with him about it. Been an ass, if he was being completely honest. But he’d also started struggling with an inescapable fear of how deeply he’d fallen for Ianto, how completely reliant he’d become on the other man. How he had absolutely no idea what he was going to do once Ianto was gone. How badly it was going to break him when the inevitable loss hit him. Maybe somewhere deep down he’d known it was coming.

He wasn’t one for regrets, but he deeply regretted the way he’d treated Ianto a few times in the days leading up to their confrontation with the 456. Ianto had done everything to help him like always, yet he’d returned the gesture by pushing him away and trying to do things on his own, because in the end, that was what he’d always end up—on his own.

God, if he could go back and do it again, he would have held Ianto every minute he could. Would have told him they were a couple, called him his boyfriend, anything that made Ianto happy. Of course, if he could have gone back, he would have made sure Ianto didn’t die.

But thinking about all this for the millionth time since his Ianto had died wasn’t helping anything. He took an uneven breath and turned around to find the present Ianto had gone into the kitchen to start rummaging around. Jack went over to the bench and pulled the items out of his pockets that he’d taken from the archives, lining them up on the counter.

“What are you planning on doing with all that space junk anyway?”

He looked up to find Ianto holding a bag of coffee beans and Jack had to tear his gaze away, clenching his hands on the edge of the counter as a surge of emotion rocked him.

Ianto had turned to make the coffee and hadn’t noticed his momentary lapse.
“I mean, it is junk, isn’t it? UNIT went in and took all of the useful tech when they closed down Torchwood.” Ianto cast him a glance as he pulled a couple of mugs out of the cupboard above his head. “How do you take your coffee?”

“I—I don’t know.” The words came out in a definite stutter, leaving him feeling like an idiot. “I mean, I haven’t really drunk it since— It was his thing.”

Ianto paused and glanced down at the mugs in his hands, seeming lost for a second. But then he started to put the mugs away again. “Sorry, I’ll get out the tea cups, then.”

“No.” Jack hurried around the kitchen bench and stayed Ianto with a hand on his arm. “Please, make me a cup. Of coffee.”

“Even though it won’t be his?” Ianto stared at him, brow creased just a little.

“It’ll be fine. And I don’t mind how it comes, just as long as it’s hot and you made it.”

Ianto gave a slow nod and then put the mugs down on the counter. “So the space junk?”

Jack grinned at him before turning to look at the things he’d gathered from the archives.

“That’s the thing, none of this is junk. Let’s just say Torchwood got a little creative with their archiving. These should help me repair my vortex manipulator.” He motioned to the small toolkit, then at the broken sonic adapter next to it. “Admittedly this kind of is junk, but I’ll be able to use it for parts if I need it. This—” He picked up the alien scanner that Tosh had adapted in their reality. This one was in original condition, because obviously in this reality, Tosh hadn’t come to work for Torchwood Three. Which in a roundabout way made him wonder what on earth had happened to the version of himself in this reality when Torchwood had been shut down. He couldn’t imagine he’d let that happen without a fight. Maybe he should have taken more time to check the Torchwood personnel files. It was weird that he hadn’t been in that one from 1967 he’d briefly glanced at in the archives. Anyway, he should be able to make enough alterations to the scanner himself so it’d work for what he needed.

“This is a kind of scanning device.” He flicked it on and aimed it at Ianto. “Hmm, you definitely need to eat more vegetables.”

Ianto rolled his eyes. “What else have you got?”

“Sonic disrupter.” Jack held up the device that kind of looked like a baton torch that guards used. “This’ll definitely come in handy.”

“What was that archived under?” Ianto demanded incredulously.

“Auditory disarray.” Jack flipped it end over end and then set it back down on the counter.

“Same, but different,” Ianto murmured, pouring the coffee. “And the last two?”

“This is a kind of battery or power source—one that never runs out. And the last is a perception filter.”

“Let me guess, the perception filter was archived under discerning strainer,” Ianto said dryly, setting the two mugs of coffee down next to his bounty.

Jack laughed. “No, it was under chameleon circuit. Honestly I don’t know why UNIT didn’t get that one.”
Ianto didn’t answer, but turned so he was leaning against the bench as he sipped from his coffee. Jack took a fortifying breath—ridiculous when all he was going to do was drink a cup of coffee. But nevertheless, he steeled himself for another onslaught of emotion as he picked up the cup and lifted it to gently blow at the steam.

He could tell Ianto was trying not to watch him closely as he took the first sip. The flavour burst over his tongue, just as good as any cup of coffee his Ianto had ever made. But instead of making his heart ache, a sense of comfort swept over him, like putting on a comfy pair of socks or slippers after a long tiring day. He took another sip, this time savouring even more the sweet, creamy way Ianto had made it.

“And what’s a vortex manipulator when it’s at home?” Ianto asked after a long moment of silence.

Jack shifted his coffee to one hand and held up his arm, stretching it out so that his coat slipped back to reveal his wrist strap. “I used to be able to use it to time travel anywhere, to any time. Unfortunately, it got burned out once, and even though it’s been fixed several times since then, a certain friend of mine keeps disabling it. He doesn’t want me galivanting around the universe, messing with the timelines.”

“You seem to doing a pretty good job of that without a working vortex manipulator.” Ianto sent him an impertinent smile over the rim of his mug, blue eyes sparking with mischief.

God, he’d missed the teasing. He’d missed the banter and the witty comebacks and the way he could never guess what Ianto was going to come out with.

“Yeah, looks like I am,” he returned with a grin, relaxing in a way he hadn’t been able to do in a long, long time. Not since Ianto had died. He took a deeper sip of coffee, watching Ianto, who watched him in return. There was something simple, yet spicy sweet about the moment, neither of them willing to break it.

Finally, though, Ianto finished his coffee and shifted to put his mug in the sink.

“So once you fix your vortex manipulator, what then? Can it take you back to your reality?”

“No.” Jack drained the last of his coffee, but before he could turn to the sink, Ianto slipped the cup from his grasp, fingers brushing over his, lingering for a moment. Jack told himself he’d imagined it, especially as Ianto quickly turned away to wash the mugs. “And I doubt I’ll be able to fix the time-travel components anyway. It’s more the teleport functions I’m interested in. Once I’ve fixed it, there are some old friends I need to look up. I think they’re in London.”

Ianto finished with the mugs and turned to him with a slight frown. “Anyone you know in your own reality won’t necessarily know you here.”

He smiled, because of course Ianto had a good working knowledge in the complexities of alternate realities. He’d never asked Ianto his IQ, but knew he had to be in the top five or ten percent of the population. His capacity to retain information and understand many things related to Torchwood had always been amazing. He hadn’t been kidding when he’d said over and over that no one knew more than he did.

“I know. These people are from my own reality. Let’s just say they migrated here a few years back.”

Ianto seemed suitably surprised by this information. “There are other people from your reality living in this one? But what about destabilization—”
“They were able to stay here because they don’t exist in this reality,” he assured Ianto.

“Right.” Ianto rubbed the back of his neck, looking a little tired all of a sudden. “Even though UNIT don’t know about this place, it’s probably not a good idea to stay too long. I’ll get some gear together and we’ll see about finding these friends of yours.”

Jack shifted around the bench to sit on one of the stools, undoing the strap on his vortex manipulator. “Just give me an hour to see what I can do with this.”

“We could take two, if you need it. But no more.” Ianto went over to the freestanding cupboard and pulled out a rucksack. He then began taking out stuff similar to what they would have normally packed in a Torchwood kit—flashlights, penlights, first aid kit, swiss army knife, basic small tool kit, and so on. Lastly, Ianto pulled out a large metal case from beneath the bed and flipped it open to reveal an impressive array of hand guns. He then reached up on tip toes and groped on top of the cupboard until he brought down a box of ammo.

Jack tried to concentrate on fixing his vortex manipulator, but this Ianto was too intriguing to ignore very easily. He efficiently broke down and checked each weapon before putting them back together. Ianto had always known his way around a gun when need be, but this was on a different level. Professional sniper lever. Ianto loaded a couple of weapons and then set them aside, before putting everything else away.

After that, he started pulling out neatly folded items of clothing, packing it all in the rucksack. When it was full, he zipped it closed, then reached into the cupboard and took out another long-sleeved shirt. This one he shook out, and before Jack could work out what he was up to, he’d shrugged out of the shirt he was wearing, leaving him bare-chested.

Jack promptly choked on the next breath he took, and Ianto turned to look at him in concern.

“Something wrong?” Ianto asked as he tossed the black UNIT shirt he’d been wearing into a laundry hamper.

“No, nothing,” he coughed out.

Ianto was trimmed and toned in a way Jack had never seen before. Probably not surprising, since he was in the military and they were stricter about fitness levels. Body shape had never been here nor there for him. It was the person he fell for, not what they looked like. He’d known that his Ianto had sometimes felt a bit subconscious about being slightly pudgy around the middle—Jack would never have thought of it that way, it was what Ianto had said. But Jack had loved every inch of him.

Now, however, as he tried not to stare at Ianto’s defined chest and hint of abs—not to mention the familiar fine scattering of dark hair across his chest—Jack was shifting in his seat, aware that his pants were suddenly feeling a little tight in certain areas.

“How’s it going?” Ianto nodded his chin toward the vortex manipulator Jack had forgotten he was even holding.

“Harder—slower,” he corrected himself, amazingly feeling his cheeks get hot. “Slower than I expected.”

Ianto ambled over, shrugging into the clean shirt and stopping by Jack as he slowly pulled it down, Jack tracking his hands as he settled the shirt over his belt.

“So these friends of yours, you said you thought they were in London?”
“What?” Jack dragged his gaze back up to Ianto’s face, who was looking at him with what seemed to be a hint of amusement in his gaze.

“What?”


“Oh, right.” Jack shook his head and forced himself to turn his attention to what he was doing. It was probably better for all concerned if he didn’t look at Ianto. Unfortunately, he got the feeling the image of his standing there shirtless had pretty much burned itself into his brain.

“Rose Tyler and the Doctor.”

“Doctor who?” Ianto asked, leaning a hip against the bench.

“Exactly,” Jack murmured, dropping his head to eye an impossibly small part on the vortex manipulator. Lucky for his 51st century eye sight or he would have needed a magnifying glass for this.

“Last I heard, Rose was living with her parents, Jackie and Pete. They’re filthy rich, so I’m hoping they won’t be too hard to track down.”

“Wait, you don’t mean Peter Tyler, one of the top ten richest men in the UK?”

He looked up at Ianto with a grin. “There you go, I found him.”

Ianto shook his head. “I didn’t know he had a daughter. And what are you going to do, knock on the front door of their ridiculously huge mansion and ask if you can see Rose?”

“That about sums it up.” Jack set one of the tools against a circuit, but then swore when it sparked and zapped his fingers painfully.

“Do you want to get arrested?” Ianto asked in a flat voice.

“As much fun as we could have in handcuffs, no, getting arrested isn’t part of the plan.” He glanced sideways at Ianto to gauge how he was taking the suggestive flirting. The colour in his cheeks was slightly heightened, but he was staring steadily down at Jack.

“Somehow, I doubt handcuffs would slow you down,” Ianto returned in an even voice, a slight smile flitting over his face.

Jack’s heart bumped at the way Ianto had responded in kind, but he put it aside, because they were straying into dangerous territory. “It’ll be fine, we’ll work out the details when we get to London.”

“Road trip?” There seemed to be a hint of excitement or anticipation to Ianto’s question. Jack was feeling a similar stirring of eagerness and exhilaration himself. Though he knew he needed to get back to his own timeline as soon as possible to avoid the whole fabric-of-reality-collapsing thing, he had to admit, landing here had turned out to be the best thing that’d happened to him in a very long time.

“Road trip,” he repeated with a wide grin. “But I get to pick the music.”

Ianto eyed him warily. “Why do I have a bad feeling about this?”
Chapter 4

It turned out Jack’s idea of picking the music was to change the station every time a song came on that he didn’t like, or when the DJ spent too long talking. The man seemed to have quite the eclectic taste in music, anything from the 1940s, through to the late seventies. Apparently the 80s were the musical equivalent to a black hole so they’d avoid anything from that decade. And to top it off, he seemed to have a thing for a few artists from the 90s, right up to now, stuff Lisa had liked to listen to.

Ianto had become increasingly exasperated by his antics, until after the first hour on the road—with Jack driving well above the speed limit—he’d finally intervened. Jack had changed to a best of the 70s, 80s and 90s rock station that he didn’t mind too much, so when Jack went to change it after one song, Ianto had simply switched it right back. Jack had cut him an annoyed look, possibly because an 80s hair-metal ballad had come on, and attempted to change it again, but Ianto had intercepted his hand and pushed it away again.

“You can’t seriously like this song,” Jack had huffed at him.

“I’ve heard worse. But you’ve used up all your station-changing privileges. It stays where it is.” He sent Jack a serene smile, enjoying the slight bewilderment that crossed his face.

A minute or two went by in silence before Jack attempted a stealth attack, but Ianto reached over and pinched him on the thigh.

“Ow!” Jack yelped, jumping a little in his seat and causing the car they were driving—stolen from a long-term parking garage—to jerk a little in its lane. “What was that for?”

He simply arched an eyebrow at him. They both knew what that was for. Jack’s expression became thwarted and he muttered something under his breath that Ianto didn’t quite catch.

The next song that came on was something by an early 90s grunge band and Jack groaned. “Come on, this is just noise. Painful noise. You’re not really going to make me listen to this, are you?”

“You picked the station.” He added a shrug as if it was out of his hands.

Jack glared at him before holding up his hand and slowly extending it forward, splitting his attention between him and the road, obviously waiting for the intervention he knew was coming. His finger had almost reached the button when Ianto slid a hand over and pinched him again, markedly higher this time and not quite as hard.

Jack made a strangled noise and returned his hand to the steering wheel.

“Fine, you win,” Jack mumbled with a slight pout.

Ianto would have thought that a grown man pouting would be utterly ridiculous, but on Jack Harkness, it was almost too cute. It made Ianto want to lean across the car and—

He shifted, abruptly turning his gaze to stare out the front windscreen.

In the past few hours, everything he’d assumed about his own sexuality had been taken and tossed on its head. He’d known that he’d been experiencing a strange kind of awareness of the man ever since he’d walked into the archives and seen him standing there in that coat, head bent down over a file, lights above catching almost golden highlights in his brown hair. But when they’d been
standing shoulder to shoulder against the wall in the alleyway, breathing in the undeniably tempting scent of those 51st century pheromones, Ianto had abruptly reconciled what that feeling was with the extremely confronting and irrefutable urge to kiss him. Jack. Another man. Right there in the alleyway.

He had never, once thought about kissing anyone other than girls, but in that second, he’d wanted to kiss Jack more than he’d ever wanted to kiss anyone in his entire life.

So what the hell did that mean? Was he bi, and just never realised it? Because he was pretty sure he’d enjoyed sex with women too much to be gay.

Not that it really mattered. Jack was here temporarily. As soon as he could, he’d be going back to his own reality. But in the meantime, Ianto was a little intrigued about this newly discovered side of himself, and like anything that piqued his interest, he wanted to explore it a little. Not do anything rash. He certainly wasn’t going to shag another man. That seemed a bit extreme. But he was definitely enjoying Jack’s flirting, and there was no denying the spark between them. And since Jack seemed to be comfortable with it himself, well, there didn’t seem any harm in a little entertainment until the captain found his way home.

Besides, he couldn’t remember last time he’d simply had so much fun. Certainly not since Lisa had died. He hadn’t even realised how dreary and empty his life had become. The thing with Carly, it’d more been about finding mutual pleasure, plus they were good friends, so it had kind of just been an easy way to get off every now and then. He’d started wondering if he’d ever love anyone again the way he’d loved Lisa. Had somehow been okay with the idea that maybe she’d been his one great love and he wouldn’t ever feel that again. Had put all of his energy into his job, being reliable and steadfast and dedicated to UNIT. The perfect soldier, kind of like Jack had accused him of being when he’d first chased him out of the archives.

Jack had almost literally dropped into his life, and it was suddenly like he’d woken up from a long, deep sleep. Like he’d been watching TV in black and white and someone had abruptly flipped it over to colour. He didn’t know what the hell he was going to do once he helped Jack get back to his own reality—probably change his name permanently and spend the rest of his life on the run if he didn’t want to end up in a UNIT prison cell—but right now, sitting next to Jack who was humming along to a song from the 70s, while in the distance the sun set on the day he’d suddenly decided to toss his whole life out the window, he told himself it would be worth it.

The next two hours to London, Jack didn’t try to change the station again, though every now and then he cut Ianto a sideways glance that made him guess Jack was thinking about it. They chatted about a few differences between their realities—mostly general knowledge and celebrity gossip, nothing personal. Except the temptation to ask if Jack knew a version of him in his own reality was getting harder to ignore. He would do it, he decided, he just had to find a way to casually work it into the conversation. Oh, the Spice Girls broke up in your reality? By the way, do you know another me? Yup, the would come out so naturally.

When they arrived in the outskirts of London, Jack had to slow down from break-neck-speed to minor-maniac. Ianto didn’t know how they hadn’t been stopped by the police already flashing the blues-and-twos.

“It’s getting late,” he commented as Jack swerved to overtake someone daring to do the speed limit and drive in front of him.

“And?” Jack asked. Impatient didn’t even begin to cover it.

“And it’s getting on for house calls, don’t you think? Besides, we still don’t know where Peter
Tyler lives.”

Jack sliced him a glare, jaw clenching as though he knew Ianto was right, but didn’t want to admit it.

“I know you’re in a hurry to avoid reality collapsing, but you’ve already been here several hours and the world is still intact. Surely waiting until the morning and going to see them after we’ve gotten some sleep—” And are a bit less manic, he added silently to himself. “So we can tackle things with clear heads would be better.”

“I never did manage to fix my vortex manipulator,” Jack grudgingly agreed. “I guess taking the night won’t mean the end of the world—literally. But you should know, I don’t sleep much.”

“Why not?”

“Side effect of something that happened to me a long time ago.” Jack gave a nonchalant shrug, but he could see the tension in his shoulders. There was more to it than that. He simply added to his mounting store on mysterious things about Jack Harkness to figure out later.

“So we’ll get a couple of rooms, you can not sleep and fix your toys, we’ll work out where Peter Tyler lives and go first thing in the morning.”

“I know just the place.” Jack flashed him a wide smile. “Assuming it exists in this reality.”

Ianto didn’t say anything but held a healthy dose of scepticism over what Jack would constitute as “just the place.”

It turned out to be a hotel on a non-descript corner in a quiet street. Jack pulled into an empty park almost right outside the doors.

“Once upon a time, this part of London would have been hopping at this time of night,” Jack told him as they got out of the car and Ianto grabbed his rucksack out of the backseat. “Swing band playing loud enough to be heard in the street, the scent of tobacco and women’s perfume in the air. The early 1940s was something else.”

“You speak as though you were there.”

Jack cast him a startled look, as though he’d forgotten who he was speaking to, or like he hadn’t realised what he was saying. Except then an enigmatic smile spread over his face.

“How do you know I wasn’t?”

He turned and strode toward the door of the hotel, coat swinging, as Ianto absorbed that little piece of information. Jack had said he’d once travelled through time using his vortex manipulator thing, it stood to reason the 1940s was somewhere he’d visited. A stirring of thrill fluttered in his stomach. What would that be like, to have all of time at his fingertips? Where would he choose to go, to see, to experience for himself?

Of course, the first thing that came to mind was going back to Canary Warf to save Lisa. Except he knew all about the danger of changing timelines. Yet he imagined if a person possessed the technology, the temptation to go back and change the bad things that happened to them would almost be too enticing to ignore. It’d take someone with real strength of character to resist doing that. Was Jack that kind of person, or having the technology at his disposal, had he gone back to change things in his own past?
He glanced up and realised Jack had disappeared inside the building, so hurried to catch up with him. Except as he stepped through the doors, he had to stop, feeling like he’d stepped into a time warp. It was all dark wood panelling, red velvet, tasseled light shades and crystal fittings. 1940s décor that had been lovingly maintained but never updated.

Jack had sauntered over to the check-in counter and rang the bell with flourish, leaning his elbow on the shiny wood. In his military greatcoat, he looked like he fit right in.

“I can see why you like this place,” he said as he stepped up next to Jack.

Jack sighed, looking around. “It does have a timeless kind of charm that gets me every time.”

An elderly man shuffled out from the back, polite smile in place and a spark in his eye.

“May I help you, gentlemen?”

Jack straightened, tugging his already-settled coat into place. “One room please, George, king-sized bed if it’s available.”

Ianto cut Jack a disbelieving look, wondering what he was playing at. One room with one bed? He had said he didn’t sleep, so maybe he thought Ianto would only need it. Still it was a little presumptuous.

The man eyed Jack curiously as he turned to fetch the key. “I’m sorry, sir, do I know you? My memory isn’t what it once was.”

Jack winked at him. “Never mind, it has been quite number of years since I last stayed at your fine establishment. How’s Tom treating you?”

George gave a wide smile. “Still keeping me on my toes after all these years. We did finally get married, though. Thought he’d never make an honest man out of me.”

Jack gave a genuinely happy laugh. “That’s wonderful to hear. He always was a good catch. Though maybe not quite as good as yourself.”

George actually blushed a little. “Go on with you now. You’re just teasing, much too young to turn my head.”

“You’d be surprised,” Jack murmured as he took the key. He wished George goodnight, and when he turned, his hand settled in the middle of Ianto’s back as if it was the most natural thing, guiding him away from the counter and toward the grand staircase floating up to the next level.

Ianto doubted Jack had even noticed he’d done it, the action had been automatic, like when Jack had taken his elbow in the street earlier while they’d been avoiding the UNIT patrols. It spoke of an ease of familiarity that left Ianto with a million more questions and made him start examining everything in a slightly different light.

The way Jack had said his name and the ragged emotions that’d crossed his face in that second before he’d regained control when they’d first met in the Torchwood archives. His careful avoidance of mentioning the name of the man he’d loved. The fact they’d both worked for Torchwood, because in Jack’s reality, Torchwood hadn’t been shut down after Canary Warf. If something similar had happened in this timeline, if he’d survived Canary Warf, would he have simply transferred to Torchwood Three in Cardiff? It made sense that he would have wanted to go home, but keep working for the organisation he’d loved so much.
And lastly, the way Jack seemed to bounce between being intimately familiar with him to guarded and wary. Even a blind person could have seen the sparks between them. Hell, until a few short hours ago, he would have sworn up and down he was straight. Yet he’d spent a surprising amount of time since they’d left Cardiff wondering what it’d be like to kiss Jack Harkness. Explain that. It was all coming together to form a picture in his mind that he didn’t know what to do with.

No. He had to be reading too much into things.

Jack led them across the landing and then down a surprisingly wide corridor, inserting the key into a door right at the end. He pushed opened the door and then stepped aside to let Ianto go through first. The room was in keeping with the rest of the décor, but he found it was actually quite tasteful.

He set his rucksack down just inside the doorway and ambled over to check out the bathroom; black and white tiles with brass fittings. A shower was definitely on the cards before he went to bed.

Turning, he found Jack standing just inside the door, starting to shrug a little awkwardly out of the long coat. Ianto automatically went over, shifting behind him and gasping it by the collar.

“Here, let me help.”

Jack froze and for a second, Ianto thought he was going to refuse. But then he dropped his shoulders and slipped his arms free as Ianto drew it off him. There was no mistaking the tension in Jack’s posture as he moved away while Ianto hung the coat up on the nearby stand.

It was like he kept crossing these invisible lines he didn’t even know existed.

“Are you hungry?” he asked just to fill the silence. “There’d have to be a Jubilee Pizza shop somewhere nearby. They’re practically on every street corner—”

“Ianto, just stop.” Jack sat heavily on the bed, closing his eyes as if in pain.

Ianto shoved his hands in his pockets, feeling at a loss, uncertain since the first moment he’d made the admittedly rash decision to abandon his post and go with Jack. He missed the easy banter they’d exchanged in the car.

“Have I done something wrong?” he asked quietly.

“No, you’re doing everything right. That’s the problem.” Jack dragged a hand over his face, looking tired and worn down all of a sudden.

“I don’t understand.” He ventured a few steps closer, even though part of him was wondering if he shouldn’t just leave and go ask George for a second room.

“No, you don’t,” Jack murmured, leaning forward and putting his elbows on his knees to stare at the floor.

Ianto stopped nearby, staring down at the top of his head, fighting the strange urge to reach down and stroke his fingers gently through Jack’s hair.

“It’s me, isn’t it.” The words came out before he’d even realised he was going to say them.

Jack heaved a sigh and looked up at him, eyes slightly damp. “You’re wrong, Ianto, it’s not you. This is all about me.”
“No.” Ianto dropped down to kneel in front of him. “It’s me.”

He didn’t know why he was suddenly so sure, but in his soul, he knew.

Jack stared at him, his breath catching, a heartbreaking mixture of confusion, hope and pure love shining in his gaze. It made Ianto’s heart ache in his chest. No one had ever looked at him like that.

“Ianto?” Jack whispered, reaching up to cup his cheek.

The light touch sent a ripple of sensation through him, amazing and breathtaking, like nothing he’d ever felt.

“I’m not him, Jack.” His voice came out rough, and he swallowed as Jack abruptly dropped his hand and blinked, shaking his head slightly as if remembering where he was. He caught Jack’s hand before he could move away, and it felt so right, his palm warm, fingers slightly calloused and pleasantly rough.

“You loved him, another Ianto Jones. And you lost him. He died.”

Jack took a ragged breath and seemed to struggle to maintain his control for a moment.

“How did you work it out?” Jack asked, voice catching slightly.

“I’m observant and I’m good at puzzles. Except I think you already know that.”

Jack nodded, exhaling brokenly. “I know so much about you. Everything about you is so achingly familiar. But you’re a complete stranger. You’ve had different life experiences—”

“Yes, though in the grand scheme of things, they’re probably minor differences. At heart, we’d have to be the same person.”

Jack’s hand tightened on his, gaze searching his face. “What are you saying?”

“Actually, I don’t know,” he admitted.

Jack nodded, then glanced away, a single tear rolling down his cheek. “Sometimes it hurts to look at you. I want to touch you so badly, but you’re not him, so then I’m left feeling like it’d be a betrayal, to want a different version of him. And it’s not fair on you because you don’t even know me. But, God, I just miss him so much. It’s been nearly nine years and sometimes I wake up still reaching for him. Then I remember and I can’t breathe.”

“Jesus,” Ianto muttered, shifting up on the bed beside him. He couldn’t imagine loving someone that much. Couldn’t imagine knowing that someone loved him that much. It was powerful and terrifying and almost too amazing to comprehend. He wrapped an arm around Jack’s shoulder, and immediately, the other man turned into his arms, dropping his head into the crook of Ianto’s neck. The next breath he took was a sob, and Ianto pulled him closer, tightening his hold and resting his cheek against Jack’s hair while he cried into his chest like his heart was breaking.

Coming here and seeing him, it had to be the worst kind of torture. And he’d blindly insisted on coming along to help him. Right now, clearly he was only hurting Jack, which was inexplicably creating an answering pain within him.

He wished he could do something to make this better for Jack, but he wasn’t that other Ianto. He wasn’t even sure of himself. Hadn’t known he could feel anything for another man and didn’t know what he wanted to do with it. His idea of having a little fun and experimentation with Jack
wasn’t fair on either of them. In fact, probably the best thing he could do was leave Jack once he’d found his friends and head back to Cardiff, back to UNIT, see if he could come up with an excuse—family emergency or something—to explain his sudden absence and hope he got away with merely a warning.

For now, however, he was going to hold this broken man and try not to wonder what he’d possibly missed out on by never meeting his own Jack Harkness.
Jack roused, confused about why and how he’d fallen into such a deep, dreamless sleep. It happened so rarely and was always so disorientating. He was tangled up with a warm, familiar body. Ianto. He relaxed back into a doze, dragging Ianto a little closer, a little tighter, a weird hollow feeling in his chest that he forced himself to ignore.

Ianto murmured in his sleep, shifting until he was nuzzling into Jack’s neck. Of course, that caught the attention of certain parts of him and a smile flitted over his lips as he turned his head, lazily finding Ianto’s mouth without opening his eyes.

He lightly brushed his lips over Ianto’s, feeling like he hadn’t done this in forever. At first, Ianto didn’t respond, obviously still sleeping, but Jack had never let that stop him. More than a few times, he’d already been well into worshipping Ianto’s body before his lover had even woken up enough to realise what was happening.

Finally, though, Ianto’s breath caught before he started tentatively kissing him back. Jack growled low in the back of his throat, deepening the kiss and sweeping his tongue into Ianto’s mouth, earning a surprised moan. That was more like it. Feeling his blood start to run hot and impatient through his veins, he rolled on top of Ianto, slipping between his legs and bringing their hips together. He could feel Ianto’s erection through their clothes, and Jack eagerly pressed his own hard length against Ianto’s, thinking ahead to the moment they’d be naked how much better this would feel.

Except Ianto froze beneath him, making Jack pause. Ianto tore his mouth away from the kiss and pushed at his shoulders.

“Jack, stop, please.” Ianto’s voice was ragged. Jack pushed up on his arms to look down at him, about to ask what was wrong, when everything came back to him in a rush. Dazed, he shifted aside and Ianto scrambled out from underneath him to sit up on the edge of the bed, breathing heavily.

“I’m sorry.” Jack swallowed down the roughness in his throat, guilt churning in his stomach. “I’m sorry, I woke up and—”

“It’s okay, you don’t need to explain, I understand. I just—” Ianto took a deep breath, shoulders expanding beneath the t-shirt he wore. “I’ve never—you know—with a man.”

“God damn it,” Jack muttered, hating himself in that second. “I know. I mean, I should have known. It was the same for my Ianto. He’d never been with a man until he met me. Not that you would have ever guessed it. He was—well, let’s just say he wasn’t shy, or hesitant, and some of the things he got us into, it even surprised me. And I’m a hard person to surprise.”

Ianto shoved a hand through his hair and got to his feet. “I’m going to take a shower. I meant to last night, but apparently we fell asleep.”

Before Jack could reply, Ianto had hurried into the bathroom. Jack winced and closed his eyes when the bathroom door slammed. He flopped back onto the bed and threw an arm over his face, breathing deep and trying to regain control over himself.

He couldn’t blame Ianto for practically running away from him. The first time they’d kissed properly in his own reality, Ianto had initiated it, not that Jack had resisted in the least. Ianto had been the one to tell Jack what he wanted, and Jack had agreed to one night, not wanting to
complicate matters with the whole clichéd workplace relationship. That night, he’d treaded carefully with Ianto, knowing all of the experiences were new and could have been confronting for him, having never been with a man before. Except as he would soon learn, Ianto’s perfectly neat suits, reticence, and polite manners hid a deep passion. He had that Welsh fire in his veins, and at times, an utterly filthy mind. None of which Jack had been able to resist. One night hadn’t been enough for either of them, though he’d never expected it to evolve into what it had.

At least his Ianto had months of flirting and getting used to Jack’s casual touches—and admittedly he had touched Ianto whenever he could get away with it, far more than he had with any of the others—to get used to the idea of wanting him before they’d finally gotten together. This Ianto had met him only a day ago, and though he’d obviously been open to and even eagerly participated in the heavy flirting, clearly curious about it all, he definitely hadn’t had anytime to process the almost tangible desire between them.

And without any warning at all, he’d woken up to Jack all over him, taking things from zero to a hundred in the space of a breath. He wouldn’t blame Ianto if he eventually came out of the bathroom and decided he was heading back to Cardiff to salvage his place at UNIT.

Anyway, hadn’t he told himself he couldn’t let this happen? That it would only make it harder to say goodbye when he had to leave?

A discreet knock on the door pulled Jack out of his wallowing and he rolled off the bed to go open the door. George’s husband, Tom, stood there with a wheeled trolley laid out with breakfast for two.

“I don’t remember ordering room service.” He added a friendly smile to the words, but got the feeling his charm was missing its usual spark.

“Complimentary,” Tom replied, wheeling the cart into the room. He was a few years younger than George and in slightly better health by the looks of things. But he still had to be in early seventies.

“Thanks, Tom.” Jack followed him in as the man positioned the cart next to the table. “I can take it from here.”

He slipped some money out of his wallet and handed it over, earning a polite smile from Tom, who left the room again.

Jack set about taking the breakfast from the tray and putting it on the table, eyeing the coffee brewing in the old-fashioned percolator. At least that might put Ianto in a better mood. As though the thought alone had drawn him out, the bathroom door opened and Ianto emerged with a towel around his hips.

“Breakfast?” Ianto went over to where he’d left his rucksack the night before and rummaged around until he’d pulled out clean clothes.

“Compliments of the house;” Jack replied, adding the finish touches to the spread.

Ianto didn’t return to the bathroom, but went over and laid his clothes out on the bed.

Jack sat down at the table, unable to tear his gaze away as Ianto casually dropped the towel and started dressing. His body was both familiar and different. There wasn’t a spare ounce on him anywhere, and Jack actually found himself missing his own slightly softer Ianto. This Ianto looked like he could take down four weevils by himself without breaking a sweat. Plus, he had scars here and there, presumably a result of his dangerous activities with UNIT, leaving Jack wondering what
kind of horrors he’d experienced over the years. Obviously in his mid 30s, this Ianto had gotten to live many more years than his own Ianto had. But what kind of years had they been?

Once Ianto had put on his underwear and pants, he picked up his t-shirt and ambled closer to the table, looking over the offerings of eggs, bacon, toast that was slightly on the burnt side, along with a couple of sausages, and cooked mushrooms in butter.

“Good, I’m starving.” Ianto quickly shrugged into his shirt and then sat down opposite him to start loading up his plate. Probably not surprising, since they’d missed dinner.

Jack eyed him for a long moment. So was that it, he was going to pretend nothing had happened between them? It was probably the best tact to take, but for some reason, Jack just couldn’t leave it alone. He supposed he needed to know if he’d completely freaked Ianto out.

“About what happened…” As he trailed off, Ianto looked up at him expectantly and he realised he didn’t know what to say.

“You don’t need to apologise,” Ianto said quietly. “I told you, I understand.”

“I know,” Jack replied quickly. “I guess I just— I just wanted to make sure you were okay. It all must be rather sudden for you, and getting your head around it—”

“Isn’t a problem,” Ianto interrupted firmly. “Because I didn’t hate it.”

“You didn’t?” His heart skipped a little, though he had no idea why.

“No. Quite the opposite, actually.” A touch of colour highlighted Ianto’s cheeks. “I just wasn’t expecting it, that’s all. Next time…”

Jack blew out a slow breath as he had to resist the urge to lean across the table and take Ianto up on the unspoken invitation. But as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t.

“Ianto, there won’t be a next time. It was a lapse on my part that shouldn’t have happened.”

Ianto’s expression fell just a little and he glanced away. “Because I’m not him.”

Unable to help himself, Jack slid his hand across the table to grasp Ianto’s fingers. “No, that’s not why. You’re not him, that’s true. But I can keep the two of your separate in my mind, and I can tell you, when I look at you now, I’m not seeing him. When I think about kissing you now, I’m not kissing him. It’s you.”

Ianto brought his gaze back up to stare at him steadily.

“But we both know I’m leaving as soon as possible. Hopefully today. If anything were to happen between us, it would just make saying goodbye that much harder.”

“Of course, you’re right.” Ianto gave his fingers a quick squeeze and then pulled his hand free, turning his attention to his breakfast.

Neither of the said much as they ate, commenting here and there on the food, or the décor, or any other completely innocuous, inane topic that didn’t take them anywhere personal. Once Ianto was finished, he went to his rucksack and pulled out a slim laptop.

“I should be able to find Peter Tyler’s address. I doubt it’ll be listed, but if I use my UNIT—”

“No, it might be too dangerous, they’d know you’re missing by now,” Jack put in as Ianto pushed
the plates aside to set the laptop on the table.

“Then what do you suggest?” There wasn’t any heat to the question, Ianto just looked at him, waiting for instructions.

He held up his arm and flipped open the cover on his vortex manipulator. “The Torchwood software should find it in about one minute flat.”

Ianto raised an eyebrow. “You’ve got some kind of Torchwood software on there?”

“Not the kind you’d be familiar, it’s my own special recipe. A dash of 51st programming with just a hint of alien AI interface.” Jack pressed a few buttons, connecting the Torchwood software to Ianto’s laptop, hearing the familiar electronic humming and blue that flashed a reflection across Ianto’s face.

Jack shifted his chair around to sit next to Ianto, diving straight into the familiar database and set it searching for Peter Tyler. Out of interest, he also set it looking for any mentions of himself in this reality to see if he could work out where his other self was and what he might be doing. He needed to take precautions to make sure they didn’t run into each other. Awkward wouldn’t even begin to cover it.

“Impressive,” Ianto murmured, gaze trained on the screen.

A moment later, Peter Tyler’s address flashed up on one tab, while another started filling with information about Captain Jack Harkness. He took a glance at the Tyler’s address, committing it to memory, before enlarging the window that had information about the other Jack Harkness. Almost immediately, his stomach dropped into his feet.

The Jack in this reality had been imprisoned by Emily and Alice the same way he had been, but unlike him when he’d cooperated with them and come to an agreement to work freelance for Torchwood, the other Jack had resisted their particular charms, which had resulted in long years of imprisonment and experimentation. In the early 1900s, it seemed Torchwood had been intent on unlocking the secrets of his immortality. As Jack read more about what his other self had been through, he felt sicker and sicker. Finally, in the 1950s he’d escaped, but by then the damage had clearly been done. Jack Harkness had changed his name to James Harper and systematically set out to destroy Torchwood. In fact, he’d been named an official enemy of Torchwood and UNIT by the mid 1980s.

“You’re James Harper?” Ianto exclaimed, shoving his chair away and cutting him a wild glance.

“You know him?” Jack asked warily.

“Everyone in Torchwood knew who James Harper was.” Ianto stood, stabbing a hand through his hair, clearly agitated. “He’s responsible for killing more Torchwood agents than any other single person. Well, apart from Yvonne Hartman, after Canary Wharf.”

Ianto lifted his shirt and pointed to a scar on his abdomen. “This is thanks to him. About three years back, he ambushed my UNIT squadron. Out of twelve of us, only me and one other survived.”

Jack stared aghast at the scar and then reached out to touch it, except Ianto pulled away and dropped his t-shirt back into place. There was no warmth in Ianto’s blue eyes as he stared down at him. In fact, his gaze was entirely cold, expression inscrutable.
“Ianto—”

He backed up another few steps and Jack pushed to his feet, blood running cold.

“Ianto, I am not James Harper. I’m nothing like him. You’ve got nothing to fear from me.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” Ianto snapped. He clenched his fists, looking as though he was going to say something else. Except then he spun on his heel and stalked from the room, slamming the door behind him hard enough to make the pictures on the wall rattle as he left.

Jack dropped heavily back into the seat, wondering if he should be making a run for it. If Ianto was even now going to call UNIT to take him in. Of all the damned luck, his alternate self had to be an immortal psychopath with a lifelong grudge against Torchwood. Not that he could blame the man after everything Torchwood had put him through. It was even more imperative that he not bump into his other self. And that he got out of this reality sooner rather than later. He didn’t fancy getting snatched up by UNIT because they thought he was James Harper.
Ianto didn’t pay attention to where he was walking until he realised he was standing in front of the bar. Empty of any other people, of course. Not only was it breakfast time, but he got the feeling he and Jack might have been the only guests at this hotel.

Though he’d never been one for excessive drinking, he could admit that occasionally a situation called for some liquid fortification, so he went around the bar and helped himself to some scotch. He didn’t bother with a glass, but twisted off the lid and drank straight from the bottle.

It burned a little going down and he paused as his eyes watered a bit. He felt like his brain had just been put through a spin cycle. Captain Jack Harkness was bloody James Harper. UNIT had a capture or kill on sight order out on the man. But no matter how many teams went after Harper, they never managed to get their hands on him. The night his squadron had been ambushed, it’d been dark, and chaos had erupted out of nowhere. He hadn’t even been sure what’d been happening at first, and he’d only caught a glimpse of the man ploughing through them like they were toy soldiers before he’d been shot and lost consciousness.

For a second up there, he’d worried that the whole thing since Jack had turned up yesterday had been some elaborate trick, that he really had been sitting next to, had slept next to and woken up in the arms of a confirmed psychopath. The thought hadn’t lasted long, however. He’d read extensive and disturbing files on Harper, especially after his squadron had been slaughtered. If Jack really had been the same man, he wouldn’t have survived an hour in his company.

He certainly couldn’t imagine Harper crying over losing the man he loved. Or sleeping so soundly in his arms. Or kissing him so thoroughly when he’d woken up.

For some reason, that was what ended up grounding him, and he set the bottle down with a long breath. He closed his eyes, trying to push the recollection of those first few moments when he’d woken up from his mind, but even a cold shower hadn’t been able to cure him of the heat still thrumming through his veins. That kiss—it’d been like no other he’d ever experienced. It had awoken apart of him he hadn’t even realised lay dormant within him. And when Jack had rolled on top of him—

He shuddered at the memory, then clenched his fist tighter around the bottle as he threw back another mouthful of scotch, hoping it would take the edge off. He’d told himself that shagging a man when he’d only come to terms with the fact he was even attracted to another member of his own sex yesterday would be a little extreme. Except now he could barely think about doing anything else. But it wasn’t just any man he wanted. It was Jack. Jack and those damn 51st century pheromones that were steadily but surely driving him crazy.

As he took another swig and then put the cap back on the bottle, he heard footsteps on the stairs a second before Jack appeared, crossing the foyer, but not noticing where he stood behind the bar. He had his coat on and looked like he was on a mission.

“Where are you off to then?”

Jack pulled to a sudden halt and turned around to face him. His expression was cautious as he came over.

“Bit early, isn’t it?” Jack nodded to indicate the scotch he was holding.
“It’s six pm somewhere in the world,” he replied with a shrug.

Jack braced his hands against the bar. “I thought you might have gone to report me to UNIT.”

Ianto returned the bottle to the shelf he’d taken it from, carefully turning it so the label was facing out, and then straightening a few others nearby.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because James Harper—”

“Isn’t you.” As he said the words, he felt the last little bit of doubt ebbing away and he turned to face Jack, slipping his hands into his pockets. “You said so yourself.”

“I know, but I wasn’t sure if you believed me.”

He sent Jack a quick smile. “I had a moment. I think I’m allowed to be shocked that the man I spent last night in bed with is the body double of someone who once tried to kill me.”

Jack gave a surprised laugh. “Well, when you put it that way…”

“So, where were you headed?” He walked around the end of the bar to join Jack on the other side.

“To find Rose and the Doctor. Now, more than ever, I need to leave this reality as soon as I can. Don’t really want to get mistaken for my apparently sociopathic twin.” Jack added a grim smile to the words, pulling his coat a little straighter like it was shield.

“Without me?” He arched an accusing brow at him.

Jack actually looked a little sheepish. “Well, in my defence, I thought you’d left and were possibly calling in a UNIT strike team.”

“I gave you my word and said I’d help you get home. I wouldn’t ever betray you, Jack.” The words came out more serious and heartfelt than he’d intended. But they were true and he could see immediately how they affected Jack, that he took them on with a quiet seriousness.

Jack sent him a nod. “It means a lot, Ianto, because there’s no one else I can trust right now.”

The words made Ianto’s chest feel too warm, but he sent Jack a smile, trying to lighten the sombre mood a little. “Well then, we better go find Rose Tyler and this doctor you keep going on about. Wait here, I’ll go and get my things.”

Jack murmured an agreement, so he hurried back up the stairs to the room they’d shared and tossed the few things he’d taken out back into his rucksack, then hurried back down to meet Jack. George and Tom were nowhere to be seen, so Jack leaned over the counter and grabbed a piece of paper, dashing off a note, thanking them both for their hospitality and wishing them all the best for the future. After that, Jack held out his hand and Ianto handed over a stack of money.

Jack had used the sonic disrupter on an ATM before they’d left Cardiff the day before, emptying it of its contents. Ianto had been horrified because he hadn’t realised helping Jack would entail becoming a criminal. But somehow, Jack had made it seem reasonable when the alternative was the fabric of reality collapsing if he didn’t get back to his own timeline because he couldn’t afford a bus ticket to leave the city. Of course, they hadn’t taken the bus, had they? Instead they’d moved on to grand theft auto.
Jack set the note and the cash on the desk below the counter and then turned, taking Ianto’s elbow as they walked away.

“You keep doing that,” he commented, as Jack walked close enough that their shoulders were brushing.

“Doing what?” Jack asked, genuinely confused over what he was talking about.

He shook his head. Honestly, he kind of liked it. “Never mind.”

They stepped outside and Jack started patting his coat pockets, looking for the car keys, frowning as he came up empty in the apparently many pockets of his greatcoat.

“Trousers,” Ianto suggested, resisting the urge to roll his eyes as Jack produced the key from his right pants pocket and held it up with a triumphant grin.

However, before he could open the door, a shadow fell across him and Ianto looked up to see a reaper bearing down on them.

“Jack!” He started around the car, yanking out his gun from a concealed holster, knowing he was going to get there too late.

Jack’s expression became startled, but then he finally turned around, maybe feeling the wind of the creature’s wings beating down on him.

The reaper dived down with its claws extended, swooping past Jack with a sharp slash and retreating. Jack was thrown against the car, yelling out in pain. Ianto got off a couple of shots—not that bullets did much against a reaper except annoy them—but it deterred this one long enough for him to wrench open the door to the backseat and drag Jack inside backwards. He only just managed to pull the door shut before the creature swooped down again, screeching, slamming into the car and rocking it on its wheels, making one of the windows crack. Ianto swore and scrambled until he was on top of Jack, who was clutching his upper chest. Blood was welling from the deep gouges that started at his collar bone and went diagonally across his entire chest.

“Oh shit. Jack—”

Unfortunately Ianto had enough experience with battle wounds to know when he was looking at a likely fatal injury. Amazingly enough, Jack was still holding the car keys and Ianto pried them out of his fingers before climbing clumsily into the front seat and sliding behind the wheel. The reaper this time impacted on the roof with a thump, making him duck and glance up to see a dent above them. He jammed his foot on the accelerator and sped out of the street in a squeal of tyres. The reaper hovered in the rear-view mirror for a few moments, as if deciding whether they were worth chasing, before shooting straight up into the air and disappearing from sight.

Ianto blew out a breath of relief, swerving wildly as he came into a busier street and up against the flow of traffic. He looked into the mirror too see Jack had sat up a little, still clutching his chest and looking deathly pale.

“That— It looked like a time reaper, but it was kind of different,” Jack said in a hoarse voice. “It must have come after me because I don’t belong in this dimension.”

“What?” Ianto knew Jack was kind of making sense, but also not really. “That was a void reaper, one of the many legacies of Yvonne Hartman’s tenure at Torchwood One. They were a by-product of her experiments with the tear between dimensions leading up to what happened at Canary Wharf. They usually snatch people, though. I’ve never seen one attack like that.”
Jack’s brow creased as if struggling to take this in, his next breath sounding too shallow. His eyelids drooped as though he was struggling to stay conscious. Ianto’s heart started pounding against the inside of his chest, veins feeling like he had ice water running through them.

“Just hold on, Jack, we’ll be at the hospital in a minute.”

This seemed to rouse Jack a little as his eyes widened and he struggled to sit up straighter. “No. No hospital. I’ll be fine. Just need a bit of time.”

“No offense, Jack, but I don’t think you get to make a call about whether or not you’re fine when your chest is in ribbons.”

“No hospital,” Jack repeated, his eyes slipping closed. “I’ll come back like I always do.”

He slumped, losing consciousness. At least Ianto hoped that’s all it was.

“Jack? Jack?”

His stomach was in knots as he debated whether to pull over and check on him or just keep driving to the hospital to get there sooner. In the end, he decided the quicker he got Jack medical attention, the better.

A few minutes later, he pulled into the ambulance bay, ignoring the tooting horns and yells telling him he couldn’t park there. He hurried around to the back seat, calling for help as he yanked open the backdoor.

By the time he’d dragged Jack out, someone had brought a stretcher, and they quickly got him on it. Ianto followed, answering as best he could when one of the nurses shot questions at him.

They hurried him into a bay, half a dozen doctors and nurses moving urgently around him. One seemed to be in charge, snapping orders at all the others; a short wiry man whose badge proclaimed his to be Dr Harper. Ianto stood with his hands on his hips, watching on, feeling helpless, all the horrible emotions and memories from Canary Wharf trying to bubble up within him. He concentrated on pushing them back and keeping them down, not really tracking what was happening to Jack. Not until all of the nurse and doctors suddenly stopped and stepped back from him, sharing grim looks.

“Why are you stopping?” Ianto demanded, going forward to stand at the end of the bed and look down at him. His lips were tinged blue and his skin was almost as white as the sheet beneath him.

“Why are you stopping?” This time the question was almost an outright yell.

One of the nurses set a hand on his shoulder as Doctor Harper cast him a professionally sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, but your friend didn’t make it.”

“No,” he uttered, disbelief making his knees go weak. He leaned heavily on the bed, reaching down to clasp Jack’s ankle. “No, he can’t be.”

“I’m sorry,” Doctor Harper repeated as the other medical staff started slipping discreetly away. “His injuries were too severe and he’d lost too much blood.”

Ianto inhaled a ragged breath, not able to comprehend it, not wanting to accept it. After everything Jack had been through, to die, just like that. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. He was supposed to go home. Ianto was supposed to help him, but he’d completely failed.
“I’ll give you a minute.” Doctor Harper drew the curtain and walked away, leaving him alone with Jack. No, not Jack anymore. Just a body.

Ianto shuffled around the bed and dropped heavily into the chair, mind going blank. He didn’t know what he was supposed to do now. Did he just walk away, go back to Cardiff and pretend like none of this had happened? No, he couldn’t do that. Not after Jack had so vividly brought him back to himself. He couldn’t go back to that half-life he’d been living.

He stared at Jack, unable to believe that a few short hours ago, he’d woken up in bed with him, been inundated with the passion and vitality that seemed to radiate out of Jack. Just like that, it was all gone. And it was hitting Ianto much harder than he’d expected. Like they’d known each other for months or years already, not just a few days.

Ianto stood and took Jack’s limp hand in his. He leaned over the bed and smoothed a hand over Jack’s hair.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get you home,” he whispered, before leaning down and pressing his lips against Jack’s in a lingering kiss. Pulling back a little, he struggled to breathe through his tight throat. “I’m so, so sorry—”

Jack gasped in a long breath, eyes snapping open as his hands reached up and clamped onto him. Of course, Ianto did what any sane person would do if someone suddenly came back to life and screamed.

Jack focused on him, panting as though trying to catch his breath, colour swiftly returning to his face. “You were kissing me, weren’t you?”

“Jack!” He pulled out of the man’s hold and straightened, brain spinning, not able to catch a clear thought. “You were—they said you were—”

“Dead?” Jack grinned and sat up. “But you were still kissing me.”

“That’s really what you’re going to focus on right now?” His voice had gone up several octaves and he couldn’t decide if he was incredulous or furious or completely freaked out.

Jack’s grin turned into a smirk. “I can always tell. Come on, we better get out of here before—”

The curtain ran back and Doctor Harper appeared. “We heard a woman screaming!”

Ianto felt his face going red hot, but the doctor was too busy staring at Jack, looking dumbfounded. Jack was staring back at him, looking almost as surprised, but in a good way, if the grin that spread over his face was any indication.

“Owen! It’s like I’m living some weird alternate-reality This Is Your Life.”

“You’re—you’re— Sir! You shouldn’t be sitting up in your condition.” Doctor Harper rushed forward as though he was going to force Jack to lay back on the bed, but Jack quickly got to is feet.

“I’m fine, really, it was just a scratch.”

“A scratch!” Ianto repeated angrily. “Jack, I’m fairly sure I saw your ribs and you were dead.”

“Nope, just a misunderstanding. Time to be going.”

Jack tightly wrapped his coat closed over his bloody torn shirt, then yanked the belt tight and
hurried over to take his arm.

“Sorry about all the fuss,” Jack told Doctor Harper who was gaping at them, clearly not knowing what to do. “We’ll just get out of your way. Nice to see you again, Owen.”

Ianto let himself get towed out of the cubicle and through the hospital. It wasn’t until they’d stepped outside through a small side door and fresh air hit his face that his mind finally snapped back into gear. He jerked out of Jack’s hold and turned to roughly grab him by the shoulders, shoving him up against the wall.

“Ianto, what—”

He ignored him, shoving his hands out of the way and then yanking at the belt to Jack’s coat, practically ripping it open.

“Whoa, there, soldier!” Jack made a half-hearted attempt to fend him off, but Ianto wasn’t having any of it. Once the coat was out of the way, he grabbed the ragged edges of Jack’s bloody clothes and tore them the rest of the way through.

“Normally I wouldn’t complain about you ripping my clothes off, but I get the feeling you’re not doing it for fun.”

He ran his fingers over Jack’s smooth, unblemished skin.

“You’re completely healed.” He knew he sounded dazed, but he couldn’t assimilate what his eyes were seeing now with what he’d seen before. That void reaper had ripped him to shreds. The doctors had pronounced him dead. And then he’d just woken up and walked out of the hospital like —

He pushed off from Jack, stumbling a few steps back. “What are you?”

Jack held up his hands in a calming gesture. “I’m human, Ianto, I promise.”

“Then how—” He didn’t have words for what he’d just witnessed, so he waved his hand in the general direction of Jack’s chest.

“A long time ago, something happened to me that means I can’t stay dead. I’m a fixed point in time. If I die, I just come back again.”

“You’re—you’re—” His brain gave him the answer, but he couldn’t quite believe it. “Immortal?”

“Yes.” Jack slowly pulled his coat closed and refastened the belt. “I’m immortal. Don’t ask me how old I am, you don’t want to know.”

“Oh Jesus.” He hiked his hands onto his hips, forcing himself to breathe. The whole dimension-crossing, fabric-of-reality-collapsing, body-double-of-wanted-psychopath thing hadn’t been enough. He had to be immortal too?

“So is there anything else I need to know?” he practically yelled, disbelief exploding into anger.

Jack tipped his chin up, almost looking defiant, but Ianto could see a hint of vulnerability in his grey-blue eyes.

“I was born in the 51st century. I was a Time Agent which is where I got this—” He indicated to his vortex manipulator. “I used to be a very different man. There are a lot of things in my past I’m
not proud of, but then I met someone who made me want to be a better person, and I’ve been trying to make amends ever since.”
Chapter 7

Jack watched Ianto closely, waiting for him to say something, but instead silence fell between. Ianto was angry. Probably understandable since he’d pretty much blown Ianto’s life into pieces the last few days. And it wasn’t every day a person met someone with the slight inability to stay dead. Although, Jack didn’t think he could take full responsibility for this current state of affairs. He had attempted to ditch Ianto when he’d taken the secret tunnel out of the archives. Of course, when Ianto had come after him, he hadn’t tried very hard to dissuade him from tagging along.

He could see Ianto taking the information in, probably examining every angle, reassessing his views on Jack and the situation as a whole. However, before he could say anything, the door they’d come through a few minutes ago slammed open and Owen appeared. He wasn’t wearing his white coat any longer and came charging out like he was in a hurry to get somewhere, then pulled up short when he saw them both standing there.

“You,” he said, pointing an accusing finger at Jack. “You were dead. Messy dead. Like your lungs were exposed and you’d lost enough blood to fill half the Thames. So tell me how the fuck you’re walking around like nothing happened?”

“It’s a medical miracle,” he drawled with a hint of impatience. “Look, no offense Owen, but I’ve got much bigger problems today—”

“And that’s the other thing!” Owen practically yelled over top of him. “How do you know my name? You’re talking to me like you know me.”

“Yup, he has a habit of doing that. Best just to ignore him,” Ianto put in unhelpfully.

He cast Ianto an unimpressed look before groping for some patience and turning his attention back to Owen.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s way outside your usual scope, but I’m Torchwood. The best thing you can do is forget about this and pretend like you never saw me.”

“Torchwood?” Owen’s brow creased as he crossed his arms. “Weren’t they a bunch of weirdos who believed in aliens and got shut down after that incident at Pigeon Wharf or whatever it was? Some kind of experiment went wrong and a whole bunch of people died.”

“Canary Wharf,” Ianto corrected heatedly, glaring at Owen. “And we didn’t just believe in aliens. They actually exist. It wasn’t an experiment gone wrong, the entire planet nearly got invaded by two violent races known as the Cybermen and Daleks.”

Jack instinctively reached out and set a hand on Ianto’s shoulder, knowing if he was anything like the other Ianto, those memories would still be difficult for him, no matter how many years had passed.

“Oh, sure thing.” Owen scoffed a laugh. “You expect me to believe aliens are real?”

Ianto crossed his arms, matching Owen’s belligerent stance. “Then how do you explain Jack? You just saw him die and come back to life.”

Owen’s gaze cut to him with a healthy dose of scepticism. “You’re an alien?”

“No!” Jack held up both hands and took a calming breath. “There is so much going on here that
you can’t even begin to imagine. Owen, trust me when I say that you’ll be much better off if you go back inside and get on with being a doctor.”

“And if I say no?” Owen’s chin tipped up slightly. He had that stubborn, slightly defiant look on his face that Jack knew too well. Once the guy set his mind on something, there was no stopping him. It was one of the reasons he’d been such an outstanding Torchwood operative. Right now, however, it was proving to be a problem.

What he wouldn’t give for a decent dose of retcon.

“Owen, I’m ordering you to get your ass back into that hospital and forget you ever saw us.” It was a long shot. Owen had barely followed his orders when he’d actually worked for him.

“Frankly, mate, you can shove your order. The amount of blood you lost, if you make it to the end of this alleyway without collapsing, I just might think it’s the second coming of Christ.”

“Fine,” he replied through clenched teeth, before looking at Ianto. “Coming?”

Ianto gave a single nod and fell into step beside him as they headed for the end of the alleyway, Owen trailing a few steps behind them.

“What are we going to do about that twat of a doctor?” Ianto asked as they reached the main street.

“I can hear you, you know,” Owen called out with sarcastic cheerfulness in his voice.

“And I don’t care,” Ianto tossed over his shoulder, before looking back at Jack. “Can I shoot him?”

Jack couldn’t help laughing. Seemed that even in alternate realities, some things just didn’t change.

“What’s so funny?” Ianto demanded, casting suspicious glances at Owen as the doctor continued following them down the street.

“You two. You used to bicker just like that, nearly every day. Sometimes it bugged the hell out of me. Never thought I’d actually be happy to hear it.”

“You mean—” Curiosity edged into Ianto’s expression.

“Yep. Owen worked for Torchwood Three with us. We also had a beautiful genius named Toshiko Sato and a stubborn, brilliant PC named Gwen Cooper.”

“So, Torchwood Three was a team of five people?” Ianto asked in surprise. “How the heck did you get anything done?”

“It wasn’t always easy, but we made it work.” Jack stopped on a street corner and looked in both directions.

“Now what? Steal another car?” Ianto stopped on his right side, while Owen came up on his left.

“I’m sorry, did you just say steal another car?” Owen clarified.

“You can leave any time you want,” Jack told him distractedly as he worked out where they were and where he needed to get to.

“Not a chance,” Owen replied stubbornly, crossing his arms.

Jack shook his head slightly as he waved down a taxi. The three of them clambered in and Jack
gave the address of Pete Tyler’s house.

“Fancy neighbourhood,” Owen commented at the cab took off. “Going to rob someone?”

“Going to visit some old friends,” Jack returned. Now he had two alternate reality ex-Torchwood employees tagging along. Seriously, he probably should have just knocked the pair of them out and left them in the alleyway. With any luck, The Doctor would have some answers about getting back to his own reality, then Ianto and Owen could get back to their lives and chalk this all up to some short, crazy adventure.

Ianto nudged him in the side and he turned to see him offering a clean t-shirt he’d pulled out of his rucksack. Jack murmured a thanks and wiggled to shrug out of his coat and then peel off the bloody remains of his shirt.

Owen was eyeing him like some kind of lab rat. “What happened to your injuries?”

“I healed,” he replied shortly. He didn’t feel like having the can’t-stay-dead conversation twice within the same hour. And honestly, what was Owen going to do with the information anyway when they wouldn’t ever see each other again after today? The thought made his chest ache, but he reminded himself that the Owen who’d been his friend, who’d worked with him and given his life for Torchwood was dead, and this Owen was a different person.

“How did you heal?” Owen demanded.

“It’s complicated,” he snapped. “If you’re so intent of tagging along, then quit it with the questions or I’ll leave you gagged and tied up somewhere. And I can promise we won’t have had a good time first.”

“First the innuendo about handcuffs, and now tying people up? I’m starting to sense a bondage theme,” Ianto interjected dryly with a quirked eyebrow.

“Don’t pretend like you haven’t thought about,” Jack teased him back. “And I can say with all certainty that you’d enjoy it.”

Ianto tried to hide a smile as he looked away, out the window, a hint of colour on his cheeks.

Both of Owen’s eyebrows hiked up and he looked between Jack and Ianto with comprehension dawning in his expression. “The two of you are together?”

“What did I just say about questions?” Jack flicked the clean t-shirt over his head as Owen held up his hands in surrender.

“Okay, no more questions. But at some point, you are going to explain all this to me.”

“Sure. How about a quarter past never?” Jack sent him a wide smile as Owen glared.

The rest of the cab ride into the wealthier parts of London went by in silence until the taxi pulled up in front of a large townhouse and Ianto handed over cash from their loot hidden in the bottom of his rucksack.

Jack led the way up the steps and rang the doorbell, while Ianto and Owen hung back, glaring suspiciously at one another. Any other day, Jack would have been laughing his ass off and finding this whole thing highly entertaining. Just not on the day when he could cause the fabric of reality to collapse and he’d very recently been torn apart by a void reaper—whatever that was. He’d never heard of any such creature before, which left him wondering where it’d come from and whether
they were simply unique to this reality for some reason.

The door in front of him opened and some kind of housemaid in a black and white uniform greeted him politely. For a second, he didn’t know who to ask for. What if they’d kept the fact that Rose was Pete’s daughter a secret since he’d never had kids in this reality and it might have been odd to suddenly have a grown-up one appear from nowhere? Pete didn’t know him from Adam, so that just left—

“I’m here to see Jackie Tyler,” he blurted out quickly after the silence had stretched long enough to make things slightly awkward.

“Is she expecting you?” the housemaid asked, not looking all that inclined to let them in.

“No. I’m an old friend.” Bit of a stretch, but surely she’d remember him saving her life on the Dalek Crucible. “And I’ve been travelling. Didn’t know I was going to be in London today, honestly. I’m sure she’ll be happy to see me. Captain Jack Harkness.”

“Wait here.” The housemaid swung the door shut in his face and he stepped back a little as he registered a snickering behind him.

He turned to glare at Owen, only to find Ianto was clearly trying to contain himself as well.

“This visit is going really well so far.” From the look on Owen’s face, he was enjoying it way too much.

“Shut it. You’re not even supposed to be here.” He turned back to the door, determined to ignore the pair of them. Luckily the door opened again to reveal Jackie Tyler staring at him with wide eyes.

“How are you here? Is he with you?”

No guesses needed to work out who he was. “No, Jackie, it’s just me and it’s a bit of a story. Is Rose around? Save me telling it twice…”

He trailed off at the look on Jackie’s face.

“She’s off travelling the world. With John Smith.” She added an exaggerated wink to the name. “Barely seen them for more than a week at a time before they’re off again to all kinds of remote corners of the planet.”

The sting of disappointment was sharp in his chest. But it wasn’t the end of the world. He didn’t physically need to see The Doctor, just speak with him, find out if he had any ideas about how to cross realities.

“Have you got some way of contacting them?”

“I’ve got a mobile number for Rose, but the places they go often don’t have service. Last I heard, they were in Nepal or somewhere like that.” Jackie stepped back and motioned for him to come inside. “If you and your friends would like to sit in the parlour, Dolores will bring some tea while I try calling. Never know, we might get lucky!” Jackie sent him an encouraging smile, but he could see the doubt in her eyes and tried not to let his stomach sink. Or panic to set in.
He didn’t have a plan B. If he couldn’t get in contact with The Doctor, he had no idea how to even start trying to work this out. He might have been familiar enough with time travel to get himself around the universe, but crossing realities was a whole other thing.

The maid led them to the parlour, indicating they should sit, before leaving again. He ended up on a two-seater couch with Ianto next to him while Owen sat on the adjacent matching armchair.

“Are you okay?” Ianto set a hand on his shoulder, sliding it a little along to his neck and then back again in a soothing motion.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He sent Ianto a smile, but knew he wasn’t fooling anyone.

“You look worried.”

He gave up on the smile and frowned at him in exasperation instead. “And how would you know what worry looks like on me?”

Ianto shrugged, gaze seeming to cut right through him to his soul. “Don’t know, just find it easy to read you, I guess.”

A shiver passed through him at Ianto’s words, like that old saying about someone walking on your grave. His own Ianto had always had an uncanny ability to read him as well, but he hadn’t become aware of it until well after the incident with Lisa. And he probably hadn’t let himself recognise or admit it properly until after the year he’d spent at the hands of the Master, when thoughts of Ianto had been one of the only things that had kept him going during those long days. But had Ianto been able to do it so soon, within a day or so of meeting him? No doubt Ianto had profiled him or used what he’d heard around the offices at Torchwood One to get himself into Jack’s good graces and Torchwood Three, so he’d always put some of Ianto’s initial understanding of him down to that.

But this Ianto knew nothing about him, and as he stared at him now, he got the old familiar sense that Ianto could see beneath the layers, beneath the persona of Captain Jack he held onto so tightly, right down to the man he was at heart. The man he missed and feared in equal parts.

Jack sighed, glancing at Owen who was unabashedly watching the exchange.

“You know I have a lot to be worried about,” he finally replied. It was more than he wanted to admit, but less than he wanted to say.

Dolores appeared with the tea and some freshly baked biscuits, and when she was halfway through pouring them all a cup, Jackie returned.

Though she was clearly trying to keep her expression neutral, he could tell the news wasn’t going to be good from the way she was twisting the ring on her finger.

She didn’t say anything until she’d sat across from them and Dolores had left the room.

“No luck?” he asked to save her from coming up with a way to start the conversation.

Her features fell a little. “I’m sorry, Jack. I’ll keep trying, but it could be weeks before I hear from them.”

“It’s okay, Jackie. But it is important, so if you do happen to hear from them, I’ll leave you a number you can contact me on. I’ll need you to get in touch right away.”

She nodded, reaching down to pick up her tea cup. “Don’t hurry off, though. Catch me up on the
news from home? How’s Micky? Oh, you wouldn’t believe how I miss that scoundrel some days.”

Jack gave an affection laugh. “Actually, he married Martha Jones.”

“Get away!” Jackie made an excited noise. “And I missed the wedding. Did you go?”

He gave her a quick answer then he filled Jackie on how he’d ended up in this reality. After that, he and Jackie exchanged stories, many of which had Ianto and Owen laughing, even though the events and people must have sounded outlandish, especially for Owen who’d only jumped on this little bandwagon of alternate-reality-insanity in the past few hours. Finally, however, they took their leave, and Jack promised to call Jackie before he left for good.

Once they were out in the street, Jack turned and headed left with no real direction in mind, no thoughts, no plan. Nothing. Just the slight burning panic in the pit of his stomach that he had no idea where to look for answers next.

“Now what?” Ianto asked as they stopped at a street corner.

The answer came to him immediately. It wasn’t an answer that was going to solve anything, but at least it might make him feel better for a short while until he could come up with something else.

“I need a drink.”

The others didn’t reply as he set off again, remembering some shops the taxi had passed a few blocks back. He didn’t recall if there’d been a pub in amongst the small strip of businesses, but he supposed failing whiskey, he could make do with an extremely strong coffee.

About halfway there, he got hit with an unpleasant tightening in his chest. He slowed, taking a deeper breath to dispel the feeling, but it only got worse. It wasn’t like anything he’d ever experienced before— Actually, that wasn’t a hundred percent true. He had felt something like this when he’d been torn into the rift and tossed through realities. Like the time vortex within him was suddenly a living, writing creature. A creature that was in pain. The sensation increased and he had to stop, which finally gained Ianto and Owen’s attention.

He bent over and set his hands against his knees, the tightness turning into a wrenching pain.

“Jack?”

He felt Ianto’s hand land on his back, concern evident in his voice.

“That massive trauma that should have killed you finally catching up, is it?” Owen asked without a hint of sympathy.

“No, this is something else,” he forced out, voice hoarse. He pressed a hand against the middle of his chest, almost feeling as if something was tearing inside him. Then a rumbling started, like an earthquake. At first, he thought it was within him, until he realised Ianto’s hand had fisted the back of his jacket and Owen was uttering a few choice swear words.

When the rumbling faded away, so did the sensation in Jack’s chest, gradually ebbing into nothingness until he could breathe properly again. Except it left him feeling weak and he swayed as he straightened. Ianto stepped into him, sliding an arm around his back to hold him steady.

“What the hell was that?” Ianto was glancing around at nearby buildings as people started coming out, looking confused.
“Felt like an earthquake.” Owen stepped forward and grabbed Jack’s wrist, holding it up with his fingers pressed to the inside, and then stared at his watch.

“Except earthquakes aren’t all that common in London, are they?”

“No, they’re not,” Jack answered Ianto. “But I don’t think it was an earthquake. I think it was me. My best guess is that reality is starting to shift.”

Ianto muttered a curse under his breath while Owen stared at him impassively. “Look, mate. I’m not going to pretend I understand what the fuck’s going on. And honestly all your talk of alternate realities sounds like a load of bollocks. What I do know is that your heart rate is well up over a hundred and if we were in a hospital right now—where you should be—I’d be calling for some antiarrhythmic drugs and a crash cart for tachycardia.”

“No hospitals.” He stepped out of Ianto’s hold to prove he could stay on his own two feet without any help. “I’ll be fine in a minute.”

For now, he added silently. If he didn’t work out how to get back to his own timeline soon, however, that would no longer be the case. And he really didn’t want to find out what would happen to him and the rest of the universe if reality collapsed around him.
Chapter 8

Ianto wasn’t sure how smart it was for Jack to be on his third whiskey in ten minutes since Owen seemed to think he’d been having some kind of heart problems out on the street. But he supposed that was the benefit of being immortal. Jack could literally drink himself to death and a few hours later be none the worse for wear.

Still, he found it hard not to worry. Especially since Jack seemed to think the earthquake or whatever it’d been had something to do with him and reality shifting. He’d hoped they’d have a little more time before things got critical. Not that Jack could leave right this minute, but Ianto wasn’t anywhere near ready to say goodbye yet.

Selfish, he knew, when the entire fate of the universe was in the balance. But he’d never met anyone like Jack Harkness before, and even though they’d only known one another for a few short days, he felt like a piece of his life he’d been missing was suddenly in place. He felt whole in a way he hadn’t done since before Canary Wharf and Lisa had died. He’d come to accept there was always going to be a hole in his heart and soul, yet as he looked at Jack, sitting across the table from him, the hollow feeling was absent. He didn’t want to say goodbye to Jack if it meant feeling that way again.

He tossed back his own whiskey he’d been nursing since they’d sat at the bar and shook his head when the barkeep asked if he wanted any more. The man topped up Jack for the fourth time before moving off to serve someone else. Before Jack could even pick up the tumbler off the slightly sticky surface of the bar, Ianto reached over and clamped his hand on top of the glass.

“No offense, Jack, but I don’t think getting drunk is going to help with reality shifting.”

Owen was sat on Jack’s other side, facing out toward the room, elbows back behind him on the bar, glass of beer in hand.

“All this stuff you keep going on about—alternate realities and whatever—it’s really true?”

Any hint of sarcasm or disbelief was absent from Owen’s expression now, as if he’d had time to process it all.

“It’s all really true.” Jack wrapped a hand around Ianto’s wrist and picked up his hand from the top of the glass, before drinking down the whiskey in one long swallow. “Course, it might not be true for much longer. It might all just collapse into oblivion.”

“Well, there’s a cheery thought,” Owen sent him a sharp smile before drinking his beer.

“So what’s plan B then?” Ianto asked determinedly, taking Jack’s glass away before the barkeep could return and refill it for him. No way was he going to stand by and watch the universe tear itself apart. Especially if it was going to tear Jack apart first. Though Jack had tried to hide it, Ianto had seen the pain in his grey-blue eyes when they’d been out in the street and the worry he’d been trying to hide when he’d said he was fine.

“There is no plan B.” Jack huffed a sigh and dragged a hand over his face. “The Doctor was it. I don’t know enough about alternate realities to cross them. Time, yes, I can navigate with my eyes closed. But multiple universes and timelines? No one but The Doctor can get a handle on that.”

“So, The Doctor, he always came to your rescue when you ran into trouble at Torchwood Three?” Ianto knew exactly what he was doing; pressing Jack’s buttons. But it seemed like the quickest
way to get through to him. For some reason, he had faith Jack could figure this out. He just needed to get over his wallowing that his initial plan to rely on The Doctor to fix things hadn’t worked out.

Jack cut him an irritated sideways glare and he had to clench his jaw to not allow a smile to slip free since his plan to annoy Jack into action was clearly working.

“No. He never did. Even when—” A shadow of pain swept through his eyes, making Ianto’s chest get tight. “Even when I thought I needed him, he didn’t come and I didn’t call him. There’s such a thing as fixed points in time; events that have to happen and can’t be changed. I figured if The Doctor could have helped me, he would have. He wouldn’t have let—Not without a reason.”

Jack took a ragged breath, and then reached over to take his hand, as if needing the comfort. Ianto turned his palm up, letting their fingers slide together. It didn’t take a genius to work out where Jack had been going with that. He figured the Doctor—whoever he was—wouldn’t have let the other Ianto Jones die unless it was one of those events that couldn’t be changed.

“When it comes to the rift, I don’t usually need The Doctor to come to my rescue like some damsel in distress. Though, I wouldn’t have ever said no if he did.”

“Okay,” Ianto replied, gentling his voice a little. “So, if this was Cardiff, your reality, your team, what would you do?”

“My team…” Jack glanced over at Owen, then back to him, brow creasing slightly before his entire demeanour suddenly changed, like he’d suddenly been re-energised. “Ianto! You’re a genius!”

Jack bounded to his feet, still holding his hand, and then leaned down to kiss him enthusiastically on the forehead.

“Of course I can’t work this out myself. I need my team!”

“Did I miss something?” Owen asked as the barkeep returned and asked the doctor if he wanted another beer.

Except the man wasn’t looking at Owen, the barkeep was casting him and Jack sideways glances, most of which seemed to be focused on their joined hands and how Jack was leaning into him. His heart bumped against the inside of his chest as he discreetly extracted his hand from Jack’s and stood, putting a little distance between them. He had enough going on right now without someone getting all homophobic on them. Not when he still wasn’t even sure what the heck was going on with him and Jack, or what his feelings toward the man meant for him personally.

“Owen Harper, we’re getting the band back together,” Jack said with a wide grin as he accessed his wrist strap.

“What?” Owen stood and leaned over to peer at Jack’s device. “And what is that?”

“51st century vortex manipulator. Never mind that. We’ve got two more people to find.”

Owen crossed his arms and glanced over at Ianto. “Please tell me you understand even half of what he says.”

Ianto grinned, enjoying having one up on the doctor, though he couldn’t really say why.

“In the alternate reality Jack comes from, you and I worked for him at Torchwood Three.” He gestured at Jack’s wrist. “I’m guessing he’s currently trying to track down the other two members of his original team.”
“Me? Work for Torchwood?” Owen glared like he was starting to think they were playing some kind of joke on him. “And why would I have done that?”

“Your fiancé, Katie, she died, right? Of some mysterious brain tumour that the doctors could never explain?” Jack put in.

Owen had gone pale, his posture becoming rigid. “How did you know that?”

“Because in my reality, I was there when it happened. It was an alien parasite that killed Katie. You found out just before she died and after her funeral, I recruited you to my team.” Jack reached up and set a hand on Owen’s shoulder. “You were brilliant, Owen. You saved so many lives. Torchwood wasn’t always easy, but you belonged there with the rest of us.”

“Were?” Owen demanded. “Why are you talking about me in past tense?”

Jack pulled his hand back, becoming slightly flustered. “Well… I mean—”

“You died,” Ianto guessed, shooting Owen a grin. For some reason he was gratified to find out his alter ego wasn’t the only Torchwood Three casualty.

“Twice, actually,” Jack mumbled, returning his concentration to his wrist strap.

“So the me in your reality died chasing aliens and now you want me to join up with the cover band for a tribute tour?” Owen said, his voice heavy with disbelief.

Jack brought his gaze up to stare at him with a hint of impatience. “You got something better to do? Don’t forget, you followed me from the hospital. I tried to get rid of you.”

Owen crossed his arms and glanced away. “Yeah, and I’ve got no bloody idea what possessed me to do that.”

“I’m starting to think it’s some kind of cosmic check-and-balance thing. The universe doesn’t want me to be here. But since I am, the energies between the separate realities is starting to blur. I think you’re drawn to me for the simple fact that I was such a huge part of the other Owen’s life. There are theories out there that when one version of you dies, other versions of you in nearby realities absorb some of the memories. Not in a way you’re consciously aware of. More like déjà vu. When you go somewhere you’ve never been before, but you get a weird sense that you have.”

“That’s actually what I felt when I walked into your room in the A&E and saw you lying there,” Owen answered in surprise.

“Me too,” Ianto put in. “Except for me it was more—”

He didn’t have words to express exactly what he’d felt, something inexplicable tugging his soul. Jack cast him an understanding look.

“I know.” Jack touched his arm briefly, before turning back to Owen. “And I know this sounds crazy, but I think there’s a reason for all of this. For Ianto being the one to find me. For me ending up at the hospital where you worked, that you just happened to be on shift, why you were compelled to follow me despite your own intentions. I need to get back to my own reality, and I need your help to do that.”

“I’m a doctor, not Stephen Hawking,” Owen muttered. “What do you expect me to do, especially considering you apparently don’t need a doctor. Ever.”
“Honestly, I don’t know right now. First we need to get Gwen and Tosh, then once I’ve got a team, we can work to our strengths and figure things out together.” Jack pushed off from the bar and spun, coat flaring out slightly as he did so.

“Oi, Harkness, where are you off to then?” Owen called out as Jack headed across the bar. The captain turned and sent them an infectious grin as he took a few steps backwards.

“Back to our base of operations. We’ve got a jail break to plan.” Jack spun again and left the bar without waiting for them.

“You have a base of operations?” Owen asked him with no small hint of scepticism in his voice.

“We had a room at a hotel stuck in a 1940s time warp,” he answered, guessing that was where Jack meant since they hadn’t been anywhere else in London besides the hospital and the Tyler’s residence.

“Does he always do that?” Owen gestured toward where Jack had disappeared a moment ago. “Just swan off and expect us to follow him?”

“Seems like it,” he replied, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“What’d you think he’d do if we didn’t follow him?” Owen asked the question more like he was thinking out loud, than expecting an actual answer.

“No idea, but my life has definitely been more interesting since he dropped into it.” He could see Jack through the window, looking at his wrist strap again.

“He’s an annoying git. And he’s more bloody cocky than anyone I’ve ever met,” Owen grumbled.

“And he’s charming. And charismatic,” Ianto added before he could think better of it. “And in that coat…”

“And we’re going to follow him, aren’t we?” Owen replied with a sigh.

They shared a look, both of them grinning at each other.

“After you, Doctor Harper,” Ianto said with a wave of his hand.

“Much obliged, Mr. Jones,” Owen replied with a slight nod.

“Actually, it’s Captain Jones. Or it least it was until I abandoned my post. I was with UNIT,” Ianto told him as they crossed the bar.

“That right?” Owen returned with an arched eyebrow. “Can’t imagine you in one of those military uniforms.”

“It wasn’t terrible flattering. Would prefer a nice suit, like I used to wear into the office when I worked for Torchwood One.”

Owen didn’t reply as they stepped out on the street to join Jack. Ianto immediately flagged down a cab and gave the driver the address of the hotel. He just hoped they didn’t run across anymore void reapers in the area. The creatures were kind of like lightning; never striking twice in the same place. Of course, it made them almost impossible to predict. UNIT had an entire team dedicated to trying to solve the problem of the void reapers, but they didn’t seem to be getting anywhere with things.
“Good memory, Ianto,” Jack murmured as the cab took off.

He felt his cheeks warming slightly, unable to work out why the simplest compliment in Jack’s smooth American tones affected him so much.

Halfway there, Jack muttered a curse and flipped closed the cover of his wrist strap with a sharp movement.

“What problem?” he immediately asked. Though, he had no idea why he kept doing it, like he had this compulsion to fix things for Jack.

“Gwen Cooper, or should I say Gwen Williams has two kids and now lives in Llanelli.”

Ianto winced and corrected his pronunciation.

“I can’t drag her into this,” Jack continued with a troubled expression. “We’ll have to make do without her.”

“What about the last team member, Toshiko?” he prompted.

Jack nodded, expression taking on a determined edge. “Toshiko Sato has been imprisoned with UNIT for the past eleven years. She’s at one of their black sites here in London.”

His blood chilled in his veins at the idea of going up against his own people. “So when you said jail break—”

“I wasn’t kidding,” Jack said in return. “We’re going to break into one of UNIT’s most secure sites and abscond with a genius who was charged with building experimental weapons for terrorists.”

“What the hell am I getting myself into?” Owen muttered.

The grin Jack beamed at him was up around a thousand watts. “Welcome to Torchwood Three.”
Chapter 9

Ianto found himself at a bar for the third time that day. Actually, it was the same bar he’d started his day in, still deserted, still looking like it’d dropped straight out of the 1940s, but this time he was nursing vodka in a glass instead of chugging straight from a bottle of scotch. That had to be a slight improvement, right?

When they’d arrived back at the hotel, George hadn’t seemed all that surprised, or if he had been, he’d hidden it well. Jack had requested two rooms. Whether it was because of what had happened between them when they’d woken up in bed together that morning, or because Jack thought Owen needed a room, he couldn’t say.

Not that it mattered for the time being. Jack had gotten straight to work, borrowing Ianto’s laptop and using the Torchwood software to put together his plan of breaking Toshiko Sato out of a secure UNIT site. Jack had questioned Owen about what kind of medical condition they could expect to find a prisoner kept in the unfortunate conditions that UNIT housed many of their prisoners, including psychological. Ianto had ordered them a late lunch, but didn’t have much of an appetite himself, and wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the unfolding plan, so he’d taken himself down to the empty bar.

The rate he was going, being around Captain Jack Harkness was going to turn him into a functioning alcoholic. Of course, there were other, more pleasurable ways to deal with stress…  He shook his head at himself and tossed back the vodka. With the threat of reality collapsing, now wasn’t exactly the time to be working out whether he actually wanted to shag another man.

“Want some company, or is drinking alone your thing?”

Ianto glanced over his shoulder to see Jack sauntering toward him. The man never simply walked anywhere. But somehow he pulled it off; all that Captain Jack Harkness thing he had going on.

“Drinking alone is definitely not my thing. Just been a trying day.” He almost could have laughed at his own understatement there. Between waking up to Jack kissing him, then watching the man get ripped to shreds by a void reaper only to find out he couldn’t stay dead, to Jack deciding he was putting his alternate-reality Torchwood Three team together, to Jack and Owen making plans worthy of a block-buster movie, trying day didn’t even begin to cover it.

Anyway, his search for vodka wasn’t even about any of those things. His real problem was Jack going up against UNIT; Ianto’s own people, his own colleagues. The organisation that had taken him in after Canary Wharf and given him a new purpose. He was torn, no idea what he was meant to do about any of it. Leaving his post to run off after Jack Harkness had been one thing, but his deep-seated loyalty balked at the thought of intentionally betraying UNIT; his one constant for the past nine years. Yet his newly developed feelings for Jack couldn’t allow him to sit back and let Jack and Owen do this without him.

Somehow, Jack had managed to inspire almost as much devotion within him in just a few days that had otherwise taken years to build at UNIT.

Jack slid onto the barstool next to him with an understanding smile. “We have a lot of days like that at Torchwood.”

“Was it worth it?” He hadn’t realised he was going to ask the question until it’d already escaped. He turned to look at Jack, who was staring across the bar thoughtfully, contemplating his words.
“When it came to my Ianto, no, I could never say it was worth it, not worth his life. But before he died, before they all died, there were days when I thought everything I’d been through to that point was worth the happiness I’d found. The family we’d made. We were brilliant, the five of us. We made a real difference. I can’t tell you how many times we literally saved the world. But even the small stuff, the days we only helped one person or did something that in comparison, probably seemed insignificant, those were some of the best days.”

“You miss them.” It was obvious Jack’s pain wasn’t just from the alternate Ianto—though that seemed to be a majority—but he was still clearly feeling the death of the others as well.

“I’ll always miss them. But maybe one day it won’t burn so much any longer.” Jack turned to catch him with a weighted stare. “What I’m doing here, trying to put the team together, that’s not what this is about.”

“I know.” The thought hadn’t even crossed his mind, that Jack was trying to replace the people he’d lost. “It’s about the best way to get you home now that the Doctor isn’t an option. But Jack —”

He wasn’t sure how to say what was on his mind and paused to take a breath.

“You’ve got reservations about going up against your own people,” Jack finished for him. “I wouldn’t have expected anything less. And I’m not asking you to do that, Ianto. I mean, I might need to clarify a few areas of UNIT’s inner workings that I’m unsure of. But I certainly wouldn’t want you to betray the people you’re loyal to.”

“Not even you?” he asked quietly.

Jack seemed a little taken aback by this. “Ianto, you barely know me. That you’ve helped me as much as you have over the last few days is enough.”

He leaned forward in his seat, reaching over to cover Jack’s hand with his. “I can’t explain it. And maybe I’m letting your feelings for the other Ianto Jones cloud my judgement, but I can’t let you do this without me. It’s too dangerous.”

“Your forgetting I can’t die.” Jack was clearly trying to downplay things. But there was also a hint of hope in his expression as though he really did need him but wasn’t going to admit it.

“No, you can’t die. But you could get caught. You could get thrown into a cell and then reality could collapse around you. And that’s something no one wants, least of all me.”

“What are you saying?” Jack asked in a low voice, studying him closely.

He took a deep breath, hit by that falling sensation again. Like he was about to take yet another leap off another ledge. But if Jack was the one who caught him, if Jack was what was waiting for him at the bottom of the unknown, then he didn’t have a single doubt he was doing the right thing.

“I want to help. Include me in your plan. I can get you into the UNIT site, as long as you and Owen can come up with a way of getting out with Toshiko.”

Jack didn’t look all that convinced. “Ianto, if you do this—”

“I won’t be able to go back, I know. Truthfully, I probably wouldn’t have anyway. UNIT gave me a purpose, a direction after Canary Wharf, but I realised in the last few days there was something I was never going to find there.”
“And what was that?” Jack asked in a quiet voice.

“And what was that?” he asked in a quiet voice.

“Happiness.” He dropped his gaze to stare at where he was holding Jack’s hand. “It probably sounds stupid, but—”

“It’s not stupid, Ianto.” Jack touched his fingers to Ianto’s chin, urging him to look up. “You deserve to be happy. But this—I don’t know if this is the answer. What are you going to do after I leave? Spend the rest of your days on the run from UNIT?”

He gave a nonchalant shrug, as though going on the run from UNIT wasn’t a big deal.

“I’ll change my name, head north, find somewhere to blend in. Move every few years just to be on the safe side.”

“Never settling down? That’s no way to live.” Jack’s features tightened, shadows darkening his eyes. “I’ve ruined your life.”

The pain and self-recrimination in Jack’s expression was plainly evident. He fully believed that he’d ruined his life, but Ianto didn’t see it that way at all. In fact, the complete opposite was true. He felt like Jack had freed him. And that feeling chased away any lingering doubt. Jack had freed him from the shackles of UNIT he hadn’t even realised he was locked into. Consequences be damned. If they managed to survive, if they managed to get Jack back to his timeline before reality collapsed, then he’d worry about his future. Because right now he figured there was more than fifty percent chance that either the entire universe was going to end or he’d get himself killed trying to prevent that from happening.

“You didn’t ruin my life, Jack. You saved it when I didn’t even know it needed saving. That’s why I’m going to do the same for you. No matter what it takes. We’ll get you back home.”

Jack’s fingers on his chin slid along his jaw, until his palm was cupping his face. Ianto leaned into the touch slightly, enjoying it far more than he probably had any right to.

“You’re a force to be reckoned with, Ianto Jones,” Jack murmured, gaze roaming over his face. Seeing him. He could sense it, that Jack had meant it when he’d told him earlier that he could separate him from the other Ianto Jones.

“It’s easy when I’ve got something worth fighting for,” he replied in a quiet voice.

“And what are you fighting for today?”

You, he wanted to say. But he clenched his jaw against the words, not sure if he was ready admit it, especially when he didn’t know what the hell he was doing. When what he wanted was in direct contradiction with his logic telling him what was smart and sensible.

Instead he took a breath, trying to calm his pulse that was starting to race. Except, Jack, damn him, he tilted his head, lips parting slightly, an invitation clear in his warm grey-blue eyes.

They’d already kissed once. Not on purpose, mind. But since that’d already happened, it couldn’t really hurt anything if they kissed again, could it?

He was pulling excuses from thin air to appease his own conscience, but what did it really matter? They were both adults. It wasn’t like he was forcing this to happen. Jack could make up his own mind about things, while he—

He was going to kiss Jack Harkness.
Taking a half breath, he closed the distance between them, catching Jack’s lips with his own. A warm flush of sensation rushed him, almost like adrenaline, but so much more consuming.

Except Jack almost immediately pulled back with a ragged breath. “Ianto, this is a bad idea.”

Maybe the words would have stopped him, except Jack’s gaze was drenched with passion and longing, making his heart stutter against the inside of his chest.

“Yes, it probably is,” he agreed, before sealing his mouth to Jack’s again.

Jack tasted as good as he smelled, something Ianto hadn’t taken time to consider this morning since he’d still been half asleep when Jack had kissed him. Plus, he’d been overwhelmed, but shockingly turned on when Jack had rolled on top of him. Then, he hadn’t been ready for the onslaught of sensation, the intensity of it, which was why he’d made a hasty retreat.

But ever since he’d shut himself in the bathroom and taken a cold shower, it hadn’t been far from his mind—when he hadn’t been getting chased by void reapers and coming to terms with the fact that Jack was immortal, anyway.

Now, it was like time had slowed down, or the universe had ceased to exist beyond Jack and the way he deepened the kiss, drawing a low moan out of him. Distantly, he wondered if he needed to stop and check reality hadn’t collapsed around Jack while they’d been distracted. But if this was oblivion, then he probably would have quite happily stayed trapped in it forever.

Jack’s hands landed on his thighs and then smoothed upward, leaving Ianto shuddering and shifting his hips forward on his seat, seeking more of his touch. He slid off the stool and collided bodily into Jack, who simply caught his waist and pulled him in tighter. The angle of their kiss changed as Ianto tilted Jack’s head back slightly and took control, kissing him deeper and harder, thrusting his tongue into his mouth, and this time Jack was the one moaning.

Though he was just about ready to completely lose himself to the feel of Jack against him—and those bloody pheromones that he swore had suffused the blood running through his veins—in the back of his mind he knew he had to stop. Despite the many and varied satisfying ways he could imagine this ending, they were standing in a very public, albeit deserted bar where anyone could stumble across them. Plus Owen was upstairs, probably waiting for Jack to return to the room. Because apparently they had a jail break to finish planning before the universe ended.

With some difficulty, he pulled back, trying to catch his breath.

“Bad timing,” he murmured.

Jack grinned, though he could see the thwarted frustration simmering in his gaze. “It’s always bad timing, believe me. But you’re right, we’re on the clock on this one. We better get back up to see what Owen is up to.”

“Owen is half way through a glass of scotch, that’s what Owen’s up to.”

As Jack turned on the stool, Ianto leaned sideways to see around him to where Owen was sat three stools behind Jack, calmly sipping at a crystal tumbler. The doctor sent them a sharp smile.

“How long have you been sitting there?” He felt his cheeks getting warm. He didn’t know Owen and didn’t really care what the man thought, but by and large, he liked to keep his private life… well, private, to be frank.

“Long enough that I was driven to needing a stiff drink. Does that answer your question?” Owen
tossed back the last of the scotch and then stood.

“And you didn’t interrupt us because…?” Jack asked, pushing to his feet. He didn’t sound embarrassed or annoyed, just mildly curious and maybe a little amused.

Owen sent them an exasperated look that somehow managed to be almost cutting. “I tried. Short of poking you with a ten-foot pole which sadly I didn’t have, the two of you weren’t coming up for air until you were good and ready. Now, can we get back to something less traumatising? Like our ridiculously dangerous plan of breaking a terrorist out of a UNIT prison.”

Jack’s brow lowered. “Tosh isn’t a terrorist. She was blackmailed into building a device for terrorists, yes. But she’s a good person at heart. One of the kindest, most understanding people you’ll ever meet.”

“A decade in a UNIT prison might say different.” Owen slid off the stool and strode out of the bar, leaving Jack standing there looking shocked, as though he hadn’t really thought about what all the years being held by UNIT might have done to Toshiko Sato.

Ianto shifted closer and set a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “I’m sure she’ll be fine, Jack.”

It was hollow comfort, and they probably both knew it. He didn’t know what kind of person Toshiko was, whether all those years in UNIT might have broken her. There was a good possibility that Toshiko wouldn’t be fine at all and wouldn’t be able to help them. He had to believe she could though, because one of Jack’s plans to get home had already been shot down. This second plan already seemed like a last resort. If putting the Torchwood Three team back together to work out a way to get Jack across realities didn’t work, then he had no idea what they were going to do. And from the look on Jack’s face, it seemed his thoughts may have been following the same track.

“Come on.” Ianto slid his hand from Jack’s shoulder, down his arm to grip his hand and tug him into a walk. “Let’s go have some fun breaking into a UNIT black site.”

A grin spread over Jack’s face, like the sun coming out after rain. “Now that sounds like my kind of party. Men in uniform, handcuffs, not to mention those red hats… speaking of which, what happened to yours?”

He shrugged as they reached the stairs. “They’re itchy as hell. I tossed it with the rest of my gear when I came after you.”

“Pity,” Jack murmured, an intimate spark in his eyes that made Ianto’s heart skip a beat.

“You’re unbelievable.” He rolled his eyes to cover up the fact that Jack could apparently turn him on with a single look.

“Oh yeah, I really am.”

He laughed, finding Jack’s complete lack of humility too charming.
Ianto could feel the weight of Jack’s concern on him as he pulled the stolen SUV to a stop just down from the UNIT black site where Toshiko Sato was being held.

“I hate this plan,” Jack grumbled as he pulled out the laptop and set it up to hack into UNIT’s security feeds.

“So you’ve said. More than once,” he replied, making sure to sound unconcerned. He was well aware that too many things could go wrong with this flimsy plan they’d concocted. But one thing he knew for certain; if Jack took one step into a UNIT facility wearing the same face as James Harper, then the game would be up. Probably for good when reality subsequently collapsed around him. So, Jack was hanging behind to play get-away-driver while he and Owen went in for Toshiko. And the captain was not happy about it. Which he had told them. A dozen times.

“It’ll be fine,” he reassured with a confidence he wasn’t feeling. “We’ll be in and out in no time.”

Jack cut him a knowing sideways glance, clearly not buying his assurances.

“And if we’re not, then you know what we agreed,” he continued, levelling a hard look on the other man. Jack hadn’t liked that part either. But Ianto knew UNIT intimately. There was no choice here.

“Don’t come after you,” Jack said obediently through a clenched jaw, though his grey-blue eyes sparked with defiance.

“My life isn’t worth the entire universe, Jack. If this fails, then you find another way. You keep fighting.”

Jack’s lips quirked in a grim smile. “Usually I give the pep talks.”

“Next time.” He returned Jack’s small smile.

Reaching over, Jack caught his hand. “Come back so there will be a next time.”

He gave a single, decisive nod and then glanced over to the backseat where Owen sat, clearly apprehensive.

“Ready?” he asked the doctor. Despite appearing on edge, the doctor’s affirmative wasn’t hesitant in the least.

Ianto pulled the SUV back onto the road and stamped down his own nerves as he drove toward the entrance. At the boom-gates, he only hesitated a fraction of a second before swiping his UNIT security pass over the scanner. This was the moment of truth—if UNIT had already flagged his ID and rescinded his access, it could all end right here. But there were no alarms, no flashing red lights, no swarm of UNIT soldiers surrounding the SUV. The panel beeped and flashed green like it always did, leaving the boom-gate to lift in front of them.

With a long exhale, he drove them around the far side of the building, to the closest entrance to the wing where Toshiko was being held. He parked the SUV in a somewhat deserted section, away from the other cars owned by staff and visitors, on the edge of an area not quite covered by the CCTV cameras.
He cut the engine and then handed Jack the keys. “Good to go?”

Jack nodded to indicated he’d been successful in hacking the internal security cameras. “I’ll have eyes on you the entire time.”

“Okay then, let’s go and get ourselves a genius.”

He pushed open the door to the SUV, but paused to glance back when Jack caught his arm.

“Be careful in there.”

Owen had already climbed out, and on impulse, Ianto leaned across and kissed Jack, quick but deep.

He didn’t bother promising that he’d be careful, but caught Jack’s gaze for a long moment after pulling back, trying not to worry this would be the last time they ever saw one another. Jack must have seen something in his eyes, because his expression tightened, and he looked about ready to toss the plan out the window and storm the UNIT building, even if they did mistake him for James Harper. Ianto quickly got out before Jack could say anything, hurrying over to join Owen where he was waiting for him.

The plan was simple; they’d forged medical records for Tosh stating that she’d been diagnosed with a rare disease that was going to require treatment off-site. They’d then fabricated and uploaded transfer orders to another UNIT black site that specialised in biological and medical research, with Owen as the MD overseeing the case, and Ianto under orders from Brigadier Whitmore to escort them. The brigadier was in his sixties and oversaw so many different sections in UNIT, he tended to rely heavily on his personal assistant. It was well known that things sometimes slipped through the cracks or got overlooked when it came to Whitmore, so Ianto had guessed the brigadier wouldn’t question having “approved” such orders—either assuming his assistant had taken care of it, or that he just hadn’t noticed it in amongst the other piles of orders he’d signed his name to.

He and Owen crossed to the side entrance—unmarked and looking unremarkable. Just a steel door with a single handle, not even any obvious lock. The security measures keeping the unwanted out were far more sophisticated.

Ianto held his security pass up to a square panel to the left of the door which didn’t appear to be anything other than an irregular patch on the wall. However, a second later the door clicked open and Ianto stepped forward to go ahead of Owen. He glanced at the doctor who was nervously tugging his leather jacket straight.

“Just look like you belong and no one will question you,” he told him in a low voice as they walked toward the guard station blocking anyone from getting down the passageway into the main section of the wing.

“Easy for you to say.” Owen muttered in return. Nevertheless, he pushed his shoulders back and slapped a bored, almost indifferent look on his face.

They stopped in front of the desk and Ianto silently handed over the forged orders then took up a rigid, expectant stance. The soldier behind the desk glanced over the papers, almost disinterested, then got on his radio and requested Toshiko be readied for transfer.

The soldier sent him a single nod, indicating he should step through the security scanner. Once he and Owen were on the other side, the soldier returned the orders to him and gave him directions to
Neither he nor Owen said anything as they passed through locked door after locked door, Ianto using his security pass each time, traversing the passageways and cell blocks until they came face to face with a small Asian women in an unflattering orange jumpsuit being led from a cell. Her long black hair swung in a plait over her shoulder, intelligent eyes darting curiously from the soldier holding her to where he and Owen stood. Her wrists and feet were cuffed and chained, ensuring she couldn’t run far even if she’d got it in her mind to try.

“The cuffs won’t be necessary,” he told the soldier as they came to a stop. The man looked confused, and Ianto drew himself, levelling a glare on the lower ranked officer “This is a medical transfer. Ms Sato is no danger to anyone in her current condition.”

An expression of confusion flitted over Toshiko’s face before she ducked her head and waited while the guard removed the cuffs. Once they were free, the soldier stepped back and Ianto sent him a dismissive nod.

“We’ll take it from here.”

The soldier looked torn—this wasn’t usual protocol—but he murmured a “yes, sir” and then pivoted to march off in the other direction.

“Ms. Sato, if you’ll come with us?” Ianto held out a hand, indicated she should join them, but she hesitated, clearly unsure of what was going on and whether she should trust them.

Owen quickly closed the distance between them. “It’s okay. I’m Doctor Harper. It really is in your best interest if you come with us.”

It wasn’t like she had much choice in the matter, but Toshiko stared at Owen for a long moment before giving a quick nod.

Ianto breathed a silent sigh of relief, ushering the pair of them into a quick walk. They were so close. All they needed was to get to the outside of the building where Jack was waiting in the SUV and they’d be home free.

They didn’t see a single other person until they reached the guard station where they’d entered earlier. As they were passing the desk, the soldier took a call on his radio, and though Ianto wasn’t close enough to hear what was being said, when the soldier looked up and his attention landed squarely on him, he knew the game was up.

“Take Toshiko and keep going. Don’t stop, no matter what,” he quickly told Owen.

The doctor hesitated, glancing back at him with concern, clearly about ask what was going on.

“Captain Jones, sir,” the soldier behind the desk said as he stood. “Colonel Preston wishes to speak with you.”

Owen quickly turned away, hustling Toshiko out of the outer door as Ianto heard the echoing clip of footsteps behind him.

He watched after Owen and Toshiko long enough to make sure they were clear of the building before slowly pivoting to face Colonel Preston and the four soldiers he’d brought with him.

“Captain Ianto Jones, you are being detained for questioning over abandoning your post in Cardiff,” Preston announced in a hard voice.
Ianto tilted his chin up as two soldiers came forward, one standing nearby with a hand pointedly on his gun while the second wrenched his arms behind his back and cuffed him. Preston was glaring at him as if he’d already decided his guilt. Unfortunately, he had absolutely no defence he could give for his actions. More than likely he wouldn’t ever see the outside of this UNIT prison ever again.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

minor trigger warning - this chap has a light torture scene. Nothing gory or gruesome though!

Jack’s hands clenched on the edges of the laptop in front of him as he watched the CCTV footage of Ianto turning to face the soldiers who’d walked up behind him. The damn thing didn’t have any sound, so he didn’t know what was being said, but from the flinty expression on Ianto’s face, it wasn’t anything good. A second later, they had him in handcuffs and Jack got his answer.

He swore, first in English, then in Galactic Standard for good measure. The backdoor of the SUV flung open and he glanced over his shoulder to see Owen hustling Tosh in. Just like the first time he’d met her in his own reality, she wore the unflattering orange UNIT jumpsuit provided to all inmates and looked a little on the pale side. The only real difference was the long, plaited hair that must have reached mid-way down her back when it was untied.

As soon as Owen slammed the door behind himself, Tosh jerked her arm out of his hold and split a glare between the two of them.

“What the hell is going on?” she demanded with the kind of heat he’d only heard a handful of times from his own Tosh.

“Toshiko Sato, you’ve just been recruited to Torchwood. Congratulations.” He turned away from her surprised expression and revved the SUV to life before slamming his foot down on the accelerator, reversing haphazardly out of the space they’d been parked in and then careening toward the gates before UNIT could work out Ianto just had a hand in breaking out one of their prisoners and stop them.

“Hang on, what about Ianto?” Owen asked, sounding somewhere between worried and confused.

“What? That bollocks about not going after him?” Owen ended the words with a curse when he took a corner too fast. “You’re not actually going to listen, are you?”

“Of course not!” he shot back. “But first I have to secure you and Tosh. And possibly get some resources. Then I’ll go back for him.”

“Resources?” Owen repeated with a sceptical note in his voice.

Jack glanced at him in the rear-view mirror, a wolfish smile quirking at his lips. “Just a weapon or two. Maybe some explosives if I can get my hands on them.”

“Someone needs to explain what exactly is going on here!” Tosh interrupted, arms crossed over her chest and looking defensive. He could see from just looking at her that this Tosh was one tough little cookie. She would have had to be, in order to survive twelve years in that UNIT prison. Either
that or break, and he knew Tosh was made of stronger stuff than that. She’d proven it over and over in small ways.

“I’m Doctor Owen Harper, that’s Captain Jack Harkness. He’s from an alternate universe and needs to get home before reality collapses around him. That other bloke we left behind was Ianto Jones. He and Jack are—something. Apparently, alternate versions of ourselves worked for him in his reality and he decided a few hours ago that he needs all of us to help him get home.” This delivered by Owen in a surprisingly clipped and straightforward manner. “Personally, I don’t know how the hell I got here, only that in the last day my life has completely turned upside down because of this twat.”

Jack gave a quick laugh, despite his worry over what Ianto might be going through. “Actually, you were always the twat Owen. I mean, we were meant to be this top secret organisation, but you constantly ordered pizza under Torchwood from the local Jubilee.”

Owen slouched back in his seat with a shrug. “Yeah, that sounds like something I’d do.”

Tosh ignored him, scrambling over the console to sit herself in the passenger seat, pushing some of her hair out of her face as she stared at him with clear speculation.

“What Doctor Harper said was all true, you’re from an alternate reality?”

Jack sent her a single, tight nod, almost guessing what would come next.

“And in this reality, I—my other self worked for you? I didn’t end up in the UNIT prison?” She searched his face, as if looking for some truth he wasn’t sure he could deliver.

“You were arrested by UNIT, yes. But a few weeks into your sentence I got you released into my custody to work for Torchwood Three in Cardiff. The colonel that ran the site you were being held owed me a few favours and I could see how brilliant you were. All that talent, going to waste in some cell. I didn’t want to see that happen, and I needed someone with your particular talents.”

Tosh looked away from him, turning to stare out the windscreen with her arms crossed, pensive expression on her face.

“They didn’t waste my talents.” The words came out sounding bitter. “The first few months, I never left that cell. But then they had a problem no one else could solve. At first I was happy. I thought at least I got to do something. At least I wasn’t sitting around going crazy, staring at those same four walls. But the things they made me work on—” Her words cut off on a strangled breath and Jack reached out to catch her hand.

“I’m sorry, Tosh.” He could only imagine some of the experimental things UNIT might have had her do. And he couldn’t say he was much better. He’d broken her out of that prison, but he wasn’t giving her much of a choice about helping him. Not when the fate of the entire universe was hanging in the balance.

They pulled up outside of the hotel where they’d been basing their operations and he turned to look at her. “I promise I’ll explain everything, but right now, I need you to trust me. I know that’s a huge ask since you don’t know me, but believe me, the only aim I have in all this is ensuring reality doesn’t collapse.”

Tosh stared at him for a long moment, before she gave a shallow nod. “Not like I have any better prospects.”

He gave her hand a quick squeeze and sent her a reassuring smile, before turning to look at Owen.
“Both of you, go upstairs and lay low. Ask George to procure some clothes for Tosh, he’ll do it, no questions asked. If I’m not back in two hours, go to Jackie Tyler’s house. Tell her what happened. The Doctor and Rose will help you both. They’ll make sure Tosh doesn’t end up back in a UNIT prison.”

Owen nodded, his expression grim. “I’d tell you to be careful, but seems a bit pointless with that whole immortal thing. Just bring the teaboy back in one piece.”

As Owen went to slide out of the SUV, Jack reached around the seat and clamped a hand on his arm to stop him, heart pounding. “Why did you call him that?”

Confusion flashed across Owen’s features, along with a hint of annoyance. “Call who what?”

“Ianto. You just called him the teaboy.”

Now Owen just looked plain confused. “I did? I don’t know, it just came out.”

Jack let him go, fingers loosening of their own accord. Realities were starting to bleed together, merging, the memories of his Owen beginning to surface into this Owen’s mind. Not that he’d be conscious of it. But it was definitely a sign that things were starting to get critical. He needed Ianto back, and then he needed to get the hell out of this reality.

He waited, watching until Owen and Tosh had disappeared into the hotel and then flipped open the cover on his vortex manipulator. He accessed information on James Harper, all kinds of facts and figures jumping out at him. But there was only one he was interested in; known associates. Someone somewhere was about to sell him a whole bunch of weapons.

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Ianto shifted in the hard plastic seat, arms and shoulders starting to go numb from the way they’d secured his wrists behind him and then bound them to the lower back of the chair. They’d left him alone in a bare room, one wall taken up by a two-way mirror, but he knew the solitude wouldn’t last. Maybe they were hoping if he was left to his own thoughts for long enough, he’d be more on edge when they began to question him. Really, all they were doing was giving him more time to get his thoughts in order and settle on a line of defence for himself.

The door to the room finally opened and Colonel Preston walked in, followed by another man in a white coat. Kind of like a doctor, but Ianto got the feeling he wasn’t one of the UNIT doctors who treated the injured. He was carrying a case, which he set on the floor not far from Ianto’s boots.

“Captain Jones,” Preston greeted, stopping a few steps in front of him with his hands clasped behind his back. “I expect your full cooperation in answering all questions put to you.”

“And if I refuse?” he asked, needing to test the waters.

Of course, Preston looked unimpressed with this. “Then this will quickly become rather unpleasant for you.”

Preston’s attention slid over to the doctor who had started unpacking some kind of straps and equipment from the case. A surge of apprehension sliced through him as the doctor unbuttoned Ianto’s shirtsleeve and shoved it out of the way, securing a strap around his wrist that turned out to be made of some kind of thin, flexible metal. It was cold against his skin as the doctor moved around him and repeated the same on his other wrist.

“What is this, some kind of lie detector?” he asked as the doctor shoved up the legs of his cargo...
pants and secured a strap around each lower calf. Lastly, a thicker strap was wrapped around his neck, leaving cold sweat blooming on his lower back.

“Let’s call it incentive,” Preston answered with a sharp, chilling smile. Once the doctor stood back, holding some kind of PDA, Preston paced a few steps closer.

“Captain Jones, do you have a valid reason for abandoning your post in Cardiff during the search of the old Torchwood Three base following a rift anomaly?”

Ianto sent him a serene smile. “Family emergency?”

Preston cast a look at the doctor, who tapped a command into the PDA. A second later, some kind of current erupted from all the cuffs and straps wrapped around him, racing over his skin. At first, it felt a little weird, if not uncomfortable, but then suddenly, every muscle in his body clenched in a painful spasm. It only lasted a moment, but it was enough to strangle the breath right out of his lungs and left him feeling slightly nauseous. He panted, trying to catch his breath while his muscles twitched with aftershocks. What the hell was that thing? Some kind of UNIT-sanctioned torture device? If he hadn’t already been having second thoughts about working for UNIT since meeting Jack, this would have sealed the deal.

“I’ll ask again,” Preston said once the sensations had subsided. “Why did you abandon your post in Cardiff?”

Ianto tensed, even before he answered, knowing full well what he was inviting on himself this time. “Something came up. Personal nature. I’d rather not discuss it.”

Preston nodded at the doctor and this time when the currents started, they intensified much quicker and lasted much longer. He clenched his jaw, riding it out, unable to do anything else, chest aching since he couldn’t breathe while the muscles surrounding his lungs were clamping around his internal organs. By the time the current shut off, black dots were swimming in his vision, tears dribbling down his face, the churning in his stomach much worse this time.

“We’ve tested this device quite extensively, you know,” Preston said conversationally, taking up pacing in front of him. “It’s calibrated to fire the nerves and light up all the pain centres in your brain. Maximum agony with minimal mess.”

“Trust UNIT to come up with something so horrifically efficient,” he replied, voice rasping.

“You’d be amazed at how long a person can last using this device,” Preston continued as if he hadn’t said anything. “The lack of physical trauma means the body can cope much, much longer before beginning to shut down or overload from shock.”

Not bothering to even ask him a question this time, Preston motioned at the doctor who subjected him to another wave of suffocating pain. When it cut off, the colonel simply stood there and regarded him impassively.

“I won’t ask again,” Ianto panted, pushing straighter in the chair from where he’d slumped during the last sustained burst from the device. His limbs were shaking, body feeling like it was liquefying from the inside out. Who knew, maybe it was. “And you just tell me what you want from me.”

Preston’s lips quirked into a sharp smile. “Always heard you were highly intelligent, Jones. One of the good ones. Your commanding officer back in Cardiff is absolutely convinced you must have been affected by some alien device or forced against your will.”
Preston came closer, eyes hard and cold as he stared down at him. “I’ve see the CCTV footage, captured in an alley a few streets over from the Plass. It certainly didn’t look like you were doing anything against you will. In fact, you looked rather intimately acquainted.”

His heart was racing, not from the pain and the stress on his body any longer, but from his mind quickly putting the pieces together. Jack. Preston had to be talking about Jack. Except they no doubt believed he was—

“So tell me.” Preston leaned over him in a way that was clearly meant to be intimidating. “How long have you known James Harper?”

“I don’t,” he replied immediately, but all that earned him was another agonizing burst from the device.

“I don’t,” he repeated, the words broken and halting, almost sounding desperate when he could draw breath again. “I know this is going to sound barmy, but that wasn’t James Harper. He looks like James Harper, but his name his Captain Jack Harkness.”

Preston clicked his tongue like he was an errant child and yet another wave of searing pain lit through him. This time it lasted until his vision was fading and he was on the edge of passing out. But Preston wouldn’t let him go under. The colonel slapped him hard in the face, forcing him to wake up. Blood pooled in his mouth and he spat it at his feet—whether from Preston slapping him or the fact he’d bitten his lip while the device had been brutalizing him, he didn’t know.

“All you have to do, Jones, is give us Harper and this will all be over.”

Ianto let his head fall back, neck muscles not working to hold him straight any longer.

“So you can lock me up for the rest of my life?” The words came out slurred, even his tongue feeling numb now.

“You conspired with the enemy. How did you think that was going to turn out for you?” Preston demanded, starting to seem frustrated for the first time. “Tell me how to find—”

Whatever words Preston was going to finish with were cut off as an alarm wailed to life.

“What the hell is going on?” Preston stalked over to the door, but before he could yank it open, another soldier burst in, practically tumbling in the doorway and just stopping short of colliding into the colonel.

“What is the meaning of this?” Preston demanded, tugging his jacket straight as the soldier seemed to gather himself.

“It’s James Harper, sir.” The soldier almost sounded panicked, but was clearly trying to maintain some dignity in front of the colonel.

“What about him?” Preston spat impatiently.

“He’s here, sir. And he’s demanding we release Captain Jones or he’s going to kill everyone in the building and then blow the entire site to kingdom come. Those were his exact words.”

Preston turned on him with a furious expression. “Still want to tell me you don’t know James Harper?”

He shook his head, brain hiccupping over the facts, sluggish, not able to put any thoughts into any
order that made sense. He didn’t know James Harper. Why would that psychopath care about him? How did the man even know—

Finally, his mind kicked the last cobwebs of pain and rebooted itself. Jack. It had to be Jack, impersonating James Harper and mounting some idiotic rescue when he’d specifically told him not to.

Preston had turned back to the younger soldier. “You can tell Harper that we won’t negotiate with terrorists—”

A distant boom reverberated through the room, subtly shaking them all and rattling the windows. The young soldier became even more pale than he had been.

“Sir?” he all but squeaked, staring at the colonel with wide eyes.

“Damn it! Where’s our defences? Why isn’t anyone fighting back?” Preston yelled. “He’s just one man!”

“We—we don’t know where he is, exactly. He shut down the entire security grid and has been communicating through our radios. But he’s somehow blocked it so we can’t communicate with each other.”

Preston held out a hand impatiently, then snatched the radio when the young soldier held it out.

“This is Colonel Preston. All command squadron leaders, report immediately.”

“Sorry, Colonel Preston, your men can’t answer their radios right now.” Jack’s voice came loud and clear through the radio, brash American tones and a hint of amusement as if he was highly enjoying himself. The bloody impossible man probably was. Ianto released a long breath, those few words, knowing Jack was coming for him, sending a swelling rush of relief through him.

“James Harper, you have intruded on a secure UNIT site. By order of regulation seventeen, section—”

“Don’t quote me UNIT regs when I’m this pissed off, Colonel Preston,” Jack interrupted in a hard voice, all previous levity gone now. “You have something that belongs to me, and I want him back.”

Preston turned to him, both eyebrows shooting up toward his hairline, all kinds of surprise and speculation flashing across the Colonel’s face, but Ianto was so exhausted from the agony, while echoing twitches of pain spasmed through him every now and then, that he couldn’t be bothered caring what Preston thought of Jack’s statement.

“Captain Ianto Jones,” Preston answered. “Yes, I have him. He’s a traitor.”

“Maybe in this reality. But in my reality, he’s a hero,” Jack answered in short, impatient tones, leaving Preston looking confused. “I’m giving you three minutes to bring him to the same side entrance he entered through earlier, or I’m going to start killing your men. And when they’re all dead, I’ve rigged this place with enough explosives to leave nothing but a smoking crater on the streetscape.”

Preston visibly swallowed. They all knew James Harper’s reputation. If they were really facing down the man in question, there’d be no doubt that Harper would follow through with this threat and probably relish every second of it. Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, it was really Jack Harkness on the other end of that radio and Ianto knew this was one huge bluff. Jack wouldn’t kill
a whole base of soldiers if they refused to let him go… At least he didn’t think so.

“I’m waiting for an answer, Preston,” Jack growled through the radio, sounding suitably menacing. If Ianto didn’t know him so well, he would have said Jack seemed ready and willing to follow through on every threat he’d made.

“Hurry up, Colonel,” Jack continued to press. “Because I will get Ianto Jones back. One way or another.”
Chapter 12

Jack kept his gaze trained on the door Ianto had walked into only hours earlier. With a gun in each hand and the smoking remains of the gate and guard house behind him, he knew he was going to make an impression when those bastards finally brought Ianto out like he’d demanded.

This was the biggest con he’d pulled in a long, long time. For a start, his trump card was non-existent. He’d only managed to get his hands on enough explosives to make a spectacle of the farthest and most empty building on the site—the old guard house, clearly not used any longer in favour of more high-tech security. He definitely didn’t have the entire place rigged to explode if his demands weren’t met. He also didn’t have enough ammo to kill every solider in the building—not that he would if it came to that anyway. No, he was completely banking on James Harper’s psychotic reputation and hoping he wouldn’t be forced to show his hand.

He checked his watch, finding two-an-a-half of the three minutes were already up. Just as he started debating whether he needed to get back on the radio and remind Colonel Preston of what he was supposed to be doing, the door flung open. Two soldiers came out, all but dragging Ianto between them. Jack strode across the open space, undoubtedly looking pissed as he approached them.

“What the hell did you do to him?” he demanded.

Neither of the soldiers answered, instead they practically dropped Ianto into his arms and then scurried back inside.

Jack caught Ianto’s weight against his chest, steadying him before he cupped a hand on Ianto’s cheek. His skin was clammy, the muscles of his body rock hard and too-tense. He seemed to only be half conscious.

“Ianto? You with me?” Jack’s pulse was thrumming with anger and apprehension, wishing he had those explosives to blow this place to hell after all.

“I’m fine... now.” Ianto’s words came out through a rigid jaw, voice hoarse. “Just get me out of here.”

“Okay, I’ve got you.” Jack adjusted his hold on Ianto and led him over to the stolen SUV. He’d have to dump it a few blocks from here and find some other way to get back to the hotel, because he had no doubt UNIT would track it to try and find them.

As he helped Ianto into the passenger side, he was moving stiffly, jaw still clenched, but Jack couldn’t tell if he was in pain or just experience the after -affects. Unfortunately, he couldn’t take the time to check him over until they were safe back at the hotel.

Damn it, he hated that Preston was going to get away with this. If it wasn't so critical he escape this reality as soon as possible, he’d be making sure Preston found out exactly what happened when someone hurt the people he cared about.

Instead he focused his fury into his driving, speeding away from the UNIT site and immediately losing the tail they tried to put on him.

He took a few extra turns just to be sure, and when he estimated they were at least half way back to the hotel, he pulled into a crowded parking garage and put the SUV in an empty space. Hurrying around, he yanked open the passenger door, reaching for Ianto’s arm and gently helping him out.
“Where are we?” Ianto asked groggily, looking around in confusion. He’s almost fallen into a doze a few times during the drive, but had jerked awake over and over.

“We need to swap cars. UNIT will be tracking this one.” He ducked his head and looped Ianto’s arm over his shoulder. They left the SUV behind, walking several rows over. When Jack spotted another SUV, this one black and the same model as their trusty Torchwood vehicle—just without the extra upgrades—he decided to take it as a sign and led Ianto over to it. His wristband made short work of the alarms and locks, and in another few moments, they were speeding out of the parking garage, this time headed directly for the hotel, the sun setting behind the buildings as streetlights flickered on above.

When they arrived, Owen was waiting for them just inside the doors.

“How’s Tosh?” Jack asked, arm around Ianto’s waist, though he did seem a little steadier.

“Fed, clothed and sleeping,” Owen answered, getting in on Ianto’s other side and helping take some of his weight. “What did they do to him?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t said much and I was too busy making sure we weren’t followed.”

“He can hear you and would appreciate not being talked about as if he’s not even here,” Ianto said, voice still hoarse but sarcasm in good working order.

“Rightio, don’t get your pants in a twist,” Owen replied as they approached the room.

Inside, they took Ianto over to the bed and let him go. He sunk onto the mattress with a groan, gingerly stretching out like he was hurting somewhere.

“So?” Owen prodded, picking up his wrist to take his pulse.

“I don’t know,” Ianto replied, flinging an arm over is face to cover his eyes. “Some kind of device. It delivered electric currents that made all my muscles spasm until it felt like my whole body was on fire. Does that answer your question?”

Owen’s brows shot up as he cut Jack a look, like he was searching for confirmation. Jack just shrugged. He’d never heard of anything like it before.

“Are you still in pain?” Owen let go of his wrist and started running his hands impersonally over Ianto’s limbs, like he was searching for any breaks or damage.

“Everywhere aches and I feel stiff all over. But it doesn’t hurt like it did when they—” Ianto broke off with a sharp breath. Jack shifted to sit on the edge of the bed and took his hand.

“What do you think?” he asked Owen, hoping there was something they could do to ease Ianto’s discomfort.

“His muscles are like stone. I’d suggest a soak in a hot bath first, and if that doesn’t work, I can see about sourcing a muscle relaxant.” Owen straightened, settling an expectant look on him. “If he starts having any muscle spasms or the pain gets worse, call me right away. Don’t leave him unattended in the bath just in case. We don’t know what this thing did to him, so I don’t want to find out later you let him drown. I’ll check back in two hours to see how he’s going.”

Jack reached out and clasped Owen’s forearm for a moment. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Owen replied with a nod. “Just try to get him to relax, any kid of tension isn’t
going to help him at this point.”

Jack arched an eyebrow at him, unable to help the grin that slipped across his face. There were certain types of tension he was very good at taking care of.

Owen held up his hands. “I don’t want to know. I’m going to go check on Toshiko.”

Jack gave a short laugh as the doctor hurried from the room. Once the door had closed behind him, Jack looked down at Ianto, who hadn’t moved or said anything, despite the innuendo going on above him.

“Don’t fall asleep, I’m going to go get the bath started.”

Ianto made a noise that might have been an agreement—or maybe it was a disagreement, he really couldn’t tell. Either way, he gave Ianto’s hand a squeeze, before setting it down and hurrying into the bathroom.

He took off his jacket and tossed it over the shower rail, then opened the taps, adjusting the temperature to make sure it was right, and found some bath oils to add to the water. When he was satisfied with his efforts, he stripped off all of his own clothes, but left on his underwear.

Out in the main room, Ianto hadn’t moved, not that Jack had expected him to. He reached down and took Ianto’s arm, gently pulling him up.

“Come on, bath time. Doctor’s orders.”

Ianto groaned as he got upright, then blinked open his eyes. His brow creased as he took Jack in, that adorable confused expression on his features Jack had always loved so much.

“I thought I was getting in the bath.”

“You are.” Jack drew him to his feet, relieved to find he was definitely steadier now.

“Then why are you undressed?” Ianto asked as he shuffled after him, wincing a little.

“Because I’m getting in too,” Jack told him in a stage whisper.

Ianto arched a disbelieving brow at him.

“What?” he demanded, a little defensive. “It’s a big bath. And someone needs to make sure you don’t have any muscle spasms and drown.”

Ianto huffed a sigh, but surprisingly didn’t argue as they stopped next to the tub, which was filling quickly, Jack took a moment to check the water temperature was still good, then turned his attention to helping Ianto strip out of his clothes. True to what Owen said, all of his muscles were taut, straining beneath the skin and rock hard. Jack could only imagine how uncomfortable he must be. He just hoped this bath would do him some good.

Once Ianto was undressed, Jack slipped off his own underwear and then climbed into the bath, lowering himself into the gently steaming water.

“Come on.” Jack held up a hand, looking at Ianto expectantly.

He hesitated, teeth worrying his lower lip.

“Don’t make me wrestle you into this bath, Ianto Jones.”
His expression must have been suitably serious, because Ianto seemed to take that threat to heart. He quickly and carefully stepped into the tub, gingerly lowering himself between Jack’s leg. Jack set a hand on each hip, guiding and supporting him until he was sitting, hunched forward a little.

“You call that relaxing?” He slid his hands up Ianto’s sides as he shot a scowl over his shoulder at him.

Jack pulled on his shoulders, drawing him back. Ianto resisted a little, but finally gave in and reclined against his chest—still tense and holding himself rigid, but it was a start.

“That’s more like it,” Jack said into his ear, not failing to feel the shiver that chased through Ianto’s body after he said the words.

Reaching over, he grabbed the bath oils from where he’d left them on the edge of the tub—a pleasant mix of sage and sandalwood. He poured a generous amount into his palm and then took Ianto’s left arm. He methodically worked the muscles from his wrist to his shoulder, loosening them up as best he could. By the time he poured some more oil and started on the right arm, Ianto had fully relaxed against him, soft noises of relief crossing his lips every now and then.

Though he had nothing on his mind except working the ache out of every single muscle in Ianto’s body, he couldn’t help his own reaction at being naked and up against the other man. And there was no way to hide it, not with the way his hips were pressed to Ianto’s lower back. But either Ianto didn’t mind or didn’t care. He didn’t say anything about it and didn’t try to shift away.

Once he’d finished with the right arm, he helped himself to yet more oil and murmured for Ianto to sit forward. Now, he concentrated his efforts on Ianto’s neck and back, smoothing out each muscle, allowing himself to be guided by Ianto—the way his breath hitched, or when a moan escaped, or when he pressed himself into Jack’s hands.

After a while, Ianto slouched almost boneless against his chest again, a low, appreciative groan escaping him.

“Feeling better now?” Jack murmured, smoothing his oil-slicked hands down Ianto’s chest. Now, however, he had to admit to himself that he was no longer working on stiff muscles, but learning the shape and feel of Ianto’s body. Enjoying the sensation of flesh beneath his palms far more than he probably should have. “Do you want me to massage your legs as well?”

It’d require some logistics—they’d probably have to shift positions, because he couldn’t reach from where he was sitting at Ianto’s back. But Ianto shook his head.

“I’m good,” he murmured lazily, entire body weight sunk against him now.

Jack smiled, pressing a kiss into his neck, leaving Ianto shuddering and tilting his head to the side, like he wanted more. Emboldened, Jack trailed his lips over his jaw as Ianto turned his head, shifting to reach his mouth. The kiss was languid and lazy, but oh-so-good, sending fire unfurling through his veins. He caressed in widening circles, from his chest over the rippling muscles of his abdomen and back up again. On his next sweep downward, Ianto shifted his hips restlessly, and giving up any pretences, Jack slid his hand further down, wrapping his fingers around Ianto’s deliciously hard cock.

Ianto moaned, bucking into his palm, so Jack tightened his hold a little and set into a slow rhythm, stroking the length, working the base all the way to the tip and back down again. Ianto moved with him, counter time to the strokes, deepening the thrust, pressing back against Jack’s own erection with every other movement. The friction was teasing, driving him to distraction. With a growl, he
set his free hand on Ianto’s hip, pulling him back harder to increase the drag of their bodies against his straining cock.

He sucked a spot just below Ianto’s ear, and it ended up being the last spark to ignite the inferno. Ianto groaned his name, his fingers clamping on his thigh and jerking against his hand as he came. His name rolling from Ianto’s lips, roughened with passion, sent Jack over the edge as well, and he pulled Ianto more tightly against him as he came between their bodies.

Ianto released a long sigh, sinking against him again.

“Was that doctor’s orders as well?” Ianto murmured, sounding sleepy.

“If not, it definitely should have been.” He gently kissed the spot on Ianto’s neck he’d been sucking on earlier, a faint bruise forming near his hair line. Whoops. He hoped Ianto didn’t have a problem with love bites. “Come on, let’s get you into bed.”

Ianto made some kind of noise, maybe because he didn’t want to move after such a blissful orgasm. But the water was getting cool and Ianto obviously needed to sleep. Besides, after everything that had happened, right now all Jack wanted to do was curl up with Ianto in his arms under a pile of blankets and pretend like the rest of the world and all his problems didn’t exist...if only for a few hours.
Chapter 13

Ianto half-woke as he kicked the blankets away; Jack’s arm draped across his chest, one leg thrown over his thighs and body generating the same amount of heat as a small furnace. As he started to cool off again now the blankets were gone, he immediately started drifting back to sleep, and the vague thought crossed his mind that rolling away from Jack’s octopus impersonation probably would have cooled him down faster. There was no denying, however, that he was enjoying the feel of Jack pressed up against him way too much to move.

Even though he hadn’t fully sunk back into sleep, images started playing through his head, flashes of pictures, hints of emotion, the quality almost like memory, not a dream. They started gaining in clarity, becoming more vivid. At first, he thought he was having a nightmare about Canary Wharf, even though it’d been years since his sleep had been disturbed by those recollections. Except events started unravelling differently. Lisa wasn’t converted and sucked into the void, instead he found her in a state of half-conversion. Followed by him sobbing desperately while she screamed in pain as he dragged her from the ruins of Torchwood Tower. Then she was in another conversion unit, this one keeping her alive, in a dark, dank basement somewhere. Then there was blood—so much blood—and a dead body he was somehow responsible for. Then Jack was shoving a gun in his face, expression twisted with fury and betrayal. Then he was on his knees, sobbing once again and surrounded by death, Jack staring down at him dispassionately, his heart broken—his entire self broken—so thoroughly he couldn’t imagine being whole ever again.

The images shifted, emotion fracturing and reforming. He watched Jack disappear through a portal in a different basement with dark satisfaction, only to chase him through it a few minutes later. But Jack was dead—oh God, he’d killed Jack. But no, he gave him CPR and Jack gasped back to life. Next, they were sitting in an SUV, rain drumming down on the roof. Jack was talking about being friends, but Ianto kissed him instead, then Jack told him just one night.

Except one night was never going to be enough. They were locked passionately together in an office he didn’t recognize but somehow knew belonged to Jack, over the desk, against the wall, on a couch that looked like it’d been in the exact same spot since the 1970s. In some kind of bunker, the back of the SUV, games with stopwatches and something Jack called naked hide and seek—each encounter had been singular, but yet another building block of his feelings for Jack, creating something intangible yet unfailingly solid.

But Jack died and he almost broke again. He returned just long enough to give Ianto hope, then disappeared without a word. When he finally came back, something about him was different, and they went on dates. Ate together at restaurants and held hands across the table despite some of the looks they got from other diners. Made out in dark movie theatres like they were teenagers. Snuggled on the couch and watched DVDs on Friday nights, spent lazy Sunday mornings in bed together. Weevil hunting and private jokes and him holding Jack when he died until he revived to ease the passing back and forth.

Except then it was all torn apart in a matter of days. Jack became withdrawn, made snarky comments about being a couple. Went off on his own without telling anyone what he was doing or why. And just when Ianto finally got through to him, he found himself lying on the checker-board patterned floor of some old-fashioned building, Jack’s arms wrapped almost too-tight around him as he gasped for breath. He knew he was dying. This was it, his last moments, Jack’s tears raining down on him, trailing over his skin like Jack’s fingers had done so many times.

Jack begged him not to leave—and God, he didn’t want to. His entire body was aching with the
knowledge of their end. That Jack would hurt, but he’d go on, and in a thousand years, Ianto wouldn’t even be a memory any longer. Christ, he loved Jack so much, more than he’d ever loved anyone, and it all came to this. But then it didn’t matter anymore because the darkness claimed him, his breath left his body and he slipped into oblivion. Then there was nothing but black and something shifting in the shadows.

Ianto gasped a slicing breath, clamping a hand in the middle of his chest, desperate for air as he surged up, startling Jack awake.

Bloody hell. For a second there, he’d been absolutely convinced that he’d died in Jack’s arms.

“Ianto! What’s wrong? Are you okay?” Jack’s hands were roaming his body, as if searching to make sure he wasn’t injured.

“I’m fine. It was a dream—just a dream. I think.” He shoved a shaking hand through his hair. “Christ, it was so real. I felt like I was living it.”

Jack slid a comforting hand across his shoulder blades. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“It started at Canary Wharf—I don’t know why, it’s been years since I’ve had any nightmares about that day. But then everything started happening differently.”

“How?” Jack asked, gaze sharp on him.

He told Jack about finding Lisa half-converted and everything else just tumbled out from there—even the parts about how he and Jack had almost been like a normal couple and fallen in love. With each passing moment, Jack’s expression became tighter, shadows creeping into his blue-grey eyes. When he talked about dying, Jack finally blinked and looked away, features contorting for a moment as though he was trying not to cry. There was no hiding the tears in Jack’s eyes, however. He didn’t understand how or why his dream would be so upsetting for Jack.

“I’m sorry,” he finally finished with, though he wasn’t sure what he was apologising for. “It was so bloody vivid. Like I could feel everything happening to me.”

Jack reached up and wiped a hand over his face. “It wasn’t a dream, Ianto.”

He gave a hollow laugh, Jack’s words sending a spike of apprehension through him. “Of course it was.”

Jack returned his gaze to him, eyes steady and too-serious. “They were memories. His memories. The Ianto from my reality.”

“What?” He shoved to his feet, no idea what the hell he was supposed to do with that information, not sure he believed it. “How is that possible?”

Jack got up a little more slowly, running a hand through his mussed hair. “Because I’m here, because the walls between realities are beginning to come down. Timelines are starting to bleed together. The same thing happened to Owen earlier, but he didn’t realise that’s what was going on. Just before I went to get you out of the UNIT site, he called you the teaboy. That was the nickname the Owen from my reality used for Ianto sometimes.”

“I’m remembering his memories,” he repeated slowly, mind spinning from the implications. “All of that actually happened. To him. To you.”

Jack nodded silently, emotion swimming in his gaze—most of it heartbreak.
“Jesus, Jack.” He blew out an uneven breath, hardly able to wrap his mind around experiencing the actual death of his other self. But not only that, the things he’d felt for Jack—the way he’d loved him. Ianto had never loved anyone that deeply, that uncontrollably, that intensely. Not even Lisa. He looked at Jack who was watching him warily, as though not sure what his reaction was going to be.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that.” The words seemed so inadequate, especially since all he could see in his mind was the heartbreak on Jack’s face, the tears streaming down his cheeks as he’d stared down and realised the other Ianto was slipping away from him forever.

Jack inhaled unevenly and glanced away from him. “I’ve lived a long time—so many lives—survived so much, seen horrors no person ever should. But that was one of the worst days of my life. I knew it was going to hurt when I lost him, and I thought I’d kept myself detached enough that it wouldn’t completely ruin me. Except I’d been lying to myself, not letting myself see how deeply I really loved him. Even worse than that, I never told him properly. The second he took his last breath, I knew how wrong I’d been, keeping that last tiny bit of distance between us. The regret was almost more painful than the heartbreak.”

Jack stared blindly at the wall, and in that expression, he could see how Jack had punished himself over this.

“I couldn’t get it out of my head. If only I’d told him properly. Six months after—there was this pub in Cardiff—the most haunted place in Wales. It wasn’t really haunted, just sitting on an active part of the rift. That night, I knew this ancient evil was going to try to escape the void between realities. I told myself I was going to close the rift once and for all—that was the only reason. But I also knew this ancient being had the power to bring back the one person you wanted to see most. Of all the people I’ve loved and lost, there was no question in my mind that Ianto would be the one I’d see.”

Jack moved to sit on the edge of the bed, looking worn down all of a sudden. Cautiously, not sure whether Jack would feel like he was intruding, he went over and sat next to him, but left a wide gap between them.

“I thought maybe it would be some kind of apparition. It never crossed my mind that it would actually be him—solid flesh. And worse, he didn’t remember dying. He thought we were there, working a case together like we used to. When he realised—when I told him—I think just for a split second he hated me. But then, he never could stay angry at me very long.”

Jack gave a sad laugh, staring down at where his hands were clasped between his knees.

“I was going to blow up the rift to seal it with me inside—probably spend the rest of eternity trapped in oblivion between realities. It seemed like the better option, when compared to living without him.” Jack took a slow breath. “I’ve loved and lost a lot of people, but I could always see a way to go on. When I lost Ianto, for the first time, I honestly wanted it all the end. When he found out my plan, he convinced me we could leave together. Forget the rift opening, let it be someone else’s problem. I didn’t even think twice about it. Sacrifice the world to get Ianto back? I jumped at the chance. Except once he made sure I was safely outside, he refused to come out. In the end, he was more noble, more of a hero than I’ll ever be. He saved me, saved the world. Sacrificed his second chance at life to close the rift.”

Ianto watched Jack as silence descended between them. Truthfully, he was a little in awe of his alter-self. Would he have found the strength to make the same sacrifices if he’d been in that kind of situation?
Except then his mind back-peddled over Jack’s words. He’d loved his Ianto so much, in that moment he’d been willing to sacrifice the entire world. The enormity of that made his lungs seize up. And then Jack had come here and fate had thrown him into Jack’s path. Not that Jack thought it was a coincidence—that cosmic check and balance thing, as he had put it yesterday.

God, no wonder Jack had looked so stunned—emotionally staggered—when they’d first laid eyes on each other.

“I’m sorry you had to experience that,” Jack finished, gaze sincere and tinted with sadness.

“I’m not.” The words came out almost automatically, but as they fell between them, he realised it was true. Of course, the dying part had been horrifying, but everything that came before it had been a kaleidoscope of the best and worst the world had to offer. His alter self may not have had a long life, but he’d lived in a way most others never did. In a way he himself hadn’t. Since Lisa and Canary Wharf, he’d played things safe, focused on his career, found a routine and stuck with it for better or worse. Maybe because it’d been easy. Or maybe because he hadn’t had Captain Jack Harkness to yank him into the blinding, brilliant sunshine of his world. And after all that, he now had a better understanding of Jack that otherwise would have taken years to find.

A question had edged into Jack’s expression, but he didn’t say anything, just stared at Ianto as if trying to understand.

Instead of trying to explain, because he wasn’t sure he could find the words, he slid closer to Jack and touched a finger to his chin. Slowly, he leaned in. Jack exhaled a second before their lips lightly touched. He brushed his mouth gently against Jack’s, the kiss a promise and a reassurance. Jack might have lost the other Ianto eight years ago, but now that he had those memories, it was like a little piece of him had revived. And that little piece was everything. He’d already felt an inexplicable loyalty to the man, but now it was fixed as firmly within him as Jack himself was a fixed point in time.

He deepened the kiss as he felt the tension leave Jack, the odd dual sensation of kissing him both new and comfortably familiar as those other memories effortlessly sunk into his consciousness like they’d always been there.

Jack finally moved, reaching up to cup his face. When they broke apart, Jack just stared at him, still with a hint of worry, but it was blurred with longing and hope.

“I’m here,” he said in a low murmur, and Jack’s breath caught. “I’m here, Jack.”

“Ianto—” Jack’s gaze was swimming with too many emotions, as though he didn’t know what to feel.

He shook his head and smoothed a hand through Jack’s mussed hair. “We still have the slight problem of reality collapsing if we don’t get you back to your own timeline. Anything else has to come second to that.”

A smiled flitted over Jack’s face before he sent Ianto an exasperated look. “You’re entirely too pragmatic, Ianto Jones.”

“It’s my biggest failing. If you have to call it that. Personally, I prefer to think of it as being sensible.”

“You would,” Jack said with a snort. He then paused, gaze roaming over him. “Are you okay, though? After getting bombarded by those memories and what happened with UNIT—”
“I’m fine.”

Jack arched a disbelieving brow.

“Okay, it feels a little like I’ve got a split personality now and I’m a little stiff and achy.”

This time Jack’s eyebrows were accompanied by a suggestive grin. “Stiff and achy, huh? That sounds like a problem.”

He couldn’t contain an eye roll. Of course, he’d opened himself right up to that one.

“Try that line on me again once I’ve had a few more hours’ sleep.” He clambered across the bed and settled back into the spot he’d been sleeping in; the sheets now cool enough that he shivered.

Jack cast a long, lingering glance along his body, before shifting over to join him, pulling the blankets over them both and resuming his octopus impersonation. This time, however, Ianto turned into him, wrapping his own arms around Jack and tangling their legs together as Jack tucked his nose into the crook of his neck. Ianto rested his cheek against his head, wishing the threat of reality collapsing wasn’t hanging over them, that he could acquaint himself with Jack’s body and discover all the pleasures he’d never before experienced.

Instead, he forced himself to relax—not hard when he’d already been running on day without sleep before UNIT had even got their hands on him. His body was still exhausted and quickly dragging him down to sleep. As he drifted off, this time his mind was full of his own Jack memories—teasing him over the radio stations on the drive from Cardiff, kissing him in the bar, Jack swaggering to his rescue in the UNIT prison, and finally the way Jack had taken care of him when they’d gotten back to the hotel. He only wished they could make a million more memories that were his to treasure—but Jack belonged in a whole other reality.

For a short time, he’d gotten Jack all to himself; a brief, bright, blur of colour in the darkness. But all too soon, he would have to give him up and return to the shadows.
Chapter 14

Jack awoke a few hours later, just on dawn, if the grey light creeping in around the edges of the curtains was any indication. Like often happened with him, one second he was deep asleep and the next he was wide awake with none of the drowsiness in between.

He wasn’t interested in getting out of bed, however. Not with Ianto snuggled up against him. At some point he’d rolled over to his other side, and now Ianto’s chest was pressed against his back, one of his arms draped across his hip and his hand curled just below Jack’s heart. He threaded his fingers with Ianto’s, pulling his arm more firmly around himself and tried to enjoy the simplicity of it, let it sink into his very being when he’d thought he’d lost the chance to have moments like this ever again.

But all his problems—universe ending problems—were crowding his mind, no matter how he tried to keep them out.

And when a tugging started in his midsection, he prayed it would go away and not get worse like it had yesterday morning. Unfortunately, it didn’t go away, it grew stronger, expanding up into his chest and soon taking over his entire body. The time vortex, the living, powerful force inside him that ran through every reality, every distant part of the universe, both past and future, the single focused entity and multi-dimensional, faceted energy that gave life and stole breath. It all existed within him, always quiet so that he hadn’t known or understood what had made him who he was. But now it was like a wounded behemoth that would destroy everything in its path when it broke free.

The pain compounded on itself, building and building until he lurched out of bed to throw himself on the floor, cold sweat breaking out on his skin, mind unable to comprehend the burning and tearing going on within him. The rumbling started up again, within him and around him as the building shook, making the light fixtures on the ceiling tinkle and a few things tumble off tables and desks to the floor.

Distantly, he realised Ianto was calling his name, then he felt hands on his shoulders, rolling him over. He was no longer in control of his limbs, like a rag doll as Ianto pulled him up into his lap. His head was throbbing, and for a second, the hysterical thought that it might actually burst like an overripe melon wended through his mind.

It seemed his heart should have been what he really worried about, however, as a second later he felt it give out on him, giving a final strained race of beats before stopping altogether. As he sunk into death—like going down into the deepest, darkest waters until the light of the surface was nothing but a pinprick—he hoped it wouldn’t take him too long to revive. It was getting worse, the barriers between realities getting weaker, the effects this time enough to kill him. But then the last little light winked out and the shadows took him.

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Air sucked back into his lungs on a strained gasp, his entire body tensing as life resumed as though it’d never been gone. He was propped up against Ianto’s chest, while Ianto sat on the floor, reclining back against the edge of the bed, the blankets a tumbled waterfall of material streaming down beside him where he’d obviously flung them in a hurry to get out of bed.

Ianto’s arms were firmly wrapped around him, and Jack clung onto his biceps as his mind tore itself free of the last few shadows, while the primal fear and pain synonymous with death released
its grip and faded away.

As he struggled to regain control of his breathing as his heart stuttered itself back into a normal rhythm, Ianto threaded his fingers through his hair.

“It’s okay, you’re back now,” Ianto murmured, before leaning down to kiss his forehead.

He started to pull back again, but Jack clamped a hand onto the back of his next and drew him in again, sealing their mouths together in a life-affirming kiss. Ianto immediately relaxed into it, almost acquiescent as Jack shifted around and straddled his legs, then pressed himself into Ianto’s chest, needing to feel all of him so he could pretend just for a second that he wasn’t in one of the worst situations of his entire long life and their time together wasn’t fleeting.

After a long moment, he broke the kiss to stare at Ianto, both of them breathing unsteadily.

“It’s getting worse, isn’t it?” Ianto asked in a low voice, blue eyes darkened with deep concern.

“We might not have much longer before—” He couldn’t say the words, they caught in his chest, made his throat tighten, and in the end, all he could do was take an unsteady breath.

What if the next attack didn’t just kill him, but the time vortex within him did tear free like it felt like it was going to and caused reality to collapse around him? He couldn't wait anymore. Somehow, within the next twenty-four hours, he needed to escape this reality.

“What are we going to do, then?” Ianto’s fingers were running back and forth through his hair at the back of his head and even at a time like this, it was almost too distracting.

“We need to get Toshiko back to Cardiff. There’s a rift manipulator in the Torchwood Three hub. With any luck, we can use the information recorded on my vortex manipulator from when I came here and reverse engineer whatever caused me to come through realities instead of time.”

Ianto started to nod, but a thumping sounded on the door.

“Oi, you two! You alright in there?”

Jack stood and held out a hand to help Ianto to his feet as he sighed. While Ianto hurried over to pull on his pants, Jack simple whipped a sheet off the bed and held it around his hips as he strode for the door.

Both Owen and Tosh stood on the other side. He didn’t even get to say anything before Owen barged in. Tosh hung back, looking less certain, her eyes creeping over his bare chest and then darting past him to where Ianto was similarly half dressed.

“Please, come in, Tosh,” he waved a hand to indicate she should step past him and added a charming, easy smile. “Apparently we’re having an importune team meeting.”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with a nod and stepped forward. The navy slacks, soft cream cotton top and deep purple cardigan were quite close to something his own Tosh would have worn. This Tosh, however, had a long plait swinging down her back and fine lines at the corner of her eyes. Most people probably would have called them laughter lines, but considering she’d spent a decade in a UNIT prison, they were more likely worry or stress lines. Still, she was as gorgeous as his Tosh had been, and he knew she’d be just as brilliant when he put her to work on the rift manipulator.

“So, Jack, I’m assuming that was another one of your earthquakes.” Owen threw himself down into
an armchair and slouched.

“Unfortunately, yes. Sorry if it woke you.” He went over and grabbed up his clothes, noting that Ianto was already dressed and crossing the room toward the door.

“I’ll go chase up some coffee and breakfast, if there’s any staff downstairs.”

Before anyone could answer, he’d slipped out into the hallway.

Jack excused himself and went into the bathroom to dress—not for any modesty on his own part, but for Tosh and Owen’s sake since he was a stranger and still mostly working on first impressions, especially where Tosh was concerned. The other Tosh and Owen had inadvertently seen him naked a handful of times. He couldn’t help grinning as he remembered Owen’s snarky bluster and Tosh’s deep blush but appreciative stare. It’d usually been after getting gooped in some way by an alien. But there had been that one time they caught him and Ianto right in the middle of what had admittedly been some rather spectacular sex… And the second they’d walked in had been the moment he and Ianto had just been a bit too far over the edge to pull back.

Owen had then managed to mention it everyday for weeks on end, giving Ianto hell over it until Ianto had found some way to shut him up. Neither of them had spoken about it, but whatever it’d been had worked a treat, leaving Owen suitably chastised and Ianto somewhat smug. Considering Ianto probably would have made one hell of an evil genius had he put his mind to it, he could only imagine whatever form his retribution had taken, it had been inventive to say the least.

He came out of the bathroom to find Owen and Tosh chatting as if they’d already connected in the few hours since they’d pulled Tosh out of the UNIT site. Considering how close Owen and Tosh had been at the end, he wasn’t surprised—probably more effects from realities bleeding together, though they wouldn’t realise that’s what was drawing them to one another.

The door opened as Jack sat down at the table to Ianto pushing a cart with everything he needed to make coffee sitting on top.

“Swiped this from the kitchen.” Ianto’s voice held a note of excitement. “They literally have no other guests checked in and didn’t seem to mind. Someone is going to bring up breakfast in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, Ianto,” he murmured, then turned his attention to Tosh and Owen who were staring at him expectantly.

“So, we broke the genius out of the UNIT prison, what’s next?” Owen demanded, never one to pussy-foot around.

“Now we head to Cardiff,” Jack said, repeating what he’d said to Ianto as coffees appeared in front of everyone.

Owen immediately picked his up and took a sip, but then paused to eye Ianto. “This is perfect. How did you know how I take my coffee?”

Tosh had also taken a sip of hers and was staring at Ianto in surprise.

“I— um…” Ianto looked at him helplessly, clearly unsure of how to answer.

“He has memories from the Ianto in my reality. And that Ianto knew without a conscious thought how everyone on the team liked their coffee.”
“He has what now?” Owen said, sounding part-sceptical, part-pissed-off, which was a pretty standard Owen response.

Ianto sighed and dropped to sit. “Last night, I had this dream. At least I thought it was a dream until I woke up and Jack told me it all happened. In his reality, to the other Ianto.”

“Okay, everyone is aware of how completely barmy that sounds, right?” Owen crossed his arms, but Jack could see something in his dark gaze, some hint of worry.

“What is it, Owen?” he asked gently.

Instead of answering, Owen glanced at Tosh.

“I had weird dreams last night too,” Owen reluctantly said, which made Tosh nod.

“I did as well. They seemed so real.” She tore her gaze from Owen to stare down into her coffee.

“I already knew you were affected, Owen,” Jack confessed. “Yesterday afternoon, before I left to go get Ianto, you said bring back the teaboy in one piece.”

“You pulled me up on it,” Owen’s confusion deepened. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Jack shrugged. “No time, plus I was hoping it wouldn’t get this bad so quickly.”

Owen gave a harsh laugh. “You were right, I did die twice. The second time was—” Owen glanced away, expression contorting as if struggling to keep his composure. Tosh reached out and took his hand.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.”

Owen sent her a tremulous smile and took her hand in his. “Guess this explains why it felt like my heart was going to explode out of my chest when I first laid eyes on you in that UNIT prison block.”

Tosh blushed prettily, her smile widening.

“I know it’s hard, now that you have all their memories, but try to remember it technically wasn’t you.” Jack said, hoping they could keep their personalities septate. The last thing he needed was any of them having some kind of breakdown.

“Actually, it’s easier to accept it and let the memories integrate into your mind,” Tosh replied matter-of-factly. “If you fight them or try to block them out, that’s more likely to cause mental strain.”

He arched an eyebrow in Tosh’s direction. “Know a thing or two about dealing with the memories of your alter self when the walls between realities start weakening?”

She blushed a little, but kept his gaze, not ducking her head like his Tosh might have done. No doubt she’d had to learn to toughen up the hard way after all those years in that UNIT prison.

“It’s basic mental health care,” she replied, almost sternly. “Admitting to the issue is one of the biggest steps to dealing with it.”

“So it’s like we actually have that split personality thing?” From Owen’s tone of voice, it seemed his doctor side was well and truly interested.
“Dissociative Identity Disorder,” Tosh corrected. “No, what we’re experiencing is more like Schizophrenia if you really want to define an inter-dimensional shift into terms of mental illness.”

Owen’s lips quirked in a quick smile. “Some of us are lagging several IQ points behind you, Tosh, so yes, we do have to stay in our lanes and define the world by our limited views.”

Tosh returned his smile and the instant amity between them was obvious.

“So,” Jack said, regaining control of the conversation. “We’re heading to Cardiff and breaking into the Torchwood Three base, where Tosh can get intimately acquainted with the rift manipulator.”

Tosh waved a hand as she took another sip of coffee. “Oh, I know that thing inside out.”

“You do?” Jack stared at her in surprise. But it was a good surprise, because now they’d saved themselves possibly hours of time where Jack had thought he’d have to explain to her how the rift and the rift manipulator worked. “How do you know anything about it?”

Tosh caught him with a level stare over the top of her coffee mug. “Who do you think UNIT got to seal the rift after Canary Wharf?”
A heavy, surprised silence had fallen over the room in wake of Tosh’s announcement. Ianto didn’t think Jack could look more shocked, except the expression was quickly giving way to pride.

“I should have guessed.” Jack reached over and clasped her hand with a quick laugh. “One of the reasons I snatched my Tosh up from beneath UNIT’s nose, I knew they’d eventually figure out what—or should I say who—they’d gotten a hold of and take advantage of it. But sealing the rift? That’s something else. Honestly, I shouldn’t be surprised. My Tosh understood the rift in a way no one else did as well. She built this amazing predictor program, among other brilliant things. Don’t know why I never considered putting her on finding a way to seal it.”

Tosh shrugged as though it wasn’t a big deal when it clearly was.

“It took me a while, but I eventually worked it out.”

Jack’s grin widened as he brought Tosh’s hand up and pressed a kiss into the back of it.

“Toshiko Sato, you’re amazing.”

She blushed, tilting her head down a little as she swirled the last of the coffee in her cup, a small smile playing over her lips.

Before anyone could say anything else, however, a discreet knock sounded at the door.

“That’ll be breakfast,” he said, getting to his feet and hurrying over to let whoever it was.

Pulling open the door, he found George behind the cart. It didn’t have breakfast on it, however, just a couple of newspapers. And if he wasn’t mistaken, George looked a little nervous.

“Your newspapers as requested, sir.”

He knew he must have been staring at the older man in confusion, because he hadn’t asked for any newspapers when he’d gone down to get the coffee cart and request breakfast. George looked pointedly down and Ianto followed his gaze to a note sticking out from one of the folded newspapers.

“Of course,” he finally answered, picking up the paper with the note. “Thank you.”

George gave a tight nod, definitely looking serious now, before backing up and hurrying down the hallway. Ianto swung the door closed and pulled the note out of the paper.

Don’t say anything, they’re listening. The hotel is surrounded, a block out in every direction. UNIT soldiers, getting ready to move in. Tom and I assumed they might have been after a certain Captain Jones… this hotel has a unique history and we often look into certain guests using particular contacts of ours—old habits die hard. I’d recommend checking out post-haste. And good luck. G & T.

By the time he finished reading the note, both his eyebrows were almost at his hairline in surprise.

“Um, Jack?”

Jack looked up from where he’d still been speaking with Tosh and Owen. Ianto practically threw the note at him and then hurried over to pack what few possessions he’d taken out of his rucksack.
“And that is exactly why this is the only hotel I’ll stay at in London.” Jack shoved the note in his trouser pocket and quickly whirled his coat around his shoulders, shoving his arms into the sleeves.

“What’s happening?” Owen asked, getting to his feet in alarm as he reached down to take Tosh’s hand.

“UNIT are coming, we have to move.”

No one uttered a single question or complaint as they rushed out of the room and followed Jack down a back flight of servant’s stairs that opened onto the kitchen. There were two staff milling around, and an older man sitting by an old-fashioned open fireplace, newspaper in his hand and pipe in his mouth with a pot of tea next to his elbow on the scarred wooden bench.

“Tom, good to see you again,” Jack threw at him as they hurried past.

“Hope you enjoyed your stay. Safe travels,” Tom said without even lowering his paper, as if they weren’t running for their lives.

They banged through the back service entrance, but Jack immediately pulled to a stop. Ianto only just managed to prevent himself from running headlong into Jack, but Owen’s reflexes apparently weren’t that good and the doctor plowed into him, knocking him into Jack.

He shot a frown over his shoulder and Owen at least had the good grace to look somewhat sheepish. However, he was quickly distracted by Jack who’d clamped a hand on his arm.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Jack muttered in a dark voice. He was looking up and Ianto followed his gaze to see three void reapers perched on the roof of the building next door.

“Oh shit,” Owen exclaimed, crowding Tosh back into the doorway. “Are they—”

“Void reapers?” he finished for the medic in a false cheery voice. “Yes, they are. Jack’s already been torn apart by them once this week.”

“And it’s an experience I’d rather not repeat,” Jack put in.

“What are we going to do?” Owen demanded, glancing over his shoulder, back toward the kitchen. “We can’t just stand here until UNIT turn up.”

“Okay, kids, what do we know about void reapers? They don’t have them in my time line. Time reapers, yes, and they only appear to correct a time line that’s been severely messed up.”

“No one’s ever worked out what they are, only that they came out of the void when Yvonne Hartman was messing around with the ghost shifts before the battle,” Ianto told him.

“That’s not a hundred per cent true,” Tosh said, gaining all of their attention. “UNIT has done extensive research on them. They’re attracted to anything that has rift or time vortex energy.”

“Oh great.” He rolled his eyes. “So Jack is pretty much an all-you-can-eat-buffet on legs.”

“Hey!” Jack shot him a dark look, but it quickly melted into an impish smile. “I can’t help it if I’m delicious. You should know.”

Jack sent him a wink and he huffed an unimpressed sigh. “You really can’t help yourself, can you?”

“Never found the need.” Jack set a hand on his shoulder, manner suddenly becoming serious again.
The man’s moods were almost giving him whiplash. “They’re attracted to me, which means the three of you can get away while I create a distraction.”

He crossed his arms and sent Jack a glare. “If by distraction you mean let yourself get attacked and killed, then no, absolutely not.”

“Ianto—” Jack started, looking at him imploringly.

“I don’t care if you’ll revive. I know—he knew exactly what it did to you every time. So no, I’m not running off and leaving you to face three void reapers on your own. We can come up with another plan.” He stared Jack down, ready to tie him up and knock him unconscious if he didn’t stop being a stubborn arse.

“I might be able to do something about them,” Tosh said, breaking up the silent stare down. “There’s a certain sonic pitch they don’t like. If I can get a radio or something, I might be able to modify it enough to emit the tone, then they won’t come near us no matter how much they want to eat Jack.”

“How long will it take?” Jack asked.

“A few minutes if I’ve got a radio and some tools.”

“Owen, go find us a radio.” As Owen hurried back inside to comply, Jack looked at him then indicated to the rucksack he was holding. “Got something she can use in there?”

He nodded, and dropped it to dive his hand in and pull out the small toolkit that could be used to repair small devices or pick locks. He handed it over as Owen returned with a small portable radio. Tosh immediately got to work, while Jack got out his Webley and took up a defensive position, glancing up and down the alley, clearly checking for UNIT soldiers. Ianto slipped into position on the opposite side of the doorframe, getting his own gun out and then holding a spare one out for Owen.

He sent Ianto a gaping look and then shook his head. “I’m a doctor, not a soldier or some sodding secret agent. I’ve never even held a gun!”

Ianto reached down and grabbed his hand and then pressed the gun into it. “Simple. Flick the safety off here, then point the round end at the bad guys and pull the trigger.”

“Pretty sure I made some oath about doing no harm,” Owen muttered, taking the gun in a two-handed grip.

“Sure, but if someone is trying to kill you, do you really think yelling the hypocratic oath at them is going to stop them from filling you with bullets?” He returned his attention to the end of the alley, but he could see Owen making a face at him from the corner of his eye.

“Got it!” Tosh announced after a few minutes of tinkering. She quickly put the outer casing back together and flicked the switch, but nothing happened.

“I don’t hear anything,” Owen said, frowning at her.

She sent him an exasperated look. “That’s because it’s at a frequency not discernible by the human ear.”

“Like dogs,” Owen replied with a smile that clearly said he thought he was clever for figuring out that much.
“Yes, Owen, like dogs. But look.”

She pointed up to where the three void reapers were now flitting around the top of the building looking agitated.

“Tosh, I think you just pissed them off,” Jack said, actually sounding nervous for the first time since they’d met.

“Probably, but I can guarantee they won’t come any closer to the source of that tone.” She handed it over to Jack and then stepped out of the alcove of the doorway. “Come on, personally I don’t want to end up back in a UNIT prison today. The food was terrible and they never served sushi.”

Owen immediately took off after her, while he paused to share a look with Jack, clutching the radio like it was some magical protection amulet.

“Void reapers down, now we just have to dodge the UNIT soldiers,” Jack told him with a smile that wasn’t quite as confident as usual.

Ianto reached out and took his hand. “I know UNIT; the pattern they’re likely to use when they close the net around the hotel. Don’t worry, I won’t let them get you.”

This time Jack’s smile held an intimate edge. “Going to play my knight in shining armour? Got to say, the idea is appealing.”

He shook his head slightly and leaned in to kiss him quickly. “Maybe later.”

“I’m holding you to that, Ianto Jones.” Jack tightened his fingers on his hand as Ianto led him out of the alcove and along the alleyway.

“If we manage to stop reality from collapsing around you, then I’ll let you do whatever you want, Jack.” It wasn’t until the words were already out of his mouth that he really realised what he’d said. A glance back at Jack revealed he had a downright salacious gleam in his gaze.

“Oh, Ianto. You have no idea what you just promised me.”

He didn’t answer, but arched a challenging eyebrow at him, pretty much telling Jack to bring it. Of course, what neither of them were willing to admit was the fact that if they did manage to save the universe and stop reality from collapsing around Jack, the two of them would end up in entirely separate realities.
Jack focused on the road through the windscreen as they came into the outskirts of Cardiff. The UNIT soldiers in London had been almost ridiculously easy to evade with Ianto leading them through the net. Shortly after, they’d stolen their fourth—or was it fifth?—car in a few short days and immediately left the city.

Ianto had driven, he wasn’t sure how they’d come to that agreement, only that he was still feeling drained after dying early that morning. Ianto hadn’t said anything, simply told Jack to get in the passenger seat and then proceeded to hotwire the car in record time. When Jack had thrown him a look, he’d mumbled something about growing up in the estate and learning how to hotwire a car before his legs had been long enough to reach the peddles.

Tosh and Owen had sat in the back, and the conversation over the last few hours as they’d driven to Cardiff had been easy and comfortable. He’d mostly listened when he wasn’t answering questions about the rift and his own timeline. It’d been interesting to hear the variations in their lives—both big and small—that differentiated them from his original team. But like the alternate versions of themselves, they had all quickly clicked in their own way. Tosh with her quiet intelligence, though he was definitely intrigued by the harder edge this Tosh had and imagined she wouldn’t put up with any rubbish from Owen. As for Owen, he had the same caustic sense of humor, but less of a cynical edge and seemed more instantly smitten with Tosh than the Owen from his reality had been. Maybe this Owen was slightly smarter.

He had to bite his lip over a laugh at the thought as he turned his attention to Ianto. He was tapping his fingers on the wheel in time with a song on the radio that was on low in the background. Dark whiskers had grown over his jaw in the past few days since they’d been on the run, and earlier he’d taken off his jumper, leaving him in a t-shirt with his toned arms bare. His hair had been left in a careless scruff, but in that sexy just-got-out-of-bed-don’t-care way.

The Ianto from his timeline had almost always been so perfectly put together—except for when they were in bed together and then he’d always been deliciously abandoned and completely undone. This reality’s version of Ianto seemed a little more relaxed, surer of himself, comfortable within his own body in a way his Ianto often hadn’t seemed to feel. Maybe it had simply come with maturity, because the Ianto from his reality had still been so young when he’d died.

His heart clenched in his chest and he had to take a long deep breath to force the sensation away. God, he would always miss Ianto. Just because he’d found a slightly older, alternate reality version of him didn’t make it all better. Didn’t stop it from hurting. They were two different people, and the Ianto he’d spent two-and-a-bit short years with was gone forever. Finding a different Ianto didn’t negate that.

Still, this Ianto now had the other Ianto’s memories, so it almost felt like he’d gotten a small part of him back… Yeah, he’d gotten it all back only to lose it again. Within a few short hours he’d have to say goodbye. He wondered what would happen when he left. Would time revert to before he’d arrived for them and none of them would remember what had even happened? Ianto would be back with UNIT, Owen still at the hospital in London, and Tosh once again in the UNIT prison with no hope of escape. Or would they remember, time would simply stay as it was and the three of them would have to go on the run?

The guilt returned, the same he’d felt earlier when he’d realised that he’d inadvertently set Ianto’s life on a landmine. Now he was responsible for doing the same thing to Tosh and Owen. He sighed, then a warm hand settled on his thigh and he glanced across at Ianto.
“You keep glaring like that, I’m honestly worried the interior of the car is going to burst into flames,” Ianto told him, cutting him a quick smile before returning his attention to the road as the traffic thickened now they were getting deeper into the city.

“Sorry, just—”

“Thinking, obviously,” Ianto finished for him. “Don’t worry, Jack. I know you originally wanted that Doctor friend and Rose to help you with this, but trust us, we’re going to do everything in our power to get you home.”

“I know,” he replied confidently, and then added in a mumble, “that’s the problem.”

One of Ianto’s eyebrows quirked, his expression becoming concerned for a split second. Or maybe it was empathy because he felt the same way. Either way, Ianto clenched his jaw and didn’t say anything, simply tightened his hand where it rested on his thigh.

Tosh asked him a question about the rift manipulator in his timeline, and he got distracted by a conversation with her for the rest of the trip.

“So,” Ianto said as they were closing in on the Plass. “How are we getting back into the Torchwood Three base, same way we got out?”

“Nope, we’re going in through the garage.” Ianto gave a nod as if agreeing that made complete sense and so Jack directed him to the parking beneath the Millennium Centre. On the third sub-level, Jack told him to pull up toward what looked to be a blank wall and then flipped open the cover on his wriststrap.

“Hope this works, or this is going to be embarrassing.” He shot Ianto a wide grin as he found the hub’s local network—mostly shut down and in basic standby mode. Luckily, the door controls were one of the few things still operating and in another moment, the panel in front of them was lifting, lights flicking on in the passage beyond just wide enough to fit a single vehicle down.

Ianto eased forward and Jack made sure the garage door lowered again behind them. A few seconds later, Ianto was pulling to a stop behind a very familiar looking SUV.

“Oh baby!” Jack jumped out of their car and hurried over to the hulking black vehicle, covered in a layer of thick dust. “I can’t believe they just left you here like this!”

He wiped a finger along the dust over where Torchwood was embellished along the front fender.

“Friend of yours?”

Jack glanced over his shoulder to where Ianto had spoken, Tosh and Owen standing next to him watching on curiously.

“Ianto, meet the Torchwood SUV. This girl was as much a part of the team as anyone else. Man, did we have some good times in this thing. Well, not this one, specifically. Mine got stolen. Only God knows what happened to it.” Jack stepped away from the vehicle and sauntered toward him, leaning in close as he passed. “Check those new memories, you’ll understand why I’m so fond of this car.”

Ianto glanced up, as if busy recalling something. A second later, a blush was chasing across his cheeks.

Owen made a rude noise. “I really don’t think I want to hear any stories about you two and the
Ianto shook his head, however. “Apparently the other version of me was responsible for losing it shortly before the hub got blown up.”

“Was he, just?” Owen sent him a grin, clearly amused by this. “Not cannibals that time, I’m assuming?”

Ianto shot him a glare. “No, just some run-of-the-mill hoodlums. And thanks, I really needed to have the cannibal memory revived. That’s going to give me nightmares for years.”

Owen’s grin widened. “Just remember it technically happened to someone else, I’m sure that’ll make your sanity much easier to hold on to.”

“That, and the fact that the other me shot you once. That definitely helps.”

Owen wasn’t looking so smug any longer and Jack had to stifle a laugh as the doctor glared after Ianto when he headed for the passageway leading to the main hub.

Jack motioned for Tosh and Owen to go ahead of him, wanting to see their faces when they walked into the hub for the first time. It ended up being eerily similar to when he’d done this with the Tosh and Owen from his reality. Owen simply said “huh,” taking in the cavernous space in a single glance and giving a surprised nod.

Tosh made an awed exclamation and immediately gravitated to the computers which had been shut down once again, no doubt thanks to UNIT. While Tosh reconnected cables and quickly got on with setting up the various screens at her work station, Ianto had started working at what had been Gwen’s desk, reviving those screens and waking up the Torchwood Three systems. Jack got the lights while Owen gravitated toward the autopsy bay.

“I’m going to hack into the systems for the local UNIT squadron. That way we’ll know if they’ve figured out we’re here,” Ianto said, not looking up from the computer.

And also not mentioning it was the systems belonging to his own team he was planning to infiltrate. Former team. For some reason, it made a glow of warmth bloom in his chest as Ianto quickly and easily got himself into the UNIT computers.

“Tosh?” Jack turned his attention to his gorgeous genius to see she was already deep into the rift program.

“I’m bringing up the readings from when you came through. Interestingly, the rift has mostly remained sealed despite your breach. I’m going to have to reverse all that and open it if we’ve got any chance of sending you back.”

A swell of apprehension pitched through Jack’s stomach. He well knew what happened when the rift got opened all the way.

“Tosh, if we can minimize—”

“Don’t worry, Jack.” She sent him a confident glance over her shoulder. “I’ve got this.”

“Oh, bollocks,” Ianto murmured, typing furiously at the keyboard.

“What’s wrong?” he went over and set a hand on Ianto’s shoulder, the muscles tight and taut beneath his palms.
“UNIT must have set up some kind of alert on the Torchwood computers the other day when you switched them on. Probably makes sense, in case you came back. Which you did. They know we’re here and they’re already putting a team together.”

“Well, this was the shortest mission in history,” Owen called from the autopsy bay.

“Not to worry,” he said, leaning down and reaching his arms around Ianto as he typed at the keyboard, bringing up a new program.

“What are you doing?” Ianto asked, keeping his attention on the screen.

“Complete lockdown.” He hit one final key and the familiar alarms went off, red lights flashing as doors clanged into place and locks clicked.

“What means…?” Ianto prompted.

“The hub is sealed. No one gets in or out for the next eighteen hours.” He set his hands on Ianto’s shoulders and pressed a kiss to his neck, before straightening.

“You’ve locked us in?” Owen clarified in a disbelieving voice as he came up from the autopsy bay. “What about food and water?”

“There’s—” he indicated to the kitchenette, but realised that since the hub had been abandoned, the fridge was turned off and there were no other supplies anywhere. Whoops.

“I’ve got protein bars and bottles of water in my ruck sack,” Ianto said distractedly, having returned his attention to the information on his screen about the team UNIT were sending to investigate the alert at the hub. “You’re not going to starve or get dehydrated in eighteen hours, Owen.”

“I know that,” Owen grumbled, walking over and picking up the unplugged cable of the video game. “I just don’t like being hungry. And we don’t have any coffee.”

“You’re sure they won’t be able to get in?” Ianto asked, spinning the chair to face him, concern knitting his brow.

Jack leaned down and kissed him, briefly but reassuringly. “Believe me, no one is getting in or out of those doors for the next eighteen hours.”

Ianto nodded, then went over and asked Tosh if she needed help while Owen managed to revive the video game. Jack walked into what would have been his office, but of course since it had never been his, nothing looked the same. He lifted the hatch in the floor to find his bunker was full of dusty junk, obviously having been used for storage. With a sigh, he went and sat in the uncomfortable chair behind the desk, watching his new-old team work. Eighteen hours. If they couldn’t work it out, then he was going to have to face the reality of being responsible for the end of the universe.
For the past hour, Ianto had been trying very hard not to get distracted by the Torchwood Three archives. One because they were such an unorganised mess and two, because of the absolutely fascinating things stashed away in there. If he hadn’t been trying to find something for Tosh, he could have quite happily let himself get lost in the depths of shelves and filing cabinets. As it was, he hadn’t seen Jack for over half an hour. They’d come down here together because Jack said there was a small chance he might be able to figure out where the item was stored faster, but after a while, it’d been obvious that Jack had no more idea than he did and they’d agreed to split up to search more quickly.

Now, however, he was fairly certain Jack had gotten lost. Or maybe he was lost. Maybe they were both lost and probably no closer to finding the tech Tosh needed—some part of the rift manipulator that was apparently missing. Though he hadn’t said anything out loud, he’d been trying not to worry that UNIT had removed the piece from the premises altogether to make sure no one could break in and use the rift manipulator… exactly like they planned to do.

Footsteps echoed on the bare floor from the row beyond where he was standing and he pulled his head out of the dusty shelf he’d been leaning into.

“Jack? Did you find it?” he called out, moving a box aside and then pausing to rub his nose when the dust tickled it.

Jack didn’t answer, but the footsteps came closer until they paused right behind him. He glanced over his shoulder to assure himself it was indeed Jack. Even though the captain had been adamant no one could get into the hub, he’d been a little nervous knowing UNIT were now staked out on the Plass trying to find ways to override the lockdown and storm the Torchwood Three base. Jack had his hands in his pockets and was staring at him, something a little odd in his expression.

“No luck then?” he prompted, straightening from where he’d been bent over and then pausing to stretch the kink out of his back.

“Looking for this, right?” Jack pulled one hand out of his pocket and held up the piece that looked exactly how both Jack and Tosh had described it.

“You did find it.” He stepped closer, but then pulled up short when he noticed Jack was no longer wearing the same shirt and pants he’d had on earlier and his braces were gone. “Did something happen?”

Jack’s brow creased. “What do you mean?”

He motioned vaguely up and down Jack’s body. “You changed.”

“Oh.” Jack gave a quick laugh, but his grin didn’t quite reach his eyes, leaving Ianto feeling like something was going on and he was missing a piece of the puzzle. “Aren’t you observant?”
“Well, yes, but you know that about me. Or should I say us, since you know two of me. This whole other-self thing is starting to get a little confusing.” He sent Jack a smile, trying to lighten the mood a little, because Jack seemed darker somehow, his mood definitely not as positive as it had been. Maybe he was more worried about reality collapsing that he’d let on.

He shifted forward, settling a hand on Jack’s chest. “I know it must be weighing on you, but try not to worry. Tosh is hard at work and like you said, UNIT won’t be getting in here any time soon.”

Jack arched a brow and looked down at where his hand was pressed to his chest, as though he didn’t know what to make of it. When he looked back up, however, there was a gleam in his eyes—one that was familiar, but also somehow wrong. It was full of lust, but at the same time almost empty, missing any of the warmth or affection he was so used to seeing when Jack usually looked at him.

He started to step back, needing space and a moment to work out what was going on here, but Jack looped an arm around his middle and pulled their hips together.

“This is an unexpected bonus,” Jack murmured, before he leaned in and caught him in a bruising kiss.

He knew from the other Ianto’s memories that both of them had enjoyed some very rough play at times, but Jack had always taken care with him. This was simply brutal and felt all wrong. Ianto broke the kiss and pulled back, but before he could escape, Jack clamped a hand on the back of his neck, the grip bordering on painful, and half spun them to shove Ianto into the stone wall. The dull edges of the uneven stonework connected painfully with his back in several places.

“Jack, what’s gotten into you?” Anger was swiftly replacing the initial surprise and he shoved hard, trying to dislodge him, but Jack was having none of it. He simply wedged a thigh between Ianto’s legs and pressed more of his body weight into him.

“Nothing has gotten into me… yet.” Jack sent him a leer, but it was a chilling parody of the usual charming flirtations Jack was so adept at. Something was very, very wrong here.

“Jack, let me go.” He hardened his voice, hoping Jack would get the memo that he was very unimpressed with whatever the hell was up with him.

“Or what?” Jack mocked, rocking his hips into him, arousal obvious. “I thought you wanted to play.”

“This is not funny, I’m serious.” He pushed hard at Jack’s shoulders, but with a quick, decisive move, Jack had captured both his wrist and pinned his arms to the wall.

“I’m serious too,” Jack murmured, this time blatantly thrusting against him.

Ianto swallowed the apprehension tightening his throat. Usually when Jack got close to him, pressed into him, made it so obvious what he wanted, he would have been half way to melting down by now. Instead a chill was ripping down his spine, his stomach was churning and his instincts were telling him this was all wrong. He just didn’t understand how or why.

“This is your last warning. I don’t want to hurt you, but if you don’t let me go—”

Jack leaned back and he breathed a silent sigh of relief, thinking the man was finally listening to him. Instead, Jack stared at him, his blue eyes utterly devoid of anything except a deeply unsettling chill, like he was dead inside.
“Too bad, because I want to hurt you.”

Cold dread burst through him. “Jack, what—”

Jack leaned in again and this time bit him on the neck hard enough to bring tears to his eyes. “Jack! What the hell!”

He started struggling in earnest, but it only made Jack laugh. “That’s right, I like it when they fight. Makes it so much more satisfying.”

Before Ianto could say or do anything else, he found himself flipped around and shoved face-first into the wall. Jack twisted both his arms up behind his back, hard enough to make his shoulders twinge in a sharp ache. He tried to buck the other man off, but it only increased the pressure on his arms, and he had to bite his lip over crying out.

Jack reached around with one hand and yanked at his belt buckle, breath hot on his neck.

Ianto’s mind was racing, every hand-to-hand combat session he’d taken flashing through his mind, recalling and discarding options for freeing himself from Jack’s hold on him, but there were very few possibilities that didn’t involve him ending up with a broken arm or dislocated shoulder. Of course, that was probably preferable to—

He couldn’t even finish the thought, disbelief that this was even happening creeping through him on an ever-expanding wave, making him numb.

“Jack, just stop for a second.” His voice was shaking, and he swallowed, trying to calm his mind that was too close to outright panic. Jack was done with his belt and moved on to unzipping his pants, gropping him through the material, even though he was no where near getting hard. He’d never felt so violated, and the fact it was Jack doing it to him—

A pain spasmed through his chest, like his actual heart was hurting.

He took in another breath, trying to think of anything he could say to stop this, but the sound of a gun cocking somewhere behind him made him freeze. Jack stilled as well, though his breath still periodically bloomed over the back of Ianto’s neck.


Wait. Jack?

The truth was like taking a bucket of ice over the head.

“Oh Christ,” he uttered, stomach churning even harder now.

James Harper.

It was Jack’s alternate self from this reality pressing him into the wall. That’s why it had all felt so wrong.

“I said let him go,” Jack repeated, the rage in his voice cutting.

The man behind him laughed, but let Ianto go, leaving him to sag against the wall for a moment, waiting for the ache to dissipate from his shoulders. He slowly turned, and by then James had spun to face Jack.

“Come on, now, Jack, we both know that gun isn’t going to stop me,” James drawled, making an
exaggerated show of holding his hands out.

“It’ll slow you down, though.” Jack stepped closer and pressed the barrel of his Webly into James’s forehead. “How did you get in here?”

“Me?” James asked, not sounding the least bit concerned. “I came hours ago. See, I heard all about how I apparently broke someone named Captain Ianto Jones out of a secure UNIT prison and since I know I didn’t actually do that, I wanted to find the person foolish enough to impersonate me. And, I have to say, I also wanted to know what was so special about Captain Jones that someone went to all that trouble,”

James cast him a lascivious glance over his shoulder. “Another few minutes and I would have found out.”

Ianto pushed off the wall and gave James a wide berth as he hurried towards Jack. When he got closer, Jack held out an arm and grabbed him as soon as he was within reaching distance, pulling Ianto behind him, all the while never taking his gaze off James.

“What do you want?” Jack demanded, keeping hold of Ianto, the touch comforting and right in complete contrast to how James had been wrong. He could see it now, with the two of them facing each other. James had a cold twist to his expression that hinted at the corruption within.

James gave a casual shrug to Jack’s question. “I want a lot of things; most of them related to death and destruction. Today, however, I only want two things.”

“And what might those be?” Jack asked, though the edge to his tone suggested that maybe he didn’t want to hear the answer.

“One, your life. I’ve got some of your memories, you see, what with the walls between realities getting thinner. I understand Torchwood still exists in your timeline. I didn’t get to finish destroying Torchwood myself here. UNIT came in and took everything over after Canary Wharf. I mean, it’s been fun picking off UNIT soldiers here and there, especially the few ex-Torchwood employees I could find. But what I really want is to burn everything Torchwood to the ground with my own two hands. So when the gorgeous Toshiko gets the rift open, I’m going through and you can stay here. I’m sure you’ll enjoy paying for my crimes.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will. And the second thing?” Jack asked through a tight jaw.

James’s gaze cut to him and Ianto couldn’t stop the cold shudder racking his body. “I want Ianto Jones. First I’m going to fuck him, then I’m going to cut him into little pieces.”

Jack squeezed the trigger on his Webly. The shot was impossibly loud in the small space between shelves, leaving Ianto’s ears ringing. At point blank range, the bullet left a neat hole and powder burns on James’s forehead, but blew out the back of his skull. Jack didn’t stop shooting when the man went down, however. He emptied his gun into the body and then stepped back. Ianto was pressed so close to him, he could feel the moment Jack started shaking.

“That should take him a while to recover from. We better lock him in the vaults as soon as possible, though.”

Ianto caught Jack’s shoulder, gripping him more tightly than he meant to, but he was still feeling unsteady. “Jack—”

Jack suddenly turned and yanked Ianto into a crushing hug, holding on so tight he could barely breathe. But he didn’t care. He clung onto Jack just as tightly, burying his face into Jack’s neck.
“Are you okay?” Jack demanded in a hoarse voice, stroking his hair. “Did he hurt you?”

“No, not really. You got here in time. I’m so stupid, though, I didn’t even realise—”

Jack shushed him. “You’re not stupid. We thought the hub was locked down and no one else was in here. And he looked and sounded exactly like me.”

“But he wasn’t you.” He pulled back and stared into Jack’s eyes, the affection, the warmth, the love there so obvious, Ianto’s heart leapt and collided with the inside of his chest. “I should have figured it out sooner.”

“It probably wouldn’t have made any difference. In fact, it might have put you in more danger.”

He started to protest, but Jack cut him off with a quick kiss. “You head back up to the hub while I lock him up.”

Ianto nodded as Jack stepped back, but when the other man bent down and grabbed James’s ankles, Ianto belatedly remembered something.

“Jack, wait.” He knelt down and shoved his hands into James’s pocket.

Jack arched a questioning eyebrow until Ianto held up the piece of the rift manipulator they needed. “Found what we were looking for.”

Jack sent him a grin. “Get it back up to Tosh. We’re one step closer to fixing this mess.”

He leaned over and kissed Jack once more, before hurrying through the shelves. Hopefully Jack had been right and the multiple gunshots would take James awhile to recover from—more than the sixteen hours of the lockdown they had left. Because there was something undeniably terrifying about being locked in the hub with an immortal psychopath.
Chapter 18

As Ianto walked past him, Jack got distracted from the work he’d been doing with Tosh. She had his vortex manipulator connected up to the hub’s computer systems, feeding information into some program Tosh had used when she’d closed the rift. She was confident that between the data on his wrist strap and by re-writing some of the program, she should not only be able to open the rift, but create a breach between realities, especially with the barriers weakening as they were. Whether or not she could do it before the lockdown reversed and UNIT got in—or worse, reality finally collapsed around him—was another matter.

It’d been a few hours since he’d locked James up in the vaults and Jack hadn’t really had a chance to talk to Ianto. He’d seemed a bit shaken up at first, but then studiously gotten to work on the rift manipulator, replacing the missing piece under Tosh’s instructions and then taking the schematics so he and Owen could check everything else was in working order.

However, Ianto had abandoned his work a few minutes ago to grab a bottle of water and had taken up pacing in front of the tattered couch. Jack carefully set down his vortex manipulator and the tools he’d been using, then got to his feet and made his way over to Ianto. The hours until the lockdown reversed were speeding by too fast—down to twelve now—and they still had so much work to do. They probably didn’t have time to stop, but the fact he quite often hadn’t stopped to take a few extra moments of time with the other Ianto had been one of his biggest regrets. He’d never been able to forget the day before Ianto had—

He’d replayed the day before he’d lost Ianto over and over—in the warehouse, Ianto making the very obvious pass at him and he’d tried to brush it off by saying the world could be ending. Ianto had told him the world was always ending and the young Welshman had never been more right about anything. God, he’d wanted to kick himself so many times over not blatantly telling Rhys to get lost that day, or simply dragging Ianto off to a private corner somewhere. It had been one of the many, many times he’d told himself whatever was going on with Torchwood was more important and he’d have plenty of time with Ianto later. For the first and last time, he’d been totally wrong about having more time with the man he loved.

In a few short hours he would be returning to his own reality. Yet again, he was faced with the fact that there was no more time for him and Ianto later. At least this time he knew. Although, the way his chest was aching, maybe knowing was worse.

“Hey.” He stepped into the path of Ianto’s pacing, cutting him off and catching his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Ianto glanced over to where Tosh and Owen were working and not paying them the least bit of attention.

“It doesn’t matter, we’ve got more important things to worry about.” Ianto turned away from him to resume his pacing, one hand on his hip, the other rubbing the back of his neck the way he’d always done when something was really bothering him.

“Come with me.” Jack brushed by him, catching his hand and tugging him along when he protested.

“Jack, we haven’t got time—”

“I’m making time,” he shot back stubbornly.
He led Ianto to what had been their second conference room in the hub after the first had been destroyed when the rift had been opened. When they’d fixed the damage, they’d decided to have the conference room on the lower level and the glass walled room upstairs had become the greenhouse for alien plant specimens.

Like everything else in this hub, a fine sheen of dust covered all the chairs and long table. There were a few cardboard boxes stacked along one wall and a broken computer piled haphazardly in a corner. Ianto immediately found a discarded sheet of some kind and tore a strip off it to start wiping the dust from two of the chairs and the table.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, watching Ianto’s harried movements. Ianto didn’t answer right away, focusing his attention on wiping every speck of dust from the table. Finally, Jack went over and caught his arm, then plucked the cloth out of Ianto’s hand and tossed it away.

Ianto sent him a fierce frown.

“Is it something to do with what happened with James?”

From the way Ianto’s gaze cut away from him as his lips pressed together into a thin line, Jack decided to take that as a yes.

“Ianto, don’t punish yourself over it. You couldn’t have known.”

“That’s not it,” Ianto replied through a tight jaw.

Jack cupped his cheek and gently turned his head so he could see Ianto’s beautiful blue eyes. “Then what?”

“It’s just—” Ianto blew out a harsh breath and closed his eyes, body tensing all over. “He didn’t really do anything except get a grope in, but it’s like I can still feel his hands on me. And it’s not only that. For a second it was worse because I thought it was—”

Ianto seemed to run out of words, dropping his chin.

“You thought it was me,” he concluded.

Ianto nodded, still avoiding his gaze. It made Jack’s chest pinch uncomfortably, as if he’d done something wrong himself.

“Ianto,” he said gently. “I would never do that to you. I’d never hurt you. You know that right?”

“I know,” Ianto mumbled. “I know, but it just feels like… God. I’m sorry, this is so stupid.”

“Your feelings aren’t stupid. And I understand. You know otherwise, but it still feels like I was the one who violated you.”

Suddenly, standing there holding Ianto seemed like the worst thing he could do. Ianto probably needed space and time to process. Space he could do, but time…

He forced the useless thought aside and shifted back, dropping his hold on Ianto, causing him to look up in confusion.

“Stay here, take a break. I’ll leave you be, but if you need anything—”

He started to turn away, but Ianto quickly caught his arm. “Jack, wait. I’m sorry, I’m not blaming you.”
“I know you’re not. But me getting too close and putting my hands all over you is probably not helping.”

“You’re wrong,” Ianto said in a low voice, tightening his hold on his arm and slowly drawing him closer. “I think that’s exactly what I need.”

“Ianto—” Truly, he didn’t want to make things worse, but when Ianto stepped into him and caught him in a decisive kiss, he couldn’t do anything except slide his hands around Ianto’s waist and kiss him back.

Ianto clenched both his hands into Jack’s shirt and began tugging him forward as Ianto backed up a couple of steps until he came up against the edge of the conference table. Jack pressed him back and Ianto slipped onto the edge, then widened his legs, pulling Jack in between his thighs until their hips were pressed together. Jack broke his mouth away from Ianto’s, but only far enough to lave wet, sucking kisses down his neck.

“Jack,” Ianto said in a ragged voice, thick with desire. “I need you.”

He didn’t have to be told twice. Jack found Ianto’s mouth again, this time deepening the kiss and tugging at Ianto’s clothes, even as Ianto started unbuttoning Jack’s shirt.

Within a few breathless moments, they were close enough to naked—both of their chests bare, belts unbuckled and trousers unzipped, pushed down far enough to be completely out of the way. Jack stroked a hand over Ianto’s erection, watching as his eyes closed and his head tilted back, expression of pure ecstasy on his face.

His heart swelled with warmth and love, but God, it hurt. He never thought he’d get to see Ianto like this again—so gorgeous as he slowly came undone in passion. Except this wasn’t meant to be. One last precious, intimate moment with Ianto before he had to go back to his own reality that was so damn empty and cold.

The next breath caught hard in his chest, so he pushed the thoughts aside and leaned in to kiss along Ianto’s collarbone. Ianto moaned, hips bucking against his hand, sending an answering wave of desire through Jack.

“Jack,” Ianto panted against his shoulder. “I want you inside me. Please.”

Jack paused, surprised, pulling back a little to look down at him. “Are you sure?”

Ianto reached up and wrapped his hand around the back of his neck, sending him an exasperated frown. “Stop asking dumb questions and shag me already.”

Laughing a little, he let Ianto pull him down into a hot, messy, oh-god-so-good kiss that sent his pulse racing.

Jack trailed careful fingers down Ianto’s arousal, then further, measuring each response—every gasp, every hitched breath, and every deep moan until he was sure Ianto was ready. And when he finally, slowly, maddeningly pushed into Ianto with gradual degrees, both of them were breathing unsteady and left groaning. Waves of intense pleasure rolled over him, but he forced himself to hold for a moment, wanting to make sure Ianto had adjusted to the intrusion.

But Ianto apparently wasn’t on board with that plan. He surged up against Jack, hands clamping on his hips tight enough to leave bruises, yanking Jack harder against him as he took his mouth in a kiss that was nothing but a claiming—body and soul.
He let Ianto take him—even though Jack was on top, it was clear Ianto was the one in control at
that moment. Guided by Ianto’s push and pull, Jack built up a rhythm, their bodies quickly falling
into perfect, euphoric sync. As he felt the first tremors building up from deep within him, he fist ed
Ianto’s arousal again, stroking in counter-time to his thrusts until Ianto was tensing beneath him,
his name falling from Ianto’s lips over and over in a building crescendo. He was so busy enjoying
Ianto coming apart beneath him that his own climax crept up on him and next thing he knew, he
was going over the edge. But it didn’t matter because Ianto was coming at the same time and
nothing in the universe had ever felt so good.

Ianto sunk back on the desk in a boneless heap, pulling Jack down with him. He settled on top of
him, relishing the simple gratified pleasure of the sweat cooling on his body, the contrasting heat
where their skin touched, and their hearts pounding where their chests were pressed together.

Jack peppered light kisses over Ianto’s shoulder and he sighed, sounding content.

“I thought maybe all those memories were slightly exaggerated,” Ianto murmured in a lazy voice.
“But that was—”

Jack lifted his head, smiling down at Ianto who seemed unable to come up with a word for exactly
what he thought it was.

“Spectacular,” he suggested in a low voice, leaning in to peck a kiss on Ianto’s lower lip. “Brilliant.
Amazing. Mind blowing.”

Ianto gave a breathless laugh, but Jack cut him off with another kiss, until Ianto was shifting
restlessly beneath him again. He pulled back, but leaned over to brush his lips against Ianto’s ear.
“Personally, I’d go with all of the above.”

Ianto made a satisfied noise and threaded a hand through his hair, holding him close. For another
few perfect long moments, they lay there together, enjoying the fading glow. But all too soon,
reality started creeping in. Mostly in the form of Owen calling out for Jack somewhere outside the
conference room, further down the corridor judging by the way his voice was echoing slightly.

Reluctantly, Jack pushed himself up. “Back to work, I guess.”

Ianto sent him a light smile, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Yep, can’t really put off the threat
of reality collapsing.”

Jack got upright and caught Ianto’s shoulders just as he climbed to his feet. “There are some things
in life that will always be more important.”

Ianto studied him for a long moment. “There’s also a lot of things that aren’t meant to last.”

Jack’s heart faltered for a moment, not wanting to accept the truth of Ianto’s statement. Before he
could reply, however, a pounding sounded on the door.

“Jack? You in there? Tosh needs you!” Owen’s voice was muffled but clearly annoyed. “This
sodding place is like a maze.”

“I’ll be out in a second!” Jack called back as he yanked his trousers into place. He stooped down to
pick up his shirt, wishing he had just a few more quiet moments with Ianto. But he needed to get
back to working on his wrist strap and the rift manipulator with Tosh. The only thing worse than
walking away from Ianto and going back to his own reality was leaving it too late and the universe
ending. But still, it was almost impossible to make himself leave the room.
“Ianto,” he started, making the younger man pause after he’d shrugged his shirt back on. “I just wanted to say— I wanted to tell you—”

Ianto suddenly stepped closer and caught his lips in a quick but heartfelt kiss. “Don’t, Jack. Saying that won’t change anything.”

Jack nodded, chest tight with emotion as Ianto pulled away from him and hurried from the room, ignoring the look Owen sent him as the door opened and the doctor clearly worked out what they’d been up to. Considering they both had sex-hair and Jack still hadn’t managed to put his shirt back on, trying to pretend they hadn’t thoroughly shagged would have been a farce.

“Really?” Owen asked in exasperation.

“Jealous?” Jack teased as he sauntered closer, taking his time to put his shirt back on.


“I meant maybe you’ve got ideas... about you and Tosh,” he said in a conspiratorial voice as he brushed by the doctor. “Trust me, you two should definitely go there.”

“No one asked you,” Owen grumbled as they headed back toward the main hub.

“Just a suggestion.” Jack grinned as Owen cast Tosh a subtle look but then beelined back to where he’d been working at the rift manipulator, Ianto already seated on an upturned crate next to the machine, schematics in hand and head bent over the papers. Owen sat down next to him and the pair traded casual insults, before settling to work effortlessly with one another.

Jack returned to where he’d been working with Tosh, a familiar expression of fixed determination on her face.

“Oh good, you’re back. I just need you to show me how to access the primary matrix of the quantum transducer in your vortex manipulator.” She held up his wrist strap and he took it with a smile.

Being here, working with the three of them again, it was almost too good, healing his soul and making him feel alive again in a way he hadn’t experienced in years. He had no idea how he was supposed to walk away from any of them.

But just maybe, he didn’t have to...
Chapter 19

They were down to the final hour. Ianto had spent most of the past fifteen hours carefully reading over the extensive schematics of the rift manipulator and checking over the device with Owen. He was as sure as he could be that everything was in working order, but he was also far from an expert.

Jack and Tosh had been working with the computer system and Jack’s wrist strap. As the hours had marched by, the tension had mounted, and though neither Jack nor Tosh had said anything, Ianto got the distinct sense they were running down the line on this one—it was possible Tosh would get the program sorted in time, but it was also possible the lockdown would reverse and UNIT would storm the hub. He didn’t even want to think about the catastrophic consequences of that happening.

Ianto stood and stretched, his back aching slightly from sitting in the same position for so many hours. Some of his muscles were also feeling sore for a completely different reason. He glanced at Jack, who’d paused to run a hand through his hair, a frown marring his brow, which only made Ianto want to walk over and kiss the worried expression from his face.

God, what’d happened between them in the conference room earlier— Just the thought of it sent a rolling resonance of muted pleasure through his entire body. He’d never experienced anything like that in his life. The man was all but addictive with those pheromones, his blue eyes, that smile, and the way he’d touched him… How did anyone stand a chance against Jack Harkness?

Of course, his whole perspective on the subject of Jack was now skewed by the other Ianto’s memories and the ghostly echo of how much the other Ianto had loved him. He didn’t feel it himself—it was weird because he knew they were someone else’s feelings skimming the edges of his consciousness, yet he could also experience the breath-stealing depths of those emotions. But even without knowing the intimate details of the life his alternate self had spent with Jack, the man had still basically fallen into his life and given him new meaning, changing everything he’d believed about himself. He didn’t know how he was supposed to go back, how he was supposed to remember these few crazy, brilliant, terrifying days and ever be satisfied with doing anything else. Jack had theorised that when he went through the rift, time might revert and it’d be like the past few days had never happened. He didn’t know which was worse—to remember all that had happened and know what he was missing in his life, or forgetting he’d ever met Jack and could feel this way about another person, as well as experience the kinds of things he had when Jack kissed him.

Pushing the thoughts aside, because he couldn't do anything about them right now, he went over to where he’d left his rucksack and grabbed out one of the last bottles of water. Lucky this whole thing was nearly over—one way or another—because they couldn’t have stayed down here for much longer on what few supplies he happened to have in his bag.

As he twisted the lid off, he glanced up at the nearby monitor showing the vaults where Jack had locked up James. Still out of it. Jack had been hoping it would take the man a long while to recover from the multiple gunshot wounds, but going off the other Ianto’s many, many memories of Jack dying and reviving, he’d thought James would have recovered by now. As he watched, there seemed to be some kind of jump or glitch in the footage and he stepped closer, studying the screen more closely. After another minute, the glitch happened again, so he quickly set the timer on his watch then waited. Sure enough, at exactly the two minute mark, the footage glitched again. A sneaking suspicion made his stomach drop into his feet, but he waited, watching one more time just to be sure.
“Jack!” he yelled out, not taking his gaze off the screen.

“What’s wrong?” Jack had quickly abandoned his work with Tosh to hurry—possible because of the note of alarm in his voice when he’d called out.

“Just watch,” he said, pointing to the screen. Jack crossed his arms, an expression of fierce concentration on his face as he watched the screen. The footage glitched again and he glanced at Jack.

“There, did you see that?”

Jack gave a single nod. “Like some kind of minor interference.”

“Except it keeps happening over and over, exactly every two minutes.”

For a long moment, Jack continued to stare at the screen, frown deepening, until the glitch subtly interrupted the feed.

“Son of a—” Jack jumped at the keyboard and started typing furiously at the keys.

“Is it—”

“A loop?” Jack finished before he could even finish the question that he really hadn’t wanted to ask. “I really hope not.”

Jack ducked his head, fingers tapping rapidly over the keys until the picture of the vaults dropped out and then reappeared, this time to empty cells.

“Damn it!” Jack surged up, sending the chair skidding backward even as he flipped open the holster on his belt and pulled out his Webley. “Tosh, keep working on that program. Owen, grab a gun and watch her back. Ianto, with me.”

Heart pounding in his chest, Ianto drew his gun from the back of his trousers where he’d been keeping it since James had attacked him down in the archives earlier. He didn’t like the idea of facing down the man who couldn’t be killed and had a serious hankering to see anyone even remotely related to Torchwood dead. Not to mention he already bore the scars from narrowly escaping one of James’s attacks on UNIT when his entire squadron had been killed except for him and one other.

James was like a walking nightmare, but he wouldn’t let Jack down, no matter how hard his pulse was pounding or sweat was breaking out on his lower back.

“How do you think he got out?” Ianto asked, words a little choppy and he and Jack sprinted down the stairs to the lower levels.

“No idea,” Jack shot back, voice clipped.

“Did you check if he had one of those things— A wrist strap like you wear?”

Jack paused to cut him an annoyed look over his shoulder as if that’d been a dumb question. Okay, maybe it had been. Jack was obviously smart enough not to let something like that slip by him.

“Of course I did,” Jack said as they continued clattering down the stairs. “But he didn’t have one on him, I’m sure of it.”

He didn’t answer since they’d reached the vault level and Jack motioned for him to be quiet.
However James had gotten out probably didn’t matter. The only important thing right now was finding him and stopping him from trying to get through the rift in Jack’s place like he apparently planned.

UNIT staked out on the Plass just waiting to get in and arrest them all, James Harper planning murder and mayhem, and reality ready to collapse around Jack Harkness if they couldn’t get him home to his own timeline. Ianto paused to take a calming breath before it could all crash down on him and send him into an outright panic. Things could have been worse… he just couldn’t imagine how.
Jack slid carefully along yet another shelf in another room of the archives. It was probably pointless; he and Ianto had searched maybe half of the lower levels in the last forty-five minutes, but they didn’t have time to search the other half and there was every chance James had simple circled around and hidden in a room they’d already cleared. In about ten minutes, the lockdown was going to reverse and he had no doubt UNIT would be down here before they could initiate another.

He paused at the end of the aisle and cast a searching glance over the shadowed corners. There were too many damned places a person could hide down here—he should know, over his long tenure at Torchwood, there’d been several times he’d spent hours, even days hiding down here when the hub had experienced an incursion, especially in the early days before they’d had technology to help safeguard the base.

Pausing, he checked his watch, silently cursing. Nine minutes.

“Ianto, we have to get back up to the hub.” He glanced over his shoulder to see Ianto nodding at him, expression grim.

“James will probably show himself the second Tosh opens the rift. All we have to do is hold him off long enough for you to get through. I’m sure between me and Owen, we can cover you.”

Jack looked away from him, a wave of concern and sharp disappointment surging through him. It wasn’t what he wanted, wasn’t how he’d planned for the final moment to happen. He’s been tossing words over and over in his mind the last few hours, trying to find a way to ask Ianto—

It’d been foolish of him to even entertain the notion. This Ianto had known him for barely a week. He couldn't ask him to give up an entire life on a whim. He shoved the thoughts down and focused on the mission, on the final moments that could mean the difference between saving the universe and reality collapsing.

“Come on, we need to hurry,” he said, instead of responding to Ianto’s plan to hold off James so he could get through the rift.

He wanted to question whether Ianto had really thought that scenario through, because if they succeeded, if he got through the rift and left them all behind, it would end with Owen, Ianto and Tosh facing down a pissed off James Harper all on their own. There was every chance James would kill them all within two minutes of Jack stepping back into his own reality. Knowing, Ianto, however, he was no doubt fully aware of what he was signing on for, had examined and studied every possible outcome.

He didn’t know what the hell he was supposed to do, because he couldn’t blithely step through the rift knowing he was leaving them all to die, but neither could he stay here, or worse, let James Harper loose on his own unsuspecting reality.

He and Ianto didn’t say anything to each other as they hurried back up to the hub. Jack checked his watch as they reached the main level—six minutes.

“Tosh, tell me you’ve got good news!” He didn’t stop running until he’d reached her work station,
almost skidding into it.

Ianto still had his gun out, taking up a position next to Owen who was holding his own gun and standing vigil over Tosh, just like he’d ordered.

“I’ve got it, Jack. Three minutes and counting.” Tosh sent him a triumphant smile, and he reached down to squeeze her shoulder.

“I knew you could do it.” Warmth blazed in his chest—he was proud of her, but also acutely aware that she wasn’t his Tosh. No matter which reality she came from, however, she was still damned brilliant.

"What about your evil twin?" Owen demanded from where he was standing, gaze sweeping the hub.

"Couldn't find him," Ianto murmured. "Keep an eye out, he's bound to try something. We have to get Jack through the rift at any cost."

Jack's heart skipped in his chest as the pair shared a grim nod of agreement.

Tosh held out his wrist strap. “Here, put this on. I’m going to begin powering up the rift. When it starts, all you need to do is access your vortex manipulator the same way you would to time travel. Since this is a return trip, the pathway through realities is all set. The only difference is, this time the rift is creating the path with the vortex manipulator acting kind of like GPS.”

He paused, running the implications through his mind. “So if anyone were to come with me, they wouldn’t need to be touching my wrist strap, they could just step into the opening created by the rift.”

“Exactly.” She grinned, her gaze sliding over to Ianto. “Planning on taking someone with you?”

“I did have a thought. Thanks, Tosh.” He bent down and kissed on her on the forehead, but she didn’t even pause in her typing.

“It’s the least I could do after you got me out of that UNIT prison.”

He half turned away from her as he fastened his wrist strap, trying not to let guilt overwhelm him. This was already hard enough as it was. If he started thinking about the possibility of her being killed or recaptured by UNIT, he wouldn’t be able to go through with it— Actually, he would, because the other option was reality collapsing.

But that was the part of himself he’d always hated; the part able to logically disconnect from the emotion of the situation and realise sometimes sacrifice was required for the greater good. It was the part of him that had been able to let little Jasmine leave with the fairies, the part that had been able to hand over the twelve children in 1965 to the 456 aliens, the part that had thought he was doing the right thing in all the months leading up to now, until Yvonne Hartman had literally strolled in and taken control of Torchwood Three out of his hands with barely a fight to be had. That part of him would allow him to walk through the rift opening and leave Tosh, Owen—hell, even Ianto—to hold off the enemy for him to get home, because the three lives against the balance of the entire universe wasn’t even a question.

“Okay, powering up the rift manipulator now. Activate your vortex manipulator.” Tosh hit a final button with a flourish and energy began building around the water tower. On his wrist, he felt his vortex manipulator vibrating slightly, obviously connecting to whatever power was being drawn from the rift. He accessed the navigation controls and saw Tosh was right, the mind-bending path
between realities was right there. Dangerous information in the wrong hands. The Doctor would have a fit if he knew what his wrist strap was now capable of—he’d been worried enough about Jack time-travelling all over the place when he’d deactivated it twice—or was it three times?—now.

He checked his watch as the energy started arcing over the water tower like it had when he’d been sucked in from his own reality a few days ago. They were down to two minutes until the hub’s lockdown reversed and UNIT got in here.

When the gunshot sounded, at first Jack thought something had gone wrong with the rift manipulator. It wasn’t until he saw Ianto going down that he registered what had actually happened.

“Ianto!” He started running the distance between them, cold apprehension blasting through him. But before he’d even gotten halfway, James Harper dropped down from the upper gantry, landing a few steps from where Ianto was now sprawled on the floor, blood seeping out from a wound in his chest. Owen quickly knelt beside him, but before the doctor had barely touched Ianto, James reached them. He punched Owen, sending him falling backward, and then grabbed Ianto, hauling him up to his feet.

Ianto yelled out in pain, swearing through a clenched jaw. Jack was momentarily relieved that Ianto wasn’t unconscious and the wound seemed to be high on his chest—it was possible James hadn’t hit anything vital.

Jack pulled to a halt a few steps away as James pressed the gun to Ianto’s head.

“Let him go!”

James sent him a wide grin. “Why would I do that when holding him gives me all the control? I’ve got most of your memories now, Jack. The past few hours have been enlightening, to say the least.”

Jack heart pounded hard against the inside of his chest and it was all he could do not to look directly at Ianto. If he did, if he saw any hint of pain or fear in Ianto’s blue eyes, this would all be over in a matter of seconds because he knew he’d surrender in the face of Ianto’s suffering.

“Sorry, James, I can’t let you go through the rift.” Jack edged sideways, planting himself more firmly in front of the tower. He could feel the energy building, feel it arcing out in all directions. The portal was seconds away from completely opening.

James laughed, hauling Ianto closer to himself until their bodies were pressed together, making Jack’s blood boil.

“You’re not going to let me?” James demanded, sounding amused. “Didn’t realise I needed your permission to do anything, Captain Harkness. Of course you are one smug bastard, so I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Like you can talk,” he muttered, feeling more than a little insulted at getting called out by the alternate-reality version of himself.

“Oh, no, you see I learned the humility you lack the hard way.” James walked Ianto forward a few steps. “And now I think it’s a lesson you need to learn as well.”

As they got closer, it was taking all of Jack’s self-control not to simply reach out and grab Ianto. Except James had to gun pointed snugly against his temple. The second Jack moved, James could kill him.
“Ianto has nothing to do with this, just let him go.” He tried to keep his voice even to sound reasonable despite the fact it was probably a wasted sentiment. If James had all his memories, then he would know exactly what he gained by using Ianto like this.

“Ianto has everything to do with this,” James replied, confirming his thoughts. “If I’m going to take your life in your reality, Jack, then I’ve decided I want it all. Including Ianto Jones.”

“What?” His mind stalled, scrabbling to make sense of what James was saying. Of all the things he’d imagined James doing to Ianto in the past few seconds, taking him through the rift hadn’t been one of them.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve loved someone the way you loved your Ianto. Long before Torchwood got a hold of me. Your Ianto died, Jack. You can’t simply replace him. Especially since this Ianto is mine.” James leaned in to inhale against Ianto’s hair. “My reality, my Ianto.”

Jack couldn’t get enough air into his lungs. He hated every word coming out of James’s mouth, but it made a twisted kind of sense.

“It doesn’t work like that,” he ground out through clenched teeth.

“Doesn’t it?” James demanded. Before he could say anything else, however, an alarm sounded, followed by a series of clicking and clanking noises.

“What’s that?” James shoved the gun harder into Ianto’s temple, making Ianto wince in pain.

“The lockdown in reversing. UNIT will be down here in a few seconds.” Great, because this situation wasn’t complicated enough already. As if on cue, his vortex manipulator let out a series of beeps signalling that the rift was fully open. A few steps and he could be back in his own reality.

James just laughed, however. “Going to make it a real party then?”

“James, as soon as they get down here, they’re going to shoot both of us on sight. You know that.”

James hustled Ianto forward a few more steps, until Ianto was less than an arm’s length from him. “They can shoot you, I have a little trip to make.”

Jack pushed his shoulders back, settling his stance. “I’m not moving. You want to go through the rift, you have to go through me first.”

Anger edged into James’s expression. “Move, or I’ll kill Ianto.”

Unable to help himself, his gaze finally flicked to meet Ianto’s blue eyes. There was a hint of fear in the depths, but Jack could also see his determination and worry—possibly that things would spiral and reality would collapse before they managed to sort this situation out. It was the same thing he’d seen in his own Ianto’s eyes before he’d stepped back into that damn pub and sealed the rift to stop the ancient evil being of Syriath escaping. It made his blood run cold, that he would have to stand by and watch Ianto sacrifice himself to save the world for a third time.

“You won’t kill him.” Jack tilted his chin up, daring James to deny it. “You just said you wanted him for yourself.”

“Yes, but there’s a very important difference between the two of us.” James said, finally pulling the gun away from Ianto’s head, leaving Jack breathing a little easier. “I don’t love him like you do.”

Jack saw something flicker in James’s eyes, some decision made.
“Wait—” He started to reach for Ianto, but James pulled the trigger.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for ending on yet another cliff hanger, I know its making a lot of you crazy, wanting to see how this is all going to end. I'll try to get the next chapter written and posted in the coming days so you don't have to wonder about James pulling the trigger. I'm sure everyone is fine... probably. :D
Ianto’s breath caught at the sound of the gunshot, heart slamming as he watched Jack go down. James had shot him right between the eyes and even though he logically knew Jack wouldn’t stay dead, it didn’t make watching him die any easier. Ianto’s chest was aching, his throat tight and every instinct driving him to go to Jack. Except James was still holding his arm in a bruising grip, and Jack had barely hit the ground when James shoved the gun against the side of his face and started dragging him forward. In the background, the familiar sounds of booted feet and shouted orders reached his ears—UNIT had arrived. But he didn’t look up, barely cared that the soldiers were threatening to shoot James and ordering them all to surrender. James didn’t even hesitate, just charged forward, keeping Ianto between himself and the soldiers now swarming in from the cog wheel door and the lift lowering from the Plass.

As they drew even with Jack, he tried to break away, but considering the pain and blood loss from his own wound, he barely had the strength to resist, let alone fight his way free. One entire side of his chest was soaked with his own blood, and he was starting to feel dizzy.

James tugged him determinedly along, and as they got closer to the rift manipulator, he could feel the energy of the portal tingling over his skin like static electricity. The strange sensation was finally enough to kick his brain into working order. Oh God, Jack was down and James wanted to take him to the other reality. No. He wasn’t leaving Jack. No way, no how.

He gave his arm a hard wrench, ignoring the pain that screamed through his chest. He managed to get free, leaving James swearing. Stumbling away from the man, he reached Jack, going down on his knees and gripping a handful of his coat, willing him to wake up. It felt like the entire room was spinning around him and the chill radiating from deep inside his bones couldn’t have been a good sign. He didn’t mind dying, not really. But he wanted to say goodbye to Jack. Though, maybe this way was easier. It didn’t seem fair for Jack to wake up, only to hold him in his arms as he died again. No. Not again, that was the other Ianto who’d died. Still, it’d feel like history repeating to Jack, a torment his heart and soul didn’t deserve.

Losing strength, he slumped down across Jack’s chest, wishing he could hear Jack’s heart beating strong and steady like the many times he’d laid on Jack’s chest after they’d made love. Wait. That wasn’t him either. They’d had a single shag on a conference table. The other Ianto had spent long, lazy hours basking in the warmth of Jack’s arms. His mind was getting murky and it was getting harder to keep the other Ianto’s memories separate from his own.

He let his eyes drift shut, wondering if it mattered any longer, when suddenly hands were roughly sliding under his arms and lifting him. He glanced up to see Jack glaring down at him and blinked in confusion. No, not Jack. James.

“You don’t need me. Just leave me here.” His voice came out too weak to sound convincing and James ignored him anyway, hauling him up into a fireman’s carry on his shoulder and sprinting for the rift opening as bullets started ricocheting around them.

James leapt into the rift opening and the sounds of yelling and gunfire was replaced by a rushing roar that sounded like it was inside and outside his head. For a few long moments, it was like he was disconnected from his body, he had no breath, no heartbeat, no longer felt the wet stickiness of his blood, the burning ache of the bullet wound or the dizziness he worried meant he’d lost too much blood.

But then reality vacuumed back in and he was landing hard on the metal gantry that ran along the
side of the water tower. Silence descended, but his ears were ringing so loud, he didn’t think he
would have heard anyone even if they’d shouted. The pain returned with a vengeance, and he
curled in on himself. The only consolation he had was that James didn’t seem to be fairing much
better. He was on all fours, but hunched in on himself as if hurting or feeling sick.

Above them, the rift was still active, energy racing up and down the tower, the portal still open.
Ianto prayed Jack would come flying through any second and find some way to send James to hell
where he clearly deserved to be.

“Are you okay?” A hesitant voice asked from above him. He rolled onto his back and stared up at
the freckled face surrounded by dark hair.

“Gwen?” At least she looked like Gwen… almost. There were subtle difference—face a slightly
different shape, hair maybe a shade lighter, hazel eyes, not green, as though it was actually Gwen
sister.

“No, not really. I do have all her memories, however.” The small gap-tooth smile she sent him was
somehow cuter than even Gwen’s had been. “Wait… Ianto?”

Shock chased over her features and she hastily crouched down next to him.

“Yes, but not the Ianto you—Gwen knew. Hard to explain.” He coughed, suddenly short of breath.

Gwen glanced over to where James was finally getting upright, though looking very unsteady on
his feet.

“What happened, Jack?”

“No, I’m not Jack.” He came over to stand above them, gaze calculating as it passed over Gwen.
“James Harper. But I can pretend if it makes it easier.”

A faintly disgusted look crossed Not-Gwen’s face before she glanced back down at him.

“You can both explain later, right now, Ianto, you need medical attention.” Not-Gwen started to
help him up, but James pointed the gun at her.

“You’re not taking him anywhere except the medbay. No phone calls out. No one knows we’re
here, got it?”

“Because if he dies, I will kill you. And it won’t be fast. It’ll be messy and there’ll be lots of
screaming involved.”

Not-Gwen blanched, but hurriedly nodded, tightening her grip on him. Together, they stumbled
toward the medical area as James went over to the work stations, mumbling something about
shutting down the rift manipulator. Ianto stole one last glance over his shoulder, looking for any
sign of Jack, before Not-Gwen led him unsteadily down the stairs.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood,” she said, sounding concerned as she helped him onto the autopsy
“Tell me something I don’t know.” He settled on the cold metal surface, glad to be lying down and trying not to think about all the dead bodies—alien and otherwise—that had been here before him.

“Let’s see, blood type,” Not-Gwen was muttering as she typed quickly at the computer. A second later, she had his file up and was pulling saline and a blood bag from the fridge. She sent him a look that was probably meant to be reassuring, but completely failed since she looked so worried. “We’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

“Here, give it to me.” He held his hand out for the cannula and needle. She sent him a dubious look, but didn’t argue, giving him all the equipment and then watching as he inserted his own IV lines.

“Well, that some trick you’ve got there.”

“Learned some basic field med while I was with UNIT.” He collapsed back again, the last of his energy draining suddenly. “When these two bag finish, you might want to give me two more.”

She glanced between him and the fridge. “You could probably just do it yourself.”

“No, I won’t.” His eyes dropped shut like they’d suddenly been weighted. “Don’t mind me, just going to pass out now.”

The last thing he heard was Not-Gwen calling his name, a hint of panic to her tone. He couldn’t do anything to reassure her, however. The darkness was too strong to resist.
Chapter 22

Jack revived to a gun pointed in his face and his hands cuffed. Taking a moment to get his bearings, he started to surge up as he remembered James threatening to take Ianto through the rift. Several more guns joined the first and he held up his cuffed hands in surrender.

“Whoa. Just take it easy, guys!”

All of the UNIT soldiers surrounding him looked on edge—like they were a second away from shooting him again. Of course, since they probably thought he was James Harper, he couldn’t really blame them. Glancing around, he found Owen and Tosh similarly cuffed a few feet away from him. Owen was looking wary, but Tosh looked mad. Scary mad in a way he’d very rarely seen in his own Tosh.

Moving his attention on, he found who he thought was probably the commanding officer, swiftly making his way over from where he’d been standing by the workstations. Neither James nor Ianto were anywhere in sight and the rift was no longer active. Though he hated to even think it, the only obvious conclusion he cold draw was that James had indeed taken Ianto through the portal to his own reality after he’d temporarily died.

“Are you in charge here?” he asked as the officer stopped in front of him. He struggled to his feet, pausing when several guns were cocked, but the officer held out a hand and the nearby soldiers stood down.

“Colonel Jacobs.” The colonel sent him a cool, stiff nod. “No need to introduce yourself, we already know who you are.”

“That’s the thing,” he replied slowly. “I don’t think you do. Name’s Captain Jack Harkness. I know I look exactly like James Harper, but believe me when I tell you I’m not him.”

The colonel scowled at him, an edge of scepticism to the expression.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell them!” Tosh interjected heatedly, sitting forward on the chair. “Some of your men saw James Harper escape through the rift just as they came in and started shooting.”

Shooting? But if James had Ianto, he would have been in the line of fire— And he’d already been injured.

Jack turned a desperate glance on the colonel. “Sir, please. You have to trusts us on this. I come from an alternate reality. I don’t belong in this timeline. I’ve been trying to get back—that’s what we were doing for the last few hours while you were up on the Plass trying to find a way in here. Except it backfired. James Harper went through the rift and took one of your men—Captain Ianto Jones. He was injured. Harper shot him. I need to get the rift open and get back to my own reality.”

“I am—was Jones’s CO.” A hint of worry crossed the colonel’s face. “How badly was Captain Jones injured?”

Jack let out a quick breath of relief. “I don’t know, we didn’t get a chance to check. Last I saw, he was conscious and on his feet.”
“Actually,” Owen spoke up, a dark note to his tone. “Not by the time that psychopath took him. Ianto collapsed just after you were shot and James carried him through.”

Jack’s stomach dropped into his feet. Damn it. Ianto. He could barely catch any of the thoughts spinning through his head—some of them he didn’t want to catch. Didn’t want to consider the possibility that Ianto might be dead or dying.

“Let us go, now.” Jack sent the colonel a steely looked, and the man actually took half a step back, causing all the guns to end up pointed at him once again.

“How do I know this isn’t some elaborate trick?” the colonel demanded.

“We have CCTV footage,” Tosh said. “All you have to do is watch. See both James and Jack standing less than a meter apart and then make up your own mind.”

The colonel scoffed. “That could be doctored.”

“Fine. Don’t watch it,” Jack growled. “But while we stand around here talking, Ianto is injured and could be dying. If anything happens to him because I couldn’t get to him fast enough, I promise, Colonel, a little thing like crossing realities won’t stop me coming back here to make you pay.”

The colonel’s expression tightened and beyond him, he could see Owen rolling his eyes.

“If you’re trying for a convincing impression of your sociopathic twin, Jack, then you’re doing a bang-up job.”

Jack dragged a hand over his face, trying to get a handle on the desperate fear and anger over whatever was happening to Ianto while he stood in the wrong reality with his hands tied, unable to do anything.

“I’m sorry.”

At this, the colonel raised an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything as Jack pushed on.

“Believe me when I tell you that there is no one else in this universe like Ianto Jones. I can’t let anything happen to him. Understand? I just can’t.”

The colonel stared at him and Jack tried to keep some honesty in his eyes and expression, hoping the other man would see he was sincere and no threat to him. Finally, the colonel gave a quick nod, then pulled a key to the cuffs from his pocket.

Though he’d been desperately hoping to get free, he was still completely surprised when the colonel let him go so suddenly.

“But, why?” he asked, knowing he probably sounded dumbfounded.

“Because James Harper never apologises to anyone. And he certainly doesn’t care about people. Definitely not to the depths that you seem to care about Ianto.”

Thank you.” Jack clasped him in the shoulder and shook his hand. However, a second later he was moving around the other man. “Tosh! I need that rift open.”

Tosh immediately got to her feet and sprang at the keyboard, the cuffs barely hampering her.

“Monitor her closely,” the colonel ordered one of the nearby men, who shifted to hover over Tosh, making her shoulders stiffen. The sight made cold dread build in Jack’s stomach.
“What’s going to happen to her?” he asked the colonel.

The man didn’t seem very concerned as he gave a careless shrug. “Back to the UNIT prison. Possibly in a more secure wing this time.”

Tosh’s expression tightened up, but she didn’t pause as she worked to open the rift.

“And Owen?” he asked through a clenched jaw, trying to remain civil and fighting the overwhelming urge to punch the man who’d freed him only moments ago.

“We have some questions for him, but then he’ll be free to go… probably.”

Owen scowled as he opened his mouth, no doubt to tell the colonel exactly where he could stick that idea, but Jack subtly held up a hand to subdue him and Owen settled with a mulish expression on his face.

A moment later, Tosh instructed him to activate his vortex manipulator. The colonel watched on with unconcealed interest, and Jack knew he could have put safe money on the man wishing he could get his hands on Jack’s vortex manipulator.

The rift fully activated and the portal opened. While most of the soldiers were distracted and in some cases awestruck by the sight, he sidled over to Tosh while signalling Owen to stand. The doctor did so, the subtly shifted closer.

“How do you feel about a new life in a new reality?” he murmured, making sure none of the soldiers nearby overheard.

Tosh immediately gave a decisive nod, though Owen looked a little uncertain.

“I can't promise you’ll be any better off, but I can guarantee you’ll be free to do whatever you want,” he added.

Owen glanced from him to Tosh and then back again.

“What the hell, not like I’ve got any better prospects here apart from a very expensive imported beer waiting at home in my fridge.”

Jack sent him a wink. “If it exists in my reality, I’ll buy you a whole case.”

“You got a deal,” Owen replied with a crooked smile.

“Settled then. Tosh, don’t take this personally, but I’m about to point my gun at you.” He let a wide grin cross his face at Tosh’s wide-eyed expression as he pulled his Webley from its holster.

He grabbed Tosh and pulled her into him, pointing the gun at her, but making sure to leave the safety on.

“Well, it’s been fun,” he announced, gaining the attention of the nearby soldiers, including the colonel. “But it’s time I got back to my own reality. Sorry for the trouble, but I’m in the mood to take hostages. You know how it is.”

“Captain.” The colonel’s voice held a definite note of warning, but Jack wasn’t deterred in the least as he managed to keep Owen behind him and walked Tosh toward the portal.

“Sorry, Colonel Jacobs. I appreciate you letting me go and hate to repay you like this, but I really need Toshiko, you see. Plus, I find the idea of letting her rot in a UNIT prison for the rest of her life
a little offensive. If you’ve got a problem with it, you’re welcome to lodge a complaint against Torchwood with Whitehall. Of course, I’m not sure how they’d send that through realities, but you can always try.”

He reached the edge of the portal and paused, putting himself squarely in the line of fire so Tosh and Owen could make their escape.

“Captain! You’re assisting in the escape of a convicted terrorist,” the colonel sputtered.

“Damn right, I am,” Jack replied with a cheeky grin, enjoying himself a bit too much. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed Tosh and Owen had already disappeared, so he turned back to the front, quickly snapping into a tight stance and cutting the colonel a sarcastic salute.

The colonel’s face turned an interesting shade of red, but Jack didn’t get the chance to fully appreciate it as he stepped backwards into the rift.
Chapter 23

The return trip through realities was only marginally easier than his unceremonious arrival, and that might have only been because he was expecting it. Jack sunk to his knees on the metal gantry as his body came back to itself in a painful, nauseating wave. Next to him, Tosh and Owen seemed unsteady, maybe a little sick, but definitely not as bad as he got it. Possibly something to do with the time vortex within him that’d been seemingly unsettled ever since the rift had first sucked him up and spat him through alternate timelines days ago.

As he brought his aching head up, he was yet again confronted with the sight of a gun barrel aimed his way. James glared at him from the other end of the weapon. Ianto was nowhere in sight, and his heart skipped with worry.

“You know, I’m getting really sick of people pointing guns at me today,” he muttered as he got to his feet and side-stepped to help Owen up. Tosh was already on her feet and he could see her eyeing the workstation James was standing next to.

“Escaped UNIT, huh?” James asked, almost sounding bored. “Well, that’s unfortunate. Now I have to kill you. But first—”

James firmed up his aim and squeezed off a shot, grazing Jack’s arm.

He immediately clamped a hand on the torn fabric over his bicep, already wet with blood, the minor bullet wound burning. “Ow. My coat! What the hell was that for?”

“Let’s call it incentive. Back through the rift, now, Jack old man. Remember, two of us can’t exist in one reality and I’ve really taken a liking to this one.”

“What did you do with Ianto?” he demanded, ignoring James’s order for the time being.

“Ianto isn’t your concern. Now, step into the rift or I’ll start shooting your friends. And they won’t get fun flesh wounds like you did.”

Jack stared at James, mind racing, trying to come up with a way to quickly and decisively fix this situation that wouldn’t put Tosh or Owen in danger. And where the hell was Ianto, anyway? If he’d been seriously injured, what would James have done with him?

“I need some help down here!” A somewhat familiar voice called from the autopsy bay.

James glanced over his shoulder with a scowl, and while he was distracted, Tosh suddenly leapt forward and knocked into him. At first, Jack thought in shock that she’d decided to attack James for some reason, but then she grabbed the keyboard and started typing furiously, key clacking loudly.

James recovered and began to swing the gun in her direction, point-blank range.

“Tosh!” Owen yelled, starting forward, even as Jack jumped into action. However, before either of them could reach her, she shoved back from the workstation, ramming into James and taking him by surprise. She followed up with an elbow to his midsection, then hooked an arm over his and yanked him off-balance, slipping the gun from his grip before completely flipping him over. He’d barely hit the ground on his back when she calmly put two bullets into his head.

Jack skidded to a halt, mouth dropping open but no words coming out. Owen had stopped beside
him, looking just as dumbfounded. Tosh didn’t even look at them, but returned to the keyboard and
tapped in two final keystrokes.

The energy rippling around the water tower increased, sparking brighter and hotter instead of
shutting down like he’d expected it to. Just when he was starting to worry they were all going to
get fried, there was a final massive spark—more like an explosion—before everything went dark.
Including most of the hub. It took a long moment for the backup generators to kick on and in the
silence, an impressive string of curses in a familiar Welsh accent floated up from the autopsy bay.

“Tosh, what did you do?” Jack hurried over to look at the monitors, now displaying all kinds of
error readings.

Her expression was resolute as she looked up at him. “I’m sorry, Jack. I had to make sure no one
could ever send me back there.”

She’d obviously done something to the rift manipulator so they couldn’t use it to cross realities any
longer. Except James was still here and they had the exact same problem they’d had all along—
two of him in one timeline causing the fabric of reality to deteriorate.

“Someone! I really need help!” The voice from the autopsy bay called out again.

“You and I are going to have words about this later.” Jack pointed a finger at Tosh, mad she’d
taken any and all decision about the rift manipulator out of his hands.

She sent him a single nod and he whirled away from her to hurry toward the autopsy bay.

“Owen!” he yelled as he reached the top of the stairs.

Ianto was laying on the metal table, blood dripping onto the floor beneath it, bright crimson against
the white tiles.

Gwen stood over him, hands streaked red, pressing a soaked piece of gauze against his shoulder.
Except as she glanced up at him, he realized with a start it wasn’t Gwen at all. Gwen had left.
Resigned her position and gone to live that life he’d always told her to hold onto. This was the alien
who’d taken up residence inside Gwen and pretended to be her for weeks so effectively him and
the rest of the Torchwood team hadn’t noticed. She’d been unconscious after they’d split her from
Gwen and he’d gotten taken by the rift. He had a damn lot of questions for her, but right now, that
had to wait.

He reached the edge of the autopsy table and reached down with a shaking hand to press his
fingers into Ianto’s neck a second before Owen arrived beside him and picked up Ianto’s limp hand
to check the pulse in his wrist.

Owen swore. “He’s in hypovolemic shock.”

“Which means what to people without a medical degree?” he practically yelled at the doctor.

Owen tossed him a glare as he started riffling through the nearby cupboards and draws, collecting
some items and chucking other stuff he apparently didn’t need out of the way.

“He’s lost too much blood and if I don’t do something about it now, he’s going to die.” Owen
paused to cast a worried glance at Ianto. “If it’s not already too late.”

Jack leaned heavily on the table, heart free-falling. God, no. Not again. He couldn’t watch Ianto
die a second time.
Owen increased the flow on both the IV fluids and blood, then put a second IV line in Ianto’s other arm and added another bag of blood.

“Right, luv, move aside and let me see what we’re dealing with.” Owen shifted around the table and took over from Gwen—No, he meant the alien who wasn’t Gwen.

The doctor muttered to himself as he ripped open Ianto’s shirt and examined the injury.

“Well?” he demanded when Owen didn’t say anything, just grabbed a tray of instruments and got to work.

“Nicked an artery. Had to make a scene, didn’t he? Bloody drama queen.” Owen adjusted the overhead light and then braced one hand around the wound, digging into Ianto’s flesh with one of the tools. “Just need to— There! All fixed.”

Owen straightened, looking relieved.

“Fixed?” he repeated sceptically.

“Well, clamped.” Owen sent him a reassuring grin that held a hint of smart-assery to it. “Bleeding is under control. His pressure should start coming back up. Easy to repair now he’s not in danger of kicking the bucket on us.”

A sudden single gunshot rapport startled them all and Jack glanced up toward the workstations where he’d left Tosh, but couldn’t see her from where he stood. She appeared at the railing a second later, however, still holding a gun.

“Sorry, James started waking up.” Tosh leaned on the rail with a thoughtful look. “Repeatedly shooting him in the head until we work out what to do with him is reasonable, right?”

Jack blinked at her, not sure what to make of this somewhat blood-thirsty version of his computer genius.

“Sounds reasonable since he shot me first,” a scratchy voice said, drawing his attention down.

“Ianto!” Jack leaned closer, cupping his face, the relief rushing through him so fast and so hard, his eyes filled with moisture and he had to blink back tears. “You had us worried for a second there.”

Ianto’s brow creased a little. “Really? Sorry, not my intention, obviously.”

“Not me,” Owen declared, preparing some kind of syringe. “I wasn’t worried at all. Jack here was going to pieces, though. Honestly, it was nauseating.”

Ianto gave a weak laugh, but then winced. “Ouch. No one is allowed say anything funny for a least a week.”

“Are you okay?” Jack stroked a hand through his hair.

“Nothing a coffee won’t fix.” Ianto sent him a smile that made Jack’s heart thrum.

“No to the coffee, but yes to a massive blood transfusion and a little sleep while I fix that ruddy great hole in your chest.” Owen stepped over to the bag of fluids and inserted the needle into the line. “Say nighty-night, Ianto.”

Ianto’s hand found his, even as his eyes started to droop. “Jack?”
“I’m not going anywhere.” He pressed a lingering kiss to Ianto’s forehead. “I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

Ianto gave a shallow nod, but then slipped into unconsciousness.

“Right, Harkness, off with you. Can’t operate with you hovering like that. Boyfriends are officially banned from my medical bay.”

Jack gently set down Ianto’s hand and then arched a question brow at the doctor. “Your medical bay?”

Owen paused to glance around, assessing the surrounds thoughtfully.

“Yeah,” he said slowly, but with a confident nod. “My medical bay. Now get lost. I’ve got work to do.”

Jack sent him an exasperated look, but his chest was filling with a warmth he hadn’t felt in a long time. Years. Almost a decade. Not since the day Tosh and Owen had died. That was when the chill had taken root deep within him. Losing the hub and then Ianto right after had turned the chill into a permafrost. But now he could feel it thawing. He knew the feeling was dangerous, even as his body welcomed the new warmth of life.

He glanced at alien-impostor-Gwen, who’d been at the sink cleaning the blood from her hands.

“You’re with me.”

She nodded as she dried her hands and then joined him at the steps.

“Owen, let me know when he’s going to start coming out of it. I want to be here when he wakes up, like I promised.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Owen muttered with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Jack jogged up the steps to where Tosh was still standing. He didn’t have to tell her to come along, she fell into step beside alien-impostor-Gwen with only a glance from him.

They returned to the workstations where James was lying on the ground, blood around his head like some kind of gruesome halo. He twitched, and so Jack took out his Webley, calmly shooting him through the head once more, even though a small part of him railed against it. He knew what every death and resurrection did to him. He hated inflicting it on his alter-self over and over again, even if the man was sick and twisted and had almost killed Ianto.

He turned to look at Tosh, standing with her arms crossed.

“First things first. Tosh, I need you to explain what you did to the rift manipulator and if there’s still a way to get James back to his own reality.” He paused as she nodded her agreement, then looked at alien-impostor-Gwen. “Then you’re going to tell me all about why you possessed one of my closest friends for the last few weeks and what the hell is going on in Cardiff.”

“I’ll tell you what I can,” she replied in a reluctant voice.

It was a start, he supposed. And unfortunately, he couldn’t deal with alien-impostor-Gwen until he got the situation with James sorted out.

He took a breath as he focused on the tech genius in front of him. “Okay, Tosh. Let’s start with
what the hell you were thinking.”
Ianto swam out of the darkness, everything feeling all kind of floaty and detached, like his brain wasn’t quite in contact with his body. As consciousness returned, however, feeling started filtering back in; he was lying on something cold and hard, someone was holding his hand in a firm, warm grip and that scent—The familiar warming, alluring smell of Jack roused him from the last of the haze in his mind.

“Sleeping Beauty’s got nothing on you,” a low voice murmured in his ear.

He cracked an eye open—mostly in disbelief—to find Jack leaning in close to him, arms folded on the edge of the table and chin resting on his fisted hands. His smile widened as Ianto met his gaze.

“You did not just say that,” he replied, which only made Jack look more amused.

Jack gave a casual shrug. “Had to check whether you were awake or not.”

“And you thought using the cheesiest line you could come up with would work?” He pretended to think about it for a moment. “Actually, you were right. Even if I’d still been unconscious, I would have come too just to tell you how utterly trite that was.”

Jack fake-pouted at him. “It took me half an hour to come up with that!”

“And he tested them all on me,” Owen said, stepping up behind Jack with his arms crossed. “Believe me, you don’t want to hear the ones he decided not to use.”

“I can only imagine,” he muttered in reply. The other Ianto’s memories were providing him with plenty of instances where Jack’s corny lines had been even worse than this most recent effort.

“How are you feeling?” Owen asked, shifting around the table to check his bandages and then the IV stand.

“Like someone shot me in the chest… Oh wait, they did.”

Owen cut him an exasperated sideways glance. “Well, I see your usual wit is in good working order. How’s the pain? I can up the meds if you need.”

“Or you could just give him the really good pain killers,” Jack suggested, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

Owen turned from where he’d been fiddling with the IV stand, almost looking insulted. “Of course I gave him the really good pain killers. What else was I going to—”

Jack waved a hand to cut him off. “I’m not talking about the 21st century opioids. I’m talking about the alien pain killers. The ones my Owen spent years perfecting.”

Ianto glanced in interest at Owen to see how he was going to take that piece of information, but the doctor seemed to be thinking about something. Delving into the other Owen’s memories, he guessed.

“Bloody brilliant!” Owen suddenly announced, hurrying around the autopsy table and opening up one of the cabinets. He sorted through the vials inside for a moment before pulling something out. “My other self was a right genius. Not only is this an effective non-addictive pain killer, it’s also
perfect for a rotten hangover.”

Jack leaned in and sent him a conspiratorial wink. “The other Owen tested out that second part pretty thoroughly.”

He arched a brow in response, and Jack gave a sage nod as if to answer his silent question. So apparently Jack’s version of Owen like to party a little hard.

Owen wasn’t paying any attention to them as he drew up a measure of the alien pain killer and went to jab the needle in Ianto’s arm.

“You do know what you’re doing, right?” he asked quickly before Owen could administer him questionable alien pharmaceuticals.

Owen’s expression became slightly insulted. “I’ve now got two life-times worth of medical training floating around in this beautiful mind, and several years of Torchwood alien medical… stuff. So, yeah, I’ve got a clue.”

Before he could say anything else, Owen poked him with the needle. He tightened his hold on Jack’s hand and caught his breath, still a little worried this wasn’t going to turn out well for him. However, in a matter of seconds, the dull ache the usual pain killers hadn’t quite subdued was gone and even the weird floaty-ness associated with strong opioids disappeared. He felt… good. Better than good, actually.

“Wow, that’s some excellent stuff.”

“Yeah it is,” Jack said with a smile. “So, while you’re feeling up to it, let’s get you off this table.”

“What?” he asked at the same time as Owen spouted something about not moving him.

Jack passed one of his signature I’ve-made-up-my-mind-don’t-argue looks between the pair of them. “This is an autopsy table, Owen. As in, for dead bodies. Now that he’s not in danger of becoming one, he needs to be recuperating somewhere more comfortable.”

Not waiting for anyone to say anything else, Jack helped him up. “And are you really going to argue when you could be lying in a bed?”

He cast his mind around in the other Ianto’s memories for a moment, trying to work out where Jack meant. This hub wasn’t quite the same as the hub from his alternate self’s memories. Even back then it’d been ramshackle and a barely-functioning cobbled together mess. The state the hub was in now, however, was far, far worse. Only the most basic work had been done to make the hub safe enough to work in, but there were still exposed wires and pipes falling down in places, waterfalls of brick and rock debris that needed clearing out, sectioned-off areas with bright yellow danger tape where the ceiling was in danger of falling on people’s heads. It was clear the hub’s recovery from the explosion had been hampered by a lack of money and time on the team’s behalf.

In amongst all that, however, the answer suddenly came in the form of Jack’s bunker. He nodded, trying not to let in too many memories of the many long hours Jack and the other Ianto had spent down there together. Between all the craziness that’d been Torchwood, the two of them had actually been happy for a short time—a matter of months. The other Ianto had often laid awake and watched Jack sleep, marvelled at how deeply he’d fallen in love with the man and wondered what on Earth Jack could have seen in him of all people when he could have had the entire universe at his fingertips.

Ianto swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat at exactly what Jack had lost in his alternate
self. Did Jack even realise what he’d had, even if it had been much too short?

“Okay?” Jack asked as he helped him down from the autopsy table. He was a bit unsteady on his feet, but he didn’t feel dizzy and he wasn’t in any pain.

“I’m fine,” he replied, voice a little rough. Jack nodded and wrapped an arm around his waist, helping him up the steps out of the medical area and around the sort distance into Jack’s office. He let go of Ianto long enough to lift open the hatch and then went down first, waiting at the bottom.

Ianto climbed down carefully, getting the weirdest sense of déjà vu as he turned to survey the dim bunker. He’d obviously never been down here before, so he was seeing it all for the first time, yet with the memories he now had belonging to his other self, everything was also achingly familiar. It was clear the explosion hadn’t reached in here—probably not surprising if the hatch had been closed, the room would have been entirely isolated. There were a few minor differences—pictures and knick-knacks he didn’t think had been there before and a different duvet spread haphazardly across the plain light green sheets. It had been eight years since his alternate self had died, a few things were bound to be different.

“This is too weird for you, right?” Jack suddenly said, obviously having interpreted his long silence as a bad sign.

“No,” he replied, forcing himself to step toward the bed. “Just needed a moment to get it all straight in my head.”

Jack hastily pulled the duvet out of the way as Ianto lowered himself onto the mattress. It was a double Jack had somehow managed to squeeze down here not long after he’d gotten back from his disappearing act with the Doctor. His alternate self had theorised that Jack had used some kind of alien technology to achieve the feat since there was no way it would have fit through the hole of the hatchway otherwise. Jack had never told him, however, and it’d become a running joke between them as Ianto had scoured the archives looking for what Jack might have used. He never did work it out before—

He sighed as he closed his eyes and laid back on the pillows. Carrying those memories was beginning to weigh on him. At first, it had been interesting and he’d definitely enjoyed having the edge of suddenly knowing everything about Jack. But now it just felt like he was intruding on someone else’s life. And truth be told, he couldn’t quite escape the tragedy of his alternate self’s final fate. He hadn’t deserved to die like that. But apparently that was Torchwood; very few agents lived past their thirtieth birthday.

Of course, if the other Ianto hadn’t died, he wouldn’t be here right now. Maybe he would be the one who was dead, killed by James. It was almost funny; the one man in his own reality he might have fallen in love with under other circumstances was a psychopath who would otherwise kill him on sight. The universe was messed up.

The bed dipped as Jack settled beside him and then Jack’s arm draped lightly across his stomach. He opened his eyes to see the other man had stripped down to his white t-shirt and pants.

“Comfortable?” he asked, even as he snuggled a little closer. Jack was just so warm, and he hadn’t realised until that moment how cold he’d gotten lying on the chilly metal of the autopsy table. Jack’s idea of moving into bed had been brilliant… not that he was going to say so. The man’s head was big enough as it was.

“So, Owen obviously came through the rift with you. Was that an accident or—”
“Tosh as well,” Jack said, suddenly looking cagey like he was hiding something. “UNIT might have had us cornered. Just a bit.”

He sent Jack a wan smile. “I’m sure travelling through to an alternate reality was the better option.”

“Mostly,” Jack hedged. “Ianto, how much do you remember about what happened?”

He frowned, casting his memory back to James shooting him, Jack going down when James had shot him as well and then—

“Oh my god!” He half sat up, making Jack’s arm slip from him. But Jack caught him by the shoulders to keep him from getting out of bed. “James brought me through the rift! Is he still—”

“He’s still here.” Jack tightened his hold, shifting in closer, blocking him from going anywhere. “But we’ve got him contained. We just have to figure out what to do about him.”

“Send him back!” He would have thought the answer was obvious. James couldn’t stay in this reality for the same reason Jack hadn’t been able to stay in his reality.

“It’s not that simple,” Jack said in a calm voice. Unnaturally calm, like he was trying to keep his own emotions in check.

Ianto forced himself to take a breath and settle. “Why not?”

“Just after we came through, Tosh did something to the rift manipulator—she explained it to me, but the science behind it was almost enough to melt my brain, so I won’t inflict it on you. Suffice to say, we won’t be opening a rift between realities again any time soon.”

“But why would she do that?” he asked, searching Jack’s open expression for the answer.

“She wanted to make sure no one could ever send her back. Just before we stepped through, there was this UNIT colonel who pretty much said she’d spend the rest of her life locked up in the most secure site UNIT had.”

“Oh,” he replied, not sure what else he could say to that. He couldn’t blame her, really. He couldn’t have said he would have done anything differently had he already been imprisoned with UNIT for over a year and was facing the same for the remainder of his life. “But what about the whole reality-collapsing thing?”

Jack’s expression became grim. “Right now, I don’t know. Time reset when we came through and going on what happened in your reality, I’m assuming we’ve got three days to figure something out. At least this time we don’t have to be on the run and hiding out from UNIT. Plus, I can try getting in contact with the Doctor. He’ll help, if he can.”

Ianto nodded, trying not to let bitter disappointment and apprehension over the fact they were still stuck in exactly the same dire situation, even though they’d managed to get Jack back to his own reality. With the rift manipulator broken, not only did it mean they couldn’t get James back, it also meant he couldn’t get home, even if he’d wanted to go. Despite having no choice about coming here, he couldn’t be sorry about it. For all he knew, he would have ended up in a UNIT cell right next to Tosh.

“Come on, lie down. You should be resting.” Jack urged him down, this time settling back himself and pulling Ianto down half on his chest. He relaxed into Jack’s warm body, hearing his heart pounding gently in his ear.
“If things had been different—if not for James and UNIT forcing your hand, would you have brought Tosh through anyway, so she didn’t end up back in jail?”

Jack tightened his arms around him, one hand trailing through his hair, lulling him as he waited for an answer.

“I’d considered offering her a new life, yeah,” he finally answered. “Tosh wasn’t the only one, though.”

His heart skipped a beat, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask outright. “Owen too?”

Somehow, he knew Jack was smiling, even though he wasn’t looking at him.

“Owen too,” he confirmed. “But you were the first one I was going to ask. Had this romantic speech planned out and everything.”

Ianto lifted his head to look at Jack, not sure how he felt about it. Part of him was elated, but a bigger part was worried about it all.

“You know that’s insane, right? We met less than a week ago. I might have all of his memories, but I’m not him and I never will be.”

Jack’s hand gently caressed his jaw, expression serious and thoughtful. “I know. I’ve got no expectations of you, Ianto. And you don’t owe me anything. If you want to leave the hub tomorrow and go find a new life in this reality, I’m not going to stop you.”

Leave? No, he didn’t want to leave. The thought made his chest ache. But he couldn’t help the nagging doubt in the back of his mind.

“But if I stay, what if I’m never as good as he was? What if I never measure up to everything he—”

Jack leaned up and cut him off with a kiss. They lingered for a moment, the action working to soothe him—no doubt just as Jack had planned—before Jack finally pulled back to look at him with a fierce expression.

“You don’t need to live up to anything or anyone. You are two different people and I’ll never compare the two of you. It’s not fair on you and it’s not fair on him—or my memory of him. You only need to be yourself, Ianto. Be true to yourself and don’t worry about what anyone else thinks.”

He sighed and settled back down with his head on Jack’s chest again. “You sound like a greeting card.”

For a long second, Jack was utterly silent, and Ianto worried he’d said the wrong thing—stupid, really to make light of it when Jack had been so serious. But then Jack erupted into laughter, hugging him closer even as he struggled to breathe through it all. Ianto grinned, secretly pleased he’d managed to so thoroughly surprise and amuse Jack. For some reason, he got the feeling Jack didn’t have enough of that in his life at the moment.

When the laughing had subsided, Jack suddenly flipped them over—gently, mindful of Ianto’s wound—and loomed above him. “You certainly know how to make a moment, Ianto Jones.”

Before he could come up with a suitable reply, Jack slowly dropped down to kiss him, deeply and thoroughly, until his whole body felt like it was glowing and he momentarily forgot all about being shot and every other little trouble. Too soon, though, Jack broke the kiss and laid down beside him.
“Rest,” Jack ordered, closing his eyes.

“Yes, sir,” he murmured in reply, enjoying the smile that curled over Jack’s reddened lips.

Even though he didn’t think he was tired, he closed his eyes and listened to the slight brush of Jack breathing evenly beside him. Before he knew it, he was slipping off into a contented sleep.
Jack felt his phone vibrating in his pocket just as Ianto’s breathing evened out next to him. He was tempted to ignore it, but despite everything that’d happened in the past few days and his new problems surrounding James, he still had other Torchwood Three team members out there to answer to.

Trying not to jostle Ianto, he slipped the phone out of his pocket and then stood as he saw Tyler’s name on the screen. He shifted away from the bed, turning his back and keeping his tone low when he answered.

“Jack!” Tyler’s voice was harried and in the background, he could hear the kind of raucous only made by a large crowd whipped up into mob-like levels of frenzy.

“Tyler, what’s going on?”

“What’s going on?” Tyler repeated incredulously, voice hoarse. “You mean besides City Hall blowing up and the mobs in the street chanting *God is coming*?”

Jack dragged a hand over his face as he belatedly remembered everything that’d happen moments before he’d been sucked into the rift. It’d been days for him, and James arriving in this reality had kind of eclipsed everything else. For Tyler and the others, it’d been less than an hour.

He quickly climbed the ladder into his office to sight Gwen—Not Gwen. Her alien double. He’d had a theory she was connected to something in the rift, and when he’d been sucked through, he’d felt something powerful brush by him. Something had come out of the rift when it’d opened and he’d travelled through realities. The question was, where had it gone? *Or more like who had it gone into.* She was sitting in a chair next to Tosh, who’d started working on repairing some of the systems that’d been damaged when she’d overloaded the rift manipulator.

*God is coming.* That’s what the people on the street were chanting—were they talking about whatever or whoever had come through the rift? What in the hell kind of alien being called themselves a god?

“Right, of course,” he finally replied to Tyler. “Did you get Mr. Colchester to the hospital?”

“No! Jesus, Jack. You need to get your arse out here now. Orr was driving and just suddenly pulled over and walked into the crowd. Something happened to them. I don’t know what—The people did something. Colchester stopped breathing but there was a doctor passing by who managed to stabilize him, except we’re still having trouble getting through the crowd and the doctor said the hospital is already over capacity with the explosion at City Hall—”

“Tyler, listen to me, I can’t leave the hub. You’re going to have to handle it.”

“No! Jesus, Jack. You need to get your arse out here now. Orr was driving and just suddenly pulled over and walked into the crowd. Something happened to them. I don’t know what—The people did something. Colchester stopped breathing but there was a doctor passing by who managed to stabilize him, except we’re still having trouble getting through the crowd and the doctor said the hospital is already over capacity with the explosion at City Hall—”

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“Tyler, listen to me, I can’t leave the hub. You’re going to have to handle it.”

“What? Jack, did you hear a bloody word I just said? This is your mess, Jack. Your fault. So you damn well better get your arse—”

“Sorry, but believe it or not, there’s a worse threat at the hub. Possibly two of them. I know you probably hate me right now—”

“Probably?” Tyler scoffed, a telling amount of anger in that one word. “There’s no probably about it, Harkness.”
“And I haven’t given you much reason to trust me lately,” he pushed on, choosing to ignore the verbal jab. Tyler would get over it. Or he wouldn’t. It didn’t really matter. Technically he wasn’t even part of the team. “But believe me when I tell you, whatever is happening out there isn’t putting the universe in nearly as much danger as you think. Deal with it, Tyler.”

“And if Colchester dies?” Tyler demanded furiously.

An old familiar ache tightened his chest. “He’s Torchwood, he knew the risks.”

The words came out sounding hollow. He meant every word and hated himself for it.

“Screw you, Jack Harkness,” Tyler spat into the phoneline before hanging up on him.

He lowered the phone from his ear slowly, looking at the blank screen, resisting the urge to grab his coat and run out of the hub to help Tyler, Orr, and Colchester. The temptation to call Gwen was almost too strong to ignore. But she’d made her position clear, and he owed her more than he could ever repay. He had to give her this—had to give her life to her and find someway to forge on without her. Instead, he did something he’d never thought he’d do as he found a different contact in his phone.

“Hello?” Andy sounded unsure when he answered the call, probably because Jack’s number always showed up as nothing.

“PC Andy Davidson, how are you this fine evening?”

“If this is Jack Harkness, I’m hanging up right sodding now. I’ve had enough trouble from you lot —”

“No-no-no-no! Andy, don’t hang up.” He paused, expecting to hear a dial tone, but instead Andy sighed, clearly knowing staying on the line was a bad idea.

“What do you want? In case you didn’t know, City Hall was blown up by terrorists and since I’m lucky to have a job these days—no thanks to Torchwood—I’d really like to get back to it.”

“I need a favour. You know Tyler Steele, right?”

“That annoying reporter bloke who got sent to jail for—”

“Yes, everyone knows what he got sent to jail for. He’s stuck on the streets between the Plass and the hospital with two of my people, one of them is seriously injured. I need you to go help him.”

“Fine, I’ll go. Suppose you’ll want the blues-and-twos on all the way.”

“That’s why you’re my favourite PC, Andy Davidson.”

“More like its ’cause I’m the only git stupid enough to still be talking to you. I’ll let you know when I find them.”

Andy hung up before he could say anything else, but he still breathed a sigh of relief. It was all he could do to help Tyler and the others until he resolved the situation with James Harper and Gwen’s alien body-double who might just be a God.

“Trouble?”

Jack turned to find Ianto standing a few steps behind him, still looking half asleep.
“Isn’t there always?” He added a smile to soften the words that’d come out a little sharper than he’d intended. “What are you doing out of bed?”

Ianto came forward, movements a little stiff. “Bit hard to sleep with you up here yelling. Your voice carries quite clearly down into the bunker, you know.”

He did know that. His own Ianto had told him numerous times. It’d just been that long since he’d had anyone down in his bunker, he’d forgotten.

“So, what is it?” Ianto asked, shifting around him to perch on the edge of the desk.

“Cardiff going to hell again. City Hall got blown up by terrorists I may have sort of been involved with quite recently.”

Both of Ianto’s eyebrows went up, but there was no judgement on his features. “Whatever your reasons for getting involved with them, I’m sure your intentions were in the right place.”

“Yeah, well you know what they say about good intentions and the road to hell.” Jack ran a hand through his hair. Truthfully, he’d made a lot of bad choices lately, he probably didn’t deserve Ianto’s understanding.

“What are we going to do about it?”

Jack’s entire body warmed at Ianto’s use of we and suddenly things didn’t seem to be weighing so heavily on him any longer.

“We can’t do anything until we’ve figured out what to do with James and make sure reality isn’t going to collapse. Then I probably should deal with the fact Gwen’s body double is possibly possessed by some kind of alien god.”

“Huh,” Ianto replied with his usual under-reaction. “I can see how that might be a small problem, yes.”

Despite all the world-ending problems stacked up against them, Jack couldn’t help a small laugh as he leaned in and kissed Ianto on the forehead.

“You should get back to bed. You’re supposed to be resting.”

Ianto got to his feet, but didn’t look like he planned on taking any advice about resting.

“Save the universe now, bed later.” A suggestive gleam lit up Ianto’s blue eyes. “And only if you’re in it with me.”


He went to move back, but Ianto held him close for another moment.

“Whatever you need, Jack,” he murmured intently. “I’m here and I’ll do whatever you need me to.”

Jack nodded, throat tight as he quickly turned away and strode out of his office. He already knew the truth of it in his heart. Because that was exactly what had gotten the Ianto from this reality killed.
Chapter 26

Ianto ignored Owen’s glare as he lowered himself into the chair next to the conference table. Alright, maybe he should have been resting like the doctor had ordered, but with the problems stacking up, resting wouldn’t do him much good if the world ended while he was curled up under the duvet in Jack’s bunker… as tempting as it was.

Jack took his place at the head of the table, accessing the screen on the wall until it was split into two CCTV feeds—one showing alien-Gwen in a holding cell, looking almost creepily unconcerned at Jack’s decision to lock her up, and the showing other James in a second cell. Still dead or dead again. Although Ianto knew Jack was having a hard time with it, they’d decided keeping him dead was the best way to ensure he didn’t escape or cause any problems like he had the first time they’d locked him up in the other-reality-hub.

But it meant one of them periodically had to go down there every little while and kill him again, which hadn’t been pleasant for anyone, most especially Jack who knew exactly what James went through every time he died and revived.

“Okay, team,” Jack said, turning away from the screen to survey him, Owen and Tosh. “I need ideas on what to do about James since we can’t send him back through the rift.”

There were no recriminations in his voice and he didn’t even glance at Tosh, but she still studiously dropped her gaze to the desk, a hint of remorse in her features.

“Well, team,” Jack said, turning away from the screen to survey him, Owen and Tosh. “I need ideas on what to do about James since we can’t send him back through the rift.”

There were no recriminations in his voice and he didn’t even glance at Tosh, but she still studiously dropped her gaze to the desk, a hint of remorse in her features.

“Maybe UNIT have got somewhere they can hold him,” Ianto suggested half-heartedly, even though he knew it was unlikely and wouldn’t solve their issue of having two versions of Jack in one reality.

Jack shook his head. “I don’t think I could trust that he wouldn’t find some way to escape. Plus, reality—”

“Would still be in the balance, I know,” he replied before Jack could finish.

“No offense, Jack,” Tosh spoke up. “But I think we’ve already found our solution.”

Jack’s brow creased as he glanced at the screen with James in the holding cell. “Keeping him locked in the vaults? But he escaped last time—”

“Not locked up in the vaults,” she said, shaking her head. “Keeping him dead. Technically if he’s dead, there isn’t two of you existing in this reality. Have you experienced any of the same symptoms you had when you were stuck in our reality?”

Ianto looked at Jack in surprise to see how he was taking that suggestion. Jack’s expression was set and mostly closed, but Ianto could see the turmoil in his blue eyes.

“No, I haven’t. But how are we supposed to accomplish that? We can’t spend the rest of our lives popping down to the vaults a dozen times a day to kill him.”

“Actually, I might have an idea about that,” Owen put in.

Jack looked at him, but didn’t answer, simply nodded and crossed his arm.

“I’ve been looking over your Owen’s notes about the cryo chambers and how the bodies are stored
“Putting him in stasis won’t work,” Jack said in a low voice. “I already considered that and it doesn’t negate the problem of having two of me in this reality.”

“Unless,” Owen said, punching out the word sharply. “Like Tosh said, he’s dead. I think I should be able to rig up something that constantly cycles a toxic substance through his body which should effectively keep him dead.”

Jack glanced away, pressing a hand against his mouth, clearly thinking about it, but obviously not comfortable with the implications—possibly imagining himself in the same situation.

“He’d never fully revive?” Jack asked. “I’m assuming it’d be like when I got buried beneath Cardiff for nearly two thousand years. Eventually the soil above me compacted so much above me I wasn’t ever able to fully revive, so my body just kind of shut down until they dug me up again.”

Owen stuck the end of the pen in his mouth, a flicker of surprise crossing his features, but he otherwise didn’t react. “Yeah, something like that, I suppose.”

Jack stood there for another long moment, posture tense and shoulders tight. But finally, he gave an almost imperceptible nod. “Get it done. Let me know if there’s anything you need.”

Owen sent Jack a kind of salute as he stood and then motioned for Tosh to come with him. “Could use your smarts on a few things.”

Tosh murmured an agreement and left the conference room with him. Once they were gone, Jack blew out a long breath and leaned forward to brace his hands on the desk, dropping his head to stare at the floor.

Ianto didn’t move, didn’t say anything. If Jack wanted to talk, he’d say something when he was good and ready. Until then, silent support seemed to be the best idea.

After a little while, Jack shifted, turning to lean against the edge of the table. “Am I doing to right thing, Ianto?”

“I think that’s rather subjective,” he replied with a shrug. “A lot of people from my reality would probably think this a mercy James doesn’t deserve considering all the things he’s done and all the people he’s killed.”

Jack glanced sideways at him. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re making the best decision under difficult circumstances.” He pushed to his feet and went to stand in front of Jack. “What do you think?”

“I think I’m about to condemn my alter-self to the kind of indefinite limbo between life and death I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.”

Now, the doubt, the self-recriminations, the shame were all evident in Jack’s blue eyes as he stared up at him.

“But you told Owen—”

“I’m hoping James won’t be aware, like when Grey buried me. But I don’t know that for sure. He might revive just enough each time to be aware of his state. He’s already unhinged enough, I can’t imagine what that would to do him long-term.”
Ianto reached out and lightly cupped the side of Jack’s neck, thumb along his jawline. “We don’t have another choice, not right now, anyway. We can keep working on it, fix the rift manipulator and eventually send him back—”

A frown drew down Jack’s expression. “Send him back to your reality so he can continue killing people for fun? And risk him spending the rest of eternity trying to get back to this reality because Torchwood still exists here and he’s obsessed with carrying out some kind of revenge? I can’t let that happen. It’s not an option.”

“It’s also not technically your responsibility,” he replied, gently, rubbing his fingers soothingly along Jack’s hairline behind his ear.

“Well I’m making it my responsibility.” Jack’s gaze took on a familiar stubborn gleam. No one would be dissuading him from that idea, then.

“Then you know as well as we all do that this is our only option to contain James.”

An edge of exasperation crept into Jack’s expression. “Talking me in circles like an expert I see.”

He let a serene smile slip over his lips. “Just helping you see reason.”

Jack pulled him closer until their foreheads were lightly pressed together, settling a hand gently on the back of his neck. “I know I told you before that if you wanted to leave and start a new life somewhere else, I wouldn’t stop you. But, Ianto, I’d really like you to stay.”

Leaning in, he kissed Jack, briefly but just deep enough to make his heart skip a beat.

“I’m not going anywhere, Jack,” he murmured after he broke the kiss.

Jack release a relieved breath. “Thank God, because I think I need you.”

Ianto leaned back to study him, finding Jack’s expression unguarded, gaze vulnerable. “About as much as I need you, I’m guessing.”

Jack’s gaze roamed his face for a moment before he pulled him in for another kiss, this one harder and deeper, sending a fissure of pleasure all the way through his body. Jack straightened and pulled him closer, but then shifted them around until Ianto was against the desk. When Jack’s hand smoothed down his chest, all the way to the waistband of his trousers, he debated whether to catch his hand, but settled for pulling back from the kiss instead as Jack tugged at his belt buckle.

“Whatsoever you’re thinking, I doubt it comes under Owen’s definition of rest.”

Jack’s lips lifted in a wicked half-grin. “Don’t worry, Ianto, I’m going to take real good care of you.”

“Why does that make me even more suspicious?”

“Because you’re a smart guy,” Jack murmured against his neck, just below his ear, before kissing the tender spot with a light sucking that sent a shudder cascading down his spine.

Jack made short work of his belt, button and zipper, pushing down his trousers and pants with one smooth move—not all the way, just far enough to free his already hard erection.

He glanced over at the door to the conference room, wondering if the door locked and not really wanting to get caught in such a compromising position by Tosh or Owen. “Jack, I don’t know—”
Anything else he was going to say got lost somewhere between his brain and his tongue as Jack dropped down to his knees and took him into his mouth without warning.

“Oh God,” he groaned, clamping his hands on the edge of the desk to keep himself upright. This can’t have been a good idea after he’d been shot and nearly lost enough blood to fill a bathtub, but he couldn’t find the words or will to protest at the indescribable pleasure of Jack’s ministrations.

In an embarrassing short amount of time, Ianto felt the shuddering ecstasy welling up within him, dragging him to the edge of oblivion too fast.

“Jack, oh Christ, I’m going to—” He tried to pull away, but Jack clamped both hands on his arse and held him still, deepening the pull on him until pure, euphoric sensation crashed over him. He had just enough presence of mind to clamp his jaw against shouting, in case anyone was close enough to overhear. Jack didn’t let up until he’d wrung every last drop of pleasure from him and he was sinking to his knees, his legs forgetting how to hold him up any longer. But Jack caught him and he found himself slumped boneless against him.

“You were right,” he murmured as Jack pressed an affection kiss to his temple. “You took very good care of me.”

Jack laughed, hugging him closer. “I plan on taking very good care of you for a long, long time.”
Chapter 27

Epilogue

Jack glanced up at the sound of footsteps echoing off the distant walls of the huge morgue Ianto was striding toward him with his hands stuffed in his pockets, gait loose and almost casual, purposefully unthreatening and unobtrusive as he came closer. He didn’t say anything, simply sat down next to him with his back to the draws of ex-Torchwood employees. In that second, Jack had a weird moment of disassociation with reality as he realised that if not for the fact the main hub had been buried under rubble and debris from the explosion almost nine years ago, Ianto from this reality would have been in a draw behind them somewhere. Instead, Jack had given him a final freedom most Torchwood agents never got and released him to his family for a proper burial and a funeral he’d never gone to.

Tear stung his eyes, but he wasn’t sure of their source; there were so many conflict emotions fighting for dominance within him.

Ianto’s hand settled on his, wrapping warm and strong around his fingers.

“This is never going to feel right,” he finally said, talking about James because it was easier than everything else.

“I know,” Ianto murmured. “And I wish there was something else we could have done, if only for your sake. I still think this is a mercy James doesn’t deserve.”

There was a hint of bitterness in Ianto’s voice and he remembered seeing the scars on his torso, Ianto pointing out which James had inflicted when the rest of his UNIT squadron had been killed. How many good people had Ianto known that James had killed in some thirst for vengeance that would never be quenched?

“What would you have done with him?” He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer, but at the same time, the need to know everything about this new Ianto was an urge he couldn’t deny.

“I don’t know, maybe sent him to the middle of the sun or something.”

Jack didn’t answer, wondering if this Ianto had the memory of what he’d done to Tosh’s alien girlfriend, Mary. It actually seemed like some kind of poetic justice, that it was the punishment he’d chosen for her, only to have his alternate self suffer the same fate for almost the same reason —killing countless innocent people.

“Nah,” he finally replied, trying to lighten his tone. “Would have cost too much, and in case you haven’t noticed, Torchwood isn’t exactly flushed with funds these days.”

Ianto laughed, and there was relief in the sound, as though he hadn’t been sure he’d said the right thing, or maybe hadn’t liked what he’d revealed about himself. He brought Jack’s hand up to his mouth and pressed a tender kiss into the palm.

“This place is filling down around you. Literally in some places.”

Jack shifted around to face him. “You mean its falling down around us.”

A warmth with just a hint of amazement lit up Ianto’s blue eyes as he stared back at him.
“Us,” he repeated decidedly. His lips tilted up ruefully. “I guess that makes your problems my problems.”

Jack sighed, leaning his shoulder against the draws. “And I’ve got a whole passel of them. The alien who looks like Gwen in the vaults, City Hall exploding, the Red Doors terrorist group, not to mention the current state of my team.”

“I think I’m having second thoughts,” Ianto said, an exaggerated look of concern on his face. “Is it too late to take back the us thing, I seem to be inheriting a lot of issues.”

“Not a chance.” Jack leaned forward and caught his mouth in a slow, leisurely kiss, enjoying the grounding simplicity of Ianto’s lips against his. After a drawn-out moment, however, he had to pull back, knowing there were a million other things he needed to be doing right now. “I should go, though. I really need to get out there and see what I can do. Andy’s cooperation is only going to get me so far.”

Ianto nodded then got to his feet, holding out his hand. “Let’s go.”

Jack reached up and let Ianto pull him to his feet. “You’re coming with me?”

“Where else would I be, if not by your side?” There was nothing but artless honesty to Ianto’s question, as if he really couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.

“For a start, you could be resting. You did get shot.”

Ianto gave a small shrug. “Then I’ll stay in the SUV and run point on the Torchwood computer system. I won’t even walk anywhere.”

“About the SUV,” Jack said, feeling a little sheepish. “We don’t have one anymore.”

“Gwen bought us a hybrid.” He knew the expression on his face was probably as pained as he felt whenever he had to fold his six-foot-plus frame in there. And pulling up to crime scenes just wasn’t as fun any longer, the little compact simply didn’t inspire the same level of intimidation the SUV had. “God, I miss the SUV.”

“Never mind.” Ianto placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Just keep reminding yourself it means you’re carbon neutral and I’m sure that’ll make it all better.”

He laughed, pulling Ianto into him. “Ianto, never stop being you.”

“Don’t plan on it.” Ianto leaned in and kissed him, too briefly, almost chastely, but Jack felt it all the way to his toes. “Come on, we’ve got a city to save.”

Jack let Ianto lead him out of the morgue and he forced himself not to look back, even though it felt like the eyes of dozens of ex-Torchwood agents were following his progress.

Putting James away had only taken care of one problem among many. A few months ago-hell even a few weeks ago-he’d started feeling like it was all getting too much, like things were spinning too far out of his control to ever regain his hold on them. But now he had Ianto. He had a second chance. He felt as though he stood at the calm eye of the storm while everything else spun around him, Ianto anchoring in place. Oh, he knew this couldn’t last. Ianto was mortal and he was practically endless. But for today, he held Ianto’s hand, he had Ianto’s smile, and Ianto’s promise of us was still ringing in his ears. For today, it was more than enough.
~ The End

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