

A man in a pinstriped suit and tie stands with his arms crossed in a futuristic, industrial setting. He is positioned in front of a large, circular doorway that is illuminated from within, casting a blue glow. The background shows metallic walls and various mechanical components. The overall mood is serious and contemplative.

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Deflections of Loneliness

ALSO IN THE COLLECTIVE DREAMING SERIES

Perchance to Dream

Away With the Fairy

COMING SOON IN THE COLLECTIVE DREAMING SERIES

Primal Instincts

Nightmares & Dreamscapes

DEFLECTIONS OF LONELINESS

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Love, these mixt soules, doth mixe againe,

And makes both one, each this and that.

– Excerpt from “The Extasie” by John Dunne, 1633

PROLOGUE

After Lisa made her choice, I found myself reliving one of the worst moments of my life. Fire, screams, the death of friends and coworkers, it nearly overwhelmed me again. I'm still not entirely certain how I survived it with my sanity intact the first time. Much less make it through a second time. Strangely, in the aftermath, I had the same thought as I had then. Go to Cardiff. Find Torchwood Three. It's how I found myself here on the Plass in the middle of the night watching the water cascade down the iconic sculpture.

The sound was soothing. I had to give it that. It was enough to soothe my overstretched nerves at least. I finally felt comfortable enough to relax despite the eerie silence and utter stillness that surrounded me. The last time I'd experienced that kind of stillness had been... well, I didn't want to think of that at the moment, not when I was finally calming down from the most recent traumatic experience in my life.

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Between the lights on the plinths encircling the basin and the full moon above, there was more than enough light for me to see by. I found a spot to sit. Ironically, on the same set of steps which had once seen me questioning my relationship with Jack, and settled in to consider my options.

There weren't many.

And that was painfully familiar. Through my own determination to become what my father wanted, I'd alienated what remained of my family. Hell, I couldn't even remember my niece's birthday. I didn't know if they existed in this strange new world I found myself in, but even if they did, I knew they didn't need my problems on top of their own. I leaned back, rested my elbows on the step behind me, and stared blankly up the full moon far above. Perhaps it would give me some answers about what I should do now.

"Can I read your cards?"

Of all the answers I have expected, I never would have thought of her. Jack had told me about her once or twice, but I'd never actually met her before. Still I straightened and smiled. "Do I have a choice?"

"Not really."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. She reminded me of myself with that bit of dry sarcasm. I shifted a bit to watch as she sat beside me on the steps and laid her cards out between us. King of Wands... Knight of Swords... The Lovers... they appeared on the concrete with rapid flicks of her fingers. I recognized the one immediately as Jack's card, but in the few weeks I'd been here, I'd never heard even a rumor of Jack's existence. So I didn't understand why his card would turn up in a reading for me.

"He still loves you. The one you're thinking about." Her hands moved again. A different set of cards appeared only to vanish beneath the hand she laid upon them. "But he's alone."

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“Jack shouldn’t be alone.” I reached across the space between us and pulled a card from her deck. I glanced at it and barely managed to contain a smile. “And you know a way to insure he won’t be,” I murmured, laying that card across the knight of swords.

“You’ll owe me a favor.” Her hand swept the cards off the step and back into the deck she still held. Her eyes met mine. I couldn’t look away. “The price may be too much for you.”

There was only one answer, I could give. “For him... anything.”

CHAPTER ONE

2 am. The witching hour, some would call it, but for Ianto Jones it was just another tick on the clock. Time and eternity always passing him, moving ever forward, and leaving him behind. He stared at the clock watching the hands tick round and round, seconds passing in the blink of an eye. He wondered what had woken him this time. It had been ages since he'd woken in the middle of the night like this – unable to sleep, yet too tired to get up.

He rolled onto his back and draped an arm over his eyes. He let his mind drift. Just wander where it wanted among his scattered thoughts. Let himself drift though the pain and sorrow, joy and ecstasy which marked his life. Pieces of his present blended smoothly into his past.

Alone. Always alone. Always waiting. Ianto had long ago resigned himself to a state of perpetual waiting. First, all those hundreds of years ago, he waited, desperate to find a way to heal Lisa.

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Now, millennia later, he was still waiting. This time he waited for Jack.

He was waiting for Jack to die.

“Strange to find yourself wishing for the final death of the one you love even as you know he still has a purpose in the greater scheme of things,” Ianto found himself murmuring into the still night air. He no longer had any qualms against talking to himself. “Not like anyone’s here to hear me. Just Myfanwy. She certainly can’t tell my secrets to anyone.”

Ianto sighed softly. The barest hint of a smile settled onto his lips. Unlike Tosh, he knew exactly how much time had passed, was in fact still passing, for Jack. His soul ached for the man he loved. He yearned to be in his arms again. The man, who hated the word couple, yet publically staked his claim to Ianto’s heart and body in so many subtle ways.

But you never will just be a blip in time, Ianto Jones. Not for me. Jack’s voice echoed softly through Ianto’s mind. The closest they’d ever gotten to a declaration of love. They’d certainly demonstrated their feelings for each other often enough; however, never did they say a word. Ianto smiled sadly. He’d quickly learned Jack wasn’t comfortable with admitting their feelings. At the time, it had hurt; however, he’d understood as well. *How could Jack admit to loving me when it was merely a matter of time before I left him in some way?*

Torchwood operatives tended to die young. Just look at the past. Harriet at twenty-six. Suzie at thirty-three. Owen at thirty-seven, if you went by his first death. Tosh also at thirty-three. He, himself, had died at twenty-six, mere months after their convoluted conversation about their feelings. A sigh slipped from his lips to caress the darkness around him.

Ianto shook his head just a bit, dropping his arm away from his eyes, and stared blankly into the near dark of the room around him.

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Shimmering blues and greens swept across the ceiling, echoes of the lights far below in the Hub, highlighting the heavy velvet hangings of his canopy bed. He turned and glanced over at the clock again; only a few minutes had passed from the last time he'd checked. Again, he wondered what had woken him this time.

It wasn't like before. When he'd woken from a deep sleep only to prop himself up to watch Jack sleep beside him, to see his soft smile while he dreamed whatever dreams an immortal man would. He'd wondered more than once what dreams Jack had dreamed in those quiet moments. There'd been softness to those times, almost a romance of sorts, watching Jack sleep. Now, this time, he'd awakened tense, worried, almost afraid but without Jack by his side to ease the tension away in that oh-so-enjoyable way of his.

Instead, he lay there, still and silent, listening to the subtle splash of water into the tidal pool as it cascaded off the water tower. Ianto concentrated on that sound; the constant repetition of it slowly soothing his body. He relaxed, was even drifting closer and closer to sleep when he jerked awake again.

His heart pounded with fear. Adrenaline rushed through his veins. He gasped for breath. He stared wide-eyed into the darkness. Suddenly, with no warning, the fear spiked again. Despite being alone in the room, he heard the stark metallic snap of manacles around his wrists. The metal cold and burning his skin as it bound him. A sharp jerk pulled at his shoulders, yet Ianto knew he hadn't moved an inch. He knew now what had woken him in the dead of the night. He closed his eyes again, squeezed them tightly shut in anticipation, and waited for it to begin yet again.

It started at his feet this time. Searing, burning pain which traveled up his body bit by bit until it enveloped every inch of him. His hands dropped to fist tightly in the sheets. Panting, struggling for every breath, as he gritted his teeth to contain the scream building deep within

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his chest. His heart struggled to beat through the pain. He felt as if every inch of his body was slowly dissolving away – his skin slipped from his flesh, flesh burned away from bone, bone melting into thick viscous goo – it was the most hideous torture known to man. Ianto’s back arched, his spine creaking as it strained to the limit, and he screamed. A raw tortured sound that ripped from the depths of his soul as he gave voice to the pain which echoed through his mind and body as he screamed the screams Jack couldn’t, wouldn’t, give voice to himself.

Finally, with a flash of white-hot agony which swept through his mind with all the speed of pure acid burning through flesh, it was over. Ianto collapsed onto the bed, sweat-drenched and shaking, and clenched his eyes shut, tears leaking from beneath his eyelids to ooze along his heated, burning skin. As he cried silent tears, a broken whisper, the merest breath of sound, rasped from his torn throat.

“Oh, Jack...”

CHAPTER TWO

With his muscles twitching in pain, he lay there. Unable to move, barely able to breathe, and yet he knew this was but the barest hint of what Jack was feeling wherever he was in the vastness of the multiverse. Ianto bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. He sucked the droplet away while inching his hand across the sheets, over the empty space between and onto the bedside table. He felt about for a bit, finally managing to grasp his phone and drag it back to him. He tilted it up to read the display. Fingers fumbling, it took him three tries to get the right number to come up, a further four to actually hit the send button hard enough to put the call through. He struggled to keep from sobbing as he waited for the call to be picked up on the other end.

“Ianto...? Do you know what...?”

“Tosh,” he interrupted. His voice shook. He had to concentrate hard to get each word out. His muscles tensed, released, and a sob caught in his throat. All those little twitches were building to what was

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certain to be a pain-filled crescendo. He dreaded the moment it would finally crest. "I need you."

"*Where are you?*" He wanted to laugh at how quickly Tosh went from outraged over being woken at nearly four in the morning to concerned and worried about him. He didn't have the energy though. Not now. Not after that experience. Still, it was a momentary bit of brightness in the darkness Ianto was currently drowning in. He could just hear her opening and closing drawers in rapid succession over the sound of blood rushing through his veins. The rustle of fabric echoed down the line. Clearly she was dressing quickly. "*Talk to me, Ianto... where are you?*"

"The Hub." He gasped, bit back the scream he wished he could give voice to, and twisted onto his side. He curled into a small ball. Ianto knew it wouldn't really help, that instinctual reaction to reduce his body mass to prevent further pain, yet he did it anyway. "There's a flat. Off the upper gantry... I'm there."

Ianto screwed his eyes shut as a particularly bad pain raced through his veins. His blood burned. He itched inside and out. The urge to scratch away at his skin was nearly unbearable. More tears gathered in his eyes, slipped down his cheeks to further dampen the bedding beneath him. "Do a scan, you'll find me."

"*I'm on my way.*" There was a long pause, no disconnection; just a long silence then he heard the sound of keys rattling and a door slamming. A familiar click echoed down the line. She must have switched the call over from the mobile to the comm system in order to drive. "*Still there, Ianto?*"

"I'm here."

"*What's happened? You sound worse now than you did after the Beacons.*"

"I can't... I can't talk about it." He surprised himself getting the words out in an even tone around the pain he was feeling. All he

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wanted to do was die. Just give up. He'd thought he'd understood what Jack felt every time he'd returned from the dead. He'd been wrong, so very, very wrong. He needed something else to focus on. "Tosh... talk to me."

"About what?"

"Anything." He needed that outside focus to distract him from what was happening to him now. The previous deaths and resurrections had been quick, almost painless, but this was a living hell. One part of his mind was focused on the story Tosh was telling, some inane mindless chatter about her childhood; however, the bulk of his thoughts were tangled up trying to figure out what exactly happened, what hideous method of execution had Jack just experienced. Being blessed, or cursed depending on your point of view, with near perfect recall, Ianto's mind supplied him with several likely scenarios, each more vivid and hideous than the last until it settled on a report from an obscure journal about a man who'd fallen in a vat of sulfuric acid dying slowly in screaming agony as the chemical burned him alive before the acid completely dissolved the victim's corpse. "Shit."

"Ianto?"

"It's nothing, Tosh." He swallowed hard. It was taking every bit of his concentration to keep from throwing up. "How far...?"

"I'm coming in now." Her soft comment was backed up by the blaring of the proximity alarms. The soft rumble of the cog door whose vibrations shook the bed he lay upon and brought a pain filled whimper to his lips. And, finally, the clang of the cage doors opening and closing confirmed Tosh's remark. *"Give me just a minute and..."* There was another briefer pause. He could hear her fingers flying over her keyboard both over the phone and echoing into the room itself from the hub below. *"I'll be right up."*

The sharp clatter of her heels along the gantry announced her proximity long before she flung the door to his bedroom open.

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Somehow, with a lot of curses muttered through gritted teeth, Ianto pulled himself up into a sitting position just as Tosh flew into the room. A wan, exhausted smile was all the greeting he could muster for her while he attempted in vain to stand up. He swayed, grabbed for the nearby bedpost and again bit his lip to contain the urge to scream. Every inch of him ached and burned. And he was certain he stank.

“You look like hell, Ianto,” Tosh’s voice echoed in his ear. The acutely sweet scent of her cherry blossom shampoo warned him just how close she was even before her arms wrapped around his waist to steady him. “Let me help. Where were you going?”

“I want a bath,” he breathed the words into her hair. He nuzzled against it. He may not have been the one who actually died, but what he’d experienced was torture enough. Ianto now understood exactly why Jack had always clung so tightly to him whenever he’d returned from the dead. He just wanted to cling to Tosh, let her warmth and life infuse him and remind him he was actually alive. “A very long, hot bath. I ache.”

“First, open your eyes.” She laughed softly. One of her hands pressed against his cheek. Her fingertips brushed across his eyelashes. Ianto leaned into the cool touch. He cracked one eye, then the other, and from somewhere mustered up another faint smile for her. “Now we’ll move.”

Somehow, with her constant support and encouragement, he made it from the bedroom to the en-suite. He leant against a wall, listening to the creak and groan of the aged iron pipes while Tosh fussed about the tub. There was a hollow sounding groan, a solid thump from the pipes, and then a gush of steaming hot water began spilling into the deep cast iron tub. Ianto managed a tired chuckle and, when Tosh looked over at him curiously, he pointed at a small corner table. “Bottle of bubble bath. Pour some in, please?”

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He watched her lean over and rummage until she found the cream and black bottle. If he was honest with himself, he'd have to admit he was watching her arse in her tight denim leggings. And, when she straightened up again, the way her thin silk blouse clung to her breasts in the steamy room. Tosh turned toward him, blushing almost immediately in response to his look, and stuttered, "C... can you manage...?"

It took Ianto a moment to realize exactly what she meant. He managed to avoid laughing at her but did smile, which only seemed to fluster her more. "Think so." She nodded and started past him, headed out the door. He reached out and caught her arm. "Don't go."

"Tanto..."

"Please, Tosh." He hated how needy he sounded. His voice reminded him of a child whining for attention. Yet, he would do just about anything to get her to stay in the room. "I don't want to be alone."

"Alright." Her free hand came up, stroked his cheek again, and she nodded. "Let me get something to help wash your hair with..." She glanced around the small room. One of her shy smiles graced her lips. "And something comfortable to sit on. I'll be back."

Ianto eased into the bath with a soft hiss for the heat of the water. So hot his skin instantly pinked, but it started soothing away his aches almost as fast. The room was redolent with steam. The heady scents of vanilla and sandalwood curled around him. The combination never failed to remind him of Jack. He leaned his head back against the still cool iron of the high back of the tub and sighed softly. He draped his arms along the sides of the tub, slid deeper into the water so it lapped at his taut neck muscles, and opened one eye to glare heatedly at the taps. He lifted one foot free of the water. Grimacing, he attempted to twist the taps with his toes. "How in the hell do women do this?" he muttered.

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“We have different taps.” Tosh’s laughing voice came from the still open door. He watched as she set one of his padded dining chairs down leaning around to slowly crank off the taps complete with squeaky protests of metal grinding on metal. “We also start learning to do it very young. It’s a skill.”

He chuckled weakly and shook his head at her. Then, Ianto groaned in pain as the head shake produced an immediate throbbing headache. “Fuck. I have weevils marching in my head. As if I wasn’t already in enough pain to start with, I get a headache.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened tonight?”

“I can’t.” He shifted a bit in order to look at her. He knew now he did indeed look like hell, having caught a glimpse of his reflection in the vanity mirror. Eyes red rimmed from crying, skin ashen and lips swollen from biting them to keep from screaming in agony. “Not now. Maybe someday, but not right now.” Ianto reached out to Tosh with one hand. He caught hers and gently squeezed her fingers. He held her hand loosely in his, stroking the back with his thumb, and again leaned his head back against the back of the tub. “Just stay with me?”

CHAPTER THREE

Ianto let his eyes drift shut even as he held tight to Tosh's hand to anchor him in this world. He could so easily just drift off to sleep if it wasn't for the jack-booted weevils rampaging in his head. Or the tension that knotted up his back and neck. Of course, sleeping in the tub would lead to drowning which would lead to a whole different set of complications he so didn't want to deal with at the moment. "Now I'm babbling," he muttered.

"No, you're not saying a word."

"I'm babbling away. You just can't hear me." He laughed and cracked an eye open. "I'm sorry, Tosh. I woke you up, dragged you here and now I'm zoning out on you."

She cradled his hand in hers. At first he thought the motions she was making were just idle caresses to keep him awake, but slowly it dawned on him she was using the reflex points in his hand to relax him further. "I don't mind." Tosh smiled at him, and then rose to lay his

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hand on the side of the tub. He grabbed for her, but she caught his hand again and pressed it firmly down again. "Just relax, Ianto."

"Can't." He swallowed, but willingly shifted as she pushed against his back. Gripping the sides of the tub as tightly as he could, Ianto pulled himself up into a sitting position. He pulled his legs up and wrapped his arms around them. He curled up tighter and rested his forehead on his knees. "I hurt so much, Tosh. Like every inch of me was ripped away, shredded, then brought back together, and is now protesting being back in one piece again."

"You've said you can't tell me what happened," she murmured. Her hand rested on his nape. Her cold fingers threaded through his hair. He shifted slightly in response to the gentle, almost tentative, touch of her hand to his back. "But it's not anything dangerous is it?"

"It won't kill me." He kept his voice low. Ianto didn't even try to keep the developing purr from slipping out. One of the few things he had managed to keep secret from Tosh in the before. He loved to be touched, caressed. Without thought he arched his neck, silently inviting her to continue the petting. "It won't harm you."

One of her hands moved, slipped away, yet the other stroked his back and neck. She reached past him, grabbed the bottle of bath gel, and soon the barely lingering spicy scent in the room redoubled. He closed his eyes and breathed deep. "Love that smell."

"It is familiar."

"It's Jack." He laughed softly. He twisted just a bit, hissing softly in pain as he did so, to look back at her. "Or as close as I can get to Jack's scent."

"Turn around." Tosh pressed lightly on his shoulder. He turned, slowly, but he followed her gentle urging. Then her hands, slick with the gel, stroked up over his back. She rested her hands on his shoulders for a moment, thumbs lying along his spine at the nape, and he could

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almost feel her indecision before Tosh pressed hard, manipulating the bones and muscle with a deft touch. An audible pop followed.

Ianto sucked in a startled breath, released it on a heartfelt groan. With one move, she'd eased his headache and all the tension in his neck. As Tosh stroked her hands over his back, occasionally pressing harder against still tense muscles, he started to purr softly. It had been so very long since he'd been caressed like this.

"You purr." There was surprise and wonder in that soft whisper. And just a hint of something more buried underneath the wonder. "I thought..."

"I like to be touched, Tosh." He twisted beneath her hands turning about to face her. Her hands didn't move. Now they rested on his chest. Ianto reached out and cupped her face in his hands. "I always have..." he trailed off while he stared into her dark eyes. He could see the want in her eyes, feel it in the flex of her fingers on his chest. He stroked his thumb over her cheek. "Touch me, Tosh," he purred. "Remind me, I'm alive."

Tosh's eyes widened for a moment. Then they half-closed while she peered at him from beneath those long dark lashes. Her tongue darted out, licked her lips, and, just when he was getting ready to apologize for the asking, she darted forward and kissed him.

It was light, tentative, as if she was afraid of disappointing him though he had no idea why she'd think that. Ianto slid his hand into her hair, holding her still, and ran his tongue along her lower lip. He teased her with quick caresses of his tongue until she yielded to the kiss. Her hands slid up to curl her arms around him and her mouth opened beneath his. He took instant advantage, deepening the kiss, and dropped a hand from her face to wrap his arm around her waist.

Ianto rose slowly using the leverage he had from the arm around her to pull her up with him. He broke the kiss for a moment to drag in several desperately needed breaths. "Tosh," he murmured. "I..."

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“Don’t.” Her fingers pressed against his lips. “Do you know how many times I watched and wondered...” she trailed off with a blush and he laughed softly.

“Want to find out?” Ianto ran his hand down her neck to her breast, just barely touching her through the thin silk of her blouse, and down further to clasp his hands behind her back. He pulled her closer to him and took great satisfaction in her soft moan as she arched into his body.

“Oh God, yes.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Ianto swooped in for another kiss. Now, he didn't hold back with her. He knew she wanted him so he dropped the restraints on his hunger and took her mouth with all the desperate desire the second-hand death experience had roused in him. Tosh gave as good as she got; her tongue twining with his as he tasted her and her hands twisting in his hair to keep him close. Ianto broke this kiss, reached up and caught her hands in his, and backed from the room leading her into the bedroom behind him.

“What about...?”

“Deal with it later.” He sat on the edge of the high bed, released her hands to clasp her waist and pulled her forward between his legs. “You're beautiful,” he purred while he flicked the buttons on her blouse open with his fingers. “Sometimes shy, but always beautiful.”

He leant forward, watching her from beneath his lashes, and licked her stomach. He nipped her skin, gentle teasing bites that wouldn't

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leave a single mark on her skin, each bite a bit higher than the previous one until he could once again claim her lips in a hungry kiss. It had been quite some time since he'd taken a woman to his bed; however, Tosh's soft sighs and moans, the restless shift of her body beneath his hands, told him he hadn't lost those skills during his time with Jack.

A quick twist of his fingers released the clasp of her bra. He slid his hands beneath the fine lace to run his palms over her nipples. He ran his hands higher pushing both bra and blouse off her shoulders to drop onto the floor. Ianto leant back a bit to consider her. From the faint blush on her cheeks to her full breasts and gently nipped in waist, Tosh was a delight. He didn't even know exactly where to touch first. There was so much of her to savor and enjoy.

“Tan...”

“Shh.” He ran his hands over her in a gentle caress just barely touching her skin with the tips of his fingers. He rested one hand on her waist dipping his fingers beneath the waistband of her leggings while he cupped one breast in the other. Ianto stroked her nipple with his thumb watching it pebble beneath the caress and looked up at her again. Holding her gaze so he could see every bit of her reaction, he leaned forward and circled her nipple with his tongue, pulling back to blow a gentle breath over the damp flesh and barely managed to contain the smile as Tosh yelped in surprise. The yelp morphed into a deep moan as he enveloped her nipple with his lips, flicking the bit of flesh with his tongue and nibbling with his teeth.

Tosh's hands tangled in his hair, pulled at the strands as she arched her back to press closer. Her panting breaths and tiny whimpers delighted Ianto. He kept her distracted with his gentle suckling and teasing of her nipple while he ran his hands down her body and around her back. He caught her nipple with his teeth, tugged it for a moment, and then let go to switch his attention to the other one. It was just as hard as the first, but he'd neglected it until that moment. Ianto bit her

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gently, soothed the hurt with a quick flick of his tongue and hummed against her skin as a surprised cry came from her throat at his actions.

He eased his hands beneath her leggings and knickers to cup her arse in his hands. He squeezed gently slowly working the fabric down her legs until gravity took over and dropped the fabric at her feet. Ianto rested one foot on the fabric, wrapped his arm around her waist again and lifted her. The combination of moves left her clothes behind while settling her in his lap.

“You are a dangerous man, Ianto Jones.” Tosh shook a finger in front of him. She shifted a bit and a smirk played on her lips when he groaned in response. “A very dangerous man.”

“Am I?” He stilled her by clasping her hips in his hands. He caught her finger in his mouth and teased it with his lips and tongue, sucking on her finger for a moment before catching her wrist in his hands and trailing kisses down from her finger onto her palm. “And what will you do about that then?”

Her lips curved into a wicked little smile. One he just had to kiss away. He broke this kiss with a hoarse groan as her fingers curled around his cock. She stroked one, twice, and then she kissed him while she sank down on him. Ianto tore his lips from hers. “*Duw!* Tosh!”

Her low rich chuckle caressed over him even as she rolled her hips. The subtle movement tore another groan from him. Ianto wrapped an arm around her, tangled his fingers in her hair and arched her backwards in order to attack her breasts with his mouth, teasing her nipples and suckling her. Tosh’s initially subtle rocking in his lap soon became the rhythmic rise and fall of a woman desperately seeking her release.

“Fuck me, Ianto.” Her hands tangled in his hair, yanking hard as she pulled him away from her breast with an audible pop. She stared at him. Their eyes locking as she stilled in his lap. “Don’t hold back anymore. Fuck me.”

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He fell back onto the bed, pulling her with him and rolled them. Immediately, he caught her hands in his and pinned them to the bed on either side of her head. Ianto watched her for a long silent moment. Then, with a deep growl, he pulled back and thrust hard. He held her down and took her. He wanted to hear her scream for him. He wanted her cries to echo through the Hub and chase away the last shadows still clinging to him. She wrapped her legs around his hips, dug her nails into the back of his hands and a soft kean came from her. Those little keening noises gradually increased in volume until she was all but screaming with his every thrust into her warm wet body. Her eyes closed, only to open again when he growled down at her, the sound every bit as feral as his movements. Ianto dropped his head to bit at her pulse. He licked his way up her neck until he could growl his words directly in her ear. "Scream, Tosh. I want to hear you scream for me."

Her back arched, every muscle in her body going taut as she pressed against him. He watched her eyes widen in surprised shock before she did just as he asked. A shrill scream escaped her throat, partly his name partly just a meaningless sound of pleasure. The sight of her, so lost in her orgasm, was the final straw on his tenuous hold on his own orgasm. He buried himself as deep as he could in her body, flung his head a back and roared her name into the dark room. His cry blended into hers as the sounds bounced about within the echoing cavern of the Hub.

Panting, Ianto dropped onto Tosh. He barely managed to keep the bulk of his weight off her. With a soft sigh, he rolled off her body to lie beside her. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to his side. "Okay?" he whispered.

"Yeah..."

CHAPTER FIVE

“What happens now?” Tosh murmured the words into the now silent room. Her fingers played in his chest hair while she studiously avoided looking at him.

“What do you want to happen?” Ianto stroked her hair back, threading the strands through his fingers again and again. “Honestly, Tosh, what do *you* want?”

“I don’t want to be alone.” She moved, sitting up a bit in order to look at him. “I’ve been alone for so long, Ianto. I just want someone to care about me.”

“I’ve always cared, Tosh.” He smiled. Ianto idly wondered how she couldn’t have known that he cared considering all the little things he’d done for her before her death at Gray’s hands. “You’re my friend. And I do care.”

“I know.” Her words were slightly muffled by the fact she was rubbing her cheek on his chest. He felt her tears dampen his skin. She

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looked up at him. Her eyes shone brightly with unshed tears. “I care about you too, but...” She paused and looked away again, suddenly tense and shy. “Do you want to continue this?”

He stroked her hair and her back. Idle caresses intended to soothe her while he gathered himself together. He couldn’t tell her everything but maybe, just maybe, the little he could tell her now would help. “I need someone to hold, Tosh.” He swallowed hard, choking back more tears. “Someone to hold me on nights like this when everything gets to be too much.”

“You’re my best friend.” Ianto shifted on the bed, sitting up a bit and pulling her up into his lap. “I’ll abide by whatever you decide, but yeah, I’d like to continue this.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her loosely. He couldn’t quite hold back the resentment that crept into his voice as he considered her. “My whole life I’ve been living up to other people’s expectations, always taking care of everyone else before myself. I want to be a little selfish.” He cupped her cheek in his hand. “Maybe we can help each other for a while.” He pressed a light kiss to her lips. Then, he laughed when she yawned and blushed afterwards.

“Sorry.” Tosh’s word was punctuated with another yawn. “I didn’t...”

“Hush.” He barely managed to contain a yawn of his own. He lay back again and tugged her down with him. Ianto grabbed the coverlet and pulled it over them. “Comfortable?”

Tosh squirmed back against him. Humming softly as she wiggled and settled. “Yep.”

He curled his arm around her waist. Pressing a kiss to her temple, he quietly urged, “Go to sleep, Tosh.” As she drifted off in his arms, he stared at the clock beyond her. Nearly five am, soon he’d have to get up and feed Myfanwy, Janet and the other inhabitants of the Hub. For now, perhaps a short nap was in order. Ianto settled back on the

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pillows, closed his eyes and, deep in the recesses of his mind, whispered, “*Forgive me, Jack, but I need this connection.*”

CHAPTER SIX

For the first time since he'd arrived here to relive the horrors of Canary Wharf, Ianto Jones slept. Not only did he sleep, but it was a peaceful sleep. Neither nightmares of those seemingly eternally long moments before his death nor the screams of the frightened, dying and dead echoed around him. He didn't even dream of any of Jack's deaths where the other man still existed far away across the multiverse. The horrors of the night were chased away by the soft scents of cherry blossom and vanilla, sandalwood and amber, and the soft embrace of a woman's arms. But all good things must come to an end. So too did this peaceful rest.

The particular double chirrup that was the Rift alarm echoed through the Hub. It was a strange sound - part alarm clock, part mobile ring. It was also very distinctive. It woke Ianto in an instant. He blinked, rolled to get out of bed and promptly fell onto the floor as he

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and Tosh both had the same thought and tripped each other getting out of bed.

Ianto tugged Tosh up from the floor and handed her his discarded shirt. He cast about for a moment, found his trousers from the previous day and pulled them on. Together they headed down for the main floor of the Hub. “What set that off?”

“I meant to tell you,” Tosh spoke quickly as if she was afraid he’d punish her for not telling him something right away. “Ever since we came down here the first time, the Rift’s been building toward something.” She dropped into her chair, grabbed her glasses from the desk, and started typing away. “I ran a diagnostic first thing, but there was nothing. No activity at all.”

“I see.” Ianto rested a hand on the back of her chair and scanned the screens. He didn’t have her training, but he did have an instinctive grasp of the Rift and its rhythms. Plus, two years working directly with Tosh before her death taught him a bit about the programs she was running. “Did anything come through or was it just a spike?”

“I don’t see anything...” Tosh trailed off as she often did while reading data. He squeezed her shoulder, leaving her to it, and headed for the coffee machine. They were both up now. They might as well get started for the day. “No. Nothing. Just a spike large enough to trigger the low level monitor we have up now. Which means...”

“That the Rift is waking up.” Ianto turned to look at her. He kept an ear on the coffee machine while he considered her. “Jack once said ‘the end is where we start from’. It was after we lost you and Owen. Weren’t sure we could continue on. Gwen even considered leaving, but he was right. We did move on because the Rift never stops. It distracted us.”

“What are you saying, Ianto?” Tosh looked between Ianto and the computers. “That the Rift’s alive?”

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“Not alive.” He straightened away from the railing he’d been leaning against; he reached back to flick off the coffee machine. “But it does have patterns. It was pretty much dormant according to all the records I saw until September 2005....”

“But that’s two years from now.”

“No, that’s last year.” Ianto considered her for a long silent moment. “Tosh, what’s today’s date?”

“10 September 2003.” She stared at him clearly confused. “Why? What’s the date got to do with anything?”

“If you asked me, I’d tell you it was July of 2006.” He leant his head back to stare at the ceiling so far above. “I’ve been here a bit more than a month. This world...” he trailed off and waved a hand around the room. “To me it began at Canary Wharf with Lisa. When I met you outside the tourist office, it had been two days since the battle.”

“While I’d just run from London to avoid being imprisoned by UNIT after aiding terrorists. I figured Jack would be here.”

“So did I,” Ianto laughed softly, a bit bitterly. “Despite not having heard a single mention of him at One, I figured he’d be here and things would be normal again.”

“So...” Tosh whipped about and started typing on her computer. Screens flicked back and forth, windows being enlarged, checked, cross-checked only to be just as quickly closed. “You’re in one timeline. I’m in another. And the Hub’s on a third?”

She didn’t wait for Ianto to answer just kept typing away. He recognized those mutters. This was Tosh in full fledged research mode. He’d missed watching her do this. Bury herself in data, finding patterns and seeking innovative solutions through leaps of logic most people could never aspire to. It was one of her greatest strengths. Ianto turned back to finish the coffee. He could at least keep her supplied with caffeine while she worked.

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Ten mostly silent minutes later, he was setting a cup down on a clear spot on her desk. He'd long ago learned to take great care in where he placed her mugs if he wasn't able to hand them directly to her and kissed her cheek. "I'm going to go shower and dress. Do you want to join me?" Her hand wrapped around his wrist before he could move. He tensed and stilled completely. Ianto stared at her waiting for her to speak. She'd never grabbed him like that before.

"Did you know the mainframe is not active?"

"No." He shook his head. "I thought it turned on when you started working."

"Just the upper level servers," Tosh murmured. "I can't access anything on the deeper mainframe. None of the translation programs, the alarms, or the time lock I was working on. All of that is on the organic side of the system."

Ianto closed his eyes. Silently, he counted to ten in three languages, one of which wouldn't be spoken for centuries, and slowly opened them again. "Tosh." He crouched down beside her. Determinedly, he focused on her face, not her half-concealed body barely covered by his dress shirt. "You came back here to work for Jack. For Torchwood. Right?"

"Yes. It was all I could think of when I realized what the date was. I didn't want to be in that cell again."

"I think I can mesh our timelines." Ianto pulled his lower lip between his teeth. "The mainframe's in hibernation mode which means at some point in time, someone locked it down, likely to keep information from an enemy."

"Can you wake it up?"

He knelt on the floor and turned her chair around to face him. He rested his hands on her thighs, stroked her skin for a moment, and moved forward so that he was kneeling between her legs. Ianto reached up to cup her face in his hand and stroked his thumb over her

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cheekbone. “I have the codes, yes.” He looked away for a moment, and then looked back. “Jack gave them to me after Owen died the first time, but if I do this. If I wake it up. We’ll have to be Torchwood again.”

“We always were.” Tosh smiled at him. It lit her eyes. He knew then that they’d found one of their purposes for their strange new lives. “With the Rift acting up, we’ll need the information. To protect them...” She waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the ceiling. “You and I both know we couldn’t *not* be Torchwood. Someone has to protect the innocents.”

“We’re doing this then?”

Tosh nodded. She twisted a bit to reach her keyboard, solemnly handing it to him, and rolled her chair back from the desk. “We’re doing it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ianto held the keyboard in his hands. One part of him couldn't wait to start entering the complex series of codes and passwords Jack had him memorize all those months ago. The rest of him was focused on the way his shirt had shifted when Tosh moved away from him. The shirt was losing a battle to cover her. And damn if it wasn't tempting him. A niggling little voice in the back of his mind, one that strangely sounded like Jack, was telling him to fuck work and go for it. Ianto looked from Tosh to the keyboard and back again. Then, he tossed the keyboard on to her desk and grabbed the leg of her chair, pulling her back toward him. "Fuck it... the Rift can wait a bit."

"Ianto...?"

"Tosh," he murmured softly. Ianto rose on his knees and spread his hands on Tosh's stomach. He stroked her skin, inching his fingers up her belly and along the underside of her breasts. "You know we'll be busy. And I want to savor..." he brushed the wrinkled, but still

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somewhat crisp, fabric of his shirt back. The fabric pooled around her wrists, tangling there, and distracting her from his actions just long enough for him to catch her nipple in his mouth.

“Ianto!” Tosh’s cry echoed around them and woke Myfanwy, who screeched back at her. Her hands tangled in his hair and held him close to her body. “God, Ianto...” her voice trailed off into a begging moan.

Ianto slid one hand down her body, combing his fingers through her lower curls, and petting her. He teased and stroked until she flung her head back with a gasping scream. He smirked, lifting his head from her breast, and caught her hips in his hands. He pulled her closer to the edge of the chair. He stroked her inner thigh, caught her leg behind one knee and shifted her to drape her leg over the arm of her desk chair. “I want a taste, Tosh.”

He rubbed his cheek on her stomach watching her closely for any objections, but she just panted and nodded her hands tangling in his hair and pushing him lower. He chuckled softly and obeyed her silent demands. He rubbed his hands up her inner thighs and considered his options. He flicked his tongue into her belly button and delighted in Tosh’s giggle. Ianto stroked his thumbs back and forth in the hollow of her hips edging ever closer to the core of her. He loved the soft not-quite whimper falling from her lips.

“Please, Ianto...” Tosh arched her hips toward him in silent demand. “Please.”

“Please what?” he teased. “This?” He dropped his head and licked her. It was a quick, fleeting touch and her whine when he moved away delighted some dark corner of his soul. He was certain that came from his connection to Jack, that man just loved to tease until you begged to be fucked. “Or would you rather this?” Ianto held her open and plunged his tongue into her, licking deep inside before pulling away to peer up at her from beneath his lashes.

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“Yes!” Tosh arched her back. Her hands threaded deeper into his hair and clutched at him. “More, Ianto.”

“As you wish,” he purred. He nuzzled, licked and teased at her all the while delighting in the whimpers and cries that fell from her lips. Ianto savored the taste of her, rich and sweet, and so unlike Jack. God, he’d missed the feel of a woman in his arms. He could feel how close she was in the tremble of her limbs, hear it in her cries. He pulled back a bit, teased her with just the tip of his tongue and thrust two fingers into her. She clenched and keened, her cries edging ever closer to a scream with his every caress until finally she broke with a shriek that rivaled Myfanwy’s hunting scream in volume.

He eased her down from the edge with gentle touches and soothing kisses. Ianto rose up on his knees, grimacing at the ache in his joints from kneeling on cold concrete, and wrapped an arm around her waist. He lifted her from the chair as he rose to his feet. Turning, he took her place in the chair and settled her astride his lap. He stroked one hand over her body while he shifted his clothes out of the way with the other. Tugging her close again, he kissed her, devouring her in a hungry kiss that was a cheap imitation of the way he wanted to take her. “Ride me, Tosh,” he ordered, shifting her slightly in his lap in order to thrust up into her welcoming body.

Tosh’s eyes widened just a bit and a wicked smirk curved over her lips as she settled herself over him. Her hands came to rest on his shoulders. He knew without looking that she was resting her feet on the wheeled legs of the desk chair using them as leverage so she could move on him. Ianto caressed her hips, dragged his nails over her back, and returned her smirk with a slight smile of his own. A groan escaped him as she clenched her muscles around his cock. They’d just found the perfect rhythm just slow enough to tease while still hard enough to please when the telephone rang. Not their mobiles, but the landline into the Hub. He glared over at it.

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“Ignore it.” Tosh dragged her nails down his jaw just hard enough to tease him. She forced him to face her. “No one knows we’re here. So ignore it.”

He tried. Heaven knew he tried, but the persistent ringing of the phone was a distraction from the beautiful woman currently writhing in his arms. He continued to glare at the phone and tightened his hold on Tosh’s waist. With a hard shove of one foot, he rolled the chair across the floor, both of them groaning as it rolled across the grating beside the desk, and snatched up the phone receiver. “What!”

“Teaboy?”

Ianto pulled the phone from his ear and stared at it for a moment, then put it back. “Owen?” he managed to barely speak the man’s name coherently as Tosh continued to ride him. Her every move designed to drag moans of pleasure from his lips.

“Yeah, it’s me. King of the Weevils and all that,” Owen snapped into the phone. “Look, shove Jack off your cock and tell me you have the Singularity Scalpel tucked away down there.”

“Of course I have it. And I know right where it is.” Ianto didn’t bother to contain the cry Tosh’s next roll of her hips pulled from him. If Owen was going to act like a prat, why should he bother to be polite? “Why do you want it?”

“I need it.” Owen’s voice was tinged with desperation. “Ianto, please, don’t listen to Jack when he tells you I can’t have it. Just get it to me, please. I really, really need it.”

Ianto tucked the phone between his shoulder and his ear. He grabbed Tosh and held her still, not letting her move while he listened to Owen’s begging. If he listened close he could just hear a woman talking in the background. Owen would occasionally pause in his ongoing ramble about why he needed the tech to soothe her. “Owen...”

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“Teaboy, I won’t even call you that anymore. Whatever you want, just please, Ianto.”

“Owen.” Ianto hardened his voice. He had to know the answer to a particular question before he could even consider pulling out the tech for the other man. “Is that Katie Russell?”

“Yeah.”

Ianto laid his head back against the back of the chair. There was no way in hell he could deny Owen his request now. He’d read the files. He knew what had led to Owen being recruited by Jack. Then there was what he himself had done trying to save the woman he’d loved. “Where are you, Owen?”

“The Marriott in the city centre.” There was a pause. Ianto listened to Owen reassuring Katie that everything was alright. “Why?”

“Give us thirty minutes. Then come in. I believe your codes are still valid.” Ianto smiled at Tosh, leaning forward to kiss her. “If not, one of us will come and let you in. Now...”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I don’t want to know. Honestly, I don’t. I’ll see you then.”

Ianto tossed the phone down and kissed Tosh again. “We have thirty minutes.” She shifted her weight on him. He flung his head back with a deep groan. “Tosh...”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ianto rummaged through the archive files. If he'd done that before now, he'd have known the mainframe was offline. She wasn't answering his queries. None of the databases were available to him. He considered himself damned lucky that he had perfect recall. He leaned his head back for a moment while he thought, then refocused on tying his trainer. There was no way in hell he was walking around the archives barefoot. It was far too cold and damp in the main hallways regardless of how well maintained the side rooms were in comparison.

Laces tied, Ianto rose to his feet and set off to the room where he stored the singularity scalpel all those years, no months, ago after Owen's death. He sighed. He was still struggling with keeping real time separate from mental time. Or at least his time separate from Jack's time. He knew, for Jack, nearly a billion years had already passed while he'd only been in this world a few short weeks. It was so

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confusing sometimes, but he wouldn't change that connection for anything. No matter how painful it was to him.

Tucking his comm unit into his ear, Ianto opened the door and flipped on the lights. He and Tosh had an agreement: she'd watch out for Owen's arrival, he'd get the tech. They were both unnerved by the fact that none of them were on the same timeline... and that Owen remembered them when clearly he was on yet another timeline. Sliding his fingers along the shelves, Ianto found the box for the scalpel and pulled it out. Taking it over to a nearby table, he checked the numbers again, nodded, and carefully opened the box. There it was, the thing that saved Martha's life, saved Gwen's wedding and nearly killed *him* while Owen was learning about it. Lifting it from the box, Ianto quickly made notes on the accompanying archive sheets so that the records could be easily updated once the mainframe was back online. Somehow, he knew that the scalpel wouldn't be going back into the archives once Owen got his hands on it.

"Ianto? They're here." Tosh's voice slipped along the comm link like a verbal caress. He couldn't resist smiling in response even though she couldn't see him do it. *"He's bringing her down via the tourist office."*

"I'm on my way back now, Tosh." Ianto cradled the scalpel in one arm, flipped the lights off and headed out of the archives. He closed doors and locked them down as he went. No need to chance Katie getting in here until they'd taken care of the thing living in her head. Ianto just prayed that this worked the way Owen hoped it would. Despite everything which had happened between them before in their previous lives, he really wanted to see Owen happy. If anyone deserved to be happy, it was Owen who life had shit on for so long, especially that resurrection Jack had so ill advisedly made the man suffer through.

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A feminine laugh echoed down the comm to him. “*He looks so dorky.*” There was a pause, more faint giggles. “*Kind of like you, but not really comfortable with it. Owen just looks so funny in a suit and tie!*”

“Tosh, you’re terrible.” Ianto shook his head. “Take a breath and stop giggling. You know how he gets.” Ianto bounded up the steps and into the alcove off the main Hub just as Owen ushered Katie in through the cog door. He had to cover his mouth to contain his own laughter at the sight of Owen in a navy suit with coordinating paler blue shirt and dark blue tie. Only when he was absolutely certain he could maintain his expression did he step out into the open.

“Miss Russell, welcome to Torchwood.” Ianto offered the scalpel to Owen and nodded to Katie. He tilted his head toward the autopsy bay. “As near as I’ve been able to determine, everything is as you left it.”

“Thanks, tea-boy.” Owen placed a hand on Katie’s arm. Ianto could see her nerves and stepped in before she bolted from him.

“Miss Russell, I’m Ianto Jones. Why don’t you come with me? I’ll make you a cup of tea while Owen sorts things out.” Ianto held out a hand to the woman. She was pretty, if you went for blondes. The vacancy in her eyes occasionally overshadowed by fear, that... that was disturbing. Still, he waited patiently for her to look back at Owen before taking his hand. He tucked her hand in his elbow, leading her toward the kitchen area, and looked back at Owen, mouthing, “Give Tosh a sedative I can add to the tea, it’ll help her. And be easier for you.” Ianto waited just long enough for Owen to nod in answer before leading Katie Russell away. *Duw, let this work*, he prayed silently while he settled the woman on the nearby chair.

* * *

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The sedative, like all the ones in the Torchwood arsenal, worked quickly. Ianto deftly caught the teacup as it slipped from Katie's fingers and passed it to a hovering Tosh. He swung Katie up in his arms bridal style and carried her across the Hub to the autopsy bay. He paused on the viewing gallery to look down at Owen. With his jacket off and tie discarded, he looked more like their Owen. The doctor was leaning heavily on the gurney in the middle of the room; if Ianto didn't know any better, he'd say the man was praying.

"Owen?" Ianto spoke softly, not wanting to startle the other man. "She's out."

He watched the other man's back stiffen for a moment before he nodded and turned around to face them. Ianto didn't mention the tears which stained Owen's cheeks. Just gave him a wan smile and shifted Katie a bit before heading down the stairs. He settled her on the gurney, brushed her hair back off her face, and looked up at Owen. "You can do this, Owen," he reached over and squeezed one of Owen's hands. "You're the best damned medic Torchwood ever had. You've saved two people with a piece of tech you had to guess at how it worked. You won't fail her."

"Thanks." Owen nodded to him and tilted his head toward the door. "You should go up with Tosh. Just in case."

"Of course." Ianto nodded back and started up the stairs. He paused halfway up. "Owen, answer a question for me?"

"What?"

"What's the date?" Ianto stared intently down at Owen. "It's important. Tosh and I need to know what you think the date is."

"12 November 2004." Owen stroked Katie's hair staring at her for a long moment before picking up the scalpel. "Why?"

"Tell you later." Ianto grinned at Owen. "Coffee?"

"Damned straight, teaboy," Owen growled up at him. "I'm spoiled. You make the best damned coffee. Now get so I can work."

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Ianto went up the last of the steps, pausing again at the top to look back into the room.

“I know you’re staring at me. That’s not getting me my coffee, Ianto.” Owen turned to look over at Ianto. “I don’t want you here when I do this, but I would like to know why you were demanding to know the date.”

“I promise to tell you when you’ve finished.” Ianto grinned down at Owen. “You pull this off, you want a job. We’ll need you.”

“Just make the coffee.”

Ianto walked away laughing. That was their Owen – overconfident and brash – just the way they liked him.

CHAPTER NINE

Fingertips ghosted over overly sensitive skin. Teasing touches designed to keep him teetering right on the edge of orgasm without falling over. He writhed, pulled at the hypersteel cuffs binding his wrists to the bulkhead above him, and bit his lip to keep from begging for release. Ianto clenched his eyes shut and forced himself to not react to the feelings flashing so quickly over his body. He focused intently on fixing the coffee determined to ignore the feeling of cuffs wrapped around his still bare wrists. There was nothing they could do now but wait. “*Fuck me... stop teasing and fuck me, you bastard.*” Ianto licked his lips and dragged in a steadying breath. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t completely block the feelings building inside him.

He lowered his head and struggled to breathe evenly. Despite knowing that Jack was with someone else, he still chased the echo of Jack’s voice desperate for any connection to his distant lover. He felt a hand rest on his back and unconsciously arched into the touch with a

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low murmur of Jack's name. Almost immediately afterwards, he felt his face heat up as he blushed knowing it wouldn't be Jack's hand on him, but most likely Tosh's. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled. Yep, one slightly embarrassed Tosh. "Sorry."

"It's okay." She rubbed her hand over his back. "You really miss him, don't you?"

"Yep." He turned to face her, absently handing her a cup of coffee as he did so, and nodded. "I love him, Tosh, and I never had the chance to tell him." He dropped his head to stare down into his own coffee mug. His hands clenched on the mug in his hands. He knew that tone of Jack's. Pure sex and now he was calling John Hart's name. "I'd planned to that night, but..."

"But what?" Tosh curled her hands around the mug she held and leaned back against the table behind her. "Ianto, how did you die?"

"Well, it wasn't an embarrassing incident with a toaster," he chuckled weakly. "But it was just as mundane." He shook his head. "A traffic accident on my way to meet Jack. He'd asked me out for my birthday. I planned to tell him I loved him. That I didn't care that he'd live forever just as long as we had my lifetime together. And what happens...?" He turned and slammed his coffee cup down. "I end up in a traffic accident a block from the restaurant. I survived years of Jack's maniac driving only to die in a car crash."

He leaned on the counter, only managing not to shrug off Tosh's hug by pure willpower, and clenched his eyes shut. "I never got to tell him I loved him. That's what hurts the most, Tosh. I let him dictate how things between us went. He never said it, so I didn't. I was never even certain we were a couple, much less a serious one." He swallowed back the urge to sob. "Now, *Duw*, I wonder if Owen was right all those years ago. All I was to him was his part-time shag and a way to ease his loneliness."

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“I may be right about a lot of things, Ianto, but never that one.” Owen’s voice cut into Ianto’s developing despair. He brought his head up and blinked at the older man. “You never noticed how he’d watch you. He always knew exactly where you were, would watch you and just smile.”

Ianto shook his head. He couldn’t believe Owen, not now with the remnants of Jack’s pleasure filled cries of Hart’s name still echoing across the back of his mind. “How’s Katie? Did it work?”

“Of course.” Owen smirked. “You said it yourself. I’m the best damned doctor Torchwood ever had.”

Ianto laughed. He reached over and grabbed a mug, filled it and held it out to Owen. He watched, absently leaning back a bit to rest against Tosh, while Owen sipped at the drink. He couldn’t help but grin at the smile that lit Owen’s face when he lowered the cup.

“I have missed that.” Owen waved the cup in Ianto’s general direction. “So, you promised to explain about the date thing.”

“It’s complicated.” Ianto squeezed Tosh’s hands before detangling himself from her arms. He was honestly surprised Owen hadn’t made a snide remark about him being held by Tosh, but figured Owen would be back to his old self soon enough. “If I really simplify it, essentially we’re all living on different timelines. Somehow being here, in the Hub, puts us on the same one, at least temporarily.” He glanced back at Tosh. He then waved a hand toward Tosh’s computer. “Tosh found out that the mainframe is in hibernation mode. Someone shut it down sometime after my death, but I think...”

“Wait a minute... Jack’s not here so who were you...” Owen blinked a few times and then his jaw dropped as Ianto took Tosh’s hand in his to lead her over to her desk. “Damn, teaboy, didn’t know you had it in you,” he muttered after the couple.

Ianto just rolled his eyes and seated Tosh. He looked up and stared at Owen. He waited patiently for the medic to join them. “To

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continue, and don't think I didn't hear that mutter Owen, I think if I wake up the mainframe, it'll align our timelines with each other."

"We can't do that without the command authorizations and control codes."

"I have them." He smiled down at Tosh, looked over at Owen, and swallowed hard. "Jack gave them to me after your first death." He tilted his head back toward the autopsy bay. "You can leave, if you want. Go back to your life with Katie, forget us and Torchwood." He stroked a hand over Tosh's hair keeping his focus on her instead of the man standing beside them. "You can be happy, Owen."

"You need me, Ianto." Owen set the coffee mug down on the desk. "I know you. You two, you'll do this as soon as we leave. You'll be Torchwood again. So, you'll need me."

"What about her... Katie?" Tosh looked up at both men. "What will be done with her?"

"I can't retcon her. Don't ask me to." Owen scowled at Ianto. "We managed before with an outsider knowing about Torchwood. She won't say anything."

Ianto blinked in surprise. Both of them were looking at him to make the decision. Owen was right. Things had worked out fairly well with Rhys knowing about them, but there was another consideration. If he did this, they only had three people for a field team for who knew how long. Someone would be needed to manage the Hub and the cover upstairs. That would be good for Katie, allow her to be on semi-equal terms with Owen, and, if he recalled the files correctly, she had medical training. She'd make a good backup doctor and assistant to Owen. Plus, having her on Hub duty, well, it was only a matter of time before he'd have to put her on desk duty anyway. Skip a step from the beginning.

"I won't. When she's awake, I have a job offer for her." Ianto smiled and nodded. "So, you're in then."

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“Damned straight, I am.”

“In what?” The soft London-accented voice from behind him caused Ianto to whirl. Leaning heavily against the wall at the top of the autopsy bay was Katie. She clearly wasn’t over the sedative, but was equally determined to get to Owen. Ianto glanced at the other man; however, he was already moving to support her. “Owen, in what?”

Ianto listened to the low murmur of their voices. Owen was desperately explaining while Katie was equally determined to deny everything even when Owen pulled out the scans of her brain and the footage of when he zapped the alien out of her brain. Ianto glanced back at the couple, looked at Tosh, and finally looked up at the shadowed alcove that housed Myfanwy. He knew how to get Katie to believe them. “Owen?”

“Yeah, teaboy?” Owen’s voice told of his exasperation with the situation. It was clear the man didn’t want to lose Katie, but couldn’t convince her that he was telling the truth.

“Bring Miss Russell up here, please.” He smiled at Tosh, leaning down to gently kiss her, before crossing the Hub to the kitchen. There he rummaged through the drawers for the protein sauce and pulled a steak from the tiny fridge under the counter. Returning to Owen and Katie, he gently took Katie’s hand and led her a few steps away from Owen. “Come over here, she doesn’t like Owen much.”

“She who?” Katie murmured. “You can’t actually believe what he’s saying. It’d be everywhere. All over the news at the least.”

“Myfanwy. She’s our pet pterodactyl.” Ianto nodded to Tosh who quickly keyed in the release for Myfanwy’s cage. With an ear-shattering screech, the animal launched herself from the alcove to circle the room. Ianto lightly coated the steak with her sauce and tossed it up in the air for the creature to catch. “She came through the Rift. We keep her here where she’s safe.”

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Ianto watched Katie stare at Myfanwy. The blonde swallowed a couple of times her mouth opening and closing repeatedly before she smiled brightly. “She’s beautiful.” Katie looked back at Owen and nodded. Ianto watched as Owen slumped a bit in relief. “He told me. I don’t know what you could need me for, but if he’s staying, so am I.” She leaned closer to Ianto and murmured, “especially if I can see her often.”

“You always can.” Ianto offered Katie an arm. “Shall we do this then?” His words encompassed the whole group while he escorted Katie back to Owen. Various tones of agreement answered him. Handing Katie off to Owen, Ianto held a hand out to Tosh. She very solemnly rose to her feet and gestured to the keyboard. He took the chair, reached up and caught Tosh’s hand, kissing her wrist, and took a deep breath. He let it out slowly, laid his fingers on the keys and began typing. With each code he entered, systems stirred around them. The Hub came to life bit by bit, an almost electrical hum building within the room, until the final code was entered. Ianto’s finger hovered over the enter key. This was the final code, the trigger for everything, and would turn on the Rift Manipulator which provided the bulk of the organic Mainframe’s power. He looked up at his friends, smiled encouragingly at Katie, and waited for each of them to nod in turn. With their agreement, he stabbed his finger down on the key.

For one heart-stopping long moment, nothing happened. Ianto rose, already opening his mouth to ask Tosh to check on the Mainframe, when the world fell out from under his feet. One minute he was standing in a semi-dark Hub with only the heavy static hum of electricity surrounding him, the next he was on the floor. His ears rang, his eyes wouldn’t focus, and all he could do was struggle to breathe.

Then, it was over. The bright lights of the Hub shined down on them while all four of them picked themselves up off the floor. All the usual background noise was there: the hum of machinery, the soft

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pumping sound of the manipulator, the beeps of Tosh's computers, even Myfanwy screeched in protest above them. Ianto looked at his friends and down at the computer. He quickly typed a command and grinned at them both. "It worked. We're in two thousand eight. And we're all registering on the system properly now."

INTERLUDE

Excerpt from Ianto Jones's Diary – 10 August 2008

I watched Owen get married today, Jack. I've never seen him as happy as he was when the minister pronounced them man and wife. His smile could have lit up Cardiff while the kiss they shared as more tender than any I've seen before. Even ours paled in comparison to that moment between them. I actually blushed, embarrassed by witnessing that kiss. We, Tosh and I, managed to convince them to take a brief honeymoon, so Owen and Katie are spending the next week in Barcelona.

Tosh is pulling away from me. I know our affair started out as a sort of friends with benefits deal, but I do care for her. Just not how she wants. I love you. Deeply, completely, obsessively... I wouldn't have done what I have if I didn't. As much as I love Tosh, she's not you. She's not even Lisa who I loved nearly as much as I do you. I

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need to let her go before I ruin our friendship because of my feelings for you.

You're hurting, Jack. It's all emotional pain, not physical. And it's tearing me to shreds. I've spent more time hiding in our office – can't say that it's yours anymore when I'm using it just as much – and crying the tears you can't seem to shed. I'm so sorry, Jack. More sorry than you can ever imagine. No one should experience the loss of a child, especially you who love so deeply when you allow yourself to love. I can't blame you one iota for getting revenge on those bastards who took her away from you. Every one of them deserved the torture you put them through trying to find her.

I need to go.

Look at that, I'm even writing this as if you're going to read it as soon as I'm done. Just how pathetic is that, *cariad*?

Anyway, I need to go and check on something in the morgue. I think I know of a way to give our Toshiko everything her heart desires, but before I even hint at the possibility to her I have to be certain that he's still there. You remember him; I'm certain you do. Tommy Brockless. He was the only man to get that wonderful half-shy half-interested smile out of her. I know she loved him. She told me more than once before we came here. So, now I find out if he's still frozen in our morgue... and, if he is, drop a few hints about him.

Then I let her go. She deserves to be just as happy as Owen is with Katie. As I was... and will be again... with you. Plus, I'll get another member for our team this way. So, hopefully, everything will go according to plan. This is Torchwood though. I know it won't.

CHAPTER TEN

Ianto dropped into the office desk chair and swiveled it about to face the CCTV monitors behind the desk. He fumbled for his drink, tossed it back, and refilled the glass from the bottle of brandy on the credenza that was now beside him. He watched the couple on the screen as Tommy twirled Tosh about before setting her on her feet in front of the tower. They kissed, long and leisurely, before moving off arm in arm across the Plass. As they went, they paused to talk or kiss. All the while, a beautiful smile graced Tosh's face. It was the smile of a woman getting her second chance with her true love.

He leant his head back and closed his eyes for a moment. His mind drifted back to the moment he'd found the reference to Tommy in the Mainframe. A small alarm on Jack's computer, now his computer for all intents and purposes, popping up to tell him that in twenty-four hours it was time to wake the occupant of drawer 006 for his annual checkup.

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Ianto blinked. Drawer 006 was the drawer he'd placed Suzie in all those years ago when she'd died. Lisa had been in 005. It didn't make sense. Cancelling the alarm, he rose and headed down to the vaults. He stood for a long moment before the drawer in question fingering the barrel latch before pulling it back with a hard snap of the latch. He took a deep breath, opened the door, and pulled out the cryogenics unit inside. Brushing a hand over the glass panel, he blinked in shock. Lying there, wrapped in white scrubs and looking just as he had the last time Ianto had seen him, was Tommy Brockless.

"You did the right thing," Owen's voice brought Ianto out of the memory of his shock over seeing Tommy in their morgue. "I know it doesn't feel like it right now, but you did do the right thing."

"I know." Ianto reached over and grabbed the brandy bottle. Once again, he refilled his glass. "Doesn't make it hurt less, but I know I did." He laughed, soft, short and bitter, and toasted Owen with the glass. "She deserved to be happy, Owen. She never would be if she settled for me. I'm too tied to Jack..." he paused for a moment. "Too deeply tied to Jack in any lifetime to love her the way she deserves to be loved. She's my best friend. I didn't want to lose that, so I gave her someone who could love her."

"Too tied to Jack?" Owen grabbed a glass off the credenza and held it out toward Ianto. "Is that something as medical officer I need to know?"

"Probably." He filled Owen's glass and used the bottle to gesture toward the chair on the other side of the desk. "It's complicated, Owen, and Tosh doesn't know about it. Even as she helped me deal with the consequences – the pain, the nightmares – she doesn't know why I'm having them." Ianto laid his head back, squeezed his eyes shut, and sipped at his drink. "That's the other reason I asked you to try to bring Tommy back. What's happening to me was slowly destroying her."

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Ianto rose to his feet, leaning over to type rapidly on the keyboard in order to follow Toshiko and Tommy's progress through Cardiff to Tosh's apartment. He smiled slightly in remembrance of the conversation they'd had just before she'd left. His heart ached, but it was for the best.

"I know you love him, Tosh."

"Ianto..."

"Shh." He pressed a finger to her lips to silence her. "Just listen. I remember how you were with him before... there before we sent him back. You loved him. You wouldn't have taken him home with you that night if you hadn't." He stroked her cheek with fingers he was amazed weren't shaking. "Consider this a second chance, Tosh. Tommy can work here, be a field agent for us, and you can have what your heart desires."

"But what about you?"

"I'll be fine." He kissed her gently, rubbed his thumb over her lips smudging her lipstick, and smiled. "I've never lied to you, Tosh, I'll be fine. If I need you, for anything, I'll call. All right?"

"Promise me you will."

"Always. Now go, Tommy's waiting for you. Take the day off. Talk, feel him out about Torchwood, but just spend a day away from here." He stroked his hands down her arms and clasped her hands lifting them up to kiss her inner wrists. "Do that for me?"

"Teaboy?"

"I thought you were going to stop calling me that."

"I lied." Owen grinned at him across the width of the desk. "What's going on with you? If nothing else, I should know as your doctor. As your friend, I'm worried about you."

Ianto flicked off the monitor and dropped down into the chair. He set the glass he held aside on the desk, crossed his arms on the desktop and dropped his head to rest in the cradle of his arms. "You can't tell

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anyone, but I've got a psychic link to Jack. I know everything that's happening to him. How long it's been since he lost us. Particularly strong emotions or experiences, well..." he raised his head to look across the desk at Owen. "I feel them too."

"Jesus." Owen tossed off the drink he held and immediately refilled his glass. "How bad?"

"I know what it's like to die by sulfuric acid, burning at the stake, dismemberment, hanging, crucifixion..." he paused for a moment. "I've also learned a hell of a lot about sex, especially kinky sex."

"That's no surprise there." Owen laughed softly. "Now I know where the narcotics have been going. I wondered. How often are you taking the morphine?"

"I haven't. Not since I managed to overdose myself on it, fall off the gantry and break my neck. I ended up drowning in the tidal pool." Ianto shook his head with a soft laugh at Owen's dazed expression. "Yes, what connects me to Jack has apparently also gifted me with his immortality."

"And you don't want Tosh to know."

"Not yet. I don't know how to tell her. She.... Well, she helped me through the first time I felt one of his more gruesome deaths. I know I need to tell her, but let me decide when. I want her to be happy before I spring this on her." He slowly rose to his feet. "If I tell her before she's moved on with Tommy, well, I know Tosh. She won't move on because of her worries for me."

"You will tell her." Owen pointed a finger at Ianto as he tossed off the last of his drink. "It's not something that should be hidden from the team. We saw how well that worked with Jack."

"When it's time, yeah, I will." Ianto waved a hand at the door. "Go on. Nothing's happening and the Rift's quiet. Take Kate and go home." He watched Owen shut things down. It was a bit strange to see Owen organized and methodical, but Ianto was certain that was Kate's

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influence on the other man. He leant on the office door just watching as Owen left. If he knew the medic the way he thought he did any minute now he'd be getting a request. He fingered the stopwatch in his pocket, tempted to time how long it took for Owen to say it.

"Teaboy, this thing of yours, can I talk to Kate...?"

"Yes, just make sure she knows not to discuss it with Tosh until I've talked to Tosh myself." Ianto waved toward the door. "Go before I make up something for you to do."

"Don't brood all night..." Owen called as he headed out the door.

Ianto swallowed, looking across the empty hub, and licked his lips. He rolled his spine along the doorframe and thumped his head back against the wooden frame. He was glad they were all out of the Hub. Now he could break down. He slid down until he was crouched on the floor and wrapped his arms around himself. Silently, he cried though it didn't take long for the silent tears to become painful racking sobs.

Duw, Jack... I'm so sorry. So, so sorry. What they've done to you... my beautiful Jack... the thoughts ran circles around in his mind while he cried. Aliens, a race neither Ianto nor Jack had ever seen before, thinking they were doing Jack a favor to ease his pain had amputated Jack's twisted limbs after his latest death. Jack was little more than a head with a vestigial torso and even that was being absorbed, slowly and painfully, into what was left of him. These aliens even rigged up a support system for Jack, one that, to Ianto's mind, was little more than turning his lover into a sideshow monster to be pointed and stared at. *Oh, Jack... I wish I could hold you in my arms, tell you I love you... but I can't. All I can do is take some of this pain away from you.* Rubbing at his neck, Ianto rocked in the doorway unable to move while Jack suffered millions of miles and billions of years away from him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ianto rubbed his cheek against the warm softness beneath his face. He hummed softly when fingers threaded through his hair in response to his movement. For a moment, one brief moment between the darkness of sleep and the brightness of awakening, he thought he heard Jack murmur his name. “Jack...” he breathed, and then moaned as he shifted. Every inch of his body ached, but especially his neck and throat.

“No, Kate.” A voice whispered from above him. “You awake now?”

“Yeah.” He cracked an eye open and shifted on to his back. Slowly, he opened both eyes to peer up at Owen’s wife. “I’m awake. Don’t want to be, but I am awake.”

She smiled at him. Then to his great surprise, covered his ears with her hands, and yelled. Even with his ears covered, he still heard her screaming Owen’s name across the width of the Hub. After a moment,

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she screamed again and smiled down at him, taking her hands away. “He’s coming. Owen wanted to know the moment you woke up.”

Her fingers threaded through his hair again. It was then he felt the tremble in her. Faint, just barely there, but she was trembling as she touched him. “Kate? What is it?”

“You scared us, teaboy.” Owen’s voice came from his left. Ianto slowly turned his head, wincing slightly as his cervical spine decided to make the most disconcerting crackling noises. “And that’s why. Found you dead in the office doorway with a dislocated spine.”

“I’m sorry.” Ianto closed his eyes for a moment once more fighting back tears. He drew his lower lip between his teeth and sucked on it. He wasn’t sure what to tell the couple. He knew they knew about his connection to Jack, but it was still so hard to talk about. “I…” he licked his lips, considered and nodded to himself, “Jack went through hell last night. So did I.”

“What happened? Can you tell us?” Kate asked quietly. She shifted his arm, tugging up the sleeve of his tee to let Owen work on him. “Owen’s going to check you out. Since you’re moving, mostly, on your own, I think the worse of the injury has healed.”

“Tosh isn’t here. I called her just after we moved you to the sofa. Told her to take her time coming in and pick up some pastries on her way. We’ve got just under an hour before she’s due in with Tommy.” Owen wrapped a blood pressure cuff around his arm while he spoke. Ianto hated those things. They always made him feel like his head was going to explode while they worked.

“Jack was attacked trying to defend a group of children. He’s gotten almost obsessed lately with saving kids, but that’s another story.” Ianto sighed softly. He knew the reason for that obsession. He didn’t think anyone else needed to know those reasons. “He distracted the aliens. He called them Najashaves. They looked a bit like the fantasy depictions of an Indian Naga, but they had wings and could fly

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which made them extremely agile in hunting their preferred prey.” He dragged in a steady breath. “Jack kept them busy. Even managed to kill a couple of them, but they managed to swarm him. They both bite and spit venom...”

“What kind of venom?” Kate asked quietly. Her hand still stroked through his hair. Idly, Ianto wondered if she knew how calming that rhythmic caress was to him. “We, Owen and I, may need to look into stocking anti-venom, if there’s a chance they could come here.”

“Do it anyway,” Ianto laughed. “Just about any kind of alien you can think of seems to turn up here at some point.” Ianto winced, hissed and glared over at Owen. “What was that for?”

“You’re flirting with Kate.” Owen switched vials as the first filled with blood. “I don’t like that.”

“You’re on decaf,” he growled back. “You’re going to be hell to live with when Jack gets back. You know he’s going to flirt with her.”

“Yeah, but he’s not here and you are; so you get stabbed with the needle,” Owen sniped.

“Enough, both of you,” Kate interrupted them. “Ianto, go on. We need to know what happened to you.”

Ianto sighed, defeated. He wasn’t going to get out of this no matter how much he wanted to ignore what happened. “It seemed to be mostly a neurotoxin. I’m not positive.” He swallowed hard. He wasn’t going to think too much on what happened next. “Killed him, of course, but the children came back with adults of their species, healers of some kind, and they drove off the Najashaves before they could actually start ea...”

Kate covered his mouth with her hand. “Too much detail, Ianto. Way too much detail.” She waited until he nodded before lifting her hand. “So the alien healers rescued him. What then?”

Ianto pulled his arm away from Owen, rolled off the sofa and stepped around the older man to pace in the small space between the

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coffee table and Tosh's desk. "They took him somewhere. A hospital I suppose and tried to treat him. He wasn't healing as rapidly as he normally does..." he stopped moving and wrapped his arms around himself. "Developed an infection, bled a lot, and..." Ianto whimpered. His voice dropped to a near whisper as he turned back to Kate and Owen. "They did what they did for all their people, started removing the areas of infection. In the end, they rigged up a support structure for what was left of him which did heal by reabsorbing those portions of his body he didn't need now. The reason you found me with a broken neck is the last thing they did, since he could absorb it, was remove the remains of his spine from his skull."

"You mean Jack's just a head... like out of a Hammer film..." Owen started to laugh only to shut up at a hard hit from Kate who'd risen to her feet to gather Ianto in her arms. "I'm sorry, Ianto. I shouldn't have laughed."

"No, you shouldn't have." Kate held Ianto close. She pulled his head down onto her shoulder. "How would you feel if that happened to me?" She pressed a kiss to Ianto's temple and murmured, "Let it out, Ianto. You don't have to go through this alone. We're here for you."

Ianto broke; he couldn't hold back the two years worth of bottled up tears. Two years for him, over a billion for Jack. All that pain – emotional and physical – that he'd kept hidden away, finally spilled from him in broken gasping sobs into Kate's neck. He had no idea how long he cried before the proximity alarm for the tourist office shattered the silence.

"Shit. She's early." Owen growled the words as he shoved supplies back into his medical case to carry them down to the autopsy room. "Why does she always have to come in early?" he muttered.

"I'll take care of Ianto. Get him cleaned up and all." Kate grabbed Ianto's hand when he attempted to move away from her. "You distract Tosh."

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“I’m on it.” Owen ran for the door, growling when the cog moved slowly. “Come on...”

Both of them could hear him running up the stairs to intercept Toshiko. Ianto blinked, smiled and then turned a smirk on Kate. “Got him trained have you?”

“Working on it.” She started across the Hub, pulling Ianto behind her, and smirked back at him. “I think it’ll always be a work in progress, but for now we concentrate on you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Twitching his tie into place, even though it was already perfect, Ianto stepped out of the flat's bedroom into the lounge where Kate sat waiting on him. He smoothed his hands down his waistcoat, catching the lower hem in his fingers and twitched it into place. Grabbing his jacket, he pulled it on, turned to the nearby mirror and settled it properly. He turned back to Kate and had to fight back a grin at her stunned expression. "Kate?" He held back a laugh, barely, as she visibly shook herself before answering him.

"Dammnnn, you look good." He laughed softly at her blush and held an arm out to her. "I mean it, Ianto," she murmured as she rose to take his arm. "I've only seen you in a suit a handful of times, including the wedding, and you look damned good. Why don't you wear them more often?"

"It's complicated." He paused in the barely lit hallway outside the flat. The majority of the light illuminating them was spillover from the

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gantry just beyond the arched entrance to the hall. “Before, when Jack was here, all I wore when working were suits.” Ianto leant back against the wall and considered her. “Seeing as you’ve taken up the jeans and casual tops, even if they are silk, I’m certain you’ve noticed how hard this job is on clothing.” He reached up and brushed his hair back. He hadn’t bothered to gel it into place after his shower so occasionally one strand would fall annoyingly into his eyes. “I wear the suits when I feel the need to be more in control, to get people to respect me as Head of Torchwood. Somehow, I have a feeling today is going to be a suit day.”

Straightening, he offered her his arm again. Together, they headed out onto the gantry. Myfanwy circled above them, screeching as she scanned her territory, while Tosh’s fingers flew over her keyboard down below. Craning his neck a bit, Ianto could just see Owen doing an induction workup on Tommy in the autopsy bay. All in all, it was a perfectly peaceful time at Torchwood. He just knew it wasn’t going to last. Still, he could take a moment to play a bit. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a candy bar and handed it to Kate. “Want to do the honors?”

“Yes!”

He grinned at her girlish squeal. Her fingers snatched the candy from his hand, tearing it open while he pulled the modified keyfob from his pocket. Pressing a button, he grinned as Myfanwy wheeled about to dive toward them. For a creature so out of her time, the pterodactyl was beautifully graceful as she swooped about the Hub. With a squawk, Myfanwy perched on the railing in front of them, dipping her beak to accept the bits of candy from Kate’s hand. Ianto stretched out an arm and scratched the pterodactyl’s crest, behind and underneath, before stroking her jaw. All the while, he did his best to imitate the creature’s growling purr, low and deep in his throat, and sighed when Myfanwy dropped off the railing to fly again when the candy was gone.

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“You really love her.” Kate turned to watch the pterodactyl wheel about the Hub before heading up to her nest. “She’s not just an alien you have to watch over, but...”

“A pet. Semi-guard dog.” He smiled for a moment. “A reminder of the past.” He leaned forward to rest his arms on the railing. “Myfanwy is a lot of things. Not many people understand my fascination with her. She’s my responsibility because she hates Owen and Tosh just doesn’t understand her.” Ianto considered Kate for a long moment. “Though it seems you understand the fascination.”

“She’s wonderful. A piece of living history...” Kate breathed out on a sigh. “Childhood imaginations made real.”

“So, I could interest you in this then?” He dangled the keyfob in front of Kate. “It’s a controller for her nest, the lift’s door, and she’s been taught to recognize the subsonic sound it makes. A pterodactyl whistle, if you will.”

“You trust me with your pet?” Pure disbelief colored Kate’s tone even as her hand reached out to close around the keyfob. “Of course, I want it.”

Ianto threw his head back with a laugh. “Yes, I trust you with her.” He sobered and smiled at her. “I did some research, way back when Jack and I first caught her, and discovered that all the theories point toward pterodactyls being a social animal like monkeys or some kinds of birds. She needs more than just me in her flock. She likes you, so...” he trailed off with a shrug.

“I don’t think I care about the reasons.” Kate leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“Your welc...” Ianto returned the smile but it dropped instantly as the Rift alarm blared out across the Hub. It continued to wail but was joined by the sound of several of the phones ringing all at one time. Whatever was going on, it was big. “Fuck,” he muttered. He stepped around Kate and ran down the gantry to take the stairs down to the

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lower level two at a time. He could hear Kate running after him, but focused his attention on Tosh. “What have we got?”

Ianto rested his hands on the back of Tosh’s chair. He scanned the monitors over her head trying to make sense of the data flying fast and furious over the screen. He waved a hand vaguely in Kate’s direction as she started answering the phones.

“Multiple incursions. All centered just west of town.” Tosh continued to type. Now attempting to narrow down the location, but it was Kate’s muttered curse that stole Ianto’s attention from the monitor. As such, he missed the horrified look on Tosh’s face.

“Shit. Are you certain of the location?” Kate’s voice was tense. Her whole body got tenser by the minute as she grabbed the medical kit off the table in front of her and threw it to Owen. Owen’s gun, safety on and still holstered, followed. “We’re on our way.”

“Oh, God,” Tosh murmured. Ianto staggered back a pace as Tosh shoved her chair back and grabbed her gun and bag. Her hand curled around his wrist. “They’re on a Council Estate, Ianto.”

“It’s Rhiannon’s.”

Kate and Tosh’s words ran together as the women all but talked over each other. It took a moment for the words to register then he was running for the door to the garage and the SUV beyond. His only thought for his sister and her family. They may not have seen much of each other in the last few years, but she was still his family... and he’d be damned if any alien would ever harm his family.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Jesus, Ianto,” Owen growled from the passenger seat as the SUV squealed around another corner. “We’ll be no help to anyone if you smear us all over the road.”

Ianto ignored the medic in favor of slinging the Range Rover around another corner before hurtling the car down the narrow lane beyond. He pushed the SUV to the limits of its engine. He hadn’t driven through this part of Cardiff this fast since his teens, but he still knew all the ins and outs of the area. Enough that he could get to Rhiannon’s home faster this way than by taking the main roads. He whipped the car around yet another corner, almost putting the vehicle up on two wheels for a moment, and brought it to screeching, sliding halt mere inches from the side of Gwen’s unmarked police car.

The car had barely stopped before Ianto was out the door. In fact, the car was still rocking slightly from the sudden deceleration while Ianto stalked away toward the edge of the scene. His eyes were taking

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in everything in a single glance. Screams echoed as people ran in a variety of directions, many chased by equally screaming police trying to get them to leave the area. The scent of blood tainted the air. Shattered glass, broken wood and bloody bodies lay everywhere he looked. He didn't see the aliens; however, he was certain they were there somewhere. His first priority, even over eliminating the aliens, was to find Rhiannon and her family.

"Ah, Ianto," Gwen's voice heralded her arrival at his side. She was almost running to keep up with him. "Took your time."

It took every inch of Ianto's self control to keep from turning to her and slamming his fist into her jaw. He'd been taught to not hit a woman, but there were days when Gwen really strained the limits of his temper. He stopped and turned to her. "We were on the other side of town, Gwen," he stated as reasonably as he could. "I'm certain you'll be getting a ton of complaints about my driving as soon as you get back to the station." He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and gave Gwen a tiny smile. "Situation...?"

"Unca Anto!"

"Misha!" That high-pitched childish mangling of his name was as full of fear as to make his heart clench in his chest. Ianto shoved Gwen to one side, stepped around her and swept up the running toddler in his arms. He shifted her expertly to his left hip, leaving his gun hand free. "You're safe. I've got you."

Misha's arms wrapped tight around his neck. She clung to him with every bit of strength in her tiny body. And she shook constantly. Ianto took a moment to tuck his gun into the waist of his trousers before he ran a hand over Misha's hair and back. Her dress, he thought it had once been pink, was nearly black from the blood soaking it. "Shh, cariad. Are you hurt?"

"Just look at her. Of course, she's hurt, *twpsyn*," Gwen snapped. Her hands reached for Misha who shrank back away from the

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Welshwoman with a fearful shriek. “Give her here so you can deal with that.” She waved a hand in the direction of the terraced houses and the chaos going on there.

Ianto looked away from Misha for a moment. He barely refrained from snarling a curse. He twisted, putting the bulk of his body between Misha and the advancing aliens. In a single move, he pulled his gun, brought it up and fired repeatedly into the head of the najashaves bearing down on him and Gwen. He gritted his teeth in order to ignore the screeches coming from the wounded alien and the screaming from his niece. He reached up and hit the comm. “Kate, come get my niece, take her into the SUV and check her over. Tosh, we’re going to need the special ammo from the back. And arm Tommy, we could use him if he’s up for this. Owen...” he broke off as he realized from where the alien had come... The shattered windows of Rhiannon’s house.

As the team, his team, joined him, Ianto handed Misha off to Kate. “Go, keep her safe for me.” He didn’t take the time to watch Kate run to the car though he did listen for the sound of the doors closing on the SUV with his screaming and crying niece inside, just held a hand out to Tosh. She slapped a gun into his palm following it up with a pair of clips for the weapon. “Stay out of our way,” he snarled to Gwen and stalked past her. “And stay the hell away from Misha.”

Standing over the alien, he fired one shot into its torso and followed that up with two shots to the head. “Shoot the wings to get them down,” Ianto forced himself to not think of what they’d likely find inside. “Then go for the center of the torso between the plating. Their hearts are there. Or hit the brain via their eyes. Just watch yourselves. They spit venom.” He glanced back at Tosh. “How many are we looking for?”

“Four.” She looked up at him from her PDA. “There were originally five, but...” Tosh shook her head. “I’m sorry, Ianto but the

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signals are all coming from Rhiannon's home though there are residual traces in some of the other houses."

"I know," Ianto nodded to her. "Misha's covered in blood to the point you can barely tell that dress she's wearing is supposed to be pink." He took in a breath, glanced at the solemn faces of the team and led the way to Rhiannon's door. He rested back against one side of the doorframe, nodded to Owen on the other side and slipped into the small hallway inside.

Edging down the wall, he tilted his head toward the stairs next to the door. "Tosh, Tommy. There's three bedrooms upstairs." He watched them head up the stairs. If the situation wasn't so serious, he'd be grinning. Even without training, Tommy was moving as one with Tosh, assessing the situation with the skill of a pro, which he technically was as he had been trained as a soldier once upon a time. Gesturing to Owen for the man to follow him, Ianto focused his attention on the lounge room in front of them.

It looked empty at first glance, but Ianto could hear the hissing sounds the snake-like aliens made. The volume rose and fell almost as if there was a pair of them fighting over something. Occasionally, the hisses would have an almost screaming sound added to them. Peering around the doorframe, Ianto saw two of the najashaves hovering over the body of his brother-in-law. One had its tail wrapped around a leg pulling with repeated flaps of its wings while the other had dug claws into Johnny's back, its own tail wrapped around Johnny's neck.

"Son of a bitch," Owen breathed, leaning back against the wall again. "I hope to Christ he's dead." He looked over at Ianto. "Sorry, mate."

Ianto just nodded. Taking in a quick breath and trying to ignore how even the air tasted of blood, he whipped around the corner and fired his gun. His anger sharpened his aim. He hit every target with single minded precision killing each alien in a volley of shots. Popping

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the clip, he let it drop to the floor, slapping in a second one and racking the slide to load the weapon. Without pausing for more than a quick breath, he turned and fired again, this time aiming for the alien he could hear in the kitchen just beyond where they were standing in the open.

“Fuck...” Owen breathed the curse into the now silent room. “Teaboy, when did you go all James Bond on us?”

A volley of shots from upstairs, followed by Tosh’s scream of ‘clear’ told them the last alien was dead. Ianto scanned the room, looking for David and Rhiannon, and seeing neither at first glance. He reached up and hit his comm. “Tosh, do you see David or Rhiannon?”

“No, we’re still checking up here.”

“Let me know.” Ianto covered Owen while the man took a quick look at Johnny. There was no denying that his brother-in-law was dead. Even if the blood loss hadn’t killed him, the grip the alien had on his neck would have suffocated him. Ianto glanced around, his hand tight on the gun, and tilted his head to one side. “Do you hear?”

“Shit!” Owen scrambled over toppled furniture toward the shattered front window. “Ianto!”

Ianto whirled around where he’d been searching the kitchen. He knew that tone of voice from Owen. He didn’t question, just scrambled over and around the mess to reach the medic’s side. Owen was easing Rhiannon down from the edge of the broken window. He knew from the single look Owen gave him that it was bad. Very bad.

“Rhi!” His voice broke as he called her old childhood nickname. He dropped to his knees, heedless of the shattered glass strewn across the floor, and gathered her into his arms. Ianto swallowed hard around tears he could already feel choking off his voice. “Oh god, Rhi, I’m sorry.” Ianto pulled her closer to him and stroked her hair back from her face. “I should have gotten here faster...”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Misha...” Rhiannon coughed. Blood flecked her lips. Ianto wiped it away with his thumb. “I dropped her out the window. Did she get away?”

“She did. She’s safe. She’s just fine.” Ianto pulled Rhiannon closer to him. “Don’t talk...”

“Oh, we’re going to talk.” She fixed a hard look on him. It was her ‘I’m the elder you’re going to listen to me’ look. Ianto swallowed back a sob and rocked them both. “I never see you. Dad died and that was it. You were gone.” She struggled to breathe, every breath she took making a wet, almost sucking sound in her chest. “Like I did something wrong. I didn’t, did I?”

“Never.” He stroked her hair again with a shaking hand. Ianto shifted her up against his chest, trying to make things easier for her, and looked helplessly at Owen. Silently, he begged his friend for help only

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to receive a defeated headshake in return. “You didn’t. It’s work. Hard to explain things like this to most people.”

“Yeah.” She laughed softly. The sound was broken and wet. More blood coated her lips, his hands. She seemed to be bleeding everywhere. All he could do was cradle her in his arms. “Misha... you’ll take care of her?”

“Of course.” Ianto half-smiled at his sister. It was taking every inch of his control to keep from reacting to the way she was bleeding from literally everywhere. The visible portions of her body covered in rapidly forming bruises and swelling. It reminded him of pictures he’d seen of victims of Ebola. “I’ll spoil her and give her right back to you.”

“I love you.” Rhiannon’s eyes closed for a moment. A shudder racked her body. A pained cry escaped her lips. “You know that, right?”

“I know.” He could see the pain in her eyes. He knew he was losing her, faster and faster with every second that passed. She was so cold in his arms. Her skin was clammy, swollen and bleeding, bruises discoloring the pretty face of his older sister. “I love you, too.”

A long silent moment passed. He couldn’t let her go. Not yet. He shifted her, biting his lip when she cried out in pain, and stroked her cheek. “Don’t go,” he half-sobbed, “don’t leave me.” He pulled her higher in his arms. “Rhiannon, please.” He stared at her, hand cupping her cheek, and let the tears flow. “Don’t, please, please don’t.”

But she didn’t answer him.

Ianto gathered her closer to him, dropped his head to hide in Rhiannon’s hair and sobbed. He rocked back and forth, just sobbing into his sister’s hair, heedless of Tosh’s calls over the comms or Owen’s terse answers. All he could think was that he’d lost his only remaining family, the only person who truly understood him. Not even Jack had understood him as well as Rhiannon had... and she was gone. “No, Rhi, no... don’t...”

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Time passed. How much, he didn't know, nor did he really care. He could hear the others moving around the house, securing the scene and speaking quietly to each other. Ianto knew from Owen's soft curse that David had been found and, since no one tried to get him away from Rhiannon, his nephew was mostly likely also dead. All he had left was little Misha.

And a promise. He never broke his promises.

"Ianto, pet, come on now." Gwen's voice broke through the heavy layers of numbness shrouding him. "I need you to hand the girl over to me so I can get her settled into care. You know you won't be able to take her. Not with..."

"Shut up," he hissed. He lifted his head from Rhiannon's hair. He glared at Gwen. "You may be a good friend and occasional colleague, but shut the fuck up before I shoot you. Misha is going *nowhere* but back to the Hub. With me. Where she belongs." Brushing his lips over her temple, Ianto slowly lowered Rhiannon's body down to the floor. He shrugged out of his now ruined suit jacket and draped the fabric over his sister, covering her from prying eyes. Then he rose to his feet, staring down at Gwen, and drew on all the strength of will he'd learned from repeatedly dying Jack's many deaths.

"Misha is my niece; my only surviving family. She will be coming home with me. If you try anything..." he trailed off and continued to glare her down. He saw the moment she backed down, mentally, if not physically, and continued in a slightly warmer tone. "I would appreciate it if you would secure the scene, any witnesses, and keep everything contained until UNIT arrives to take it over. I'll leave Tosh and Tommy here as well." Ianto swept from the room, stalking out of the house with Gwen trailing in his wake, and headed for the SUV. He had to see Misha, had to hold her and know she was safe and well. "The rest of us will be going back to the Hub where Kate and Owen can examine Misha."

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“Ianto, you can’t...”

“Can’t what, Gwen?” He stopped and turned on her. “Raise a child? Have a family? What can’t I do, Gwen? You seem to have no problems letting me watch Bran whenever you want time alone with Rhys. I seem to recall that’s why you are in the condition you are in now.” He nodded to her pregnant belly.

“That’s just babysitting. This is different. You can’t raise a child in Torchwood. You told me that yourself. Remember?”

“No,” Ianto shook his head at her and started walking again. “I told you it was difficult to raise a child in Torchwood, not that it couldn’t be done. You have to have support to do it.” He smiled at the scene before him. Kate sat in the backseat of the SUV, a towel wrapped Misha cuddled against her chest, singing softly to his now nearly asleep niece. “My team will support me, Gwen.”

Leaving his old friend to gape after him, Ianto carefully opened the door and reached in for Misha. He lifted her in his arms and hugged her to his chest. She nuzzled against his neck, arms wrapping around him, and sniffled. “Unca Anto, want Mama,...” she whimpered.

“So do I, cariad, so do I,” he whispered while tossing the keys to the SUV to Owen. “But Mama’s gone, it’s just you and me now.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ianto shifted Misha on his lap. She was filthy. Her blonde hair matted with blood. Her arms were lined with tiny scratches. Much to his relief, they weren't bleeding but had already begun to scab over. She'd likely been scratched by some of the remaining glass when Rhiannon had dropped her out of the window. The slowing of the SUV had him lifting his head to look out the window. They were only pulling into the garage, so Ianto shifted Misha again so he could easily carry the now sleeping child once they were parked. The whole ride from the estate to the Hub had passed in silence. Or so it seemed to him, he was so numb to the outside world.

Owen parked. Kate hopped out of the passenger seat and reached back to open Ianto's door for him. He smiled at the woman and slid carefully from the car. He dragged in a steadying breath. The trio moved swiftly through the tunnels into the Hub itself. Ianto headed

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straight for the medical bay. “Owen,” he called softly. “Would you check her over for me? Make sure she’s fine.”

“Course, mate, though Katie says she’s fine.” Owen bounded down the steps behind Ianto. “Ianto, do you want a medical file for her in the database as Torchwood?”

Ianto settled Misha on the gurney in the middle of the room. She looked so damned small and helpless cocooned in that large grey-white towel from the SUV. He started to step back, but she clutched at his waistcoat with impossibly strong hands. “No!” she screeched. “Dunna go, Unca.”

Ianto immediately stepped back, wrapped his arms around her and held her close to him. “I’m not going anywhere, Misha.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “I promise. I’m not going anywhere.” He looked up from Misha to nod to Owen. “Yeah, consider her the first Torchwood Three baby since the seventies.”

“There were other children?” Owen gestured at the table. It took Ianto a few minutes to figure out the convoluted hand gestures meant that he was to hop up on the table and steady the exhausted child for the medic. “I always thought that was impossible. The nature of the job and all that.”

“It was rarer at Two and Three than at One. London was essentially a mega-corp, so we had a maternity leave policy and even an on-site crèche.” Ianto dropped his gaze and swallowed hard. He hated to think of what he’d seen there after the Battle. “Before the sixties, just about every female operative for Torchwood had at least one child. There were only three exceptions – Emily Holyrood, Alice Guppy and Harriet Derbyshire.” He gave Owen a cheeky grin. “Why do you think I insisted on Kate not being field qualified? You’re married, I know what that will lead to eventually.”

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“So that’s why...” Kate’s indignant voice echoed down at them from the viewing landing above. “I wondered why you had me train with firearms, but still wouldn’t pass me for field work.”

“That’s why.” At Owen’s softly spoken request, he lifted Misha out of the toweling and settled her in his lap while Owen took his blood samples and gave her shots. “I figured I’d skip a step since the moment you told me you were pregnant, I’d have to pull you from the field anyway.”

“Good thing I love you.” The sarcasm just dripped from her words.

Ianto blushed; he couldn’t help it, and ducked his head. He gently shook Misha to wake her up again. “Hey, don’t go to sleep. You still need a bath, cariad.” She grizzled at him and put her thumb in her mouth. “Why is she so tired? You didn’t...”

“As tempted as I was, I didn’t retcon her.” Kate smiled reassuringly down at Ianto. “I did give her a light sedative to calm her down. She was screaming herself hoarse trying to go after you. She’ll sleep for a few hours and be fine afterwards.”

“Why don’t we retcon her? No child should have to live with those memories.” Owen asked while labeling his samples prior to adding them to the collection of blood samples for Torchwood members. “It would likely cut down on the number of nightmares she’ll have.”

“We can’t.” Ianto lifted Misha into his arms again and hopped off the table. “Retcon can’t be used on a child under five. They’re too young. It permanently damages the neural relays in their brains.” He closed his eyes for a moment, resolutely shoving that memory back into the darker corners of his mind. “The results are neither pretty nor pleasant.”

“So, for the foreseeable future, we’re going to have to deal with an exhausted child suffering from nightmares and an over caffeinated Ianto.” Owen dropped into his chair and groaned. “Great.”

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Ianto would have retorted but the feel of Misha shivering in her lace trimmed knickers and vest refocused him on the niece who was now his child. He pulled her closer to him and grabbed a blanket to drape over her. “I’m going to go up to the flat, give her a bath and try to warm her up. She’s freezing. Could one of you contact Tosh, ask her to stop off and pick up a couple of things for Misha?” He thought for a moment, mentally converting measurements to sizes. “Tell her we need enough for at least two days. Jeans, tees, sleepwear, and underwear in a size 3/4 yrs. And a pair of trainers in a size 4, I think. I’m not as good with kids sizes as I am with adults.”

“You’re going to have to learn,” Owen smirked. “Better you than me.” The medic immediately ducked to avoid the slap from his wife.

“I’ve got time.” Ianto kissed Misha’s temple and started out of the room. “And I don’t mind one bit.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ianto settled a now clean, but still towel-wrapped, Misha in the center of his bed. She'd fallen asleep in the tub leaving him to struggle with bathing her. He sat beside her and stroked her clean hair. "What am I doing, Misha?" he whispered. "I know nothing about raising kids." He closed his eyes, clenched them tight and bit his lip to contain the urge to sob. "I was supposed to be the doting uncle who spoiled you rotten before giving you back to your mother. Not your father... no matter how much you look like me."

"She does look like you."

Startled, Ianto looked up. Tosh stood hesitantly in the doorway a carrier bag clasped tightly in her hands. Behind her, hand resting on her back, was Tommy. Just beyond the couple he could see Kate and Owen. All of them coming up to see him; the only one missing was Myfanwy. He gave them tired smile, kissed Misha's temple and rose to

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his feet. He swayed a bit from exhaustion, but there was no time to really rest.

“Since you’re back, Tosh, I assume UNIT has control of the site.” He didn’t pause for her to answer, just continued speaking. He couldn’t stop, no matter how tired and depressed he was, because Torchwood never stopped. The Rift never stopped. He’d just have to manage it all until a quiet moment came again and he could break down. Besides, it was better to think of work than to remember Rhiannon’s last moments. “I’ll need you to setup a monitor for the apartment so I’ll know when Misha’s awake again. Get her in the system as well. Owen, that’s you. Have you got her tracker implanted yet?”

“Slow down, mate.” Owen stepped around Tosh. He came over and grabbed Ianto’s arm. “The only thing you are doing is getting some rest. That little girl needs you far more than we do at the moment.”

Ianto attempted to twist free, but Owen’s grip tightened. A needle slipped skillfully into his arm. He yelped and glared at the medic. “Owen!” he growled. “There’s work to do. Misha’s custody... the scene... the cover... I don’t have time...”

“You’re going to rest. Doctor’s orders.” Owen glared right back. “Mine and Kate’s. We know our jobs, Ianto. Martha’s in charge at the scene and is doing the required autopsies. Tosh will handle the records side for *our* niece. You are going to sleep because she’s going to need you, sooner rather than later.”

“Don’t let Gwen...” Ianto broke off with a yawn. He gave Owen another glare, but allowed the man to settle him in bed next to Misha.

“We’ll handle it.” The whole team fussed about the room. Tommy and Owen getting him settled while the girls somehow managed to dress Misha in pastel jammies without waking her up. “Just sleep, Teaboy.”

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“There are clothes for Misha in the bag, Ianto.” Tosh leaned across the bed and kissed him. It was a barely there kiss, but a strange comfort in the middle of this disaster. “I’ll be listening for you both. Now, sleep. I know you need it because of your own nightmares.”

Ianto blinked at her, glanced at the rest of the team, and nodded. There was no getting out of a nap. Not with Owen’s industrial strength sedatives racing through his system. He focused on Tosh again and nodded. As they trooped from the room, he took a moment to wrap an arm around Misha, pulling the toddler’s tiny body close to him. He never heard the team close the door as they left.

* * *

“Mama!”

Ianto jerked awake at the shrill scream. “Misha... Misha... come on, cariad, wake up.” He gathered a struggling Misha in his arms. He held her tight against him. “It’s okay, sweetheart. Everything’s okay.”

“Mama...” Misha rubbed her face back and forth across his chest. “Want Mama, Unca.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he murmured. All he could think was ‘how do I tell her Rhiannon’s dead?’ He had no idea how to tell her that not only her mother was dead, but also her father and brother. “I’m sorry, baby. So, so sorry.”

Her tiny hands scabbled against him until she found something to cling to, handfuls of his shirt clutched in her fingers. “Monsters. Hurt Papa...” Misha looked up, her blue eyes wide and terrified, and sobbed. “Hurt Mama... where’s Mama?”

Ianto closed his eyes for a moment. This was so damned hard. It hurt more to say the words to Misha. Speaking the words made it final, permanent. His sister was dead, never coming back, and he’d never have the chance to mend the broken bonds between them. All he

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could do now was raise her daughter the best he could and keep his promise to his much-loved older sister.

“She’s gone, Misha,” he said softly. He lifted Misha’s chin so he could look into her eyes. “Mama, Papa and David are all dead. The monsters killed them.” He felt her shake in his lap. Her eyes darted about the room. “You’re safe, baby. I killed all the monsters before they could hurt you or anyone else.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” Ianto pulled her close again. He stroked her hair and rocked them both. He crooned an old Welsh lullaby until she relaxed against him, asleep once more. Then he laid her back on the bed, covering her, and settled in to watch her sleep. “I swear no one will ever harm you, Misha. Not while I’m alive to protect you.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ianto knelt on the floor in front of the sofa. He was fairly certain the only reason he was awake and semi-coherent was because he'd pretty much replaced his blood supply with coffee. He was exhausted. Misha on the other hand, despite having woken him up at least once an hour all night, looked as awake as anyone. How she managed that, he had no clue. It had to be a child thing. He chuckled to himself and shook his head.

He lifted her foot, wrangled her trainer on, and set the now shod foot on his knee to tie the short little laces. He felt so incompetent. Completely out of his depth with regard to what Misha needed. He was so tired all he could do was think in short sentences, just enough to keep his mental list going, or he'd go off on some tangent and nothing would get done.

Car seat for Misha. Don't take the SUV, use your own car. Sturdy clothes that won't stain would be best. She'll be in the Hub a lot. Ianto

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paused in his mental listmaking for a moment. “Oh, hell.” He dropped his head onto the couch beside Misha’s hip. “I need to look into getting a proper house.”

Misha’s little hand thawped him on the back of the head. “Bad word, Unca!”

“Don’t hit me,” he groaned softly and turned a bit to peer up at her. He reached over her, crept his fingers up the sofa and tickled her. Her giggles and squirms brought a smile to his face. Ianto grabbed her and tumbled her down onto her back. He tickled her until she cried uncle, and then swung her up onto his hip as he rose from the floor. “Now, do you want Modryb Kate or Obasan Toshiko to come shopping with us?”

Misha just blinked at him, her thumb slipping into her mouth again. Ianto barely refrained from rolling his eyes and sighing in frustration. *Dammit, Rhia*, he thought. *Why didn’t you at least teach her a bit of Welsh!* He shifted Misha on his hip and pointed at each of the women in turn. “Modryb is Aunt in Welsh, so we’re going to call Aunt Kate that. And Obasan is Aunt in Japanese which makes it the proper term for Aunt Toshiko. Okay?”

Misha nodded and plucked her thumb from her mouth. She rubbed her thumb dry on his jumper, which he did roll his eyes at, and pointed at Kate. He smiled at her and kissed her temple. “So, Kate, want to go shopping with your niece and me?”

“Of course.” Kate rose and kissed Owen’s cheek. “We can take my car. It has a car seat in it for my other niece. So, you don’t need to worry about that.”

Ianto almost sagged with relief. He made certain she could see his thanks in his expression. Turning from her, he focused on Owen. “You’re in charge. Continue to liaise with UNIT on the cleanup.” He looked down at the grating for a long moment. “Let me know when Martha releases the bodies so I can get started on arrangements.” He turned to Tosh. “Finish up the paperwork for me so I don’t have to

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fight with Gwen over Misha. We all know how Gwen gets when she gets an idea in her head.”

“Already on it.” Tosh grinned at him. She reached over and tweaked the toe of Misha’s trainer. “Arigatou, Ianto.”

“Doutashimashite,” he murmured, leaning over to kiss Tosh’s cheek. “I couldn’t think of a better woman to give the title to. You and Kate will both teach her all the things I can’t.”

“We ready?” Kate rested a hand on his back as she joined him. “Lots to do today.”

Ianto looked down at his pocket back at Kate and then over to Misha. Then he looked back at Kate. “Why am I suddenly in fear for my credit rating?” Everyone, even Tommy who looked a little lost at the moment, started laughing. Even Misha started to giggle. Shaking his head, Ianto headed for the door. It was going to be a long day.

* * *

It had indeed been a long day. His quiet little niece had turned out to be a very opinionated little girl. She had very distinct tastes. At least in furniture which was what they’d purchased first. He’d thought she’d still be in a crib, but no, not his niece. She’d dragged him over to a bed; a proper, if small, bed designed for toddlers and firmly informed him that it was her bed. So, bed and matching dresser purchased along with a car seat for his car, they’d moved on to clothes shopping.

Or they attempted to.

They’d been walking through the St. David’s Centre headed for his favorite coffee shop before trying to find decent, sturdy play clothes for Misha to wear in the Hub when they came upon the Build-a-Bear Workshop. His niece, so well-behaved until that moment, dug her heels in, plopped on her butt on the floor and stared up at him with

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wide, tear-filled eyes. Her lower lip quivered as she pouted up at him. She pointed a finger toward the shop. "Please?"

He stared down at her and wondered when exactly he'd lost control of the situation. Ianto glanced back at Kate, who wasn't even trying to hide her laughter, and sighed. Crouching down in front of Misha, he stroked her cheek. "Sweetheart, we have..."

"Please!" She demanded, crossing her arms over her chest and poking her lip out a bit more. One lone tear escaped her eyes to trail down her cheek. "Please, Unca?"

That one tear did him in and he caved. Dropping his head, he sighed softly and scooped her up off the floor. "Yeah, but just for a little while," he murmured, rising to his feet again. "We still have clothes to buy for you."

"Oh, that's so good for her, Ianto Jones. Just giving in the first time she pouts and cries at you."

Ianto shifted Misha in his arms and slowly turned in the direction of the voice. There was Gwen in one of her self-righteous little snits. From the moment they'd met in this new reality; he'd been struggling to cope with his opinion of Gwen. He liked Rhys and adored their son, his godson, but Gwen... He could barely tolerate the woman, her fits of hypocrisy, and that wasn't even going into their mutual past at Torchwood before his death.

"I believe I can manage my niece just fine, Gwen," he stated very carefully. "She's traumatised by yesterday and has lost everything she's ever had, including her parents. If she wants a teddy, I'm going to get her a teddy."

"You don't deserve a little girl, Ianto. You'll just get her killed," Gwen snapped. "That's if she doesn't die of neglect first. Now give her to me where she can be taken care of properly." She reached for Misha. Actually grabbed her around the waist and pulled her away from him. "Don't make me pull my badge on this, Ianto. Let her go."

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He clung to Misha. Ianto tightened his hold on his little girl and growled softly. He wasn't letting her go. Especially not to a woman so desperate to have a daughter to spoil she would take his away from him. Misha began to cry, gasping sobs that tore at his heart, and scream, kicking out at both him and Gwen in her attempts to get away from the Welshwoman.

But it was Kate who settled everything with one well-placed punch.

Ianto blinked in shock as the Londoner stepped between him and Gwen's sprawled body. He crooned to Misha to calm her and flashed Kate a grateful look. She'd done what he didn't dare to, couldn't do, and he owed her seriously for it. He inclined his head toward the shop, moving off through the gathered crowd at Kate's nod. As he walked away, he was totally unprepared to hear Kate defending him so fiercely.

"You can't take his child. You can't arrest me," Kate snarled at Gwen behind him. "We're Torchwood, Gwen Cooper, and you're measly police powers mean nothing to us. I know Ianto offered you a job with us. If this is an example of how you work, I'm fucking glad you turned him down." There was a pause, and then Kate's voice was once again the even tones so familiar to him. "And now, I'm going to go help my niece find the perfect bear to take shopping with us." Kate then stepped over the sprawled body of Gwen Cooper and headed into the store after Ianto.

"Thank you." Ianto smiled over at Katie as he set Misha down on the floor. "Sometimes Gwen just..."

"Don't worry about it." Kate waved a hand. "You worry about that little girl. Not some biddy who can't see beyond her own wants to the bigger picture."

Ianto took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He watched Misha closely as she picked up each individual bear, squeezed it, and apparently deciding it didn't meet her exact standards, put it back on the shelf. He was content for the moment to follow along behind while

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she hunted for 'her' bear. "Gwen was always single minded like that. I kept hoping she'd grow out of it, if only for Jack's sake. Apparently she never did." Ianto half shrugged. "She's always had potential, but..."

"Never achieved it?"

"Something like that." He glanced over at Kate, considered, and shook his head. No, if she didn't know; he wasn't mentioning it. He found a chair where he could sit and still watch over Misha. "When I worked with her, there were days when she was the perfect operative, followed orders, did what was needed when it was needed. Other days, it was all any of us could do to keep from shooting her, especially when she went on one of her 'Jack needs me' tangents."

"Look, don't worry about Gwen. Put her out of your mind." Kate nodded to Misha who was toddling slowly toward them, a plush cream coloured bear clasped tightly to her chest. "Think on that bit of adorableness instead."

"Found your bear then?"

"Uh huh." Misha plopped the bear firmly in his lap. "This is Jack," she solemnly informed him. "He fights monsters."

Ianto was certain his expression firmly echoed Kate's totally stunned look. "Is that so?" he asked, lifting Misha onto his lap with the bear. Her ponytail bobbed as she nodded. "Well, I guess that means Jack is coming shopping and then home with us. Right?"

"Uh huh."

He handed the bear to Misha and waited until she had a firm grasp on the teddy before he let go. He rose to his feet and sighed. He wondered where she had decided on the name from, but also decided to not worry over it too much. If she was precociously developing psi-talents, there wasn't anything he could do anyway. She was too young for any real lessons. He'd have to look into setting some shields on her himself later when she was asleep, just in case.

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Crossing the shop, he handed his credit card to the shopgirl with a smile. “You need to let her scan him, cariad. Maybe if you ask nice, she’ll take the tag off for you.” He watched Misha stare at the shopgirl for a full minute before her expression blanked, echoing his own public mask, while she held the bear out to be taken. He handed Misha over to Kate in order to sign the receipt, put his card away and took the bag the girl insisted on putting Jack-bear in despite Misha’s developing pout. They trooped out the door and as soon as they cleared the security gate, Misha was leaning over Kate’s arm scrabbling for the bag. Ianto set the bag down on the floor, took Misha and lightly smacked her arse. “Cut that out,” he ordered. “You’re going to fall on your head doing that.” He set Misha back on his hip and tugged Jack-bear out of the bag. Handing the bear to Misha, he smiled. “Come on then. Let’s get you some clothes and things.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ianto settled on the edge of the sofa and fingered Misha's hair where she slept in one corner. She was well hidden behind the sofa pillows, curled up in a tight ball around Jack-bear, with her thumb back in her mouth. She flat out refused to be separated from him. When she was away from him, she hid in small corners. He worried over her. She was scheduled to start nursery at the school he'd found for her, a very security conscious school, in a week. How could he send her when she was like this? He knew she needed the normalcy of a proper schedule with lessons and friends, but would her life ever be normal with him for a father and Torchwood always hovering in the background?

He stared blindly out the windows at Roath Park. The house, the huge house if he was honest about it, he'd purchased simply because Misha refused to sleep in the Hub. She was terrified of Myfanwy. Just the sound of the pterodactyl would send her into screaming fits for

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hours. After a week, he'd given up, started searching and finally found this place, an Edwardian end-of-terrace in Pen-y-lan overlooking Roath Park. It put him further from the Hub than he would like, but between them, he and Tosh had managed to setup his study with a computer link and remote monitor. He wasn't completely out of touch. It just seemed that way.

He'd get used to it. He'd have to. Misha's mental stability was more important than his being on site twenty-four seven. The whole team would have to adapt to the situation. Ianto twisted a bit, looking back at the group gathered in one of only three decorated rooms in the house. Aside from the parlor only the kitchen-family room and the master bedroom had furniture. Hell, half the house needed remodeling before he'd even think of it as a proper home. At least the last owners had put in an en-suite to the master bedroom. That made it far easier to manage things with Misha.

Ianto sighed. He needed a break. Especially today of all days, he just needed a break from people. He didn't want to be polite. He just wanted everyone to go away, take their empty platitudes and just leave him alone. He'd just buried his sister. Nearly a month after the attack that killed her, he'd finally buried Rhiannon and her family. He didn't want to host a party for the mourners, he wanted to mourn her himself. He closed his eyes for a moment, bit his lip and dropped his gaze back down to Misha.

His little girl was whimpering in her sleep. He shook her a bit, just enough to wake her, and wrapped his arms around her when she rose to her feet. She pressed her face to his shoulder, her black dress blending seamlessly into his suit. The color did nothing for her, washed her out and left her looking like a corpse, but it couldn't be helped, appearances had to be maintained after all.

A camera flashed. Ianto glanced about the room until he found the culprit. He glared at Rhys, shocked that the man would bring a camera

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to a wake, and only relaxed the glare when Rhys shrugged helplessly at him while tilting his head in the direction of his wife.

“Oh... you two look so cute together,” Gwen gushed as she waddled over to the sofa. “I’ll get you a print of it, you’ll want it. She looks so like you Ianto.” Gwen plopped herself down on the sofa and stroked her fingers over Misha’s shoe. “You sure she isn’t yours?”

“Gwen!” Rhys hissed, soft and low, while he scanned the room. “What the hell are you thinking? Are you even thinking at all?”

Ianto knew the other man was scanning the room to see if anyone had overheard Gwen’s thoughtless remark, but most of the guests, save for his team, knew the truths of his family. Council estates thrived on gossip. And Rhi had been notorious for gossiping. Even if there was no confirmation of the rumors about him possibly being Rhi’s son, it was enough that the gossip was there to begin with, especially after Misha’s birth. So, it was no surprise to them that Misha looked so much like him. “It’s alright, Rhys.” Ianto tightened his hold on Misha. “I would appreciate it if you’d take your wife and go. It’s been a stressful day for everyone.” He gave Gwen a smile. “With her condition, she doesn’t need to add more stress.”

“Course, mate. I’ll call you later, plan a play date or something so Misha there can meet Bran.” Rhys helped Gwen off the sofa and started for the door. “I’m sorry about...”

“I know.” Ianto held up a hand and shook his head. “Rhys, please, just...”

Before leaving, though, Rhys scanned the room and then whistled sharply. Ianto blinked as everyone turned to look at the older man. “Listen, little Miss Davies is tired, so is Ianto. This needs to break up so they can get some rest.” Rhys flashed a smile at Ianto who could only stare silently at him. “Everyone who wants it, I’ll spot you a drink at the local.”

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Ianto had never seen a room empty so fast. He should have expected it, after all Rhys was offering free drinks, but he still hadn't expected everyone but his team, Gwen and Rhys to exit the room as if a weevil was chasing them. He looked up at Rhys, unsure how to thank the man, but knew from the smile he received that no thanks were necessary. He just vowed to repay him when circumstances allowed. Grudgingly, Ianto accepted Gwen's hug, shook Rhys's hand and watched the couple leave the room behind the others.

Now all that was left was the team...

And judging from their expressions, he wasn't being left alone tonight.

Ianto didn't know if he was pleased about that or bothered, but either way he was grateful for their uncomplicated company.

INTERLUDE

Excerpt from Ianto Jones's Diary – 14 February 2011

I miss you, Jack.

I miss you so damned much.

Especially on days like today when I see so many couples walking along hand in hand without a care in the world. Valentines, we never celebrated that holiday. You hated it. Of course, you also hated the word couple and could never admit your feelings for me to me. I accepted it though. No surprise there, really, the man I was would take just about any crumb you offered me and cling to it forever as if it was the most reverent vow of love ever given a man.

I've changed since then, Jack.

I've had to.

See, being a father changes everything. I can't just roll over and let you run roughshod all over me. I have to worry about Misha and how

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she'd react to you. We're a pair, Jack. Can you accept that? You're once young and wild lover is now a staid parent. She's lost so much in her short life. Her parents, her brother, all her things, all she has is me. I have to do what's best for her, no matter what that means to my own heart. No matter the pain. I have to take care of her.

I tell myself it won't matter. I remember how you tore apart the Time Agency – tore it down until it couldn't recover from the destruction at all – searching for Kerensa. I tell myself you will accept my daughter, help me raise her, and everything will be fine. Then, well, and then a treacherous little voice tells me – remember how he ran from commitment with you? Remember, how he hated to be thought a couple with you? How he flirted with Gwen, with Suzie, with anyone who stood still long enough? It hurts to know that the fact that I have an almost five year old will likely drive you away from me faster than a gazelle escaping a cheetah.

I've changed in other ways, too.

Torchwood is mine, Jack. In all the ways that matter, Torchwood is mine. I took four strong willed, talented individuals and turned them into a proper team. We're a family. We live for each other. We would die for each other. I don't know how you're going to react to that. I don't even know if I can turn it back over to you when you finally return. I've commanded us for three years now. Longer, technically, but we can't count that as it was a confused mess of - what is that phrase you used once? - timey-wimey stuff. Still, Torchwood is mine... and I'll protect my team by whatever means necessary. If that costs me you, I guess I'll have to live with that, too.

Myn Duw, I miss you. I miss you so damned much. I ache with it sometimes, Jack. I hurt because I'm alone... So very alone... Especially now... oh, I didn't tell you that little detail and why I'm awake at nearly midnight on a holiday dedicated to couples and love? Our little Toshiko is engaged. Tommy asked her tonight. Took her out

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to the Castle for a romantic walk in the moonlight and asked her to marry him. So, now I work with two committed couples while I'm alone and missing you.

I crave you.

Sometimes, late at night when I can't sleep and there's no paperwork to distract me, I find myself reaching along that bond strung so tight between us, just touching the edge of your thoughts, just enough so that I know you are still there, still with me, even if time and distance keep us apart.

I want you.

I want your hands on me. To feel you over me, in me, claiming me again and making me yours. So very yours. I want to see your blue eyes go dark with lust, the way they always did when you looked at me, and see that smile that was solely mine.

I'm running out of patience, Jack, but that most recent connection between us. That one incandescent moment of pure adrenaline... oh, that told me it won't be long now before I see you again. It's been years for you, but mere months for me. You're dying, Jack. I can feel it. The exhaustion dragging you down after twenty-four years of this aching pain, but you won't give in. You're holding on with everything you have and even a few bits of me, just enough of me to keep you going until you've solved this – whatever it is – that's kept you in pain for so long.

And I'll be waiting, Jack. My Jack... I'll be waiting for you when you come back to me... because I still love you. Despite everything I've felt, everything I've seen, all the pain and terror, the entire trauma, I still love you.

You are my heart, Jack... I gave it to you so long ago, the night before we sent Tommy back to 1918; I gave it to you with a kiss. Because in your own way, you told me you loved me. Not specifically,

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not in those exact words, but enough that I couldn't hold back any longer. I gave you everything... my heart, my soul, my life...

Come back to me, Jack...

Make me whole again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Oh my God... Ianto!”

Ianto whirled around from where he'd been making coffee, even if he was the head of Torchwood, no one touched the coffee machine but him, and stared in Tosh's direction. She only called his name like that when something personally important to him was happening.

“Ianto, get over here!” She turned and grinned at him. “He's here!”

He dropped the coffee. He didn't care that his priceless Kopi Luwak coffee beans were spilling all over the floor to roll through the grating into the tidal pool. Ianto could only focus on one thing. After so long waiting and so much pain, Jack was back. He crossed the Hub in brisk strides to stand behind Tosh's chair. “Show me.”

He rested a hand on the back of her chair and leaned the other on the edge of her desk. She didn't like it, but she'd gotten used to him doing that over the years they'd worked together. Tosh smiled up at

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him even as her fingers flew over her keyboard. Rift data was rapidly replaced with various views of the Plass in front of the Water Tower. She pointed a well-manicured finger at her monitor. “Who do we know who dresses like that regardless of the time of year?”

For one moment, one heart stopping moment, all he could do was stare at the monitor. Jack, *his* Jack, was back. It had been so long. So very, very long since he’d seen him, held him, that all he could do was stare at the man on the screen. He ached, just the sight of him set every inch of him aching for Jack. Some inches more than others, if he was truly honest about it.

Then he was issuing orders as he ran across the Hub to the lift. “Tosh, call the school. Tell them that something’s come up. Kate will be picking up Misha this afternoon.” He hit his comm as he stepped onto the lift. “Kate? He’s back. You and Owen up for Misha sitting for a while? You can use the house. I’m not ready for him to know about her. We don’t need for her to get attached then lose him if he decides not to stay.”

He swallowed, those words actually hurt to say, but he wasn’t risking his daughter being hurt by Jack leaving her. She’d finally, after two years, gotten over the bulk of her separation anxiety. The nightmares of the attack finally gone after Myfanwy had attacked a loose weevil threatening her. Ianto took a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling, and pulled the keyfob with the lift controls, among other esoteric things, on it and hit the button. As the lift rose, he watched the roof mechanism drop, heard the distinctive clunk as it moved back to allow him passage to the Plass.

He blinked several times as his eyes adjusted to the brightness of the Plass after escaping the dim recesses of the Hub. Ianto stared at the man in front of him. Well, the back of the man in front of him. He watched as Jack leaned his head back to turn his face up to the sky to savor the warmth of the sun on his skin. Ianto could feel Jack’s

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pleasure in the warmth on his face after so long trapped in a smoke filled jar. He wondered how to get Jack's attention, but all he could think of was a classic Shakespeare quote from *Twelfth Night*. He wondered if Jack knew it or if he'd even understand it. Taking in another deep breath, he spoke, "Journey's end in lover's meeting..." He let the words trail off. Everything was up to Jack now.

"Every wise man's son doth know."

He watched Jack shudder. Felt the echo of that shudder race down his spine. He felt Jack's worry and fear that this was another dream, some hallucination of his dying mind before he regenerated and returned to live another tortured life. He smiled to himself. "Aren't you going to look at me?"

Jack's hands went into his pockets. His shoulders hunched. Slowly the other man turned toward him. Ianto forced himself to stand still to wait on Jack to move when all he wanted to do was fling himself at his lover, kiss him and drag him off to bed for hours until they were both too exhausted to move.

Jack stared at him, his eyes wide and dark, but his skin rapidly paled as if he was seeing a ghost standing before him. He wanted to reassure the older man that he was alive, real, but before he could speak, Jack reached out, curled a hand around his neck and pulled him into a searing kiss. Ianto could feel his body melting into his long-lost lover. It had been so long, so very, very long since he'd experienced one of Jack's toe-curling, body-melting kisses. It seared through his being bringing his body to an instant state of arousal. He pressed closer to Jack, curling his arms around the older man's shoulders to cling to him. Jack's arm wrapped around his waist, pulled him closer, and Ianto moaned into Jack's mouth as his hunger for the other man spiraled even higher. The kiss broke when they both needed air. Panting, they stared at each other. "Ianto..." Jack breathed, fingers tracing over Ianto's throat.

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“Jack...” he murmured, or thought, he wasn’t certain. Either way, he tangled his fingers into Jack’s hair and pulled the other man back in for another deep kiss. He had to have Jack. His tongue slipped into Jack’s mouth, tangling with the other man’s, and groaned as he ground his erection against Jack’s hip. A click from beneath his feet warned him of Tosh activating the lift. Ianto braced himself for the initial drop, breaking the kiss for a moment to draw in a much needed breath before claiming Jack’s mouth in another kiss.

Myfanwy’s screech of greeting broke their kiss. Jack laughed softly, eyes scanning the Hub around them, before returning to stare into his own. Ianto smiled at his lover attempting to reassure the other man without saying a word. There would be time for words later. “Welcome home, Jack,” he murmured. “We’ve missed you.” He pulled Jack in for another kiss, softer and more loving than their initial hungry ones. “I’ve missed you so much,” he whispered against Jack’s lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“So, Teaboy, how’s life with the Captain?”

Owen’s sarcastic voice oozed over Ianto. He looked up from his contemplation of the floor and sighed. “Why are you calling me that again?”

“If you’re going to act like the teaboy, that’s what I’m going to call you.” Owen dropped down next to Ianto on the spiral stairs leading up to the upper levels. “Look, Ianto, this isn’t you.” He waved a hand at the darkened Hub around them. “Where’s the man who took out five najashaves without flinching? Where’s the man who thinks nothing of arguing with the Queen when he knows he’s right and she’s wrong?”

Ianto just shook his head. He didn’t understand it either. It was like Jack came back and he turned into a wimp again. A whiny, childish, depressed wimp who just accepted whatever the Captain felt like telling him without complaint. He leant back to prop his elbows on

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the stair behind him, contemplating the ceiling arching so many feet above them, and closed his eyes after a moment. "I don't know."

"Well, you better damned well find him because I am not spending who knows how long locked in here waiting for the Captain to deign to come back." Owen twisted a bit and nudged an elbow into Ianto's ribs. "I don't know what's gotten into you this past week, but this man here on these steps - this isn't my commanding officer. This man isn't the friend who merrily got pissed with me the night before my wedding yet still managed to get me to the church on time, and sober at that."

There was a metallic creak as Owen shifted on the stairs preparatory to rising. Ianto made a mental note to look into getting the ironwork inspected and possibly replaced before the stairway collapsed.

"I know you're unsure of things. I get that. I remember how it was with Katie just after her surgery." Owen rose and turned to face Ianto. "Fuck, Ianto, you're acting as pathetic as an abused wife in a codependent marriage, letting him run roughshod all over you without a peep of complaint." He leaned down, sneering, and hissed his final words. "You outrank him, Teaboy. We're *your* team. Now do something about this before I sic Tosh on you."

Ianto blinked. Then, he blinked again. He couldn't find fault with any of Owen's arguments. He was acting like an idiot. A codependent wife allowing her husband to use and abuse her at will. It was indeed a fitting description. He ground his teeth together and pulled himself to his feet. "I had forgotten that. It's mostly a ceremonial rank."

"Doesn't matter, Sir," Tommy's laughing voice came from the slightly brighter darkness surrounding Tosh's desk. "Ceremonial or not, in a battle situation, the officer on the field with the highest rank takes command."

"*Duw*, I've been sir-ed." Ianto waved Owen off. "Weapons?" he asked as he stalked toward Tosh's desk. He'd completely forgotten that when he'd taken over Cardiff Branch in 2008, he'd received his

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own set of command level lockdown codes. It went with the position. Each commanding officer had their own personal codes which were usually deactivated when their final logout was done. He'd never logged Jack out of the system, so Jack's codes were still valid; however, *he* was the active commander. Ianto did indeed outrank Jack in the system. The question now was would his verbal overrides work since the whole system was shutdown thanks to the lockdown?

Ianto braced his hands on the edge of Tosh's desk and glanced around at the team. No, not just the team, Owen was right. They were *his* team. He'd been the one who pulled them together into a family that would fight and die for each other. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and smiled at them. This was another one of *those* moments where the first step took you irrevocably onto a new path never to go back to the old one again.

"Jones 36091033." He listened for a moment. Just when he despaired of the computer accepting the first part of the code, he heard the faint beep of acknowledgement. His smile broadened as he recited, "Though lovers be lost, love shall not. And death shall have no dominion."

With a deep hum, and a vibration he felt throughout his body, the system began powering up. The lights flared up. "That's it. Everybody move." Ianto reached down and rapidly typed on the keyboard, bringing up the communications system. As soon as it pinged to life in his ear, he reached up and tapped his unit. "Jack? Everything okay?" He didn't even have to look toward Owen's whistle, just reached up and caught the pistol the other man threw him. Both men were already moving toward the door. "We're on our way."

"Everything's fine. Go ahead and send the other's home."

A click in his ear told him that Jack had disconnected his comm from the system. "Son of a bitch," he muttered. "Damned man, always going off on his own..." Ianto muttered as he racked the slide on the

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gun and tucked it away under his suit jacket. “All right, let’s move. Tosh, where is...?”

A very distinctive high-pitched trill interrupted Ianto’s demand. He froze. Every muscle in his body went tense. He swallowed hard and stepped over to the computer. “Not this...” he muttered. “Not now. Not when I’m happy.” He reached over Tosh’s shoulder to enter a code into the computer and waited, hoping desperately that there was a mistake, but the image that came up over the energy readings the Mainframe had picked up showed there was no mistake. The readings were the ones he’d specifically set this alert for.

“Fuck,” he whispered. He closed his eyes for a moment, squeezed them tight and swallowed again. Raising his voice, he addressed the others. “Go home. All of you.” He didn’t turn from the monitor, just stared blankly at it. “Owen, I’ll be home after Myfanwy’s exercise. I’ll send Kate home as soon as I get in.”

“Ianto?” Tosh first, no surprise there, she seemed to always know when he was upset for any reason. Followed almost immediately by Owen’s, “Mate, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing you can do anything about.” He straightened away from the desk, absently resettled his suit jacket, and started for the controls for Myfanwy’s aerie. He glanced back at his team once he was certain he was far enough away, and far enough into the shadows, that they couldn’t see his tears. “Jack’s made his choice. We just have to live with it.” He flipped the switch with a shaking hand. “Go home. Take tomorrow off. We’ll have a team meeting the day after... decide where we go from here.”

“Mate, Ianto... you can’t just...”

“Watch me.” Ianto glared across the room at Owen. “He doesn’t know. I never told him. He never asked,” Ianto said bitterly. “I can manage, Owen. I’ve managed all this time. Just go.” He didn’t wait for an answer, just stalked into the tunnels and headed for the access to

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the Millennium Center. He'd watch Myfanwy from the roof there. He was beginning to understand Jack's fascination with standing on roofs. After all, when you have forever, every bit of pleasure you find in life is all the more special for its rarity. Now, he just needed to figure out how to tell Misha that her heroic Uncle Jack wasn't going to be living with them after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ianto huddled in his heavy coat. He hunched his shoulders against the chill breeze blowing in off the bay and gave himself one moment to indulge his emotions. He had to let them out at least once before returning to the Hub. Here, on one of Jack's favorite rooftops, he knew he'd be able to give vent to his feelings without worrying the team, especially Tosh. If he broke down like this in front of her, who knew what would happen.

He let the tears flow. He hadn't felt pain like this since Lisa had left to rejoin the Cyberman Army. For one glorious week, he'd had everything he could ever have wanted – Jack, in his home, his arms, his bed – but he also knew that it wasn't his choice. Jack had to make the decision to stay with him. Obviously, since his tracker had disappeared from the system at the same moment that the energy signal for the TARDIS had, Jack had gone off traveling the universe again. Ianto

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couldn't begrudge him, despite feeling as if Jack had taken his heart and soul with him.

He sighed, pulled his hands from his pockets and fingered the gold filigree cufflinks Jack had given him. Ianto looked up at the sky, silently promising himself that nothing else mattered, even his own loneliness, as long as Jack was happy, wherever he was. "Beunydd, Cariad," he murmured. "Beunydd."

"I'll hold you to that."

A pair of arms circled his waist and pulled him back against a very familiar body. Ianto tensed for a moment, startled, and then relaxed back against Jack. He leant his head back against Jack's shoulder and smiled. "I didn't know you knew Welsh."

"I lived here for more than a hundred years." Jack's voice was soft, his breath a warm caress over Ianto's cool skin. "I picked up a few things."

They stood in silence for a while and watched Myfanwy circle the bay. The pteranodon's screeches occasionally broke the pre-dawn silence which hung over the Plass. Finally, as the sun crested the horizon, Ianto felt Jack shift behind him.

"It's only been a year for you, but eons for me." After a moment, Jack's hand reappeared in front of him holding a small honey-oak box. "When I found this in my desk, I promised myself no more doubts or regrets."

"Jack?" Ianto took a step away from Jack in order to turn and face him. He stared at the older man for a long moment. Then he took the box from Jack's hand, opened it, and felt his jaw drop in shock. "Jack, are these what I think they are?"

Jack didn't answer him. At least not verbally, instead, his captain reached out and plucked one of the rings from inside the box and offered it to him. "Having found you again, I'm not going to take the

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chance of possibly losing you without you knowing exactly what you mean to me.”

Ianto stared in shock. He couldn't speak. He looked from the ring to Jack and back. Then he silently offered Jack his hand.

“I pledge to love you forever...” Jack's lips twitched slightly as he spoke. Ianto wondered about the almost laugh and resolved to ask in the future. “To be open, honest and faithful to you. I promise to comfort and challenge you. And I promise to stand with you as we share this life and cherish the memories we make together.” Jack lifted his hand, kissed Ianto's fingers just above the last knuckle then slipped the ring into place.

Ianto swallowed. It took him a solid minute to get his mind working again. The declarations Jack had just spoken had so thrown him. He blinked and then blinked again. He took his ring's mate from the box and dropped the box onto the roof. It was no longer important. “*Ti yw fenaid i. Dw i'n dy garu di, Cariad,*” he murmured, sliding the ring onto Jack's offered hand. He clasped their hands together, brought his other hand up and sank his fingers into Jack's hair. Ianto pulled the other man to him and kissed him deeply. Now, his perfect dream could become their true reality.

But, as the saying went, all good things must come to an end. Ianto broke the kiss and took a step back. He licked his lips and pulled out his keyring. His fingers searched through the keys for the fob which held Myfanwy's recall signal and pressed it. All the while, he stared at Jack trying to figure out what to say and how to say it. “We need to talk, Jack.”

“What could we possibly have to talk about? I love you. You love me. The team seems to be completely happy.” Jack smiled at him. “So, by my reckoning, it's time for the ‘we're engaged let's celebrate' sex.”

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“Not on the roof,” Ianto scolded absently. He was already turning toward the trapdoor that provided access to the curving expanse. “And you were wrong, Jack. It’s been four years for me.” He paused, crouched and retrieved the box for their rings. “A lot has happened that you don’t know about and you really do need to know before things go any further.” Ianto shook his head and sighed. “I could keep you separate from the bulk of my present life easily this past week because I was so certain that you’d leave me. That this planet would be too small to keep you when there was every chance one of your Doctors would show up and offer you the chance to travel the universe again.”

He flashed a smile at Jack. It seemed for the first time since the Cyberwoman incident, he’d genuinely confused the older man. “But you surprised me, Jack. When you disappeared off the system, I figured that was it. I’d be alone, loving you, until...” he trailed off and shook his head. “Well, a long time at least. However, you came back.”

“I told you before.” Jack crossed the rooftop and crouched next to him. “I came back for you.”

Ianto laughed and turned, heading down the access ladder into the building, and lead the way back down multiple staircases to the tunnels connecting Millennium Centre to the Hub. “I remember.”

Their footsteps echoed through the tunnels. Both men lost in their own thoughts. Unsure of where they stood with each other, yet still their hands drifted to each other, fingers entangling as hands were clasped tightly. A silent reassurance, for now at least, they were together and in love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ianto closed the door behind Kate. He flicked on the latch and then twisted to the side to turn on the security system. One step he never forgot as it also connected his house to the Hub's internal alarms. Anything happened here and both the team and the police would be summoned to his home.

"So, you have a house." Jack's breath caressed his ear as the man spoke. "Going to show me your bedroom?"

"You have a one track mind, Jack." Ianto rested his hands on the wall and shoved back with his body forcing Jack to move away from him. He stalked away down the hall and up the stairs. "I bought this house for a reason, cariad. The first year or so I was in this world, I lived in the Hub." He paused on the half landing and drew in a deep breath. "Then things happened and I had no choice but to buy a house. Found this place..."

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“It’s a lovely house.” Jack smiled up at him from the step below. “I’ve always loved these old terrace houses. They have such character.”

Ianto bit his lip to contain the groan Jack’s absentminded stroking of the stair railing pulled from him. It was a struggle to keep from grabbing the man, pulling him down to the other end of the hall and throwing Jack onto the bed where he’d spent so many hours fantasizing. “They do, but that’s not why I bought it.”

Gathering his courage, he led the way down the hall to Misha’s door. He smiled as he saw it was cracked open. Despite everything, she still wasn’t quite ready to be alone all the time though she was doing better now. Peering through the crack, he smiled at the scene before him. Resting a hand on the door, he looked back at Jack. “We need to be quiet. I don’t want to wake her.” Then, he pushed the door open and gestured Jack closer.

Ianto leant back against the door. He knew what the other man would see. A large bedroom done up in soft pastels and creams with a massive canopy bed dominating the space. And nestled beneath the thick duvet, arms wrapped around her well-worn teddy, lay his little girl. He tore his eyes from his sleeping daughter to watch Jack’s reaction.

“What the hell?” The words were hissed – soft, low and vicious – right in his ear. “Just when were you planning on telling me about this? After I legally married you?”

“I’m telling you now.” Ianto glanced over at Misha and was relieved to find her still asleep. He shoved Jack into the hallway and pulled her door closed behind him as he followed. “What is the problem, Jack? She’s my daughter. It’s not like I was introducing you to my wife! You have no rea...”

“Wife? You’ve got one of those tucked away here, too?” Jack shoved a hand through his hair. Ianto struggled not to smile as all the

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action did was make the other man more adorable to him. “You’ve got a fucking child! A daughter you didn’t see fit to tell me about!”

“Keep your voice down. She doesn’t sleep well when I have to work late.” Ianto shoved Jack again, trying in vain to get him to move away from Misha’s room. “I’m not married, Jack. I’ve been waiting for you! You know that.”

“Do I? You’ve conned me before, Ianto. Remember?”

The doubt that laced Jack’s tone was the final straw for Ianto. Without thinking of the consequences, he reached over and grabbed the crystal vase off the hall table and threw it at Jack. “*Basdun*,” he snapped. “How dare you mention that? I’ve spent nearly three years celibate, waiting on *you*.” He stalked toward the other man, his fingers itching for his gun. Ianto was so angry he could easily kill Jack at that moment. “And I know all too fucking well that you didn’t waste any time hopping into someone else’s bed after my death!”

He would have said more but the shock on Jack’s face combined with the creak of the floor behind him kept his mouth shut. He gave Jack one last hard look before turning around to face Misha. “Hey, cariad, did we wake you?”

“Stupid question,” Jack muttered behind him.

Ianto ignored him and went to Misha, crouching down to hug her tight and stroke her sleep tangled hair back off her face. “You need to go back to bed. You’re supposed to help Obasan Toshiko tomorrow with the translations, remember? You need your sleep for...”

“Obasan Toshiko?” Jack interrupted. “What’s Obasan mean? I’m rubbish at most Earth languages.”

“Uncle Jack!” Misha squealed. She shoved past Ianto and ran for the other man. “You’re here! You can fight the aliens with Tad!”

“Misha!” Ianto scrambled around to reach for her but received the shock of his life when Jack dashed forward the few steps necessary to

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grab Misha before she ran into the shattered crystal littering the hallway floor.

“Careful,” Jack scolded, tapping Misha’s nose with a finger. “There’s broken glass on the floor. You could have been hurt.”

Ianto climbed slowly to his feet. One part of him was in shock over Jack’s quick action in grabbing Misha and the playfulness of his actions as the older man carried her back into her room. It didn’t mesh with the fit he’d thrown over her mere existence. He could only watch as the pair came to join him in Misha’s bedroom doorway.

“Now, kiss your father good night and tell him you’re sorry for scaring him.” Jack grinned over at Ianto before turning to present Misha to him. “I’ll see you in the morning, sweetie.”

“Promise?”

To Ianto’s complete surprise, Jack raised an eyebrow in silent question. There was a faint brush of something across his mind. Ianto focused on that mental touch, caught Jack’s quickly concealed surprised look even as the other man’s voice whispered across his mind, “*Will you let me stay the rest of the night? You were right. We do need to talk.*” Ianto managed a quick nod, accepting Misha’s kiss and taking her from Jack to put her back in her bed.

She didn’t settle down right away, sitting back up with Jack-bear clutched in her arms. “You promise, Uncle Jack? You’ll be here when I get up?”

“Promise...” Jack blew her a kiss causing Misha to giggle. “Now go to sleep while we clean this mess up.”

Ianto kissed Misha’s temple and pulled the duvet up over her. He crossed the room to Jack’s side and smiled back at her. “Sleep well, cariad.” He waited for Jack to leave, pulled the door closed, and then sighed softly. He lowered his voice a bit before speaking again. “I’ll go get the stuff to clean this up. There’s a trash can in the bath there.” He pointed at the door just beyond Jack. “I’ll be right back.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“It was you those last few years, wasn’t it?” Jack’s voice drifted to him as Ianto slowly climbed the stairs with the broom, dustpan and a small hand-held vacuum. “Not Novice Hame, but you who kept me from slipping away before the Doctor showed up to help release the people on the Motorway.”

“Yes.” Ianto saw no reason to lie. This was part of what he’d been planning to discuss with Jack anyway, so he’d let Jack lead the conversation for a while. “You were so determined to save them. I had to help you do it.”

For several minutes the only sounds in the hall were the swish of the broom over the stripped wooden floors, the faint chime of crystal shards hitting each other in the trash and the two men’s breathing. The silence was comfortable though, despite the earlier argument.

“She looks like you,” Jack murmured.

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Ianto blinked down at Jack and stopped his almost mindless sweeping. He leant on the broom and nodded. "I know. Save for her eyes and the lighter brown of her hair, she does look like me." He half shrugged and snorted a laugh. "Gwen never lets me forget it. She seems to think that I have no morals at all. Misha's my niece by blood. She's my sister Rhiannon's younger child."

"Why isn't she with Rhiannon then?" Ianto tensed, but didn't respond when Jack held up a hand. "Don't. I'm not implying anything. It's just I don't understand why you're raising your sister's child and apparently have been doing so for long enough that the girl calls you father."

"Tad, actually," Ianto corrected.

"Technicalities." Jack grinned at him, shifting things to one side of the hallway, and rose to his feet. "Welsh, English... she's still calling you her father."

"I think part of it is because she does look so much like me. Everyone assumes she's my child to begin with." Ianto propped his broom beside the other cleaning supplies and offered Jack a hand up. "If we're talking about this in detail, then I need a drink. Come'n." He tightened his hold on Jack's hand and led the man down the hall to his bedroom. He waved a hand toward a small sofa grouping nestled in the big bay window overlooking the park. "Whiskey or scotch?"

"Scotch."

Ianto filled the glasses, turned and offered one to Jack. Tossing off his jacket, he threw himself down on the leather sofa to sprawl there and stare at Jack. He sipped from his glass of whiskey while staring at the other man trying to figure out where to begin the story. "Do you remember the najashaves?"

He felt the shudder that raced over Jack. Saw the other man clench his jaw tight, grinding his teeth together and his hand tighten on the glass before he raised it to toss back the contents in one swallow. Jack

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rose, refilled his glass and brought the bottle back with him to set it on the table between them. “Do I ever,” Jack almost growled the words at him. “You don’t easily forget an experience like that.”

“We had a hunting pack appear here. Five of them materialized on the Cromwell Estate outside town.” Ianto tossed off his drink, set the glass on the table, and lay down on the sofa. He draped an arm over his eyes and swallowed. “They killed, Jack. We lost nine civilians that day including my sister, her husband and son.” He dragged in a shuddering breath. “Rhia managed somehow, and to this day I have no idea how she did it, to hide Misha from them. I’ve guessed that it was accidental based on Misha’s state when we got there, but regardless, Rhia managed to hide her then drop her out a shattered window. She told her to run.”

Ianto jumped at Jack’s barely there touch to his arm. He lifted his own arm to peer at the other man from beneath it then lowered it again to hide his eyes. He couldn’t talk about this while actually looking at Jack.

“Misha ran to me. I had Kate keep her in the SUV while we took care of them.” He paused and swallowed again. “Owen found Rhiannon. She bled to death in my arms after making me promise to take care of Misha. Like I wouldn’t because we hadn’t spoken in years, much less visited each other.”

“Ianto, I...”

“Don’t, Jack.” Ianto reached out with his free hand and stroked Jack’s cheek. “I’ve accepted that when it comes to Rhia, I’ll always have regrets. I should have spoken to her as soon as I moved back to Cardiff, but I couldn’t. In many ways, I was ashamed of her, of her just accepting that we were now Council kids without any prospects just because Father drank after he lost the family business.”

“What about your mother?”

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“She was institutionalized in Providence Park when I was very young. Rhia all but raised me though she was just a child herself. For years there were rumors that I was actually Rhia’s son. I think the people who were her friends still think that because of the similarities between Misha and me.” Ianto shifted onto his side to consider Jack. “Like Misha, my mother was psychic. In my mother’s case, she was a clairaudient. The voices she heard, the things they said to her eventually drove her into a state of constant paranoia. She ended up diagnosed with schizophrenia.”

“That’s not in your records.”

“I was good enough to smuggle a Cyberman into your basement and leave no traces. Don’t you think I can delete a few records to keep things about myself hidden from Torchwood staff?”

“Good point.” Jack laughed. He rose and returned to his chair. “You said something in the hall before Misha woke...”

“I said a lot of things, Jack.”

“This one is important to me.” Jack leant forward and stared across the table at Ianto. He wanted to squirm under that intense regard. “Just how long were you linked to me, Ianto? How deep does that link go?”

“Three years.” Ianto sat up and grabbed the scotch bottle Jack had left on the table. He poured himself a generous serving of the liquor. He was going to need it. “It was three years.”

“Ianto.”

In any other circumstances, that tone of voice from Jack would have him instantly hard, panting with arousal and more than willing to do anything the other man asked him to. Now, now it just caused his inner tension to rack up another notch. He didn’t want to answer that question. “For me, it was three years. Isn’t that enough, Jack?”

“No.” Jack rose and stood over him. Ianto was finally forced to look away from Jack; his eyes were so hard and cold. “It’s not enough, Ianto. Tell me.”

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"I know you climbed into bed with John Hart within days of my death." Ianto tossed back the drink in his hand and refilled the glass yet again. "I know what it's like to die by drowning in a vat of sulfuric acid." He rose to his feet and shoved past Jack to pace the length of the room. "I think I'm the only twenty-first century man who knows exactly what it feels like to give birth." He stopped pacing to glare at Jack. "Does that tell you enough, Jack? Do you understand just how deeply I'm bound to you from that or do I have to find a few more examples?"

"Ianto..." Jack staggered back a step. "My God... I..."

"It was my choice, Jack." Ianto set his glass down. "The decision was mine alone." He crossed the room to lean his arm against the window frame. He stared out into the early dawn twilight and sighed softly. "And I was happy to do it. It helped you while I waited for you." He looked over his shoulder at the other man for the briefest of moments. "But if you plan on judging me for that, for loving you that much, then you deserve to know everything before you do so."

"No. I could never judge you for loving me." The heat of Jack's body enveloped him as the other man stepped up behind him and wrapped his arms around Ianto's stomach. "Just..." Jack's voice seemed to break for a moment while the other man nuzzled his face into Ianto's neck. "Just tell me you knew what would happen when you made the choice. Please tell me you knew you'd suffer all that." There was another, much longer pause, before Jack whispered to him, "Suffer for me."

"I suspected." Even now, even if it would be easier for them both if he could do so, Ianto couldn't lie to Jack. He turned in Jack's arms and was completely unsurprised to find Jack crying. He could still feel the other man's emotions and knew he'd overwhelmed him with his confession. "I didn't know for certain until it happened the first time, but I did suspect. I was told there was a high price to be paid." He

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cupped Jack's cheek in his hand and stroked his thumb along his cheekbone, wiping away some of the tears. "And I'd do it all again if it gave me you in the end."

"Ianto," Jack breathed his name on a sigh. The other man's hands came up, cradling his face and just held him for a long moment. "My Ianto," his voice faltered for a moment before steadying. "Oh, my love..."

Ianto felt more than heard those final words as Jack's lips brushed over his in a delicate kiss. A kiss so soft as to be barely felt while the emotion behind it slipped between them flowing over the bond between them as a caress of its own. Ianto melted into Jack's body, looping his arms around Jack's neck and clinging to the other man as he sought to deepen the light kiss. Breaking the contact between their lips, Ianto whispered, "Take me to bed, Jack."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“With pleasure,” Jack purred, “with very great pleasure, Ianto.” He took a step back from Ianto and slid his hands down his lover’s arms to clasp his fingers around the younger man’s wrists. He stroked his thumbs beneath the starched cuffs circling over Ianto’s pulse. It seemed almost as if their hearts were beating in time with each other. The symbolism brought a smile to his face. Jack lifted Ianto’s left hand and pressed a kiss to the ring he’d placed there earlier. “Did you know that according to the customs I grew up with, the moment you let me put this on you, we were married?”

He watched Ianto, just watched, while he played with the younger man’s fingers. He took a wicked delight in the blush that spread over the other man’s pale skin as he shook his head just the tiniest bit. The blush was as endearing as always but it was the way he looked away before peering up from beneath lowered lashes that always sent a shot of pure lust rushing through his veins. Jack turned Ianto’s hand in his,

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pressing a kiss to his palm before sinking his teeth into the pad of his thumb. He took a visceral delight in the moan the action tore from Ianto. Sucking lightly on the other man's skin, he worked the cufflink free before releasing that hand to focus his attention on the other. He dropped the cufflinks onto the chest beside them and leant forward to kiss Ianto. Again, he kept the kiss light, just barely touching their lips together before pulling away again.

"Jack," Ianto moaned, reaching out to tangle his fingers in Jack's hair. The silken strands teased his fingers as he pulled the other man back to him. "Cariad, don't tease." He kissed him, hard and hungry, and pressed his own desperate need to be taken by Jack into the other man's mind. "Please don't tease me tonight."

"But you love it when I tease you." Jack laughed as he attacked the buttons of Ianto's shirt. He flicked them open one at a time following the trail of exposed skin with his lips. "You love to tease me just as much with those lovely Welsh vowels." He trailed his lips over to one of Ianto's nipples, biting just hard enough to get a startled yelp from his lover. Jack stripped the shirt from Ianto and tossed it away. He didn't care where it landed, so long as the fabric was out of his way. He slid his hands down Ianto's skin and hummed appreciatively at the purr the action pulled from deep in Ianto's throat. He promised himself, yet again, that one day he'd get Ianto to make that particular sound while sucking his cock, just to feel the vibration of that sound through such sensitive flesh.

Jack slipped his fingers beneath the waist of Ianto's trousers. He teased the hidden skin with his nails while he worked his fingers around from back to front before pulling free to undo Ianto's belt. He took his time unbuckling the leather, pulling it back and forth before finally letting the loosened ends hang free. Jack nuzzled Ianto's neck, pressing open mouthed kisses to the other man's pulse, and murmured words in his native language against his skin. He told Ianto he loved

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him, adored him, cherished him, would stay with him forever all in a language whose roots hadn't even been sprouted yet. He pressed a kiss to Ianto's chest right over his heart, sucking a bit of skin between his teeth to worry it until a purplish bruise darkened the skin, and then he released it, looking up at Ianto while trailing his hands down the other man's chest to flick open his trouser button and slowly, teasingly, lower the zip.

He shoved his hands beneath trousers and pants, shoving the fabric down with rapidly increasing impatience. Jack trailed kisses down Ianto's chest pausing to flick his tongue in the younger man's navel. He loved how that would elicit a chuckle which would rapidly become a gasp of pleasure when Jack would flick the tip of his tongue over the head of Ianto's cock. Distracting Ianto with leisurely strokes of his tongue over the younger man's cock, Jack quickly and efficiently stripped Ianto of the last of his clothes, tossing them away along with shoes and socks. He ran his hands up Ianto's legs, dragging his nails over the soft flesh of inner thighs, until he could grasp the hard thick length of Ianto's erection in his hand. He cupped Ianto's balls with one hand and stroked him with the other. Jack looked up at Ianto as he swirled his tongue around the head of his lover's cock. He was waiting for just the right moment, the moment Ianto would stare down at him and beg so prettily in that rough Welsh accent, and when it came, that stuttered please he so adored, Jack swallowed Ianto's cock, flexing his throat and humming around the flesh he was teasing with his tongue.

"*Duw!*" Ianto dropped his head back with hoarse groan. It thumped off the wall behind him. He dropped one hand to tangle in Jack's hair while his other reached up above his head to dig his nails into the edge of the window framing. "Fuck, Jack. *Yes!*" He thrust his hips and whined his pleasure as Jack sucked harder in response to his movements. He wanted more. He wanted to drive his cock deep into Jack's throat, force the other man to take everything, and it was a

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struggle to hold back. The wet warmth wrapped around him, the caress of Jack's tongue over his cock, the teasing brushes of Jack's fingers over his entrance, it all combined to drive him slowly insane. "Jack... Jack... Please, Jack..." Ianto chanted softly as he struggled to contain his body's reaction to the other man.

"Let go, Ianto."

Jack voice teased his mind. It was a wicked mental caress that tore further at his control. Ianto whimpered. He couldn't help it. He released Jack's hair to stretch his other arm above his head, clutching at the window frame to give himself something solid to cling to as Jack tore him to shreds with pleasure.

"I love you like this. All debauched and wanton, panting and begging, all for me. Are you mine, Ianto?"

"Yes!" Ianto all but shrieked the words as Jack pulled away from his cock with a soft pop. "Yours!"

Fingers stroked and teased. Hands cupped his arse, kneaded the flesh, and that warm mouth closed over his cock again. Ianto yelped in surprise. Then, he moaned and thrust his hips. He wanted more. Anything to stop this wickedly pleasurable torture and he was willing to beg to get it. "Jack, m'gŵr, I'm yours. Always yours. Just, please let me come... please."

"Oh, I'll let you come, Ianto. At least twice..."

Ianto felt Jack's warm chuckle slide through his mind even as the actual sound drove another hoarse cry from his throat. He felt those warm hands slip off his hips, knew from the feel of Jack's arms along his sides that the other man was resting his hands on the wall to either side of his own body, and took advantage of the freedom that movement gave him. He thrust his hips, blindly seeking the release he craved.

"Now, m'cariad, let go and come for me..."

That one Welsh word, purred across his mind in Jack's sinfully

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wicked voice, tore his orgasm from him. Ianto arched his back, clutched the framing with fingers that ached, and screamed Jack's name as the pleasure whipped across his mind. He writhed with it, panting and keening softly as it went on and on until he finally collapsed back against the wall, panting for breath and barely able to keep himself upright. He stared down at Jack, at that wicked smirk curling those full lips, and whispered, "What did you do to me?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Nothing you didn’t want me to,” Jack murmured. He slowly rose to his feet, letting his still clothed body brush over Ianto’s, and shivered as he shared Ianto’s response to that contact. “Just a few mental tricks I picked up over the centuries. I wondered if it would work.” He smiled, stroked his hands over Ianto’s arms and slowly peeled Ianto’s fingers from the window frame. “If I promise to teach them to you, will you not get angry?”

“I wasn’t angry, just curious.” Lips brushed over his in a teasing kiss. “Though I may fall on my arse now that you moved my hands.”

“We can’t have that. I have plans for that arse.” Jack chuckled, took a step back and swung Ianto up into his arms. He took the short steps between window and bed in quick brisk strides. “We need a different bed.”

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Ianto blinked at the non sequitur. “We do?” He yelped softly when Jack dropped him onto the mattress. “I like this bed. Why would I want a different one?”

“Because I can’t tie you to it,” Jack intoned solemnly. He straightened away from the bed and began to strip off his clothes. “And you know how much you enjoy it when I tie you down, tease you and make you beg.”

“I’ll take your request under advisement,” Ianto murmured. He crooked a finger at Jack and smirked. “But only if you stop messing around and fuck me.”

His cock hardened further, if that was even possible, as he gazed as the Welshman sprawled across the burgundy velvet duvet. Jack went back to stripping off his clothes, throwing them haphazardly any which way, and tossed the bottle of lube from his pocket onto the bed by Ianto’s hip. He swallowed back a yearning moan as he watched Ianto trail a hand down his body to stroke his cock back to full hardness. “God, you’re gorgeous,” he murmured, resting a knee on the bed. “So, fucking gorgeous and so very mine.”

Jack gathered up handfuls of the duvet, pulling the heavy weight from beneath Ianto, and threw it over the end of the bed. He knew how hard it was to get stains out of velvet and didn’t want the thought to distract Ianto from what was to come. If Ianto looked decadent sprawled across red velvet, he looked positively sinful on black linen, like a fallen angel just waiting to be debauched by him. Jack rescued the lube from the pile of covers and tossed it to Ianto. “Prepare yourself for me, I want to watch you.”

“Jack...”

“Do it, Ianto,” Jack ordered softly. “Show me how much you want me.”

He caught the bottle of lube with one hand and stared at Jack, stared into eyes so dark with lust as to border on black, but beneath the lust

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was something else, something warm and soft which called to the depths of his soul. Ianto sighed softly sliding up the bed to lean back against the piled pillows. He grabbed one, tucking it beneath him, and lubed his fingers before throwing the bottle back to Jack. Spreading his legs, Ianto wrapped one hand around his erection, stroking slowly, while trailing the other back behind his balls to tease his entrance with one finger, circling slowly before breaching himself with a cry. Ianto flung his head back and closed his eyes. In his mind, it was Jack stretching him, slowly and teasingly. One finger became two as a hiss escaped his throat. He wanted more, wanted Jack inside him, but knew the other man would wait until he begged and Ianto was determined not to beg again that night.

Oh, no, he wasn't going to beg. He cracked his eyes open and peered at Jack from beneath his lashes, gauging his lover's state of arousal. Jack had phenomenal control, but Ianto could always tell just how close the other man was to the end of it by the shading of his eyes and the curl of his lips. He recognized that feral smile starting to creep onto Jack's lips, the rich dark blue of his eyes, and smirked to himself. Ianto pulled his fingers from his arse and reached between his legs to grab Jack's arms. He pulled the other man toward him and rolled, flipping their positions so that Jack was on his back amongst the pillows.

"I'm tired of waiting, Jack," he growled against the older man's neck. He nipped his way up the tendon in Jack's neck, along his jaw, and kissed him hungrily. He broke the kiss to sit up, straddling Jack's lap, and reached back to position the other man's cock for him to slide down it impaling himself on the hard thick length. "I think I've been patient enough tonight."

"Ianto!" Jack all but screamed. "Fuck, Ianto!"

"Exactly," Ianto purred. He stroked his hands over Jack's chest as he paused to allow his body to adjust to being filled by his lover. Ianto

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caught Jack's hands in his, pinned them to the bed and used that as leverage to establish a quick hard rhythm. He needed this, wanted this, and now he was going to have this - Jack inside him in their bed. "You're mine, Jack. Now, always, and forever..." Ianto growled the words in time with his movements over Jack. "You. Are. Mine."

"Ianto!" All Jack could do was relax beneath Ianto and let the other man dominate him, use him for his pleasure. The feel of Ianto pinning him down surged across his mind, sent him reeling as baser instincts long suppressed urged his complete submission. Without even thinking of any of the future consequences, Jack obeyed those urges, closing his eyes and baring his neck in a silent demand to be owned, possessed. He wasn't expecting Ianto to understand, but once he felt the other man's teeth against his throat, he knew he'd never leave again. After so very long, he was finally home, accepted and protected by his mate. "Oh God, Ianto... yes!" he panted. "Yours... always yours."

Ianto sucked hard at Jack's pulse, growling against Jack's skin, and some tiny part of Ianto's mind murmured about him claiming his mate much as wolves claimed theirs but that voice was drowned out by Jack's wordless scream of pleasure as his lover arched beneath him. He rode out Jack's climax before he lifted his head and sat up, still impaled on Jack's softening cock, and smiled down at the other man. That same primal instinct to mark Jack's throat urged him to come all over his lover's chest, smear his come on him, cover him in his scent so no one else would even think of touching him.

He curled his hand around his cock, stroking slowly, and considered the man sprawled boneless and limp beneath him. He took in the sweaty hair, the heaving chest, and the closed eyes. Oh, that wouldn't do at all. He wanted Jack to watch him, to know who he belonged to. "Agored eich llygaid," he ordered. "Look at me, Jack." Jack's eyes slowly opened. Sated, and more than a bit dazed, they met his own

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after a long silent moment. Ianto's hand moved faster over his cock. His hand, still slick with lube, moved easily over his heated flesh. His breath caught in his chest as his climax rolled up his spine. He flung his head back with a hoarse cry, every muscle in his body clenching as he came all over Jack's chest and stomach. Ianto collapsed over his lover, just catching his weight on his hands and smiled down at Jack before pressing a light kiss to the other man's lips.

He eased off Jack's body, sprawling beside him, and stroked a hand over his stomach, smearing his come into the other man's skin. "Eiddo?" he questioned softly, far more comfortable asking the question in Welsh than English.

"Te, eiddoch," Jack murmured the response. He caught Ianto's hand in his, lifting it to his lips to lick his fingers clean. He rolled onto his side to consider Ianto for a long moment. Then kissed him lightly, whispering, "Byth a beunydd."

EPILOGUE

“Dance with me?”

Ianto looked up from where he'd been watching Tosh dance with Tommy to see Jack, an almost shy smile on his face, holding a hand out to him. For all their openness in the Hub and Jack's having moved in with him and Misha, they'd never publically shown their actual relationship to anyone outside the small private circle of the team. He smiled and took the offered hand, letting Jack pull him to his feet. “You never wanted this before,” he murmured.

“I was too afraid to admit how important you are to me,” Jack replied as he pulled Ianto into his arms. “When I lost you,” he paused, pressed his lips to Ianto's temple, “I felt like part of my soul had been ripped away. I knew before Gwen ever said a word that you were gone. When you...”

“When I what?” Ianto demanded softly.

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“Not now. I’ll tell you another time. It’s a long conversation.” Jack shifted their clasped hands to rest over his heart. “Would you...” he swallowed and leant back just a bit to look into Ianto’s eyes. “Would you like one of these?”

“What? A wedding?” Ianto asked, totally thrown by the question. “Misha would certainly enjoy it.” He tilted his head to where his daughter was very carefully, all formally and properly, dancing with Bran, Gwen and Rhys’s son. It was adorable. The two children looking almost like a miniature bridal couple themselves as they swayed on the edge of the dance floor.

Jack looked over and laughed softly. “I wasn’t asking Misha though I’m sure like any female she’d adore the chance to dress up again. I was asking you.” Turning serious, he refocused on Ianto. “I want this, Ianto. I want us to be a proper family with all the entanglements and legalities.” He looked back at Misha again. “I won’t push you, but God do I want this.”

“Jack,” Ianto murmured, lifting his hand from Jack’s shoulder to stroke his fingers over the other man’s jaw. “Jack, look at me...” he waited for his lover to turn back to him and searched Jack’s eyes. For the first time, there were no doubts shadowing those crystalline blue eyes, no lurking shades waiting to steal Jack away from him. “You’re serious; you really want it all with me?”

“Yes.” Jack nodded. “I even want her. She’s adorable, Ianto, and so much your daughter. I’d love it if you’d allow me to help you raise her.”

Ianto smiled and tilted his head, curling his hand around Jack’s neck to pull him forward for a kiss. He pulled back after a moment and smiled. “Yes, Jack, I’ll marry you.” He stepped close again, swaying to the music, and whispered into Jack’s ear, “even if we’re already married in all the ways that truly matter to us.”

DEFLECTIONS OF LONELINESS

BETH MCCOMBS

Previously published under a pseudonym as an erotic romance author, Beth McCombs has returned to her roots as a fan fiction writer in an attempt to recover from a severe bout of depression-induced writer's block. She still hopes to be published again someday, but isn't pushing herself in any direction instead she writes for the pure joy of writing.

Beth lives in South Alabama with her husband and young daughter. In her spare time, she studies history, anthropology, and mythology.

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