Old Rooms
by Trobadora

Summary

"Don't remember where you put it?" - The Doctor is looking for something. The TARDIS is showing her everything but. And Jack comes face to face with a memory.

Notes

Written for the Winter Companions Summer/Winter Holidays challenge 2018. The prompts were: "Aerihnya, shivers, a glove, in an airlock."

"Well! There we are." The Doctor pushed the door open, throwing a quick grin at Jack. It had been good luck and bad, running into him. Catching up with Jack had delayed her, so her friends had been captured - but it had also kept her from walking into the same trap.

Jack came to stand next to her, looked into the room. "What are we doing in a hydroponics lab?"

The Doctor finally looked inside herself, and her nose scrunched up. "I don't remember a hydroponics lab." Of course the TARDIS had one, or several, but there hadn't been a lab here, last time. Brushing blonde hair out of her face, she looked up at Jack. Still getting used to him being taller, this time round. "Hydroponics, huh. You remember any connection to the installation we're looking for?"

"Can't say as I do." Jack's blue eyes were thoughtful. "It's a stellar shield generator platform, not an
agri-dome. Anyway, I thought we were going for the star map."

"We are," the Doctor murmured distractedly, already turning away, sprinting down the corridor. The map was on a datacrystal she'd brought as a souvenir from Callidis Four, ages and regenerations ago, during the collapse of the Call-Franian Authority. More likely than any other set of data to contain the coordinates they needed. And quicker to acquire than running back to Callidis Four - if she could find it.

The Doctor opened the next door, took a peek. Engine room. On to the next: a bedroom with a 20th-century shop window dummy wearing a Victorian dress. She scowled. Jack stood beside her, his hand resting on the small of her back. She turned her glower on him.

"Don't remember where you put it?" he teased.

"Pfft. I know exactly where I put it." The door just wasn't where it was supposed to be, namely wherever she happened to look for it. That was how the TARDIS worked - usually. And her ship didn't generally hide rooms from her without a reason.

The Doctor snapped her braces in thought, then moved on down the corridor. Jack, of course, followed.

"Doctor?"

She didn't reply, just motioned him along. That was best about Jack: whenever and wherever they met in their long, tangled personal timelines, they could always drop right back into this. She could regenerate; he could add a few thousand years to his age. They could stumble into each other in ancient Rome, on Raxacoricofallapatorius, in the middle of a Dalek war or during a trip to the ice cream parlour on Siviprit, and they always dropped right back into the same companionship. A constant, in its own varied and inconstant way, much like Jack himself.

The Doctor smiled to herself. Wouldn't do to let Jack know she thought that way, of course. She had a reputation to uphold.

Next door: the bedroom she'd used when she'd been in her celery phase. Next one: the swimming pool, except it seemed to be filled with books rather than water.

Jack looked over her shoulder, snorted. "I don't suppose you'll be going swimming any time soon."

"Swimming in words? Might be fun." She shrugged. "Better than books and water, at least. Eh, the TARDIS'll sort it all out again when she feels like it."

"Yeah - what's up with Gorgeous?" Jack asked, rapping his knuckles against the door frame. He'd known the TARDIS for a long time; of course he'd caught on.

"Good question. Come on!" the Doctor wheedled, addressing the words to the ship at large. "You know I only want the stuff I brought from Callidis Four." She really needed the coordinates of that old facility now; her friends had been taken there. "Don't you want to find our friends?" She tapped her fingers against the wall, Morse-coding her impatience: go, go, go. "They're in danger; we need to get a move on."

"I don't think that worked," Jack commented, throwing a concerned glance at the ceiling.

And indeed, a hopeful look behind the next door only revealed a secondary control room, dusty and cobwebbed. Spiders? Since when were there spiders in the TARDIS? The Doctor patted the wall, grinning through her worry. "Oooh, I didn't know you kept pets!"
The TARDIS's telepathic hum grew gentler for a moment, but she gave no signs of relenting.

The Doctor huffed, then leaned against the bulkhead, crossing her arms and pouting at the ceiling. "Come on, old girl. I know you don't want me to abandon them. So what do you actually want?"

"Nothing."

Jack watched them, a small, fond smile warring with increasing worry on his face, an uneasy coexistence.

The Doctor widened her eyes at her ship. "Please?"

The telepathic field around her seemed to be charging. Then, abruptly, it dropped away to normal levels, and down the corridor, a door popped open.

With a bright, wide grin, the Doctor sprinted down and rushed inside, then came to an abrupt stop. "Oh," she said.

It was another bedroom, looking like it had been left minutes ago. It had been centuries. Millennia, depending how you counted. But there were still silk pyjamas on the bed, and behind her, the Doctor could feel Jack stiffen when he caught sight of the greatcoat hanging on a coat rack.

"That's still here," he said flatly. His voice, like his body, seemed frozen.

The Doctor turned around, examining him. Both humour and worry had drained from his face, and he was staring blankly into the room that had once been his, centuries upon centuries ago.

"Jack?" she said softly, then flicked her finger under his chin.

He winced, then turned a glare at her, the blankness thankfully gone. "Hey! What was that for?" But there was still a disquieting distance in his voice, grating on the Doctor's nerves.

"Don't be a child." She turned around, strolled into the old bedroom, her fingers brushing briefly over the wool of the greatcoat. The smell that hung in the air wasn't stale at all, kept fresh by the TARDIS's temporal exceptions. Jack's old aftershave, a whiff of engine oil and electricity, a trace of fifty-first century human pheromones.

Nothing of Jack's present-day Vortex-charged fixedness, though of course he was bringing that inside now. No, what was still echoing in this room was the memory of the mortal man he'd been.

"Got you into my bedroom after all." Jack managed a lighter tone this time, rallying to some facsimile of his usual form. That was better. "I was really hoping at the time, you know."

"Mm. I remember a bit of that." They'd never made it there, at the time. A kiss in Kyoto should have been a start, but after that, there'd been time for nothing but a kiss good-bye. Of course, the regeneration after ...

The Doctor snorted as she saw what was lying on the desk. A single glove, decorated with nanofibre stitchery and specks of crystal. A device tuned to the local infonet on the planet they'd been visiting, but surely it could be reconfigured ...

She picked it up. "You kept this?"

Jack came to stand next to her, considered the memento with an unreadable expression. "Jealous? You were at the time."
He'd claimed the same at the time - wrongly, of course. The Doctor smiled in nostalgia. Jack, mortal, had been a handful. Not that he wasn't now.

"No, I wasn't." It was only that Jack had been so absorbed with flirting with Aerihnya, that he'd been so pleased with her gift of a token, and the Doctor had - had -

It had been annoying, that was all.

"Yes, you were," Jack said, animation coming back into his features. "You were extra grumpy the rest of the day. Went into full show-off mode, you did. Rose noticed, too."

"You're one to talk about distraction," she huffed. "We'd never have ended up in that airlock if you -" 

"If you hadn't poked your screwdriver into things," Jack said, and his grin was more real now. Enjoying the memory of an old argument.

It was fun, now. At the time, they'd both been sulking, truth be told. They'd been stuck in that airlock for hours. Rose had been shivering, and Jack had lent her his coat ...

Well. That hardly mattered now. Jack had been mortal then; it was forever ago.

The Doctor leaned into Jack, nudging him with an elbow. "Funny old times."

"Yeah." He wrapped an arm around her, accepting the comfort without comment. That was unusual, too - as unusual as the Doctor offering it. Normally he'd call the Doctor on an uncharacteristic gesture like that. After a moment Jack waved his free hand to indicate the room at large. "I didn't think this would still be here."

"Everything's still here. Everything's always still here." She squeezed his shoulder lightly, her attention divided. Her friends were trapped on an ancient Callidian installation by an idiot trying to recreate the Franian Expansion Shield. The TARDIS was hiding that star map from the Doctor for whatever reasons of her own. And Jack was right here in body, but distracted in mind, unsettled by old memories.

Good memories, too, which only made them harder to accept at times. She should know.

"Why'd you think the TARDIS brought us here?" Jack murmured, echoing her own thoughts.

"I don't know." She'd been looking for the star map, been planning for a rescue. Neither of that could have anything to do with Jack's mortal years, could it? With those distant memories?

That was the thing about memories, though: unlike the years that had passed, a memory could always come back. And this was more than a memory: a moment caught in amber, a memento, kept safe here. To be stepped back into at any time, if the Doctor so chose. If the TARDIS so chose.

The Doctor pulled away from Jack, her eyes widening.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, slapping her palm against he forehead. Of course. "Sorry, sorry, slow on the uptake today. You're still the best, old girl. What would I do without you?" Extravagantly, she kissed her own palm and blew the kiss towards the door. As good a direction as any, for blowing it at the TARDIS.

No, her TARDIS hadn't been obstinate, hadn't been keeping things from her: she'd been showing her something.
"Doctor?" Jack was back in the here-and-now, alert and thinking. Anticipating.

The Doctor lifted her hands, cupped Jack's face between them and drew him down, planting a smack on his lips. Then she leaned back, grinning in excitement. "All those rooms, don't you get it? Ones I know, ones I don't. Memories and potential. Past and future, all right here, right now."

Something sparked in Jack's blue eyes, and he tapped his vortex manipulator. "She wants us to split up, does she? I think she's jealous."

Quick. But then, he'd always been. Brilliant.

The TARDIS hummed warmly in her mind, and the Doctor twirled, patting the bulkhead with a smirk. "Never you mind, dear, he's got a one-track mind."

Of course Jack had grasped it right away. He usually did. Yes: past and future - that was how they needed to come at the problem of that installation. That was how they would save the Doctor's friends, coming at it from two sides at once: one of them in the past, laying the groundwork in that installation before the current idiot turned up; one in the future, reaping the benefits. If they went into the past together, they might be prevented from reaching the future in time, but with two of them here, they could split up. And they'd meet in the middle, afterwards.

The TARDIS was amazing, really. The best friend a Time Lord could have. Good on Jack for appreciating her.

"How about that star chart, love?" the Doctor asked her TARDIS, delighted. "I actually know what to do with it now." Then she turned to Jack, his eyes alight with speculation and excitement, the melancholia of memory set aside. Better that way, definitely. Looking forward.

Still. The Doctor's eyes flickered back to the old coat, the glove, the pyjamas. There was something to be said for mementos. That was part of the TARDIS, after all: all those mementos, all those memories, and all the things the Doctor yet had to find. Everything the TARDIS contained, kept by her, staying with the Doctor, making a home.

She had this, had always had this. Not like Jack, who wandered without a ship. Who stayed in places and left them again, moving on without carrying his past along.

The Doctor patted Jack's arm. "Let's come back here when we're done," she said, quickly, before she could reconsider. "Relive some memories, why don't we?" And make some new ones.

The TARDIS held more than her own memories, after all, and Jack, unlike the Doctor's mortal friends, did - could, and would - come back to her time and again. Why not let this be a place to keep his own mementos, if he chose? Even if he couldn't carry them with him when he left.

Jack's eyebrows went up. No question that he knew what she was doing. "Doctor," he said, then stalled, lifting a hand to her face.

"Don't make something of it." She stabbed a finger at his ribs. "What do you say?"

You belong here. This is for you. Not words the Doctor would ever say out loud. But perhaps this was close enough.

Jack examined her for a long moment. Then, finally, he let a grin bloom on his face. "Yeah," he said simply. "Sounds like a plan."

Rolling her eyes, the Doctor grabbed his hand and pulled him back out into the corridor. "Let's," she
repeated, grinning at him over her shoulder. "First step: save the world."


The Doctor snorted a laugh, and a second later Jack joined in. The grateful squeeze of his hand didn't belie the laughter, only made it richer with the depth and the layers beneath: a moment to cherish, a memory to keep.

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