

NANCY BROWN



THE ROOTS OF THE  
QUADRATIC

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# The Roots of the Quadratic

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*by Nancy Brown*

Torchwood, New Who | R | Jack, Ianto, Alice, Jenny, John Hart, OCs | 47,000 words

*Jack and Ianto discover they can only outrun old sins for so long.*

Betaed by: queenfanfiction, wynkat1313, temporal\_witch, and fide\_et\_spe

Warnings: character death, angst, child endangerment, mentions of sexual coercion, violence, timey-wimey temporal physics, and of course, Captain Bad Touch rides again

Spoilers: up through CoE, one spoiler for "End of Time," one spoiler for *Bay of the Dead*

Notes: This story is the direct sequel to [Intersecting Geodesics](#), and also the sequel to a much shorter story called [In My Unique Position](#). Familiarity with both stories is suggested but not required.

Queenfanfiction, wynkat1313, temporal\_witch, and fide\_et\_spe had a hand in fixing this. All remaining mistakes are mine alone.

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## Prologue

"A woman alone might run into trouble. Two women can cause plenty of it." - Mary, "Avalon, pt 1" *Gargoyles*

"Every death is a holocaust to those left behind." - unknown

"Living with someone is like running a marathon. Along the way, there will be times you're gonna ask why you're doing this to yourself. Some aspects will make you want to puke. The best times will leave you hot and sweaty and accomplished. People on the sidelines will be shouting advice all the time about how to get to the finish line faster. But the point of the marathon is the run itself. Finish lines are just a way of keeping score." - from "Me: An Autobiography"

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From the point of view of the entire lifetime of the planet, an eruption of this magnitude happened every several thousand years, so it was hardly remarkable when one of the world's largest volcanoes exploded. That same volcano was situated far enough away not to incinerate the human inhabitants (population: two) but instead merely change the planet's climate. For a certain immortal, it meant the difference between frying fast, and choking and freezing to death repeatedly in the aftermath. For his companion, who had already walked out alive from not one but two major catastrophes, it was just another damn nuisance.

The rambling red house, the self-sufficient gardens and lands, the rivers with their fish and the woods with their game, everything lay covered under soot and snow from the unexpected winter. The generator would hold

out until the air filters finally gasped their last, and then it was just a matter of time.

They didn't talk about it. There was nothing to say.

One bitterly cold morning, the transceiver beeped. Jack was outside, bundled up from head to toe and over his face, checking on the stores in the outer building. Ianto tuned into the frequency of the passing ship. Some spiteful deity continued to look out for him, and it always showed an utter, utter bastard approach to timing.

"There's a freighter headed into the system," he said, when Jack came back inside. "It'll pick us up in an hour. I've started packing and putting everything into lockdown. In theory, when the climate restabilises, we'll be able to return."

Jack set down the load he'd brought in and began peeling off his outer layers of clothing. "How long did we think that'll be, again?"

"Ten years or more."

"I really shouldn't be out and about yet. People who know me are still alive out there." Jack had first come to this planet to stay out of his own way while he did his second go-round through the fifty-first century. The appendices to his memoirs included a handy chart showing how many times he'd passed through various eras, partially so he could remember where and when to avoid himself if he happened to loop back.

"Fair enough. See you in a decade." Ianto turned back to his packing. Jack laughed and wrapped sooty arms around him.

"If we go, will you stop whinging that I never take you anywhere?"

"Yes. If we flee certain death together aboard a space freighter, huddling in the cargo hold with nothing but a duffle bag holding all our worldly possessions, I promise that I will not complain about never going anywhere exciting with you."

"Deal."

## Chapter One

"Goddamned motherfucking piece of shit machine!"

Jenny's lips twitched, specifically not laughing at her as Alice kicked the console angrily. "Did you decide sweet talk wasn't working?"

"She's doing it on purpose." Alice scowled and kicked it again. Ever since they'd accidentally reactivated the AI on this bloody Chula cargo ship, it'd given them nothing but trouble. The time travel circuit, which already only functioned under protest and with what Alice found to be a bizarre sense of humour, now refused to operate at all without an hour of coddling.

The hour hadn't worked this time. Nor had two hours. Fed up with the niceness, Alice was ready to beat in the thing's electronic brain with the nearest spanner or lead pipe. And yes, she'd noticed Jenny quietly and efficiently removing both from her reach. Jenny was good at rescuing Alice from her own worse nature. When they'd first met, she'd coaxed Alice out of the shell of her fresh grief, luring her into the stars with promises of a purpose, a reason to live. Alice had come to recognise the gift for what it was, and tried to live up to the duty implied, and when she failed, Jenny was there with a smile and a suggestion that she owed herself another go.

"Hilda," said Jenny in her sweetest voice. "You need to stop taunting Alice. It's not nice." She paused, waiting for an answer. "Hilda?"

"She yelled at me," said the ship's computer in what could best be described as a sulk.

"Of course I ... "

"Alice, please."

"Fine." Alice flung herself into a seat by the console, arms wrapped around her own shoulders.

Jenny said, "Hilda, would you please let us reset the time travel circuit?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because Alice is angry with me."

"Alice is angry with you because you aren't being cooperative."

"So?"

Jenny sighed. Alice growled. She'd never had a daughter, certainly never a teenaged daughter (she let the twinge come, as it always did, and let it fade into the dull pain that was the background of her life) but Hilda came close to what she thought it'd be like.

Jenny said, "Do you need me to sing to you?"

There was a long pause. "Maybe."

"Would you like the lullaby again?"

"Yes."

"If I sing, will you cooperate?"

"Yes."

"All right." Jenny started to sing something they'd picked up twelve worlds ago, with an odd melody and words that made no more sense than any other lullaby. Alice had been trying to sing it for two hours. Her throat was sore, she was tired, and she was more than a bit jealous that the ship seemed to enjoy Jenny's singing much more than her own. If

she'd just told them at the beginning, they'd be at their destination already.

"There," Jenny said when she was done. "Now will you let us navigate?"

"Yes."

Alice got up from her seat and approached the controls. They'd been frozen the last dozen times she'd tried them, so it was with trepidation that she grabbed the handle and went to turn the temporal dial. It moved under her fingers like it had been greased. She held back swearing at the computer again in case it heard her, but in her mind, she was showing it two fingers.

Jenny came up beside her and made the final adjustment. Time Lord thing. Alice never would, never could understand exactly what that meant, except that Jenny was sensitive to the subtle currents and eddies of space-time. That was enough for Alice.

"Ready?"

"Let's go," Alice said, and braced herself for when the ship leapt into the Time Vortex like a fish. Immediately, the ship began to shudder and shiver violently. Uh oh.

"Hilda!" Jenny shouted. "What's going on!"

"Rerouting," came the ship's voice in a monotone.

Alice and Jenny exchanged looks. Sometimes, the ship not only had a mind of its own, it also operated under its own willpower. Or someone's. Long before Hilda had come online properly, the time circuit seemed geared towards sending them places where they could have a large impact, for good or ill. Usually good, thought Alice, and she was proud of that.

Still ...

"Get the guns," she said to Jenny.

"Get the packs."

-----

Alice was ready for anything. Almost anything. Okay, landing in a clearing on what turned out to be a tropical paradise wasn't her first guess. Warm, humid air caressed her skin and lifted her hair. She scented heavily-perfumed flowers, heard the cries of sea birds, could taste the salt in the air. It was like the holiday she'd taken with Joe to Havana, the one good holiday they'd had together after their honeymoon.

Jenny breathed in deeply beside her and laughed. "Oh, this is delightful!"

"Where are we? Hawaii?"

"I've never been to that planet."

"Never mind." Alice took point. They'd seen a settlement not far from their landing site, and had surely attracted attention with their arrival. Their weapons were stowed out of sight, but where they could be reached.

Sure enough, within about fifteen minutes, they came into contact with the locals. Three human-looking men dressed in loose, simple clothing held particle guns their way, though with a nervousness that told Alice they weren't used to guns. She was glad theirs were hidden, for now. Weapon to weapon only led to faster violence, and they always tried to see what was going on first.

"Hello," said Jenny, with one of her biggest, friendliest smiles. Alice found it comforting to

know that Jenny could be utterly sweet and utterly deadly, depending on her need.

"Greetings," said the tallest of the men. "Who are you and what is your business here?" Alice's right ear heard the tinny sound of the miniature translator; her left was open and heard the cadence of his true voice, heard the worry in his tone even without the words. She always wondered what her own sounded like, translated in reverse.

"I'm Jenny. This is Alice. We're travellers."

This took the men aback, and the tall one conferred with his friends for a moment.

"Please come with us."

They were led through the thick forest out past tended fields to the village. As they walked through the rough streets, villagers gathered to either side, watching them suspiciously. Jenny flashed her disarming grin, while Alice managed her own careful curl of lips. We're all friends here, the smile said, so let's keep it that way, yeah?

"Why are you here?" A man stood before them, dressed like the others but exuding a particular level of authority. The same worry that had filled the other's voice filled his.

Alice said, "We are travellers."

Jenny stepped forward. "We've come to help." The change in his expression told them both what they needed. "What's happened?"

"Forgive us, we are not trustful of strangers," he said. "Two strangers came to our village four days ago, speaking pleasantly and offering trade. The following evening, they abducted my grandchildren and fled. We have sent out

search parties, asked our neighbours, but we cannot find them anywhere."

The grief written on his face hit Alice hard enough to draw a gasp. It shouldn't, she knew impassively. By her own reckoning, she'd lived almost ten years since ... Since. But sure enough, every time one of their adventures involved children, the hurt came back like a hammerblow to her chest.

The woman beside him said, "The strangers may be working with them. They could be here to meet with them." Anger, such anger. That would be the children's mother. Alice felt a sudden sympathy with her.

Jenny held her hands spread wide. "We came alone. You may search inside our ship."

"We will."

Jenny looked at Alice. "Would you prefer to stay here and find out what happened, or would you rather introduce them to Hilda?"

"Hilda," she said too quickly. Jenny nodded. Jenny understood.

"Come on, then," Alice said. "You can inspect our ship. We've got no one else with us." With a last look to Jenny, Alice turned and led the three guards back towards the ship. Jenny could deal with the grieving family.

Back at the ship, the men were startled by Hilda's pleasant voice. "Welcome," she said, all smiles and sugarplums after her earlier sulk. Alice made herself not grumble.

"Please have a good look around. Our technology may be unfamiliar to you."

The shortest of the three men, the one with the darkest hair, examined the ship's control

panel. "You are still using sublight? I thought most vessels were equipped with hyperdrive."

Alice's jaw opened, and then closed. "We have an alternate propulsion system," she said after a moment. "The sublight is just for intrasystem travel." She'd spent years learning how to repair it.

"Ah."

When they were satisfied with the contents of the vessel, certain that she wasn't hiding anyone's children anywhere, she let them lead her back to the village proper. Now that she knew they weren't as primitive as she'd let herself believe, she found signs of technology seamlessly woven into the village's buildings.

Jenny emerged from one of the houses, her pretty face drawn into a frown. "I have good news. And then again, I have bad news." Alice folded her arms to listen, a cold chill already creeping down her neck. "The good news is that we have a lead in the disappearances. I can positively identify one of the abductors."

"The Master? Dorin? Don't tell me it was John Bloody Hart."

"No, but you're getting warmer." Jenny's eyes were sympathetic, and that's how she knew.

"I'm going to kill him."

She waited. Somehow, she waited. Until Jenny explained to the mayor that they needed to go back to their ship. Until she said they had to research records of the man she had seen in their recording, the one with the bright smile who juggled and made all the children laugh, the bastard.

The second Hilda's door closed tight behind them, Alice let out a wordless scream of rage

and frustration, punching the bulkhead so hard she bruised her knuckles.

Hilda said, "Alice?"

"Do not even start with me."

"It's all right, dear," Jenny said to Hilda. "Alice isn't angry at you. Why don't you run diagnostics for a bit?"

"Okay." The computer's hum changed tones. They weren't alone, but Hilda wasn't paying attention, either.

"I hate him."

"I know."

"I keep thinking, he'll get better. I keep thinking, he's not a monster, he's just been put into terrible situations. And then ... "

"I know."

Jenny let her talk. While keeping her eyes completely on Alice, listening closely and gently, her hands made tea in the cramped kitchen space.

Alice said, "Five billion years for the son of a bitch to finally die, and I thought that could make up for what he did." She wanted to punch more, to scream more, and settled for throwing her pack against the wall. "He takes children from their families. God only knows what he did to these two. Give them to aliens for drugs? Burn up their brains?" Fresh tears were on her cheeks and she didn't care.

"Damn him." She had a time machine at her disposal, but having traced every painful minute of the worst day of her life, there was no way to step back into time and pull her son

out alive, not without causing a world-shattering paradox, and there was only one person in the universe to blame.

Jenny wrapped her hands around the mug of tea.

"I want to kill him. And the worst thing is, it would probably make him feel better."

"Probably." Jenny encouraged her to drink her tea, and Alice let it scald down her throat. Jenny found her a handkerchief, too, and Alice thanked her quietly.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, when the tears had passed and the anger was drained and she was left shaking with an empty mug.

"Well, I am going to do some research, like I told these nice people I would. Hilda's been getting some very good results tapping into the Vortex for information." Jenny spent hours at a time communing with Hilda that way, teaching the computer to read history books that hadn't been written yet.

When they'd met Jenny's dad the first time, Alice had learned that once upon a time, there had been an Academy, and young Time Lords had learned how to access and control the vast depth and breadth of information at their fingertips. All of that was gone now, and Jenny was a child by the old standards, teaching herself how to crawl and walk and fly. Her brain buzzed with information, so loudly sometimes Alice could almost hear her thoughts, but catching them and taming those thoughts into something useful was a skill she learned every day.

"Can I help?"

Jenny kissed her on the forehead. "You can sleep. It's late, and I'll be talking gibberish to the computer all night."

"Wake me if you need anything."

"I will."

Alice went back to her bunk, but sleep evaded her for hours.

-----

A hand on her shoulder and lips in her hair woke her. "Alice."

"I'm up." A decade spent running into and out of danger meant she'd learned to sleep light. She sat up and threw her legs over the edge of the bed. "What is it?"

"I've been looking for traces of Jack in the current timeline. The last positive hit was from almost five hundred years ago."

Alice shook her head. "He must have gone into non-linear time again. Or went underground."

"I can't sense him in the here and now." That was settled, then.

\*

*Jenny gasps, clutching her head like she's been struck with a migraine. "What the hell is that thing?"*

*Alice sighs, looking at the familiar face across the street. He hasn't noticed them yet, but he will.*

*"That's my father."*

\*

"We'll have to go back," said Alice. The frown on Jenny's face hadn't lifted. "What is it?"

"I also looked at this history of this world. I know why we're here."

-----

One of the rules Alice learned about time travel was that there are Places everyone went eventually. If you lived long enough, if you travelled far enough, if you pissed off the non-existent gods watching over you enough, you'd find your time-travelling self at particular foci in the space-time continuum. On Earth, the *Titanic* was the most over-booked ship ever built, and Pompeii the most crowded pre-volcano city.

Sometimes, they were able to help. Their transmat beam plucked a handful of survivors from the freezing waters, even as Alice choked down lungfuls of the stuff. Daff had been with them at Pompeii, and fortunately so: while they'd been dismissed as hysterical women, Daff's voice had ordered the two dozen people they'd rounded up in the chaos onto the ship and off to safety. Jenny had kept her head tilted oddly the entire time, and told her later that the Doctor had been there but that she didn't dare encounter him, not yet. Daff was gone again before they went to Hiroshima, and if they had managed only to shelter one family from the horror, it was still enough, had to be enough.

Sometimes, Alice fell asleep at night with the sense that the balances were tilting in favour of justice, of kindness, of other imaginary things she knew she used like a blanket against the darkness of the universe. Sometimes they simply stood in mute witness, the sole survivors to walk away from disaster.

More than once, they'd come upon Time Agents busy at their tasks, collecting their own

bounties of human lives for the Agency's mysterious ends at disaster after disaster. Only one had turned, joining them in transporting the would-be victims of a shipwreck to someplace new, someplace safe from the Agency as well as the roiling waves. Lega's masters had taken her life for her disobedience. Alice had no love for the Time Agency, and with her friend's loss, for any of its Agents.

Convincing people to leave was always the hardest part before catastrophe struck. After, they were lucky if there were even survivors to gather.

"The asteroid will collide with this world tomorrow," Jenny said, the full knowledge of the disaster radiating off her. "If we make multiple trips, we can evacuate the entire village, but we must start now."

Lomas -- the mayor, or minister, or whatever passed for leadership in the village -- sat back, playing with his own fingers. He looked lost and very tired. Alice placed a hand on his arm. "You must believe us."

"No," he said at last. "We must not. The last strangers lied. What if you are taking away our people to leave us defenceless? What if you are actually here to raid our crops and take our possessions?"

Jenny offered him one of her innocent smiles. "We wouldn't."

A grim smile touched Lomas' face. "Two women, travelling alone. I can imagine that on many planets, the people assume you are harmless. We've seen your weapons, even though you've kept them hidden from us."

"We haven't used them," Alice said. They'd have noticed. Jenny never missed a shot.

"I cannot justify emptying the village on your word alone."

"Then do a scan!" Jenny said irritably, slapping her hands on the table and standing. "You have the equipment. Look into the sky. I can give you the coordinates. I can't stop the asteroid. All I can do is offer you safety. But we are running out of time."

Lomas wrote down the coordinates as Alice felt the seconds ticking away, and he left them there to wait. They weren't under arrest, and even if they were, she was sure they could fight their way out and get to the ship. They could save themselves, if nothing else, but surely Lomas would see reason?

"Mother says he thinks you are lying to us," said a small voice. A girl in her early adolescence, long dark hair swept back from her frowning face, watched them from the doorway.

"We're not," said Jenny.

Alice said, "What's your name, dear?"

"Klay."

"It's nice to meet you, Klay." Alice prodded Jenny, who merely said, "Hello." Jenny had trouble with human customs when she was agitated.

"Lomas is my grandfather, Kamb is my mother. My brothers, they were taken by Jix and his shadow." Her frown deepened.

"I'm sorry," Alice said. Against her better judgment, she added, "He took someone from

me as well. My son." And it hurt, again, always.

"So you do know him. Mother said she thought you did. Did he come to your world the same way?"

"Not exactly the same."

"Did you get your son back from him?"

So much blood. "No."

Klay bowed her head. "Then I am also sorry."

-----

Hilda cooperated with the evacuation better than was her usual wont, running back and forth between the doomed world and the new planet Jenny had found in a search. The ship could only hold so many people, and with the time constraint, the only possessions the villagers could take was what they could carry. Almost fifty chose to stay behind and take awkward shelter rather than abandon all.

History said they died.

Alice stood with Kamb outside the ship, after the last group unloaded to safe ground, as the first group was already busy constructing rude shelter.

"I'll find him," said Alice. "I'll find your children."

Kamb's eyes held disbelief, but she nodded, and without a word, went to join the others in trying to build a new home.

When Alice boarded the ship, she asked Jenny, "Five hundred years?"

"He was arrested."

"What a surprise."

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The game was called *kalaya*, and as far as lanto could tell, it was a cross between chess and liar's dice. Jack had tried teaching it to him over the years, but while lanto could grasp the basic structure of the moves, the real point of the game was cheating as boldly and as often as both players could, and Jack was a much better cheater.

Or would have been were his skills not quite so rusty.

The sentence was six months, automatically enforced upon arrest. The good news about being stuck on this out of the way space station where the freighter had dumped them was that the only record the local authorities could pull on Jack was his Time Agency ID, and not any of his outstanding criminal charges. The bad news was what had got them into this mess in the first place: no access here to the various accounts Jack had squirreled away over the years. In theory, thanks to the blessings of compound interest, Jack was extremely wealthy, but theory wouldn't buy them lodging, food, or even passage off this bloody wreck of a station to someplace with a better connection to the interstellar banking system. Apparently, neither would gambling their last dozen credits on a rigged game.

"I thought I had him," Jack said, from the other side of the partition. "The whole *point* of the game is to cheat!" That last was shouted at one of his impassive gaolers, a twenty-stone behemoth who may well have been made of actual rock under its tough grey skin. The gaoler did not bother responding.

"Perhaps the rules changed," lanto said, because he didn't want another argument.

"You don't change rules like that."

"And yet here we are."

Jack folded his arms. "Here I am. You could still go."

He smirked. "Hitchhike across the galaxy? Without a towel?"

"What?"

"Nothing." He should have known better. Jack had forgotten vast swathes of twentieth and twenty-first century pop culture, not that lanto could blame him. If he could purge his memory of Oasis lyrics and exchange them for more vivid memories of his family, he'd take that trade, too. "I start work this evening." Jack's eyebrows raised suggestively, and lanto bit back his sigh. "I told you about it already."

"The bar, right. I paid attention."

The job was nothing glamorous, although not even the Top Secret Organisation What Hunts Aliens job had been glamorous, and involved the same general cleanup and maintenance duties. The pub owner needed a new warm body to wash dishes since the last person in the position accidentally ascended to a higher plane of existence -- a process which, the owner was quick to assure lanto, hardly ever happened to the staff.

"By the time you're released, we should have enough money to leave if we're not choosy about transport."

"So no five star luxury liners?"

"Not this time."

The guard cleared its throat in a fashion that would not have been out of place in a Cardiff

gaol. lanto tried to remember the name of that one copper, Gwen's friend, but it had been over twenty years by his reckoning, and those memories were gone.

"I'll see you tomorrow," lanto said, with a nod to the guard, who nodded back. Spouses were permitted to visit the prisoners every day, if just through an impenetrable sheet of clear polymer, and the station rules weren't picky about formal versus informal marital arrangements. lanto came as often as possible, and cursed the partition in his thoughts, and kept up his politest demeanour for the guards so he could do it again the next day.

"See ya." Jack glanced away. Hardly off the planet, and he'd exchanged one prison for another. lanto wouldn't blame him for being jealous of lanto's relative freedom, even if that freedom was, not for the first time, to work a low-end and thankless job among strangers for the benefit of someone else.

With that cheerful thought, and one last look at Jack who was already being escorted back to his cell, he hurried back to the small quarters he shared with three other workers at the pub. He could stick to the plan: be quiet and helpful, keep his head down, wait for better days.

The mass jailbreak during Jack's second month was *not* part of the plan.

## Chapter Two

"Sometimes I really wish people came with signs. 'Caution: Psychotic Stalker Who Will Obsess on You for the Rest of Time' would be helpful to know when meeting someone. 'Self-Absorbed Jerk Who Will Abandon You and Then Break Your Heart After You Spend a Century Tracking Him Down' really wouldn't hurt, either. [*Not that I disagree with either description, but perhaps you want to tone it down in the next draft.* --- Yeah, yeah. I'll be nicer in the rewrite.] Even a simple 'This Person Will Change Your Life Forever' would have come in handy, say when I was admiring someone's butt as she was hanging from a barrage balloon, or when I had help subduing a Weevil one night. Had I known then how important these people would become to me, I probably would have been more polite." - from "Me: An Autobiography"

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"Thank you, Hilda," Jenny said, petting the ship's controls as they came to a stop at the dock.

"You're quite welcome," chirped the AI, apparently on a happy upswing in her mood again.

Alice really wanted to say something, but Jenny silenced her with a look, and she sighed.

"Thanks, Hilda."

The Dock Master was of a species Alice had never encountered before: six arms, lemon-yellow scales, all muscle. He charged them more than Alice thought was fair, but Jenny handed over their falsified credit slip with a perky smile and a tip for his services.

"We're looking for the local authorities," said Jenny.

Alice said, "We've a bounty to collect."

The Dock Master gave them a look that, on his unfamiliar face, could have been respect or fear or desire. "Bounty hunters?" It was a cover story they adopted when necessary, and one Alice felt to be useful in this situation. She saw him take in their guns. "You must check your weapons with the Head Constable."

Jenny smiled wider. "Please. Take us there."

As they made their way through the station, Alice did her best not to look like a tourist, but it was difficult. Nearly ten years in space, and her entire life before that in the shadow of her parents' occupation, and still her breath caught at the sight of real aliens. Every visit was a new education in the variety of existence out here, seething and living together and fighting and loving. Tiny creatures no bigger than her thumb but stronger telepaths than any other in the galaxy bumped elbows (or what passed for elbows) with skeletal giants that only breathed argon in their compression suits. Colours and shapes and pelts and feathers, and the smells, oh the *smells* of creatures cooking and breathing and farting. At a crossroads such as this, even a backwater, Alice was overwhelmed. She walked, and tried not to stare, and envied Jenny's easy grace among this flow of life.

An alarm went off, loud klaxons and red flashing lights, breaking her thoughts. Alice gripped her gun, as Jenny readied her own.

Jenny said, "What's going on?"

"Unknown. Wait here." The Dock Master left them and hurried onwards. Alice and Jenny exchanged glances, then followed him.

The flow had changed, settling into two distinct streams of "trying to get closer to see what was wrong," and "trying to move away from it as quickly as possible." They bumped into the latter, were separated, rejoined, and then held hands against the tide as bodies surged.

Jenny shuddered, grabbing her head. Alice's heart went to her, but there wasn't time. "Where?"

The pretty mouth moved into a reflexive expression of distaste and horror. "Over there."

Alice took her hand again, dragging her through the rush towards the place where she'd pointed. Moments later, she collided with someone and fell down hard.

"Ow."

"Sorry," he said quickly, already moving away when he stopped dead. As her senses cleared, and she recognised his voice, the same recognition dawned on his face. "Alice?"

"Hello, Dad." He was dressed in bright orange clothes, and stuck out in the crowd more than usual.

Jenny made a whimper in the back of her throat, and Alice turned from him to help her friend stand. "It's okay," she said. "Remember how you did it last time."

"I'm trying," said Jenny, but she looked as though she wanted to vomit or flee, unable to raise whatever mental shields she erected around the horror that was Alice's father.

"Not that I'm not really glad to see you right now," Jack said, looking over his shoulder, "but I'm kind of trying to get away. Could we?"

Alice let out a sigh. "Did you just escape from gaol?"

"It wasn't my idea! Someone else opened the cells, and I figured ... "

"Stop!" shouted someone who sounded like an authority figure, and Alice grabbed Jenny's arm.

"This way."

"No," said Jack, "this way." He led them in a different direction, still surrounded by running humans and aliens of every kind, and leaving them no choice but to follow. They ducked through three corridors and came out in a less-populated common area with stores and restaurants. Jack immediately entered the nearest of these.

Alice hissed, "This is not the time for a snack!"

He ignored her. "Hey!" A human man about her own age came out from the back of the shop with a comical look of surprise on his face as Jack said, "Time to run."

The other man dropped the towel he was holding. "What did you do?"

"Nothing! The guy in cellblock Theta shorted out the cells, and everyone's out."

"So go back! We can't arrange transport yet, and they'll catch you and put you in for twice the time."

"You're not as happy about this as I thought you'd be."

Alice said, "We need to go."

Jack said, "Then let's go." He took the hand of the human man.

"No passengers," said Alice irritably. "Certainly not your flavour of the month."

"He's not my flav ... "

"ENOUGH!" said Jenny. She was weaving on her feet. She looked at the other man. "Are you coming with him?" He nodded. "Fine. Nice to see you again. Let's go."

Again?

"One minute," said the man, and he hurried back into the restaurant as time slipped away from them. He came back with a small rucksack. "Lead the way."

They ran, headed generally back towards the dock while avoiding the authorities who would be looking for Jack. They came close once, backed around a corner while three gaolers dressed in beige did a sweep of the area they needed to cross, but the gaolers moved on and they made it back to the dock without incident.

The Dock Master waited for them, all six arms folded across himself. "Stop."

Jenny put on her friendly smile again. "Please let us know if we owe you any more."

The Dock Master pointed to Jack. "He is a prisoner."

"Yes," said Jenny, her hand on her weapon again. "Our prisoner." Alice took Jack's arm and stole a longer look at his companion. When recognition sunk in, she squeezed Jack's bicep in a hard pinch.

"I'm going to kill you," she said in a low voice.

"Fine," said the Dock Master, as Jenny handed him an extra credit slip.

Jack's face filled with glee as they approached the ship. "Chula?"

As they hurried aboard, Jenny said, "I picked her up right after I started travelling. She's got a time circuit, so I can take her home when I'm finished." Finished *what*, she'd never said.

Alice went to the controls as Jack came up beside her. Uninvited, he slid his hands over the panel, and said in a low voice, "Hello, gorgeous."

Alice shoved him away. "Stop molesting the ship."

"I was just saying hello."

"I believe she said that," said his friend.

Hilda made a sound that Alice refused to believe was a giggle before they disengaged from the dock. The transceiver spat out complaints from the station: were they harbouring any fugitives?

"Negative," said Jenny sweetly. "Just a quick stop. Off now, thanks."

"Please cease your departure and return to the station. Your ship will be boarded and searched."

"Negative," Jenny repeated, with less kindness. "Our ship is none of your concern." As she spoke, Alice set their course, muttering to herself about the wait as they slowly steered clear of the many ships around them.

"Return to the station immediately, or we will fire."

Jenny said, "Violence is not an acceptable option. We are leaving, not attacking you."

On the viewscreen, Alice saw the largest three cannons rotate towards them, and then Jack pushed her out of the way, grabbed the controls, and threw the throttle. Hilda jerked then zipped off, smoothly dodging a transport and a freighter in her way, skimming to a hard starboard roll to evade the blasts from the cannon.

Alice pushed down her anger and ran to the time circuit, flipping it to random, and punching it as soon as they were clear of the last ship. Moments later, she felt the sharp tug at her navel that meant they were travelling in time as well as space.

Jenny said, "That's them taken care of, then." She turned to Jack. "Time and place?"

"Anywhere that isn't a cell."

"Time and place the last you saw us."

"Oh." He scratched his head. "Cardiff, 3009. You?"

Alice said, "Triskellion, 18,063." She wouldn't look at him, not right now. The initial rush of their escape had faded, leaving her with a cold pit in her stomach.

"Right. I won't see you there for a while."

"Yes."

Jenny said to the other man -- Alice remembered his name now -- "Let me give you a tour, shall I?"

He glanced at Jack and Alice, as though measuring the tension. "That'd be lovely, thank you."

As soon as they were out of the control room, Alice said in a low voice, "I cannot believe you."

He folded his arms. "Good instinct. I don't believe me half the time, either."

She pointed down the corridor. "You asked me for his name, and then you brought him *back*?"

His face changed. "Oh. Oh, no. Alice. I didn't." He reached out to her arms and she pulled back instinctively. His hands moved without her there, and then fell to his sides. "The Time Agency picks up people from mass disasters."

"I know what the Time Agency does. We've run into their handiwork before." Too many times, they'd arrived just as Time Agents had started a convenient war in order to gather bodies. More than once, they'd touched down on worlds where Agents had absconded with technology that the Agency could use. And of course, they'd met at the mass catastrophes, which Alice and Jenny did everything in their power to prevent, while the ghouls fought them at every turn to collect their tithe of human lives.

"They picked up the Thames House victims in one of their acquisitions. The Doctor dropped lanto on my doorstep afterwards. The bowtie one?" Alice had met that Doctor. He was a bit weird. "I think he was trying to be nice to me."

"There were nicer things he could have done."

"But this is what happened." He was asking neither her forgiveness nor her approval, she saw. Jack's life: one impossible thing after the other. He shifted expressions again, moved from sorrow over the things they couldn't change into curiosity. Another thing about him: always moving forward. "So what brings

you here? I'm grateful for the save, but you were just about dead last on my list of people I thought would show up to help."

One anger easily morphed into another. "You kidnapped two children. I promised their mother I'd bring them back to her."

He folded his arms, back in the defensive posture. "I've done a lot of terrible things. I don't think kidnapping kids ever showed up on the list, though."

She smiled without warmth and flew back to the controls. The picture taken back on the tropical planet came up. "That's you."

Jack's eyebrows raised. "That *is* me." He bent in. "And I looked *good*."

She resisted the urge to punch him. It would only make him feel better if she did. "It's clearly a younger version of you. Not so much grey in your hair." She noticed his eyes flick to the silver streaks in her own, and ignored him. "It happens about five hundred years from now. Ring any bells?"

"Nope. Sorry."

Alice slammed her palm onto the surface of the control panel. Hilda made a noise that meant she'd need to be coaxed into doing anything for the next day at least. Alice didn't care. "Think harder! Damn it, you really can't let any child go unscathed, can you?" That blow hit, though not as hard as she'd wished.

"I'm over five thousand years old. Forgive me if I don't remember every last crime I've committed."

"No. I don't think I will."

Just then, Jenny came back. Alice gave Jack another frown and moved away from him. "It was pointless," she told Jenny. "He doesn't remember."

Jenny's face fell. "That's it, then."

Jack looked at his companion's confused expression. "Old sins."

"It always is, with you." He went to Alice and held out his hand. "Ianto Jones. It's good to finally meet you." She frowned at him. She knew his name. She'd run into another version a while back, hadn't she? When she said nothing, did not take his hand, he added, "I just wanted to say, I am so sorry for your loss."

Jack wouldn't have coached him; Jack didn't think about things that way. "Thank you," she eventually managed around the stone in her throat.

-----

One of the many things about Jack that both frustrated and amused Ianto was the man's ability to throw himself completely into a situation and be utterly relaxed and at ease. Jack could be set naked on a planet with a chlorine atmosphere, and within an hour, he'd have found something to eat and someone to chat up for a shag, and within another hour, he'd have annoyed a spouse or potentate enough to call for his beheading. Ianto had observed this in action back in their Torchwood days, and read about it repeatedly in the extensive annals of Jack's memoirs.

Even as Jack was making himself right at home at the controls of Alice and Jenny's ship, ignoring the glares from his daughter, Ianto took the chance to go through the rucksack. He'd foolishly left most of their clothing back

on the station, but that couldn't be helped now.

Identification, check. Three copies, all Jack's under various names. Law enforcement types went directly for DNA idents, but most places settled for paper or the equivalent, which meant they could purchase fakes for lanto when they reached a proper port.

Currency, check. Everything lanto had earned over the last two months was here, although it wasn't much, and there was no way to tell if it would be valid where they ended up next.

Wrist strap, check and removed to return to Jack.

One change of clothes, lanto's, check. Kept on hand for the sake of spills and messes in the restaurant, now his only other outfit. Still better than what Jack had, which were the prison clothes on his back.

And ... Good. Data chip, containing every piece of information they'd had on the computer back home, including Jack's book, check.

Everything else was gone.

lanto closed his eyes a moment, and then let it all go with a sigh. There was no point in complaining now. He glanced over at the others.

Alice was angry with Jack, for understandable reasons. That the anger splashed onto lanto as well was going to be par for the course. She had given up on glaring at her father and pushed him away from the control panel.

"Let us get something straight. You are not to touch the controls of the ship again. This is our ship. She responds to us. She likes us."

"I like him," said the AI.

"Not now, sweetheart," said Jenny.

"Sorry for saving your lives," said Jack.

Alice said, "Our lives wouldn't have been in danger if we hadn't brought you along."

"Not my idea."

Jenny asked, "Why were you incarcerated? The record didn't say."

lanto said, "He cheated in a game."

"You're supposed to cheat!"

"Then he mouthed off to the constable who was investigating."

"I was explaining how the game works."

"And then he punched the constable."

"He hit me first."

"No-one argued that. You, however, were not permitted to hit back."

"Stupid law."

"Enough!" shouted Alice. "I stopped caring at 'incarcerated.'"

Jenny sighed. "I suppose we'll simply drop you off somewhere."

Alice said, "Back at the space station would be choice."

"They'd fire on us, dear." Alice's scowl was firmly in place as she stalked to the other side of the control room away from Jenny's gentle chiding.

lanto cleared his throat. "Why did you pick us up in the first place?"

"Something I did that I don't remember," said Jack. Seeing Alice's face, and perhaps hoping to win a few points back with her for honesty, he added, "Apparently I kidnapped two kids a while back."

"How far back?"

Jenny said, "The incident happens five hundred years after we picked you up. But Jack was younger than he is now."

Ianto frowned, wrapping his head around that. "Jack, when's the last time you went non-linear?"

"A few times with the Doctor. But we didn't grab any kids."

"During your Time Agency days, then?"

He shrugged. "Could be. I don't remember much from back then."

Alice said, "We'll have to run into him earlier."

Jenny put a hand to the side of her head as though she had a sudden headache. "No. That would be bad." Jack nodded and Alice sighed.

Something tickled at the back of Ianto's mind. "The Time Agency doesn't normally do kidnappings. Not for just a few people. Were they part of a large group?"

"No," said Alice. "He stole them from their family."

Jenny said, "Their planet was about to be destroyed." She frowned. "Typically, the Agency would have taken the whole village, wouldn't they?"

"Typically," said Jack.

It had been decades, but Ianto remembered the feel of fine sand under his feet, the sound of the waves on the shore, unfamiliar stars over his head. "Not if the village didn't meet the requirements."

Alice said, "They didn't just disrupt people's lives randomly?"

Jack shrugged again. "We had rules to follow, when it involved acquiring people. Adults and teens for preference, not too closely related, no fewer than fifteen for a haul, up to about a thousand at a time. If deceased, bodies must be mostly intact and available for transport and revival within twelve hours. If alive, check for genetic abnormalities and disease, and treat prior to transport." For someone who hadn't done the job in millennia, he remembered awfully well.

"They were too closely related," Ianto said, folding his hands so he wouldn't play with them nervously. "Your genetic screener said they'd intermarried too closely, that there were problems lurking in the DNA. The Agency would never have accepted them." He met Jack's eyes. "The only ones you could save were the twins."

Jack blinked. "I don't ... Wait, the two years?"

Ianto nodded. "Only mission you ever took me on. I talked you into saving the children."

"What two years?" asked Jenny.

"I lost two years of my memory while working with the Time Agency. I'd always thought it was them, that they'd taken the memories away for some reason. That's why I quit and went off on my own." He jerked his thumb at Ianto. "Turns out, funny story, it was him. The Agency picked him up, but he gave them the

slip and ran into me. Young me. When the Doctor came to get him, I had to forget them both."

Alice turned her wrath on Ianto. "You stole those children?"

He put up his hands defensively. "The planet was going to be destroyed. We thought we were saving their lives."

"Why didn't you save their parents and the rest of them at the same time?"

"No room," said Jack. "I could only have taken two small passengers if Ianto was with me. We'd have had to carry them."

"Fine," said Jenny. "All fixed, then. You took the twins, we took the whole village to another planet."

Ianto said, "They're saved?" He barely remembered the people, now, having known them for such a short time. He still recalled the grief he'd felt back then, although he'd long since let it fade. Was this what it was like for Jack all the time?

"Yes. Where did you take the children?"

"To the same colony where the Time Agency left the Thames House survivors. I thought they'd be taken care of there."

Alice went to the controls. "Where's that?"

Ianto's mouth fell open, and he glanced at Jack, but Jack's memories had been wiped.

"I have no idea," said Ianto.

Jenny sighed. "Back to square one, then."

"No," Jack said. "The Time Agency kept records of the placement worlds. If we're sure it was

the same planet, we can find it there." This was to Alice, an offering. He smiled. "Want to break into the Agency?"

"How?"

"Simple. First, we get a Time Agent."

-----

When she'd been a little girl, before she'd understood why her daddy didn't live with her and Mummy, Alice would perch on the back of the sofa by the big front window and watch, often for hours, waiting for his car to pull up in front of their house. After he left, she'd wait in the same spot, squinting as his tail lights grew smaller, pretending that she could see them long after he'd driven away, wishing he'd come back soon.

If she'd known everything then, she'd like to think she'd have thrown rocks at the car, ripped holes in the tyres, shouted and cursed at him until he went away forever.

"Care to talk about it?" Jenny's eyes glittered in the dark of Hilda's down cycle. Why the ship insisted on regular sleep intervals, Alice would never know. It meant enforced downtimes, and long hours of pointless revolving in her own thoughts when what she needed was just to keep moving in search of the next adventure, like a shark trying to breathe.

"No."

"All right." Jenny pressed her lips onto Alice's head. "I'm turning in. We can make the jump in the morning and start fresh."

"Good night." Alice watched her go.

Sometimes on the bad nights, when her memories just wouldn't let her be, Alice crawled into Jenny's bunk. They'd wrap their arms around each other and the sound of Jenny's hearts would soothe her. On the worst nights, Alice prowled the ship waiting for exhaustion to claim her instead of sleep. Jenny left her alone then, but always joined her in the false morning with tea and company, offering the only respite she could: the promise of another good fight.

Tonight Alice paced restlessly, wanting nothing more than to be there already, to possess the information they needed, to have the children in arms to give them back to their family. To get Jack the hell off her ship again.

She paused, not intending to, in front of the door to the tiny cabin Hilda had offered their guests. She could hear the pair of them talking quietly, could not make out the words. Funny. Knowing her father, she'd have expected him to be naked and occupied the second he was alone with his current toy. She didn't linger, in case the conversation was merely a lull between events, but heard his deep chuckle at her heels as she walked away.

It wasn't fair. Whatever he claimed about how it'd happened, Jack had got back someone he'd lost. If the damned Time Agency could bring people back from the dead willy nilly, why did it have to be some bit on the side her father had shagged and forgotten?

Why hadn't they brought back her son?

-----

Over the years, Jack had slept, or pretended to sleep, in any number of places. The mud in the trenches, stinking and dark, came back to him nights, along with echoes of the groans of the

dying. The prison ship in Haldon, now that had been bad, and his year on the *Valiant* even worse. He'd slept standing up, slept chained upright or supine, slept under the earth the little he'd been able to sleep while dying. The bunk on this ship wasn't much more comfortable than the ledge in the space station's gaol, but as bunks went, it was familiar, comforting even. Ianto had cracked jokes about old times, giving Jack that sideways glance he often did when mentioning the past, but this, sharing a small canvas bed with someone else, Jack remembered well.

He listened now to the easy rhythm of Ianto's breathing. He was not quite asleep, but almost. They'd talked for over two hours, and Jack still wasn't happy with the plan, even though a quick check with Hilda indicated she could manufacture the items they needed. Hilda was happy to manufacture a number of items, actually. Handy, that. They weren't going to talk *all* night, since they hadn't seen each other properly in months. No medical upgrade on this model of cargo ship, but they couldn't have everything.

Jack pressed a kiss to Ianto's head. Ianto made a noise in his throat and rolled over, and five breaths later, he was sleeping. Jack remembered that, too, but then, they'd had plenty of practise over the years. He lay back, wide awake, and stared at the conduits crisscrossing the ceiling of the small cabin.

Alice still hated him. The last time he'd run into her, she had been angry, but she'd also done him a kindness. The thing about time travel, other than the fact that *he* should be the one doing so rather than someone he still had trouble remembering was no longer sixteen years old, was never knowing what part of the other's path you'd found. With the

Doctor, it often meant starting fresh with a new (or old) face accompanied by the latest adoring groupie. With Alice, it typically meant dancing around the question of how much time had passed for her since Steven's death, which was something Jack obviously didn't want to be the first to mention. He'd had thousands of years to get past the pain and he'd buried too many other people he'd loved to cling to a single loss, while for Alice, the wound was freshly bleeding.

Family reunions were tough for normal people. Jack had suffered bone-shattering injuries that were less excruciating than conversations with his daughter. He held no illusions that, should the plan work, she would welcome him back with forgiveness. If his entire reward for success this time around was a slight decrease in the pain in her eyes every time she looked at him, that would be enough.

Jack tried not to worry what the price would be for failure. Beside him, Ianto slept.

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"There's a few places to check," he'd said. "Planets and times known for their, um, broad-minded approach to entertainment. Time Agents are attracted to legally-suspect worlds and establishments like a ploka to a nimbom." Ianto and Alice had stared at him blankly, while Jenny had nodded in understanding.

Apparently the nimboms they'd visited thus far were the ploka-repelling type. Or something. Twelve pubs on five planets, and not a nibble. Ianto didn't hold out much hope for this one, as they stepped in the dark, noisy, loathsome room. Aliens he couldn't recognise, with claws and fins, shook in feigned rage at *kalaya* games, while humans and more oddly-shaped

creatures danced and drank and consumed what could be food and could be drugs, no-one knew but Jack. Choking smoke boiled from pots and the ends of unknowable cigarettes. The music of this era was given to screeching with accompanying three-dimensional images thumping with the awkward beat, and the whole thing pounded behind Ianto's eyeballs painfully.

Jack led the way, always a fish at home swimming in any stream. Jenny brought up the rear, and Ianto felt a swift pity for anyone who saw her and assumed she was the easiest target. Suddenly, Jack stopped short, and Alice bumped into him.

"What?"

His face broke into a grin. "Of course." He turned and headed in a different direction towards the heart of the crowd. Ianto heard the voice and felt a dull recognition right before Jack darted in, grabbed with both hands, and pulled out a dishevelled and nonplussed John Hart. "I should have known you were here."

Hart sneered a half grin. "Wondering when I'd run into you again. I see middle age has finally smacked you in the face with a brick. About time, if you ask me."

"No-one did," said Ianto.

Hart's eyes widened and narrowed. "Aren't you dead?"

From behind him, Ianto heard two similar and distinct sounds. He turned, and saw Alice and Jenny both training their weapons squarely on John.

"You bastard," said Alice.

"Ah," said Ianto. "I see you've met."

They were attracting attention from the other patrons. Aliens, humans, and quite a few in-between either backed away or drew weapons of their own.

"This is a personal matter!" Jack said loudly. He grabbed Hart's arm roughly, and led the little party to a smaller room at the side as the crowd reluctantly made way. Ianto noticed two distinctly bouncer-looking aliens heading their way and he shut the door before the bouncers reached them. Alice and Jenny hadn't lowered their weapons or changed their stances.

Jack placed himself between John and the guns, hands raised. "All right. What's going on?"

"We've met him before," Jenny said.

"That's obvious," said Ianto.

Hart looked at them, the leer growing. "Oh, I don't know about that. I'd certainly remember meeting two gorgeous women like yourselves."

Jack frowned. "They don't look familiar?"

"Not a bit. But if you say we've met, then by all means, let's get better acquainted."

Jack's hand thumped into the middle of Hart's chest, holding him in place. "I don't think they want to get acquainted. Also, the one on the left is my daughter, so if you don't want me to castrate you again, you can back down now."

Hart flinched, and Ianto just stopped his sympathy flinch.

"Again?"

"Time loop," they said together.

Jenny said, "Can we kill him?" Ianto was taken aback. Jenny had been the sweet one thus far. Dangerous, but sweet.

"No," said Jack. "Think. If he doesn't remember you, then he hasn't met you yet. Which means whatever he did hasn't happened yet. You could seriously jeopardise the time stream by killing him."

Alice said, "I'm willing to take that chance."

Jack looked to Ianto for help, but Ianto would gladly hold Hart still for Alice to shoot him, and told Jack so without saying a word.

Jenny pursed her lips. "We can't cause a paradox. We can't kill him," she said sadly.

Alice asked, "Can we maim him?"

Jenny looked thoughtful, and Hart started back. Jack held up his hand in the middle again. "No-one is maiming anyone."

Ianto said, "You did just threaten ... "

"I know what I threatened. For now, no shooting, maiming, or otherwise damaging John."

"Oh, I'm 'John' now, am I?"

Jack shrugged. "Works for me. I'm currently back to Jack, by the way."

"I'll just call you Gorgeous, and make it simple."

"Good," said Alice. "His new name is Gorgeous, yours is Dungbeetle."

"I like that," said Ianto.

"Shut up, Eye Candy."

Jenny made the face again like she did when her shields were down around Jack, like she

was facing down the world's biggest headache. Ianto couldn't blame her. "I understand the plan, but are you certain he should help us?"

"Help us?" said Hart, delightedly. "You're here to ask me for help?"

Jack wrapped a hand in Hart's shirt in a fashion that could lead to kissing or punching. He said to Jenny, "We need a Time Agent to get us in. He's got active codes and a better memory of the place than I do. Plus, we pay him enough and he probably won't double-cross us."

"Oh, I can think of plenty of ways for you to pay me, Gorgeous."

Jack's face went close to his, and Ianto felt a sharp clench in his stomach. As soon as Jack had told him what his idea was, he'd been worried what else it might entail. But as Jack's lips stopped an inch away from Hart's, Jack held up a credit slip and slowly brought it between them.

"How about this?"

Hart took the credit slip and his eyes grew huge with greed. Then he narrowed them and looked at Jack craftily. "It's a decent down payment. Double after we're done."

"Deal."

## Chapter Three

"Theft is the oldest crime. Theft of goods, theft of life, theft of autonomy, it all boils down to loss. One day I woke up and found out two years of my memories had been stolen. As you might imagine, I was kind of pissed off. *[Go into more detail here. As resignations go, yours was spectacular.]*" - from "Me: An Autobiography"

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Alice suppressed a shudder, seeing John Bloody Hart back aboard her ship and gazing around it as though he'd never been there before. He hadn't, not on his personal timeline, and it went a long way towards explaining how easily he'd wormed his way into their confidence, how well he'd known Hilda's controls back when she'd thought they'd first met.

Bloody time travel.

The object in her hand bit into the palm. Alice focused on the pain sensation.

Jenny made herself John's primary contact, knowing without asking how little Alice wanted to deal with him. "You are not to touch any of the controls. You are not to talk to the ship's AI. You are not to attempt a repair, prepare any foodstuff, or otherwise interact in any way with Hilda's operation. You will not be left alone at any time."

"Oh good," he oozed. "And are you going to be my keeper?" He made the mistake of placing his hand on Jenny's shoulder. A second later, he was flat on his back. "Ow."

In the same tone as before, she said, "You are not to touch any member of the ship's crew without their prior authorisation."

"Oh, I like her," said Ianto.

"No maiming," Jack reminded her.

"Ow," John said again, getting slowly to his feet. "Right. No touching anything."

"Here," said Alice, and she threw the object at John, who caught it easily. "You left this."

He brought it up to his face. "What is it?"

They hadn't the foggiest notion. Silvery and intricate, the object was a carving about the size of a man's thumb. Alice thought it rather looked like a chess piece. Jenny had performed a scan but found no radiation, no signals, nothing to indicate it was anything but a simple bit of art, which meant it was probably a bomb or another trap. She should have airlocked the damned thing, but she'd held onto it as a souvenir to remind herself about caution in dealing with seductive strangers. "You dropped it when you were here."

John inspected the piece again, then shrugged and shoved it into a pocket. Sadly, he did not immediately explode.

Jack said, "I figure we'll want to go into the Agency right around the time I left. We don't want to run into ourselves, but if we wait too long, I'll set off an alarm just by setting foot there."

John said, "And you're going with me because?"

"I don't trust you. You get me inside, I can find the information we need."

"Of course you can." John folded his arms.  
"Because the Agency didn't keep the locations of their breeder planets locked up tight."

"I found it before."

"You were familiar with their systems before. You're out of practise."

"Well, that's why I have you, isn't it?" Jack's voice was playful. Alice felt another wave of nausea, thinking of John's brief time in her bed.

"The rest of us," said Ianto, loudly, "are going to be your backup."

"No," said John, "you three are going to be good little children and stay with the ship."

"Negative," Jenny said. "We've got a record to fake. Alice and I just saved a planet full of people. We're going to ensure the Time Agency leaves them alone." She pulled out a data stick from the console. "We'll overwrite their files."

Alice glanced at the stick, the lynchpin of her own private plan with Jenny. The first time one of the files they implanted was accessed, it would start a chain reaction in the Agency's systems, corrupting file after file. The lives the Agency disrupted, the worlds whose historical courses they changed for their own benefit, all of it would come to a stuttering halt thanks to a few brilliant lines of code Jenny had written. But Jack and John didn't need to know that.

She turned to Ianto. "You can stay with the ship and keep us coordinated."

Jack shook his head. "Ianto's needed for the backup plan. He'll stick with the two of us."

"What's the backup plan?"

Jack shook his head. "Need to know basis."

"I need to know," said Alice, but she caught the tilt of his head towards John. She sighed. She'd have to make him tell her later.

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The Time Agency had branches in far-flung regions of space, but the main office was on Lourdis Four, known as "Narda" to the natives, the same world where the United Council currently made their home. Ianto had lived here for almost two years, and never known the name of the planet. He'd only seen the spaceport once, and that from a distance. The rest of his time had been spent working at a low-rent pub in the slums, searching for a way back to 2009, and quite accidentally, getting to know a much younger version of Jack.

If Jack's memoirs spanned thousands of years and many volumes of books, Ianto figured his own life story would make at least a decent hour or two of telly.

The spaceport was crowded. They had to circle the landing site for hours until a spot came open for them. Hart's ID bought them freedom from too many questions. Ianto had questions of his own, but he held them, instead observing Alice watch the aliens around them. She'd spent more time in space than he had, but she gasped when they passed a rolling ball of iridescent green fur which ducked to allow a sloping brown-gold giant the right of way.

Ianto saved his wonder for the architecture. He'd lived in a willowy spire with Jack, thought he could even pick out which one, but the bulbous shapes of the other buildings brought back sharp memories: fear, loneliness, the patter of voices speaking Nardek, long hours at work, longer nights beside a man who couldn't

be allowed to remember him. He gaped, piecing together landmarks from his memories.

Jack leaned over. "You look like a tourist."

"Couldn't be. I'm not asking what the funny words on the monument mean."

Something flickered in Jack's eyes. Ianto chose to believe it was recognition, though Jack probably had forgotten the Plass entirely by now. Then Jack said, "Didn't you tell people it was Welsh for 'I adore my beautiful sheep?'"

Jenny's laugh pealed out unexpectedly, as Ianto said, "No. That was Owen." In a lower voice, he said, "I used to say it meant, 'Fuck the bloody English.'" The smile that earned him from Jack was more than worth the glare from Alice.

Their clothing wouldn't draw attention on the streets, not in a port city like this, but walking brazenly into the Time Agency would require better camouflage. Ianto recalled the humiliating dance of acquiring fresh clothing when he'd first arrived here after his unexpected resurrection, but this Jack was far more willing to purchase off the rack, as it were. Two hours after their arrival, Jack and Hart were bedecked in matching navy blue Time Agent uniforms, while Ianto, Alice and Jenny were garbed as office workers. (No suits. Definitely no ties.) Jack had dyed the grey from his hair, and Ianto found that he already missed running his fingers through the silver edging.

"This is never going to work," Hart said, as Jenny emerged last from where she'd gone to change. The clothes were perfect, Jack claimed, but something about Jenny was too vibrant and intense to be disguised by mere fabrics.

Jack said, "You just keep your part and don't worry about it."

As they approached the Agency building, Ianto's palms started to sweat. He'd only been inside once, the day they brought him back from the dead, and while reviving from death was certainly better than dying had been, he still considered the whole mess one of his worst days.

Jack hung back two steps, letting Hart lead the way and allowing the two women to get ahead of them. In a whisper, he asked, "Are you going to be okay?"

"Fine. I never expected to come back here willingly."

"That makes two of us." Jack looked at him, and Ianto saw his worries reflected back, and that was enough to clamp down on his own fears for now. Jack had lived through various forms of hell, and this place had to be bringing back unpleasant memories. Ianto gave Jack's hand a quick squeeze before they reached the entrance. Even as he watched, Jack put on the old persona, the one that said he and Hart were privileged princes and none dare get in their damned way.

A guard, bored, waved them all in as Hart flashed his credentials with a swagger that Jack matched in spades. As the gate shut behind them, Ianto tried not to shudder.

The corridors all looked the same, but Hart led them via a winding path to a quiet spot not far from the entrance. He pointed down the hallway. "Two rights, second door. You'll need this." He handed Jenny an ID chip. "No-one should question you. If they do, you're running a search for Mr. Hardison."

"Who's that?" asked Alice as Jack handed her his sidearm.

"One of the Directors," said Jack. "Meet us back here in an hour." He tapped the bulky wristwatch Hilda had provided, matching the ones they all wore. Ianto's felt heavy on his arm, and Jack caught his eye again. "Anyone not here, we're coming to find you."

"Understood," said Jenny, and she and Alice were off.

Silently, Hart led Ianto and Jack in a different direction. Jack was clearly counting doorways and trying to remember where things were in case their guide betrayed them. Ianto counted his own doorways, in case he needed to escape without either of them. He remembered this, barely, from his mad dash to freedom when he'd first arrived in the fifty-first century, but then all office buildings took on a similar form from their function. While Time Agents and their masters plotted out the past and future of the human race, underlings still had to mind the paperwork, fetch food and drink, and get on with the day to day business of keeping the organisation running smoothly.

He let the clothing settle him into the proper mindset: don't mind me, the harried clerk, looking after these big, arrogant babies. The persona he wore was familiar in any time, and he let a half-smile hide behind his mild impatience. Really, these Time Agents couldn't tie their own shoes without someone there to file a Form 792-B in triplicate. He met the eyes of other clerks and staffers as they passed in the halls, human and humanlike and not, all joined in the brotherhood of understaffers everywhere whose fate it was to sweep up messes both literal and figurative on a meagre salary with a reasonable benefits package.

He ought to ask Jack if the Time Agency offered paid holidays.

They went up three flights of stairs, past another gate, and through a section that Hart and Jack were waved through, but only Hart's annoyed wave and grab got Ianto through as well. The security wasn't tight, but then, who would suspect two Agents of breaking into their own building?

"All right," said Hart, stopping suddenly in front of a door. "Eye Candy can wait out here. Look inconspicuous."

"Here," Jack said, handing Ianto a datapad he'd snatched from an unguarded desk two turns ago. "Hold this."

Ianto took the prop, and watched them duck into the records room. Whenever someone walked by, his eyes darted down to the datapad, and he mumbled at it as if annoyed by what he read.

After a minute, he tried deciphering the language in front of him. Jack had taught him once, and over the years, he'd kept up a little, but it was difficult. He had a plan, though, one half-formed years ago and brought back by the lure of the technology available all around him. He hadn't mentioned his own plan to Jack, for fear of his reaction.

Keeping his face on the datapad, Ianto's eyes darted around as he walked away from the door. They wouldn't be long, and if this was going to work, he'd only get one chance. He found a sign that looked promising, and bit his lip, indeterminate. If he tried the handle and it was locked, he'd go back and not think about this again.

The handle was unlocked.

With one last glance down the hallway, Ianto let himself inside.

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Alice waited within the room while Jenny worked. She longed for her own gun rather than this unknown piece of tech in her hands, but Jack insisted the Agency did regular sweeps for anachronistic technology. A sonic pistol would pass unnoticed, especially one carried in by an Agent. Still, Alice would feel better with a weapon she knew.

"I was afraid of that," Jenny said.

"Tell."

"Hilda's software is a bit different from theirs. I'm going to have to rewrite some of the program." Her fingers flew across the keypad, striking the unfamiliar letters as easily as Alice would type her own name.

She'd long ago stopped asking Jenny how she knew so many details about language and culture and physics and more. The answers were always the same: the people who'd created her had pre-programmed her with basic information on how to fight and survive, but as for the rest, Jenny had no more idea than Alice did. Surely Time Lord knowledge wasn't passed on genetically? Jenny had an affinity (or in Jack's case, an allergy) for her father's former companions, it was true, but she didn't know details about them. Yet, without understanding how or why, she could spool out data on the decay cycles of stars, and express high-level mathematical theories using ideas Alice was certain didn't exist on Earth even in this time.

"There," Jenny said, with that note of pleasure in her voice. "That should take care of it."

"Just the overwrite?"

"For the moment." She bent back to her work to tweak the virus into something usable.

"I'll watch the door," said Alice, and waited for Jenny's nod before she slipped out into the corridor.

The Time Agency. God. She hadn't heard many stories at home, but she'd learned enough. Mum had insisted Dad keep the worst of his past from her until she was old enough to understand, and by then, she was too disgusted with him to care. Since starting her travels with Jenny, she'd learned any good that came of the Agency's stated purpose of protecting the human race was far overwhelmed by the evils they did in its name. Just something else she'd privately added to her list of grievances against her father, she knew.

She caught sight of a trio of Time Agents at the end of the corridor, bent and whispering to each other instead of striding like she expected. They should be sneering. Alice was sure all of them sneered. Lega had, before she'd changed her mind and died for it.

The weapon was easy enough to hide behind her back, shoved into the waistband of her trousers and hidden under her loose shirt.

One of the Agents broke from the others and came towards her. Suddenly she wished she'd stayed in the room with her friend. "You," said the translator in her ear. "You're not supposed to be in this section." The woman reached her, slid an arm under Alice's elbow. Alice was suddenly up close and personal to pale and blonde and cold all in one.

"Sorry," she stammered. "I'm new. Still getting my bearings. Isn't this Research?"

Now the Agent was completely in Alice's personal space, but backing away would mean hitting the doorway, and the less she drew attention to Jenny's work, the better. "No," the woman said. "That's two floors down. You really are new."

Alice recognised the smile forming on the woman's face. She'd seen her father show that same smile countless times, occasionally to her boyfriends unlucky enough to have been brought home during one of his rare visits.

"Leave it," said one of the woman's friends. "Playtime later. This is serious."

"Jarron's run off in a snit. Probably had a row with Georgn again. He'll be back in a week with a hangover and an excuse. Hardly what I would call 'serious.'" She returned her attention to Alice. "Now, where were we?"

"I was looking for Research." She prayed Jenny stayed put.

"I'll show you the way." The woman wrapped her arm around Alice's, and led her away from the doorway.

"Gerta ... " The other female Agent had a long-suffering tone to her voice.

"I'm bored. She's pretty."

Alice wondered what the etiquette in this century was for, "I'm not interested." Knowing the two examples of the time period that she did, she doubted the phrase ever came up. Perhaps she could convince Gerta to stay in a closer hallway, have a quick grope to allay suspicion, and then make her way back.

"I'm Melissa," she said, because it was easy to remember.

An alarm sounded. The pleasant touch on her arm went like steel, as Gerta's eyes focused on her in a completely different way.

"Where's your ID?"

Alice went for her wristwatch, which Hilda had outfitted with a tiny transmat unit for each of them in case of an emergency getaway. Gerta was faster, though, and yanked Alice's arm in a vicious twist, stripping the watch off her neatly.

Alice really hated Time Agents.

She bent her body with Gerta and with her free hand, reached back for the gun. If she wasn't getting out of here alive, she'd have the pleasure of taking one of them with her.

As she swung the pistol around, her arm was met with a strong kick, followed by a headbutt to the face. Her fingers went numb but she managed to hold onto the gun. Just a little further.

Gerta squeezed down on her other arm, and Alice swallowed a scream as she heard something crack. The weapon clattered to the hard floor, and her vision swam.

"So," she said, gasping in pain while the other two came to help take her into custody.

"Fancy a snog?"

-----

lanto scanned the room, looking for the right cupboard. Not all of the Agency's proprietary tech was in here, but there was enough. He read label after label, trying to make sense of them.

The door opened. He pressed his back firmly against the closest wall, wishing Jack had left him a weapon.

Hart's head came into view, and lanto sighed in unexpected relief. "Wondered where you'd run off to," Hart drawled.

"Just looking around," he replied, relief vanishing in the light of discovery. All that for nothing.

To his surprise, Hart began opening cupboards and stuffing his pockets with whatever he found. "What are you doing?" asked lanto.

"The same thing you were about to do. This is my last chance to get hold of Agency tech. Everything falls apart after this. I want the good stuff."

lanto considered castigating him for the theft. Then he joined him, rummaging through cupboards and drawers, searching for his prize. There! His fingers closed around a phial, and an electric tingle moved through him, imagined or not.

Hart chuckled. "All this, and that's what you want?"

"Only thing worth stealing," said lanto, intentionally dismissing the bulges in Hart's uniform pockets.

One phial of nanogenes, carefully labelled, sat in his hand like the ticket to every second chance he'd ever wanted. Jack was proof that immortality was more curse than gift, but if lanto preserved and extended his own life, he could offer Jack company for a long, long time. lanto hid the phial deep in an internal pocket, telling his racing heart to calm down. This was insurance, that's all. Life insurance.

"We should get back."

"Gorgeous is still working on locating the planet where they stowed you early twenty-first century types. We can gran the system, but the search function is a bugger."

An alarm went off. Their eyes met.

"Time to go," said Hart, and without waiting for lanto, he ducked out the door. lanto hurried to keep up, following him back towards Jack's location. A force field came up between them. Hart turned his head, shrugged, and kept moving as lanto ran his hands over the sparking, immovable wall separating them.

Jack ducked out of the room and locked onto lanto. "You okay?"

lanto nodded. "Did you find it?"

Jack's face froze, and then he shook his head.

"I told you to let me look," said Hart, but that had never been an option.

Footsteps hurried around the corner from them. They'd be discovered in moments. Hart pressed a button on his "wristwatch" and vanished. lanto had expected him to use his VM, but then, he wouldn't get the rest of his money that way, would he?

Jack said, "We'll transmat out, try again. We'll come earlier."

"Can't," lanto said. "Too risky, you said."

"I'm better at time travel than you." There was a desperate edge to his voice. "We'll come back. Hit your transmat."

The footsteps rounded the corner, and guards had their guns trained on Jack. "Agent JH Alpha27, you are hereby ordered to stand

down. You are charged with desertion of duty, conduct unbecoming an Agent, and gross insubordination."

Jack's face broke into a fond smile. "I remember that! I left the Director that present in his office before I quit." According to Jack's memoirs, he'd written a long screed accusing the Time Agency of memwiping him, denouncing the Agency's methods, and questioning the Director's personal hygiene choices. Then he'd defecated on the Director's desk. He wrote that, in hindsight, choosing to resign while stinking drunk had been a bad plan.

Without turning, but throwing his voice towards Ianto, Jack said, "Run. Now."

Ianto turned from the force field and dashed in the other direction. Behind him, he heard the brief whine of the transmat just as the guards opened fire on Jack.

Jack would be all right. Jack was always all right.

Ianto ran down the corridor to a dead end. No escape from here. His hand went to his wristwatch. One press, and he'd be taken back to their emergency rendezvous point near the spaceport. He dropped his arm, let it fall to his side.

The force field shut off behind him. The guards approached as he turned around and raised his hands over his head. "I surrender."

-----

Jack materialised beside John. Jenny appeared a moment later.

"Where's Alice?" Jack demanded.

"She should be here any moment," Jenny said. Alice failed to appear.

"Shouldn't Eye Candy have joined us by now?"

"No." Jack checked the time. Still no Alice. "Do you have communications with her?"

Jenny nodded and touched her ear. "Alice? Are you all right?" She frowned. "No answer."

The worry he'd barely been keeping in check for Ianto came back hard for Alice. "We'll have to go back in for her."

"Don't think so," said John, who was watching his Vortex Manipulator. "The whole building's on alert now. You set off the alarm?"

"Probably." He'd been searching for the information, trying to remember this system, trying to put dates and names into something he could use. He'd granned it before, he knew. Hell, he'd have been the one to find the planet the last time for them to have left the kids there. But he'd forgotten so much, and when he'd made a simple error, the machine had scanned him for ID. Stupid.

Even as he watched, Jenny was already hurrying back towards the spaceport. Jack loped to catch up. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to see if Hilda can get a location on Alice's comm. I should be able to rig up a remote transmat from the ship to grab her."

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Gerta and her associates dragged Alice to a holding area. She mentally prepared herself to be hurt further, but other than one last pull at her aching wrist, she was left unharmed. As soon as the door was locked, she touched her ear with her good hand.

"Jenny!" she whispered as loud as she could. "Hilda!" Neither answered. Alice swore. She glanced around the room, saw what was probably a camera, and swore again. Without her transmat, the best she could hope was that Hilda locked onto her comm signal.

She paced the room, searching for some means of escape. She didn't expect to find one, and she wasn't disappointed. After a while, the door opened and she was escorted to an office. The part of her brain that constantly amazed at the sights and experiences she'd had outside of her home time was thrown into a loop by the sheer normalcy of the office, from the plain desk and severe chairs to the unsettling beige of it all.

The man behind the desk wore a plain white outfit. He was flanked on either side by two humans (she couldn't determine their sexes with an easy glance) in bright blue.

"Look, there's been some sort of mistake."

The man said something in a language she didn't recognise. Automatically, her hand went to her ear to smack the translator. He smiled. "I thought as much," he said in English.

The door behind her opened and two blue guards brought in Ianto, whose mouth dropped and then closed again rapidly when he saw her. He struggled against his guards, but Alice herself had done many a fake struggle and saw the distraction from a mile away.

She bolted for the door, which was blocked by two more guards in blue. They were armed. The door closed.

"If you're quite done," said the man, and he indicated two chairs at the desk for them to sit.

Alice took a seat, massaging her wrist. Ianto was pushed into the other chair. Fantastic.

One of the guards behind the desk held a small device, which s/he handed to the man in white. He waved the device at both of them, and pressed something on the pad.

"Adult post-pubescent human male. Genome matched to Unit 2009C36." He smiled unpleasantly. "We've been looking for you. To be honest, I didn't think we'd find you inside the building."

Ianto shrugged. That led credence to what Jack had told her, anyway.

The man in white turned his attention to Alice. "Adult post-pubescent human female, recent onset of menopause." Alice glared. "Genome anomaly. Genetic composition appears to be half twentieth century, half fifty-first century. Interesting." He pressed another button. "Agent JH Alpha27 identified as father. Temporal genetic flux appears to be minimal."

She settled for bullshit. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"One of our agents went rogue two days ago by our reckoning. You share half his genes. The other half of your genetic profile suggests you are from the same time as Unit 2009C36."

"Sir," said one of the guards, "there's a rumour going around that the Agent was harbouring a fuge."

The man in white asked Alice, "Did Agent JH Alpha27 keep your mother as a sex slave?"

Horror filled her. "What? No. He ... No. He wouldn't." She rounded on Ianto. "Would he?"

He wouldn't meet her eyes, because neither of them knew for sure what Jack would do, what he'd done. Jack was a murderer, after all.

"Oh, never mind!" She turned back to the man in white. "No, my mother wasn't a sex slave. They worked together. He had sex with all the people he worked with at one point or another." She didn't look to see if there was a flinch at her words, but she rather hoped there was. "One broken condom later, here I am."

The man made a note on his device. "No other genetic problems detected. You're from the late twentieth century, early twenty-first, then?" She didn't answer. "Good. Your name?"

"Alice Carter."

"Thank you."

He turned his attention away from them and to the guards. "Remove the last of any anachronistic technology from them and take them for processing." He handed the device to one of the blue guards.

Another guard ran a handheld machine over them, beeping at her ear. "Hey!"

"Your communications device has already been disabled." She twitched as the comm was pulled from her ear and placed into a plastic storage box.

The machine beeped at Ianto's wristwatch. He let them take it, but struggled when the guard reached into his clothes and pulled out a small phial.

"This is a highly controlled substance," said the man in white when the phial was passed to him. He added the phial to the box, then checked a panel on his desk. "A number of

classified items were stolen at the same time the alert went off. Did Agent JH Alpha27 take them?"

Ianto went slack. Then he growled, "The bastard told me he'd give me half of whatever we took, and then he fucking left me here."

"I see," said the man in white. Alice tried not to laugh.

The guard scanned Ianto further, and made to move away when something beeped again. The machine homed in on the ring on his left hand.

"No!" Ianto pulled his hand back towards him. "Please. That's not tech. It's just an alloy. In my time, you exchange them when you marry." His face lost all the anger, was left open and sad. "Please."

The man looked down at his panel, reading something. "I've processed many units from your time and am familiar with the custom. You may keep it for now."

"Thank you." The rest of his sweep came up clean.

Arms took hold of her, and Alice winced. They were taken from the room and escorted down several turns and hallways into another room. Equipment lined the shelves. An unsmiling technician in red greeted them coolly, taking the device from the guard.

"This will be the medical portion of your processing. Please sit."

They weren't given much of an option, but were placed in chairs at a slight lounge, which Alice found she could not get out of again.

The technician ran a scanner over both of them, and paused at Alice's wrist. "Injury detected." She went to the shelf and retrieved a phial like the one they'd taken off Ianto.

"What's that?"

"Nanogenes," Ianto said. "They can fix almost anything. Brought me back from the dead. Jack, too, once." No wonder he'd stolen some. She'd always found the thought of Jack's immortality unsettling. Perhaps Ianto had decided to even the odds a bit.

Golden glitter floated out of the bottle as the tech opened it, settling on her arm in a cloud of pinpricks. Warmth touched her wrist, and the pain was gone. The tech shushed the nanogenes back into the bottle, carefully capped it, and placed it on the shelf. Ianto's eyes stayed locked on where she'd set the phial while the tech retrieved something new.

Alice felt a sharp jab in her arm. "Ow! I thought inoculations were supposed to be easier in the future." She only felt a little better when Ianto said his own, "Ouch!"

"You are being immunised against most known diseases. You have also been given a broad-spectrum immune boost to increase your ability to resist infection. When the process is complete, your bodies will be nearly optimised to fifty-first century standards. You will be stronger and healthier than you remember, and unforeseen accidents notwithstanding, you should expect a lifespan of approximately two hundred years."

Another jab. Alice winced. Ianto didn't get a second shot. "What's that for?"

"Your hormonal levels are being restabilised to more favourable conditions for reproduction."

The technician didn't bother to meet her eyes, and Ianto very pointedly looked away.

"Excuse me?"

"The program," said the tech in a bored voice, "is designed to rebuild the human population following near-extinction events. You're no good to us if you can't breed."

Alice's hands formed into fists on their own accord, but as she tried to rise from the chair, the electric bands forced her gently but firmly into place. "How dare you."

Still bored, and clearly having had this argument before with prior subjects, the tech said, "We are saving the human race using diverse genetic materials from units which would have died otherwise." She nodded towards Ianto. "I processed that group from 2009. Approximately one hundred units, most of them within breeding age and none with a genetic problem we couldn't easily correct. By your reckoning, they were dead and wasted. Place them on a planet with other colonies fetched from a similar period, and there's a world ready to seed the galaxy when the time comes."

"What if they don't want to breed?" She remembered lying beside Joe on warm sand, hands mingled, talking about children. They'd wanted five of them. God, she'd been so young.

"Then they don't. Once you're in a colony, your decisions are your own. We can provide a list of good genetic matches, but if the colony has been built properly, there are very few bad matches. For example," she said, examining an instrument on a table beside her, "there is a ninety-eight percent chance that the two of

you could successfully produce a viable child within a standard year's time."

"The two of ... " She looked at Ianto, and her mouth dropped. "Oh my God, no. Not ever."

"As I said," said the tech, "your decision. You will be placed at an interval after the initial colony setup in order to avoid timeline confusion with the support team assigned to the planet. Many units will have already established relationships, which will limit your options. Both of you."

"Not interested."

"And I'm spoken for," Ianto said.

"From your home time? That will be taken care of during your psychological processing."

Alice didn't like the sound of that, but like too many things in this situation, she doubted she was going to get a choice about it. Where was Jenny?

-----

"Any luck?"

Jenny calculated an 85% chance that the expression on his face matched with the tone in his voice indicated Jack was anxious. She could not be fully certain due to the intentional changes he made to his facial features, probably to lessen the appearance of worry, and she attempted to mimic him, thereby reflecting the emotion back.

"Our comms are blocked by something in the building."

"The alarm," said Hart. "Standard protocol, jamming transmissions in and out." His expression and tone were of smug disinterest.

She calculated a 90% probability that the disinterest was false. This did not prevent her desire to punch him in the mouth.

"What about the other transmission?" Jack asked, arm folded.

Jenny said, "We have a clear signal." The Time Agency had yet to discover this particular form of energy.

Hart said, "You've got her. So beam her up."

"That's not Alice," said Jack.

Hart's eyebrows shot up. "You think they'll take Eye Candy back to the planet we're looking for. You're tracking him," he said accusingly.

"Simple enough plan," Jack said, his eyes on the readout from the transmitter.

"And the reason you didn't tell me about it?"

"You'd have found a way to intervene," said Jenny. "You are untrustworthy."

He rolled his eyes, but she noticed he didn't argue the point.

"All right," Jack said. "Can you do a lifeform search? Unless they've just done a collection, there should only be two people in the building with late twentieth century genetic codes, and we're tracking one of them."

She shook her head. "Hilda's scanners can't reach inside the Agency building, not now."

"Fine. We'll go back inside after her." He turned and headed towards the hatch.

"Bad plan," said Hart. "They're looking for you now. You won't be allowed anywhere near the place."

"We're not leaving her there!" Jack snapped.

"John and I will go. We haven't been discovered yet, and he's the one with the passcodes."

A smile slid across Hart's face, and he went to put his arm around her shoulder. Her muscles working on automatic, Jenny grabbed his arm and threw him to the deck, placing her boot on his throat. Her programming identified him as an enemy, not to be trusted, terminate on sight, and only the thought of her father prevented her from pressing down. She saw his twitch before his hand snaked out to try to trip her, and she dodged it, then stepped off.

"I warned you about touching. We're going now." She allowed him to rise to his feet. "Hilda, please keep track of us until we're inside. In the meantime, see if you can listen in on Agency traffic. They might tell us where they've taken Alice. All right, dear?"

"All right," said Hilda.

"Tell Jack if you find anything."

"Yes, Jenny." Jenny hoped that wasn't a giggle. With a last glance at Jack, she went out.

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"So," said the pleasantly bland woman in the purple suit, "tell me about your skills."

Ianto stared at her. "My skills?"

"We'll be providing a skills template to help you adjust to life in the colony, but if you can give me an idea of your already-existent abilities, we'll be able to provide you with the most suitable option for you." She smiled encouragingly. "What did you do for a living in the twenty-first century?"

Fought aliens. Filed anachronistic and extraterrestrial artefacts away for safe keeping. Disposed of bodies. Provided food, drink, laundry services, and sexual favours to my employer. "General admin work."

The woman in purple made a note. "Any hobbies or activities that might be relevant? Agricultural background in your family?"

For the past twenty years Jack and I have grown most of our own food, hunted for game and fished the rivers. "A bit. More of a focus on crops than animal husbandry." Ianto was willing to put up with a lot for this plan, but he refused to deal with sheep.

"Any child care? Construction work?"

"No."

"Thank you." She looked at her datapad. "Hold still."

A shivery coolness settled between his ears, like someone had poured ice water inside his brain. Ianto gasped from the cold, saw the edges of a blue light shining down from above him. His thoughts filled with crop rotation and nitrogen balance and good soil mixtures for various forms of vegetation, including several he'd never encountered before despite suddenly knowing their vitamin and nutrient levels. He knew how to sow and harvest, how to care for the plants and how to store their bounty.

The cold faded.

"Tell me that has a 'Kung Fu' setting."

The woman's expression didn't change. "Now we will go over some of the changes you will be experiencing as a result of your temporal dislocation. You should know that you are

three thousand years in your future." She said this carefully, offering her hand for support if he needed it.

"I know."

She blinked. "Were you already exposed to this information?"

"Yes."

She returned to her script. "You may feel grief at the loss of your former life, and the friends and family you have left behind. We cannot provide you information about your loved ones, but rest assured, most of those you left behind went on to live full, satisfying lives."

"My sister died when she was fifty-nine. She married twice. Both of her children lived at least into adulthood." He folded his arms.

"How do you know that?"

"I just do. Anything else?"

"Yes, yes." Her eyes flickered back to the datapad. "Unless your spouse was part of our collection of your site, he or she moved on without you and has been dead for many years. You are no longer married. This may come as a shock to you, and you may need time to adjust to the information. If you would like to request grief counselling, I can schedule sessions for you after your placement at the colony. Should you find the memories to be too painful, we can arrange alternatives."

"Thank you, no."

"If you change your mind, the colony will be visited at regular intervals by our staff to help ease your transition, and you may make a request at any time." She offered up another insipid smile. He was reminded strongly of the

Human Resources department at Torchwood London, all false joviality and easy psychological profiles as employees filled out non-disclosure agreements and signed away their futures for a paycheque.

Another smile. "One of the best things about our program is the opportunity for you to make a fresh start. Your life will begin again with this second chance. A new career, a new spouse, and the knowledge that you will be helping the human race survive. While you may experience some feelings of loss, your new life will have many advantages you cannot even imagine."

lanto laughed. He couldn't stop it, not if he'd tried and he didn't try. The laugh boiled out of unexpected places inside of him, and he let it go until his sides hurt and his stomach felt ill. The woman in purple watched him sympathetically.

"That's rich," he said, when he could breathe again. "A new life, full of new opportunities. You tell all your breeding stock this?"

At last, she frowned. "We don't like to use the term 'stock.'"

"The rest of the Agency does. That's what we are to you, isn't it?"

She smiled but did not answer, touched part of the pad instead. "Sir."

"Yes?"

"Unit 2009C36 is the recovered subject?"

"Yes. *It should be part of the record.*"

"Yes, sir. I didn't see the note. Thank you." She closed the circuit and smiled yet again.

"I'm sorry, you've been processed incorrectly."

"Does that mean you'll take away the farming implants?"

"No, we'll simply have to re-install them." She touched the pad. "Sit still, please." A joke: he couldn't move from the chair regardless. His legs and bottom were going numb from the lack of movement. "Your record says you have been here approximately two years." She pressed a button.

Another light appeared above his head, this one a cool green. He had time to wonder what in the world this part of the process was, when he felt an eerie trickle inside of his mind.

"Close your eyes," said the woman pleasantly. "You'll feel tired. When the memory wipe is complete, we'll begin again."

Memory ... "No!" Ianto tried to struggle against the invisible bonds of the chair, kick out his legs, something, but the pressure held tight, and there was nothing but the woman's smile, nothing but the cool green slipping into his brain like a sweet, sleepy dream.

"So," said a voice from far away. "Tell me about your skills."

-----

"Going in," said Jenny to her earpiece just before they reached the front gate.

*"Good luck."*

The guard stopped them, demanding Hart's codes and inspecting them thoroughly.

"I was just here," said Hart irritably. "Is this really necessary?"

"Sorry, sir. We've had an incursion, and the bosses want the heads of whoever let the spies in."

"Spies?" Jenny gasped with what she hoped was a good impression of shock.

"One of the Agents." The guard glanced at Hart. "They say he stole massive amounts of classified tech, and tried to crash the system. We're supposed to stop even the highest-ranking Agents now."

"That's awful," said Jenny, well aware of her own lack of identification.

Hart laughed. "You left your badge back at the pub, didn't you?"

"What?"

He pointed at her chest, careful not to touch. "You set it down when we got drinks." She was 60% certain he wanted her to follow along with this line of dissembling. There was a mad part of her that wanted to announce she was an inspector from the Assembly on a surprise visit, and bluff her way inside. With psychic paper to help, she estimated she'd have a 99% chance of effectiveness. But she lacked psychic paper.

She turned to the guard. "Can I still go inside? I promise I'll get my badge after work."

"Afraid not. If you'd asked me this morning, I'd have said yes, but ... " He shrugged.

"You go get it, love," said Hart. "I'll tell your boss you'll be late."

"Thank you," she said, and turned around. Hart would have to retrieve Alice alone. She calculated a 95% chance that Alice was going to be enraged when she saw him.

-----  
Alice rubbed her aching head, blinking back tears she refused to shed. The man in the purple suit had said she'd be ideal for child care duties, and plunged data into her head like an ice pick, each shove dislodging memories she'd buried to stay sane. Alice had been an expert at child care, once.

They'd brought her to another holding cell, or maybe the same one again. No sign of Jenny, which was bad. No sign of Ianto, which might be worse and might not. His plan was risky, and she hadn't intended to be part of it.

The door opened, and her head shot up, hand automatically brushing at her face. A blue guard led her out, past a series of rooms she couldn't see into, to a large room behind a security door.

"What's this?" she demanded as they went inside. Ianto was already standing in the room, face drawn into confusion as he saw her. Dad never did pick them for their intelligence. (Except for her mother, she amended with loyalty.)

The man in white had returned and was standing behind an ominous-looking control panel. The last electronic device she'd run into had plugged a career directly into her mind. This one didn't look any more promising. The man said, "You are being introduced to the colony approximately two years after its founding, due to temporal concerns of the staff. Your progress will be monitored, and if you have any questions, please address a staff member at any time."

"Why am I being sent to the colony? I wasn't part of the Thames House disaster."

"You are temporally displaced. By your own words, you were born in the late twentieth century."

"I could go back."

"You don't. Our records of the time indicate death or disappearance in early 2010. You'll be a good fit for the colony."

She calmed herself. Fighting her way out of here wasn't going to work. Talking her way out was just as unlikely at this point. She had to trust to the plan, trust that Hilda would be able to track them through time and space by the transmitter hidden in Ianto's ring. When Jack had explained they'd stolen the idea from Hart, she'd been torn between shouting again and admiring the chutzpah.

The guard placed her on the metal platform beside Ianto. The Agency had mass temporal transportation capabilities, Jack had said. It was how they moved large groups instead of one by one with a Vortex Manipulator, but the power expense was steep. The three guards and the boxes of what appeared to be supplies around them suggested why they were using it this time.

"Are you all right?" she asked Ianto in a whisper as the man in white readied the chamber for transport.

"Fine. Bit of a headache from the skill set implant. And yourself?"

"Same."

He nodded. Then he held out his right hand politely. "Ianto Jones. We appear to be stuck together for the time being."

She stared at his hand. With a sharp intake of breath, her eyes darted to the other, which

hung lightly against his side, bare of any rings.  
"Ianto?"

"It's a family name," he said. "After my grandfather. And you are?" The extended hand stayed out.

Please let him be acting. Please let him have the damned ring hidden in a pocket somewhere. Please. "Alice." There was a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

"Not Alice Carter?"

She nodded. It had to be a ruse. But why would he admit knowing her if it was a ruse? Damn Jack and his mad plans. Mum said half of them didn't work, and the other half only worked because they involved his getting naked.

Ianto's face went sad. "You don't know me, and I suspect you won't like me much when you do, but I wanted to say, I am so sorry for your loss."

His eyes were guileless. The cold feeling she was trying to ignore in the pit of her stomach blossomed.

"Oh God."

"Safe trip," said the man in white to the guards, and Alice felt her navel twitch. The world wrapped around her and changed to light and green and golden.

## Chapter Four

"Your successes may move you ahead in life, but your failures stay with you forever. Trust me on this." - from "Me: An Autobiography"

-----

John followed the beeping signal from the bloody ring. Jack's plan was stupidly simple, which meant something was going to go wrong. You didn't know someone this long without figuring out how bad he was at making plans. Still, now that John was inside, he could gran the system himself to find the kiddies, rescue Jack's daughter and Jack's crumpet at the same time, and then Jack would owe him. Big.

He grinned, opening the door to where the signal led, mouth already open in an excuse.

No-one was in the room. The signal emanated from a plastic box filled with discarded junk. Process box, he thought. Take all the shinies off the stock, have some underling go through each piece to check for usefulness or value, file the good stuff, discard the rest. Back in the day, he'd nobbed more than a few of the filing-types; there was something to be said for sex with someone who was meticulous and detail-oriented.

In the box, John recognised two of the snazzy wristwatches, a communications earpiece, and a small phial of nanogenes. He pocketed the phial, because Eye Candy wasn't completely brainless, was he? Magic sparklies meant surviving anything. The signal ring glittered beneath it, abandoned. John hesitated, then pocketed that as well.

The computer station in the room wasn't nearly as secure as it should have been. Two

units had just shipped to a classified location. One included a memwipe.

He'd need to get to the systems in the classified area to find out where and when the colony was. Choosing to be stealthy by being obvious, he swaggered his way to the proper area -- pausing to flirt with passing bits of beautiful, because you never knew -- only to find that the entire floor was under tight lockdown after the break-in.

"Well, then," he said to himself.

A guard noticed him. "Sir, respectfully, this floor is sealed off until further notice."

"Don't tell me what to do. You're a peon."

The guard tilted her head. "Sir, please. Our orders are not to let anyone through, not even Agents."

"But you're allowed to stand here. Where's the logic in that?" He considered pulling out his weapon and just shooting, but there were twelve guards and one of him, and frankly, he wasn't interested enough in Jack's little quest to risk his own neck.

"Sir?"

"Fuck off," he said in English, knowing the guards wouldn't understand. He turned on his heel and stalked towards an abandoned corridor to transmat back. No sense walking to deliver the news.

-----

John was alone when he came back to the ship, and Jack bit back his shout of anger and disappointment. "Tell me."

"They've already been sent off, classified location."

Jack nodded. "That'll be the planet we're looking for. Tell me they sent Alice to the same place."

"Far as I know, they did."

Jenny said, "Then we just track them." She turned to the ship's controls and initiated the tracker. "That can't be right."

John pulled something from his pocket and tossed it to Jack, who nearly fumbled the catch. The transmitter ring. He held it between two fingers. "That's a problem."

Jenny sighed. "We need to get back in the Agency's computers."

"Not today," John said. "Thanks to our little raiding party, they're locked up tight. No-one's getting in. And the younger version of yours truly gets back from assignment tomorrow."

"We jump," Jack said. "Find another time when you're not around."

"After this? There aren't any times left until the Agency falls. I remember this. Bad situation after you left, everyone suspicious of everyone else. Agents were called off their missions or sent in secret, assignments made even less sense than normal, heads rolled. Thanks to your little announcement about being memwiped, anyone with a lost weekend started thinking they were getting fucked over by the Agency. People vanished in the middle of the night. I stayed and watched it all crumble."

"And got out with plenty of contraband?" asked Jenny.

"I wasn't getting paid anymore at the end. Had to make a living somehow." He looked at Jack. "I had holes in my memory. You didn't see me running around whining about it."

"I thought they stole two years of my life."

"You thought?"

Jack chose to look at the computer readout instead of at John. "That turns out not to have been the case."

"Someone else memwiped you? Or you just drank too much?"

"Retcon. I took it myself to avoid contaminating the timeline."

John threw back his head in bitter laughter. When he calmed down, he said, "You're telling me the Time Agency fell because you memwiped yourself and forgot about it?"

"The Time Agency was going to fall anyway," Jenny said. "It was unstable."

"If you say so," said John. "Oh. You should know. One of the units they sent was memwiped. The record didn't say which one."

Jack's eyes flicked over to Jenny, who'd frozen. "Did they say the duration?"

"No."

Memwipes were tricky. The machine worked with a backwards-wipe from the present, with settings from a few days to decades depending on need. Stubborn or potentially suicidal units might be memwiped back to adolescence if the psychological testing suggested they'd be better colonists without pesky memories of the people they'd left behind in their old lives. It'd been a risk with this mission, but he'd talked

things out with Ianto when they'd hatched the backup plan. Ianto had planned to cooperate as much as possible, with an easy story on where he'd been. Alice hadn't been prepped that far, though, and she had plenty of reasons to want to forget the last decade or two.

"I'm sure they're fine," he said, without believing his own words.

-----

The smells assaulted her here: dung and compost and fresh cut wood and growing things. As a child, her school had taken the class on a field trip to a farm so the children could see where their food came from. She'd met stinking pigs and obnoxious sheep, and had her hand licked by a cow, and this was the sum total of Alice's rural experiences in her old existence. She'd lived in cities her whole life, and she'd been happy with that. Travelling with Jenny, she'd been in many situations both urban and abandoned, alien worlds and even Earth at all time periods. She'd met people of all shapes and colours and species, fought some and loved some and saved some, but the first thing she ever noticed about a new place was its smell.

Alice took in deep gulps of air to acclimate herself. Beside her, Ianto made a face and covered his nose.

A middle-aged man and woman waited for them at the steps of a large, pre-fabricated wooden building painted white. "Welcome," said the woman. She had ash-blond hair pulled back from her face and a tilted smile. "I'm Flora Mayhew."

"Harry Smith," said the dark-haired man beside her, and he shook Ianto's hand and then

Alice's. "We weren't expecting new people to join us."

"We were placed here," said Alice. "Alice Carter."

Ianto introduced himself with an absent smile. Now that she knew what to look for, she saw the dullness around his eyes. Drugged, she guessed, to keep him pliant.

The guards said, "We'll unload the supplies. Why don't you show these two around and get them settled?" Now that they were away from the Agency, the guards seemed less distant.

Flora nodded at them. "Come on in. Our Town Hall was the first building at this site, so it's nothing fancy." Inside, the building was simple, but efficient: small offices in the front, restroom facilities, and a large meeting room taking up most of the structure. Alice wouldn't have blinked to find the floor plan in any little town she could name back home.

Harry said, "We're small enough that we tend to vote on everything as a group, and the town committee -- that'd be the two of us -- gets the day to day work done."

"What did they program you with?" Flora asked.

"Child care," said Alice.

"Agricultural work," Ianto said. "I have an urge to go plant something." Flora and Harry laughed, while Alice frowned.

"I think I need a moment."

"Of course," said Harry. "It takes a while to get used to this place. It's a bit overwhelming, being dead and then coming here." Something slipped behind his eyes. Then he took Ianto to

see the maps of the field layouts surrounding the town.

Flora touched Alice's arm. "Did you work together at Thames House?"

"No. We're not from the original collection. We lived at the same time, though."

Flora nodded. "Your friend, they wiped his memory, didn't they?"

Alice looked over at Ianto, but he kept the same bemused expression. "I think so. When he greeted me, he didn't remember meeting me before."

"Are the two of you together?"

"Not romantically."

"That's good, at least. We've had a few couples where they wiped one of them but not the other. Bit of heartbreak there."

"Did it happen to you?"

Flora shook her head. "My wife was left back in London. It's very strange, reminding myself that she's been dead for nine thousand years."

The enormity of it gave her pause. Alice had visited the distant past and over five billion years into the future, but no matter how far she went, the hurt followed. Now she was stuck here with no means of contacting Jenny, who could be anywhere, anywhen. She might never see her again, and would that make Jenny as lost to her as Steven?

She closed her eyes.

"Nine thousand. When are we?"

"Our colony was established to help ease a bottleneck event in AD 11300. There are five

colonies on this world, and we're one of the smaller ones. The closest is about ten kilometres away. When the time comes, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be here to help repopulate the human race."

"You've had children here?"

"One. I have another on the way, but I'm not showing yet." Alice's eyes automatically dropped to the other woman's abdomen, then dragged back up again. "It's funny," Flora said with a smile that said it wasn't funny at all.

"Back on Earth, I worked with spreadsheets all day. Now I help run the colony and my kids will be part of the main line of human genetics. Not what I went to uni for, I can tell you."

"I suppose not."

"When you start having children, you'll see."

"I'm not having children. I already had my child. He died."

"I'm sorry," said Flora, and Alice believed her. "Give yourself some time to adjust. You may change your mind. I named my daughter after my wife. It helped, a little." The woman wore her own grief on her face. Alice wondered how many colonists volunteered for the memory wipes, how many simply killed themselves to escape.

"Thank you," she said, because there was nothing else to say.

-----

"As I see it," said Jack, "we have two options. Both of them involve going back into the Time Agency. We have about two years between the acquisition of the Thames House group and now. We could go back to some point between and look in the computer records

again. Or we go to a point after the Agency falls and see if they've left any records behind them."

"They didn't," said Hart. "The last act of the management was to hide all traces of where they'd been."

"Hide them how?" asked Jenny suspiciously.

He shrugged. "The computer files were destroyed. A few Agents went after the colonies they knew about. It's a good gig: there's a bottleneck approaching, take over the only humans left. Most of the stock are so willing to roll over after the Agency's done with them that they won't even argue, and the ones that do argue are outgunned."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "Tried it?"

Another shrug. "Spent almost a year living like a king. Made a decree that everyone had to nob the boss. Great party."

If the disgust she'd felt for him could have grown, it would have. "You ordered them to sleep with you?"

"Not much sleep involved, love. Anyway, they voted me off the island, didn't they?"

Jack folded his arms. "I'm surprised they didn't behead you."

"They tried." He grinned darkly. "There's no telling which colonies got the instant god treatment. Be funny as hell if our little castaways ended up at mine, wouldn't it?" Jack and Jenny stared at him. "What?"

"Let's go," Jenny said, and she stroked Hilda's controls to life under her fingers. "Time to find Alice, dear."

-----

Since they'd missed lunch, Flora and Harry offered them sandwiches -- vegetables on coarse bread with a paper-thin slice of meat for each -- and given them some privacy. For the first time since her capture, Alice let herself relax, just a little. They were still in trouble, but they were no longer under observation.

"You don't remember meeting me, do you?"

"We never met," Ianto said. "Jack said you're a time traveller now."

"Yes. You've been on my ship. We came here to retrieve two little children you and Jack took from their parents."

He frowned. "That doesn't sound like something we'd do. We've been living on an uninhabited planet for years. Jack's afraid of running into himself or someone who knew him." He took a bite of the sandwich, made a face, and then took it apart fastidiously on the plate to reach just the bits he liked.

"You had to leave the planet. There was a volcano, I think."

"Really?"

"It's not important. Anyway, we found you, Jenny and me."

"Jenny who?"

"She's ... Jenny. We travel together." She's the best person I've ever known, and for some reason, she likes me. "You and Jack went on a mission together when he was a Time Agent. You rescued two children from a planet that was about to be destroyed. Any of this sounding familiar?"

He nodded. "I remember that. We took them to the same world where the Thames House survivors were taken."

"That's where we are now."

He started, sitting up and looked around himself. "We are?"

"Yes. You and I were captured by the Agency and sent here together. I think they took some of your memories."

Ianto looked around again, and she saw dawning horror and revulsion. "That makes sense," he said after a moment. "What did they do to me? Why did they take my memories?"

"I don't know. I want to figure out how much they've taken. You said you live with Jack?"

He nodded. "It's a lovely little world. Nice climate. We raise our own food, and about once a year, one of the trader ships comes into the system and we can restock on supplies, find out what's going on in the galaxy." The absent look was back in his eyes, but this had nothing to do with whatever sedatives the Agency had given him along with the mind wipe.

"A pretty prison is still a prison," she said, "no matter how big or who's there with you. And if you say something idiotic like, 'Nor iron bars a cage,' I'm going to smack you. Fair warning."

"Warning noted."

She sighed. "How long have you been on the planet with Jack?"

"Not quite twenty years."

She nodded. "You've lost a few years then, but not many. That's something."

"Does Jack know you're here?"

"He knows you are, and by now, they'll have noticed I'm missing. But the transmitter he was going to use to locate you is missing. Unless you find a ring in your pockets, we're stranded."

Ianto immediately patted himself down but found nothing. Alice hadn't let herself hope.

"All right," she said. "Jenny's brilliant. If there's a way to find us, she will. In the meantime, we're stuck here. At least there's civilisation." She picked at her own sandwich, but found she lacked an appetite.

"Alice?"

"Hm?"

"You know who I am. Do you hate me?"

She thought about it. "A little. If I had to pick someone to come back from the dead, it wouldn't have been one of Dad's shags."

"I know it doesn't make you feel any better to hear it, but I know Jack. If he'd had the choice, he'd have chosen Steven, too."

She stood up from her chair. "If you're done eating, we should rejoin the others." Without waiting for his reply, she hurried out. One room looked like another, but she located Flora and Harry.

"Have you rested?"

"Enough. What are you going to do with us?" Behind her Ianto approached but kept a respectful distance.

"Do?" Harry looked confused. "Well, we could start with a tour of the town. We'll introduce you around. Flora said you weren't at Thames House. Did you know anyone who was?"

"No," Ianto said, a bit too quickly.

"That's fine. We're all pretty friendly here. There's a dormitory for the single folks, but since it's your first night here, you're welcome to stay at our homes."

"Thank you," said Alice.

"Tomorrow, you can start work," Harry said happily. "We've got two new arrivals in the nursery, so you'll be busy."

Alice's head shot up, as did Ianto's. "Good," she said weakly. "I can't wait to meet them."

-----

Hilda brought them into orbit smoothly, activating the cloak as she did.

"Seven habitations located," she said. "Southern continent. Approximate population, two thousand humans."

Jenny pulled up the readings. "The largest colony has four hundred people. Do we know how large the one we're looking for would be?"

Jack came up beside her. "There were about one hundred in the original haul. But we don't know how long it's been since founding. They could have had children. People could have died off." He glanced over at John. "Any of these look familiar?"

"A colony's a colony. We were making plans to invade the others when I was asked to leave."

"We'll start with the largest one," Jack said, watching Jenny's face. "We can land here," he

pointed to a spot a few clicks away, "and walk in."

"If we're here after he was expelled, he's going to be a liability."

"Fine by me," John said. "I'll stay with the ship."

Jenny looked at Jack. "We're all going. One weapon, defensive only. This is reconnaissance. If we've found the correct colony, we can retrieve Alice and Ianto and then we can fine-tune the timing to get the children."

An hour later, they stood at the outskirts of the settlement, John complaining about the tiny biting insects nibbling at every inch of exposed skin, Jenny muttering under her breath about the men's lack of camouflage. Jack ignored them as well as he could, trying to get a better look at the colonists and scraping his memory to think of distinguishing characteristics of early twenty-first century humans from the United Kingdom. Tea was a safe topic, but cultural milestones were always tricky. Had disco died yet? Had they invented the glippy, or was that a few decades later? Later, he thought. Ianto had never mentioned owning one, but he still talked about his iPod as though he'd left Earth last week. Jack could work with that.

Now the question was, what was an iPod?

Jack saw a man working near the edge of the village. He waved a hand at Jenny and John to stay back, and put on his friendliest smile. "Hi there," he said, coming out of the protection of the overhanging trees. The man's head came up.

Jack jerked his thumb over in a direction away from the other two. "You're not going to believe this, but I saw an iPod over there."

The man looked at him. "???? ?????"

Jack sighed. "???????????. ?? ?????? ????" He turned on his heel. The man put down his tools and started to follow, but Jack put up his hand, and fortunately, the man stopped.

"Well?" asked John as soon as Jack rejoined them.

"Wrong colony."

"There are six more on this planet," Jenny said.

"Yeah." There were thousands of colony worlds, scattered through time and space. The likelihood that they'd found the right colony on the right planet at their very first guess had been impossibly small. That hadn't stopped him from hoping, and it really didn't help at all with the disappointment.

-----

Ianto woke disoriented. His head ached, his muscles ached, the surface under his body was wrong, the room he was in was wrong, everything was wrong. He sat up, heart racing.

"Jack?"

There was no answer. The darkened room was claustrophobically small, but open doorways to either end assured him that he wasn't a prisoner. His fingers felt over the sleeping surface, and found a simple, sturdy sofa made up into a bed. Bookshelves lined the walls, and a computer terminal sat on a desk opposite him. This clearly wasn't a room in their house, so where ...

Memories trickled back, no longer blunted by the drugs he must have been given. He and Jack had stopped arguing out loud and fallen into a cold silence. Jack had been the one exiled to sleep on the sofa. Ianto had just reached over to turn off the bedside lamp to mutter himself to sleep, and then he'd opened his eyes to find himself sitting in a chair being interrogated about his farming skills. Not twenty minutes later, he'd been loaded on a platform with Jack's daughter (!) and sent to the same colony he'd just barely escaped when he'd first been brought to the future. And Alice had said it was all part of a plan Ianto had no memory whatsoever of helping to concoct.

No wonder they'd drugged him. Had he his wits about him yesterday after all that, he'd likely have killed someone.

A light flickered on in an adjoining room. Ianto clutched his thin blanket closer, checking himself rapidly for pants.

"Are you all right?" Harry, his name was Harry, appeared in a dressing gown at the doorway. He and his wife had invited Ianto to stay with them while he got his bearings. Alice was staying with the woman, what was her name, Flora. People were being kind to them. The Thames House people ...

He felt all the blood leave his face at once, and he leaned against the back of the sofa. Harry frowned and sat down beside him, placing a hand on Ianto's shoulder. Ianto jerked away from the touch. Oh God, this man was offering him comfort and kindness. Oh no.

"I know what you're going through."

Ianto gaped. "You do?"

"They wiped my memories when we arrived. The others told me that I fought with the guards after they woke us up. Even had a gun on me." Harry smiled with grim pride in the dim light coming in from the other room, but Ianto blanched further. "About a third of us had memories taken, mostly people with families. Apparently I had a wife and two little kids."

"I'm so sorry," Ianto whispered.

"Thanks," he said with that same strange and sad smile, taking the words as sympathy rather than the admission of guilt that they were.

"Anyway, they drugged us afterwards, probably to keep us quiet. When the drugs wore off, suddenly there was this gap in my life. Part of me is angry that I lost my family, but it's a Catch-22, you know? I don't remember them, so I don't have anything to miss."

Ianto thought about Jack's book, the many volumes recounting lives and lovers and children and friends. So many people only existed in Jack's memories. Someday soon, he'd go back to only being a random reminiscence in Jack's mind. And if someone took those memories from Jack, he'd be nothing at all.

"We've had some suicides. Most happened right after we arrived, when the drugs wore off. A few more a couple of months later. If you start doubting yourself, please come talk to me or to someone. It's a shock right now, but you will get over it."

Yes. Ianto would get over having killed all of these people, leading them to exile far from home without their families or even the

memories of their families. He let out a short laugh.

"It's really not so bad," Harry continued.

"You'll make friends. Lots of good people here." He must have seen Ianto's flinch, because he added quickly, "And plenty of opportunity to be by yourself if you need time to adjust." He smiled wanly. "When I arrived, I thought I'd died and gone to Hell. Then I met Tanya. She says we knew each other on the second floor, but I didn't remember her. We're happy. You'll see. You'll meet someone."

"I have someone." At least, he thought he did. They'd been fighting, hadn't they? Perhaps the Agency had done him a favour and wiped the last of a messy break-up. But Alice had said Jack was in on the plan to rescue them, so maybe he and Jack had worked things out. That was difficult to picture, as he remembered the hard words they'd exchanged.

"She's gone, mate. We're nine thousand years in the future."

Ianto frowned in confusion. Then he shook his head. "It's different."

Harry nodded. "Give yourself some time. But that girl you were with, Alice, she seems nice."

"'Nice' isn't the first word I'd pick." His brain caught up with him and his eyebrows shot to his hairline. "Do not ever try to set us up. I'm her stepfather." Kind of.

Harry jerked back. "Sorry. You know what happens when you assume."

"Yes." He'd assumed he and Jack knew what they were doing when they went after the 456. He'd assumed that rescuing two children from a doomed world was the kind thing to do. He'd

assumed once he'd left his mistakes behind him, that they wouldn't come back.

Harry stood. "I'm getting some more shut-eye, and so should you. Work tomorrow. If you need anything, you let me know." He gave Ianto's shoulder a friendly squeeze and headed back to his bedroom.

Ianto lay back down, mind dizzy with his own past, wondering how much of it was gone forever.

-----

Alice went to the nursery with high hopes of finding Kamb's children and figuring a way out of here. Within five minutes, one of those hopes was already dashed.

Chrissy was in charge of the nursery, having been a day care worker before she'd accepted the job in Human Resources that led her here. A matronly woman who appeared to be mostly bosom, she befriended everyone instantly, including Alice. "And these are our newest arrivals," she said in a happy voice.

Alice peered over the edge of the cots to see two babies of about three months of age. Nothing like the toddlers she was seeking.

"Where are their mothers?" she asked, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

"Back at work. The new mothers don't have to work if they choose, but when the children are about this age, the mothers seem to want to get out for a while. Our business here is to make babies, so we try to accommodate the parents as much as possible."

"Do the fathers help?"

"Of course. Everyone does. Not all of the little ones have declared fathers, though we know everyone's genetic history. If you want a child without having a husband, plenty of men are happy to donate."

"I'm sure," she said, horrified. But this was what the Time Agency did. Human population about to take a tumble? Breed more. "I'm not having any children."

Chrissy nodded. "Flora said you might be that way. It's all right. No-one's going to force you." She reached in a cot and pulled out one of the new babies. "There's plenty of babies to go around." She handed the child to Alice, who took it -- no way of telling gender -- and held it.

The child was awash in baby smell, and Alice remembered. Oh, she remembered. She thrust the baby back at Chrissy, and did manage to run to the loo before vomiting up her breakfast. Chrissy waited outside when Alice came out wiping her mouth and trying not to cry.

"I had kids, too," said the woman, a world of sorrows in her words. "They can take those memories from you, if you ask."

Alice shook her head violently. The only thing left of her little boy in all the universe was her love for him. "I'm keeping my memories. All of them."

"So am I," said Chrissy.

-----

They met at lunch. "I can't stay here," Alice said as soon as they sat down at their own table away from other diners. "I can't work there. I can't be around these people."

He wanted to offer a comforting hand, but this was Alice and she would not take it well, so he didn't. "Talk to Harry and Flora. See if you can work somewhere else. It's not bad work in the field. We're weeding." He frowned. "I know things about weeds. It's weird. And mostly the others will leave you alone."

"There are so many children here." Her face was distant.

"I'd call it ironic, almost. Since this started with the children."

"If you dare call this life-affirming ... "

"... You'll smack me. I am maintaining the list of smackable offences."

Unexpectedly, this drew a smile. He was glad. Bad enough that he was ready to panic.

"Talk to them," he said. "I'm sure they'll understand. And remember this is just temporary. Jack and Jenny will find us."

"And John."

Fear hammered through him. "Not John Hart? The poodlefucker?"

"He fucked a poodle?"

"Maybe. He wanted to. This is bad. He's bad news."

"I know he's bad news. We've met."

-----

Bad News lazed in a chair in the control room as Jenny wrapped up the nasty burn Jack sported across his back. "You know he'll heal up in an hour or two."

"I know. I don't want him bleeding on the surfaces."

Jack flicked his annoyed glance from John to Jenny. "Thanks. Really."

"It's not my fault," John said. "You were the one who talked to them."

Jenny said, "But *you* were the one they wanted to kill."

"Some people can't get over their grudges."

They'd kept to the sidelines of the colony as before, but when Jack introduced himself, a sharp-eyed local had spied Hart and Jenny lurking in the shadows, and sounded the alarm: the monster had returned! Jack had caught the brunt of the sudden attack from blasters and worse, even holding back to allow Hart and Jenny a little more time while he provided their pursuers an easier target.

Jenny would be more grateful if she weren't 93% certain he'd been trying to impress her.

Hilda said, "Alert. Incoming."

Jenny had enough time to turn her head and say, "What do you ... " The ship lurched beneath them.

Jack bounded to the controls. Jenny pushed him out of the way and took them. "Evasive manoeuvres, you know this." The ship jerked forward, and Jack shoved Jenny.

"Let me." His hands flew over the controls, and Hilda zoomed out of reach of another attack.

Jenny, annoyed but too busy to deal with the emotion, pulled up an image of the planet. "They have weaponry. They just shot us."

"That can't be right," Jack said. "The Agency would leave them with defences, but nothing with an offensive capability. Someone would

have had to have brought them weapons." They stared at each other, and then as one, turned to Hart.

Hart had heard of shame and didn't want any part of it. "What part of 'dictator for life' did you not comprehend?"

"The part where you're still breathing," said Jenny.

He tapped his Vortex Manipulator insouciantly.

Jack brought Hilda to a parking orbit around the largest of the planet's moons. Jenny went back to the controls. "She's hurt. Hilda, tell me about your systems."

"Hyperthrust, offline. Time circuit, offline. Life support, damaged but online." Hilda paused, then said in a plaintive tone, "Where is Alice?"

"Alice isn't here, dear. We're looking for her."

"I want Alice!"

"I do, too, dear."

"So we're stuck?" Jack asked.

Hart played with his VM again. "You might be."

Without looking at him, Jack reached out and grabbed his arm. "Thanks for mentioning it. We may have to send you to fetch parts." He let go, rolled up his sleeves and crawled under the control panel. "Hello, beautiful. Let's see if we can put you back together."

-----

The first week crawled by. While his mind was filled with knowledge on how to treat or pull each weed from a row and details on how to wrap healthy tendrils around the delicate slats of a lattice, lanto found his body was not yet

on-board with the new program. This enormous farm was a far cry from the small fields he and Jack had haphazardly tended whenever they remembered. The rich soil of their planet had been easy to work: place a seed, and it would grow. The soil here was poorer, and stony, and required physical effort he wasn't used to. Muscles gone soft with ease and comfort protested at their new work. Meanwhile, his mind raced with the issue of their big problem, and the smaller ones surrounding it.

They needed to make contact with Jack and Jenny (and, God help them, John Hart). They needed to find out when the children would arrive. They needed to leave before someone caught onto who he was.

Resting between rows, lanto glanced over the fence to an adjoining field, where he could make out Alice under a wide-brimmed straw hat, plucking weeds and swearing. She didn't like the work and hadn't been programmed for it, but her mood was better out here than in the town proper. He wondered if she knew how much her eyes darkened when she passed by a child. He didn't dare wonder, had he been there in the room with Jack on that terrible day, if everything could have been different.

lanto took a lukewarm drink from the water flask at his hip and started on the next row.

When they broke for lunch, lanto took his familiar seat with Alice. "Did you hear? We have tomorrow off."

"Are they calling it Sunday?"

He shrugged. "They're calling it a day off. Harry says when they first arrived, there was a resolution to make the official state religion of

the colony the Church of England, but it was voted down."

"I'm sure that was a mess." She took a bite of her mashed vegetables and made a grimace. Seasonings were at a premium here, brought out for special occasions only.

"I'm thinking about walking to the next colony."

"Why? Are you emigrating?" There was a teasing smile on her lips.

"No. I just want to see. And if we *are* stranded here, it might not be a bad plan for me to make myself scarce." He played with the bread that came with their lunch. He'd run into the guards who'd been on duty the day they'd all died. Thankfully for him -- less so, for the former guards -- every one of them had been given memory wipes of two to ten years each. None of them had any clue who he was. The woman he'd spoken to when they'd first awakened, and the only one who might have remembered him from that time period, had killed herself a week after arrival. He worried nonetheless.

"Well, *I* am going to take a nice, long hot bath and stay there for three hours tomorrow." Her expression was already luxuriating in bubbles, although they had work ahead of them still today.

"Enjoy." He toasted her with water.

"What do you miss most?" she asked him suddenly. "Other than people?" Of course, since she'd said it, his thoughts turned to his friends and his family. He'd lived in the future since he was twenty-six, and it still didn't seem like they were gone.

He took two bites before responding.

"Chocolate. Talking to people who understand references I make. Top Gear."

She laughed. "Top Gear? Really?"

"Mindless diversions in general. But yeah." He drank some more of his water. "You'd think there'd be more entertainment in the future. Seriously, the longest thing I've had to read in years has been Jack's book."

"I cannot imagine reading that," she said, her expression horrified.

"I've been helping him edit. He rambles, and he thinks commas should go where they're pretty." Ianto had long since given up trying to explain ordinal lists and clauses, and settled for just cleaning it up himself. And if he happened to learn more about Jack's mysterious past as he did so, well, it wasn't like Jack hadn't written the thing for the whole universe to see.

"He used to help me with my homework," said Alice. "The weekends he'd visit. But he always knew science and things far ahead of what was in the textbook, so it was marked as wrong."

"He got into a fistfight with your teacher once, didn't he?"

Alice sat back. "He told you that?"

"I read about it. You're all through the book. Stories about when you were small. The times he ran into you again." Jack had sired other children through the years, but none came close to the amount of space he'd dedicated to the woman across from him. "I think Jenny must have come up once or twice, but you were the focus of those scenes."

Her face scrunched. "He wrote his tell-all with me in it?"

"It's not a tell-all. It's just Jack. He's had an interesting life. You're a part of it." Her expression did not look convinced.

The supervisor called them. Lunch was over. Ianto thrust the last of the bread into his pocket for later. Alice put her tray away, the rest of the food untouched.

They went back to their respective fields. Though he tried to catch her eye, she didn't seek him out again for the rest of the day, and at supper, he ate alone.

-----

There was a sharp crackle, and the lights in the control room dimmed and then rebrightened.

Jenny was intent on her work on the top panel, rewriting the time circuit code for a jump that might use a little less power. "Stop it," she said to Jack, irritably. He didn't respond.

Her senses twitched, and for a moment, she felt the constant headache ease. "Oh." She peered under the control panel to be sure.

Hart said, "Problem?"

"Not a permanent one. Jack just electrocuted himself."

Sure enough, a minute later, there was a gasp of air returning to his lungs as he revived just out of sight.

"Be more careful," Jenny chided, continuing to work as her temples resumed their pounding.

## Chapter Five

"I'd like to be able to say that it amazes me how much time humans in particular spend on convincing other people to have sex with them. Unfortunately, I'm usually naked by that point and then there's not much opportunity for talk. [So your running commentaries during sex don't qualify as talking?]" - from "Me: An Autobiography"

-----

Alice's bath only lasted an hour. The water got cold, and she didn't have a book. When she emerged from the tub with her towel, she found Flora in the sitting room playing with her daughter Katie. The stab went through her and out again, and Alice managed a smile. She hated the Time Agency, hated the 456 and everyone involved in the clusterfuck surrounding them. But here was a little girl who never would have been born back on Earth. The part of Alice that fought against the random cruelty of the universe insisted that had to mean something. The rest of her wondered how many children were never born because their would-be parents had choked and died that day.

After she dressed, Alice sat on the sofa watching them. "I've imposed on your hospitality enough. I should go live in the dormitory."

"It's been no trouble," said Flora. "I like having another adult around. I've missed that." Katie's father, Alice had been told, had also donated a sample for Flora to conceive her second child. Everything was recorded in a database the Agency had helped them construct. In the next generation, they would be expected to intermarry with the

neighbouring colonies. By the time the planet's automatic contact system was activated, they should have a healthy, thriving, and genetically-diverse population ready to meet up with the last survivors of the human race in the wider galaxy. In the long term, it meant genetic continuity, but in the short term, while people were encouraged to breed, not all would find a suitable partner for a relationship.

"How *is* the dating scene here?" Alice asked.

"If you're straight and not picky, it's robust. A lot of people aren't looking for long term, and thanks to the shots, there aren't any STIs to worry about. Colin had HIV and even he's fine." She gave Alice a more measured look. "Are you straight or picky?"

"Looking at my exes, I think I was less picky than I gave myself credit for." Sometimes she wondered what Joe would make of her new life. He'd come to the funeral, and she hadn't had tears to spare to scream at him.

Flora still watched her. When Alice didn't say more, she said, "There's not much of a gay community. A few of the younger girls say they're bi, but most of them are out with the boys. Sahira's bi, but she said if she was going to have kids with someone, she wanted to be in a relationship with him, so she and Steve got married."

"What about the guys?"

"Vijay and Nico got married. I think Forrest and Kris are seeing each other. If there's anyone else, they haven't come out."

Alice snorted. She placed even odds that five hours after her father finally arrived here, a good third of the men would suddenly decide

they weren't as straight as previously claimed. It had happened once at a party she'd thrown when Mum had been out of town. There hadn't been enough alcohol in the house to drown out the image of her father snogging a boy in his last year that she'd had a crush on since Form One. She sighed.

"I like you. I'm not going to tell you I'm straight, but I'm not planning on getting involved with anyone."

"Because you're going to leave?"

Alice kept her voice calm. "What makes you say that?"

"We all had the same thought. Those of us who could remember. It'll pass." She tickled her daughter on the arm. "Give yourself time."

But Alice had time, all the time in the universe. Jenny had given it to her.

-----

Supper was outdoors in the fine evening air. A bonfire burned pleasantly, chasing away the bugs, and they all ate cold leftovers from the previous day piled onto sandwiches. Ianto was put in mind of any number of community picnics, and he breathed in the fresh air tanged with good smoke as he ate voraciously. He'd walked to the next colony, just to see, and he knew he'd be feeling it tomorrow, but for now he was satisfied. He didn't speak the main languages used at the other colony, but two people spoke English and told him their home had been threatened by a giant wave. The Time Agency had pulled them all to safety: parents, children, elderly, everyone. Their lives continued on this new world, five hundred people saved from the waters.

He wondered if there was a planet for the victims of the *Titanic*.

Ianto took a long drink of water. The one thing this planet could use more of was fresh water. The colony had a series of wells that provided enough, but his walk had been through thin, brown grasses sapped of moisture by the summer sun, and he'd drunk his whole water supply by the time he'd reached the next colony and had to ask for more to come home. The big red house where he'd lived with Jack had a river close by, which Ianto would often sit beside for hours, just listening, and now even that was gone. He missed the sea.

After the food, there were games, which he declined to play, and alcohol, which some colonists had been brewing from their grain. Bottles passed from hand to hand, and he took a grateful swig when it was his turn, mindless of the sour burn. Jack didn't drink except on very special occasions so Ianto hadn't touched rotgut in years.

He passed the bottle to a pretty girl with red hair. "You're the new guy," she said, taking a drink of her own.

"Ianto."

"Laurie."

"It's nice to meet you, Laurie."

She giggled. "So where did you come from?"

"The Time Agency brought me here. Wiped my memories," he said quickly, hoping to forestall any additional questions.

She nodded sympathetically. "They took two months from me. I wish I knew why."

"Who can say?"

"What did you do back on Earth? Before they wiped you."

"Oh." His old life flashed before him. "Nothing really interesting. Admin work."

"You were an admin?" Disbelief filled her round face.

"Fastest filer in all of Cardiff."

"I'd have figured you were one of the higher ups. Or maybe a scientist. They said we had a few of those running around in the building."

"Nah," he said. "Well, they did wipe me. For all I know, I was the Prime Minister."

She laughed. "Couldn't be. All the PMs have been gits. You seem nice."

He thought back. Green had been willing to hand over the world's children to save his arse. Saxon was a maniacal alien bent on world destruction who killed Ianto and his friends and at least a tenth of the Earth's population. "I liked Harriet Jones." He often wished his own official death had been even a fraction as purposeful as hers had been.

"She was okay." Laurie didn't appear to be really interested in politics. "Where do they have you working?"

"In the fields. It's very strange, knowing things about beans."

She laughed. "I'm in construction. We put up and maintain the buildings. You got a place to live yet?"

"I'm staying with Harry's family."

"Well, I'm sure you're on the list for housing. We're going through it pretty fast. You know you get a higher priority if you're married."

He wasn't sure if that was a proposition or just small talk. He decided he didn't want to find out. The tiny Jack Harkness who lived inside his brain kicked him as he said, "I'm attached."

"Already?"

"From before."

"Oh. Those don't count. You'll see. Everything's new here. It's a second chance."

Yes, he thought, but one that they didn't necessarily need to have. He looked around the fire, saw faces, none familiar. How many of them would recognise him if he said he was from Torchwood? How many would want his head in retribution for the lives they'd lost?

There was a thump beside him. "Alice."

"Ianto." She looked over at Laurie. "Who's this, then?"

"This is Laurie. Laurie, this is Alice."

"Hi," said Laurie, her perky smile fleeing in the presence of the other woman.

"Charmed," Alice said, in a tone that said she wasn't.

"You two arrived together, then?" Laurie asked.

"Oh yes," said Alice. "We go way back. He shagged my father for years."

Laurie's eyes went wide. She turned to Ianto, who merely shrugged. Alice had apparently learned her tact right at home.

"Sorry. You could have said." And a moment later, she was gone.

Ianto watched her leave. "That could definitely have been phrased more derogatively. Thank you."

"She was hitting on you."

"I'd noticed."

"And she's about half your age." He'd noticed that too, but he'd ignored it. "And you're gay."

"I'm not gay."

"Are you about to quote you know who about labels?"

"Depends. Is that on the 'smacking' list?"

She glared at him. He glared back. The bottle came round again, and he watched her take a long drink before she passed it. Fastidiously, he wiped the mouth.

"So how *did* you meet my father?" she asked, faked interest laced with heavy sarcasm.

"Oh, the usual story. I stalked him to get hired on so I could install my half-converted Cyberman girlfriend in the cellar and find her a cure. Jack found out and tried to feed her to the pet pterodactyl I gave him. When she transplanted her brain into a pizza girl, Jack and the rest of the team shot her." Alice stared at him, jaw agape. "And after that, well, I was single again, and he wasn't busy. So." He took a long drink. Then he passed the bottle.

"You've had a three thousand year long relationship with your rebound shag?"

"Five thousand. He did that bit underground."

"I remember." The mild horror on her face hadn't faded. "You're completely mad, you know."

"In fact, I have. *Had*. A piece of paper from Providence Park to assert that I'm not." He wondered if Rhi was given that amongst the rest of his belongings. Gwen had always been horrified about the Torchwood policy regarding employees and their possessions, he recalled. "Our colleagues really never got us. He took care of me when most people would have written me off, and when I got back on my feet, I made it my job to take care of him." One of the things they had in common: caring for someone else reminded each how to be human. Although Ianto had never wanted children of his own, there were times he'd considered the prospect solely for Jack's benefit. They could take advantage of fifty-first century medical technology now so that when Ianto was dead and gone, Jack would still have someone else to look after and love. On a more selfish note, giving Jack a child would also guarantee Ianto would be remembered just a little longer.

He glanced at Alice again and reminded himself that merely having a child was no guarantee that Jack wouldn't screw up somehow. He sighed.

"What about you and Jenny? How'd you meet?"

Alice played with a spot on the knee of her trousers. "She saved me."

"Aliens?"

"Suicide."

"Ah." He was in no place to judge. There was a reason he'd had his paper.

-----

The dormitory was a friendly enough place. While the construction crews worked on individual houses, most based on a very simple ranch-style model, the colonists who weren't married and either hadn't had children or weren't interested in raising the ones they'd helped create could live together in a reasonably managed group. Alice shared a large room with three other women, with her own bed. After a week on the sofa, it felt like a luxury. She had only wakened once to the muffled sounds of one of her roommates rutting with a man she didn't know, but most of the time, people aimed for privacy when they had sex.

Alice missed sex. She'd slept with a few of the men she and Jenny had encountered in their travels, the most infamous one being her father's ex-lover. She hadn't slept with Jenny, though not for lack of thinking about it. Three planets ago, Alice had shagged a gorgeous blonde in the midst of saving her village from robotic pirates, and it had nothing to do with the woman herself. But when it came to her best friend, Alice worried about changing the dynamic they'd spent so long building. Back in her youth, she'd ruined any number of friendships by introducing sex to the equation, and she didn't intend to make that mistake with Jenny. If she ever saw Jenny again.

On a rest day, Alice sat alone at lunch, wondering if Ianto had wandered off to the next colony. A man she vaguely recognised sat down next to her.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello." She continued to eat.

"I'm Gary."

"Alice."

"I know." He grinned. "I've seen you around. You're usually with your friend."

"He's off somewhere today," she said, absently. "Do you need something?"

"I was wondering if you'd like to go on a picnic with me later. Get away from here for a bit." She stared at him, finally. Gary was good-looking, in a tattered sort of way, like he had heard of how to fix his hair and wear his stock Agency-issue clothing (they were going to start a proper textiles industry next year after the construction phase ended) but hadn't really paid attention past the basics. He resembled a scarecrow, even to the straw-coloured hair sticking up from his head.

"That'd be ... Sure." Why not? She didn't intend to get involved with him, but it wouldn't hurt to have some fun. And, she thought with more fear than she wanted to admit, they'd been here a month now with no word from the others.

Five hours later, the picnic basket was abandoned and they were half-naked on the blanket she'd brought. Kissing was good, sex was better, but Alice had no intention of getting pregnant. On a colony world with no birth control options available, she refused to deal with penetration and the risks involved.

"You sure?" he said into her ear, his hands doing wonderful things inside her knickers.

"Positive." His fingers worked inside of her obligingly. Her own hands grasped his hips, bumping against them as he brought her off. She took him into her mouth after, a simple suck for a simple night together. Smooth and easy. And there was one itch scratched.

They walked back together, attempting to hold hands but the picnic basket was too unwieldy. "I worked in maintenance," he said. "I was down in the boiler room when the alarm went off. I never even made it up to the first floor. I thought there'd been a fire, or a bomb, or something."

"The newspapers said it was bioterrorism. They didn't say the aliens did it, but I guess they didn't lie."

"You died after that."

"I died the following day." He took her hand again, and somehow managed the basket with the other this time.

"Can I see you again?"

She tilted her head. "Ask me next week. I'll probably say yes."

-----

Hart had gone to his cabin for a lie-down (he'd claimed). Jenny didn't care if he was sleeping, humping the bunk, or plotting their deaths, as long as he was out from underfoot. She wasn't happy with Jack's help on Hilda's poor fried systems, and calculated a 78% chance that he'd electrocute himself again before they were finished.

"The good news," he said from the corner, elbows-deep in wiring, "is that I don't think we'll need any extra parts." He extracted his hands and wiped them on his trousers.

"How long did you have your Chula ship?"

"A little over a year, by my reckoning. She needed a lot of work when I first got her, so I had a crash course in maintenance." Knowing Jack's history, there was a 34% chance that he

had stolen the ship, and a 46% chance he'd purchased it in a shady transaction. She considered the chances that he either found it abandoned or bought it fairly to be possible but equally unlikely.

"I've had this ship for approximately ten standard years. The AI came online about three years ago while we were repairing the computers."

"Oh," said Jack, rubbing a gentle hand over one support strut. "She's just a baby, then."

"I am not a baby," said Hilda.

"Of course you're not, dear," Jenny said. The time circuit was almost fixed, but the engines still needed work. If they were to go back to the Agency again to find the data they required, Hilda must be ready to run.

Jenny told herself that they were in a time machine, that honestly, Alice could not be in any danger because they could arrange to arrive minutes after she materialised at the Thames House colony. Still she worried. Alice was good at getting herself out of trouble, but Jenny only knew this because of Alice's penchant for finding it in the first place. And she had to look after Ianto while she did it, because if Alice's tales and Jenny's observations were accurate, anyone dim enough to be involved with Jack on a long-term basis probably didn't have the self-preservation skills necessary to work Velcro shoe closures. Given the data available, she estimated an 84% probability that at least one of them would be incarcerated by the time Hilda arrived in orbit.

Jack kept his eyes on the work before him. In a tone that he probably intended as casual, he asked, "So how's she doing?"

"Hilda will be fixed soon."

"Alice. How's she ... How long has it been?"

Oh. This was going to be one of those conversations. With Alice, Jenny found reserves of patience. With the abomination, much less so. "Not quite ten Earth years." She spared a glance to him, watched his big fingers poke uselessly for a moment at the wires.

"She's coping."

"I won't ask if she still hates me."

"Good." Jenny continued working, could not help but notice he'd stopped. "If you want to know how she is, ask her."

"We're not good at talking to each other."

"You've got thousands of years to learn."

He smiled weakly. "Do you talk much to your father?"

Her hearts skipped, as they often did when she thought about him. He hadn't abandoned her intentionally, which was more than she could say for many of his companions over the years. Still, his absence hurt sometimes, in the calm times between adventures. "We've only run into each other three times since I was born."

"Oh." His hands restarted their work. "I figured he was the one who sent you to find Alice. That's his kind of thing to do."

She shook her head. "I was thinking about finding someone to bring along, when I found a note addressed to me telling me where and when to find her."

He nodded. "Notes from yourself from the future. I've done that. Back in the Agency, we had guidelines on how to word it, codes to

make sure you knew it was yourself. I always used my brother's birthday."

"It wasn't from me."

"Then who?"

"I'm not sure." She'd known it was important, known as soon as she read the brief words that Alice was exactly the right person to travel with her. "Alice didn't recognise the handwriting."

"You still have it?"

She wanted to stay and keep working, but she also knew he'd wheedle and prod until she gave up in frustration and went to retrieve the much-folded and perused sheet from her cabin anyway. When she returned and handed it to him, she was unsurprised to see the smile spread across his face.

Jenny sighed. "Have you sent it yet?"

"Not yet. Tell me again where and when you found it."

-----

The hours in the field, while hard, were putting a defining cut on his muscles as well as tanning him gently. (One of the inoculations was permanent SPF protection, his roommate Malik had explained.) The food was plain but nutritious and filling. Although he was nearing fifty, Ianto mused that he hadn't been in this good a shape in his youth, which had been filled with bad food, little sleep, and rare exercise. Blame the Time Agency all he wanted, but their diet programme would put the Atkins cultists he'd known back home to shame.

He'd received permission to take an extra day off to go to the next colony past the tsunami

survivors. There he'd met a colony drawn together from three aeroplane crashes. One crash happened four years after his death, and he'd lingered, listening to news of things from long ago. Their colony was more divided than the other two he knew; passengers hailed from different years and different countries, and viewed one another with suspicion still.

Should it look like he and Alice were stranded here for good, he decided he'd move to the aeroplane colony. Alice could stay or go as she pleased. He'd originally thought to stay close in order to protect her, but the colonies were free of crime, disease, and war. There was nothing to protect her from, save her own mistakes, and she was an adult.

Ianto did not like Gary much, if anyone asked him. No-one ever did.

"You know we've been here two months," Alice said to him one evening at the weekly bonfire. "Sixty one days."

"That can't be right." But of course it was. He'd helped with the first harvest of the season already. Three more babies had been born and he thanked God they hadn't given him the midwifery implant; delivering one baby had been more than enough for his tastes. Time was passing.

"What if they can't find us?" Her eyes were big and worried.

"They'll find us." Aiming for a safer topic, if not by much, he asked, "How's Gary?"

She waved her hand. "Who knows? He's taken up with that Laurie."

"I'm sorry. I thought you two were together."

"It was just a bit of fun," she said airily. "Not my problem if she wants him to be exclusive."

That sounded familiar: enjoy the amusement while it lasts, don't mope when it's gone. But telling Alice she sounded exactly like Jack was certainly at the top of the smacking list, so instead he just nodded quietly and tried not to wonder how short a time it would be for Jack to stop searching for them and move on with a shrug.

"Anyway," she said brightly, "one less thing to worry about when we leave." He thought he spied the crack in her armour then, a hurt look in her eyes that she covered with a smile, and that was also all Jack.

Two months.

-----

Jack took a short break after the third time Hilda's wiring zapped the life from him. The first two times, he could credit to his own mistakes and hands made clumsy with anxiety he refused to admit. More than that, and it was obvious Hilda was holding a grudge because Alice was missing.

"Gonna hit the head," he told Jenny, who didn't respond. Fair enough. Jenny didn't like him, either, though in her case it was partly on Alice's behalf and partly because Jack himself was a walking toothache for Time Lords. When he'd found out that Gallifrey had appeared in the sky during his absence from Earth, Jack mused that the best way to fight the invading Gallifreyans would have been to launch himself at the planet and let them scream in pain at him for the rest of eternity behind the time lock.

He washed his hands when he was finished, taking in the feminine touches he spied around him. Alice wasn't given to expensive soaps and bottles of hair products despite his many attempts to teach her in her youth. Yet, there was something indefinably soft about the towels in the tiny shower cubicle, something gentle in the lingering scent of unnamed perfume that followed her (a gift he'd given her, however unintentionally, alongside the turn of her scowl and the twist of her mind). Bare of decoration save a sprig of some dried purple flower taped to the plain, age-spotted mirror, this room nonetheless spoke of women in a way the decadent lavatory he'd built in the big red house hadn't since Jeanne died.

A smile met him in the mirror. He hadn't thought about Jeanne in a while. She'd joined him in exile of her own choice, and they'd spent years together. He had mourned her when she'd passed, and made her grave in the shade of the trees she'd loved, and written down the details of their life together, and now he'd already started to forget.

\*

*"You're going to forget me someday."*

*"Never could."*

\*

But he had forgotten, hadn't he, had needed an unexpected run-in with Alice to remind him. His smile slipped, was gone.

Jack remembered his promise and forgot the details, and when Alice had given that back to him, he'd sworn never to forget again. That day he'd started planning the whole project of writing everything down, even if it took him a while to get started. The universe could get

florid descriptions of Jack's raucous life, and Jack could flip open to page three thousand and seventeen and remind himself that Lucia had enjoyed grapes, and like that, he'd have her back in his mind. He could make himself remember, hold on to all the people he loved. It just took effort.

Time travel complicated things. Alice had said they would run into each other in several thousand years. But if she died on this mission, what would he do when he saw her again? How tempted would he be to muck with the threads of time just to keep her safe?

He no longer worried about losing Ianto. He'd never say that out loud because he didn't want to fight, and he didn't want to watch the shutters come down over a despairing look. That wasn't what he'd meant, he'd have to say, and he'd explain that having watched Ianto die twice, part of him would always assume he'd come back. Jack would go on, saddened and alone as he'd done before, and move on with his life and fall in love again and again, until Ianto was one of many pleasant memories. Then, one day, he'd turn a corner or open an airlock, and Ianto would be there in front of him, smiling in mild confusion, and Jack would be equally confused, but mostly, "Oh, there you are. Where've you been?" If this took ten million years, well, Jack had time to spare, and that'd be more for them to catch up on, just like when he ran into the Doctor, and Alice, and even John. It was hard to explain his assurance against all logic that every separation was merely temporary. Jack knew inside his bones that Ianto had joined the list of people he would never really lose ever again. Ianto would only get that look, the one that said, "Yes, I know you're one hundred times my age, and I love you, but you're a moron."

The smile came back in the mirror, as Jack pictured the quiet sigh and barely-held eyeroll. It'd be a shame to have to wait ten million years to see that again.

Time to get back to work.

-----

Harry and Flora kept the calendar in their office. By general agreement, the colony chose to declare the day they arrived to be two days after they'd all died, and set the calendar accordingly. The solar year, Alice had learned, was somewhat shorter here, and Flora said they'd probably have to eliminate some days to catch up if they wanted to maintain an Earth calendar, but people would have to vote which days to lose. No-one wanted to lose birthdays or anniversaries, however fragile their memories might be. The matter was tabled for now and would be revisited in a few years when it became more obvious that the date on the paper and the seasons were no longer the same.

The second anniversary of their deaths came suddenly. One day, Alice was working as usual, the next there was a rest day, and all the faces around her were sombre, thoughtful.

"Today is for mourning," Flora said over a cup of tea. She watched Katie play with her blocks. "Tonight we'll gather around the bonfire, and talk about the people we miss. Tomorrow, we'll work. The next day, we'll celebrate. Harry came up with it. He says rituals help people cope."

"I'm surprised you don't have a church set up here already."

"If that's a project you'd like to pursue, please do. We could use some religion."

"What? No." She shivered. "I'd be a bad choice." She'd grown up learning her catechism, but had lost the last of her faith before she'd left Earth.

"You know how it is, Alice. Work is done by those who show up to do it." Flora made a bitter face over her tea. "That's why Harry and I are in charge. We were the only ones willing to organise everyone. I was actually programmed with the animal husbandry skill set. I should be milking cows."

"Cow!" said Katie.

"That's right, sweetheart. What does the cow say?"

"Moo!"

Flora smiled indulgently. Alice tried not to wince.

The fire that night chilled rather than cheered. Alice went with Flora and Katie, and she held Katie while Flora started the talking: these are the things I remember, these are the people I miss. While she spoke, an ember crackled from the fire and flew out, whizzing by Katie's head and making her cry.

"It's okay," Alice soothed. "Auntie Alice has you."

Flora let Harry speak next while she came back to collect her little girl. Harry missed his X-Box, and he missed oysters, and he'd like to think he'd miss his family, his eyes gone large with tears. Harry's wife Tanya missed fresh strawberries, and her mother. The litany went on, passed from person to person: Christmas crackers, parents, lovers, Graham Norton (that got a laugh), summers at the beach, children, chocolates, and so many things.

When it was Ianto's turn, he shook his head and indicated the next person. "It's all right," Harry coaxed. "It's newer for you, but it'll help."

"I ... " Alice was sure he would say he missed Jack, but Ianto said, "I miss my sister. We weren't close at the end. I wish we were."

Harry nodded kindly. The next person, one of Ianto's roommates at the dormitory, missed his little brother.

Alice's turn came eventually. "I miss my son," she said. "His name was Steven." She stumbled over the words, realising she hadn't spoken his name aloud in years. "He was my world."

"Got it," Jenny said proudly. The ship hummed around them. John yawned. Chula tech was no patch on what would come along in another five thousand years, and here Jack and Jenny were patting each other on the back for repairing what amounted to a hole in a canoe.

John could think of much more pleasant ways to celebrate with the two of them, including activities that involved backs, but would they listen? No. Honestly the only thing keeping him from setting his VM and leaving their miserable arses was the fact that Jack hadn't paid him yet, and wouldn't until this sorry mess was over. While lingering with them (and maybe talking Jack into some fun after all) had its benefits, John decided he was set for rescuing the two lost lambs as long as it meant he got his money sooner rather than later.

With that in mind, he palmed the time circuit control before either of the others could reach him. "Where to?"

-----  
The Agency sent their people to assist the colonists on a bi-weekly basis. Supplies continued to come, therapies were available for the asking, notes were taken on the progress of their community and the growth of their nursery. Everything came with a bland smile dressed in primary colours.

So when the Agency missed a scheduled day, Alice found Flora pacing worriedly in her small office at the Town Hall long after everyone else had quit for the evening.

"It's time travel," said Alice reasonably. "It's not always easy to get things exactly right." They'd messed up arrivals plenty.

"But they're never late," said Flora. "The visits were pre-programmed into the system."

"I'm sure it's nothing." She convinced Flora to come to a late supper with her, and they chatted, and Alice walked with Flora to collect Katie from the nursery, and went home with them. Flora was starting to show now, and Alice traced the line on her belly with one fingertip, remembering when her own body had swelled like the sail of a ship.

The people from the Agency didn't come the next day, either, or the one after.

Harry and Flora held a town meeting. They didn't bullshit, they didn't claim that they were sure the Agency was coming. They took questions, and wrote down concerns. Malik (formerly of Information Technology and Services, now of Herbivore Domestication, Shearing, and Butchering) threw out Ianto's name as someone who'd been to the neighbouring colonies, and who might be able to see if they'd been visited.

lanto, displeased at the sudden notoriety, agreed to head out in the morning to ask.

"Why aren't there any vehicles?" Alice asked Flora later that night as they lay together holding hands, the nightlight in the hallway casting a bright pattern on the adjacent wall.

"We're supposed to be self-sufficient. Strictly speaking, lanto's breaking the rules when he goes to see the other colonies. The Agency had us spread out in case of disaster or disease. We've got maps telling us where they are, but really, we're on our own." She rolled over and rubbed Alice's arm with her hand, her belly falling oddly to the side. "There are ships," she said in a whisper. "Spaceships, you know. Far enough from any of the colonies that we wouldn't find them. When it's time for our great-grandchildren to leave the planet, the ships will have the instant skills training ready. But there's a time lock on the map to get us there."

"I've run into time locks before. Put it in a time machine, and voila."

Flora laughed. "Yes. Find a time machine and use it to open the lock." She bent in for a quick kiss. "You're funny."

Alice didn't meet her eyes after the kiss. Gary was easy to dismiss. Flora actually liked her. While Alice thought Flora was a lovely person, and she enjoyed their time together, she saw this as the emotional equivalent of huddling under a blanket together for warmth. She sighed. Her father made breaking hearts look easy.

The following afternoon, news spread through the colony like a fire. Alice heard it from Colin, who told everyone in their section of the fields:

strangers approaching the village, three of them, dressed like Time Agents.

Her heart jumped. At last! They'd have to catch up lanto at the next colony, but that'd be easy enough. She set down her tools, placing them carefully for the next person. Farming was no longer her concern. A quick glance showed her that cleanliness might be; she was a sight, covered in dirt. Jack wouldn't care, and frankly, she didn't give a damn what John thought, but Jenny deserved clean hands when Alice hugged her.

She ran to the pump and scrubbed down. Kris noticed and said, "What are you primping for?"

"No reason." Alice dried her hands on her trousers, then hurried to catch up with the rest of the interested onlookers. Everyone was bustling to get a look. She hoped the rest wouldn't be disappointed that this wouldn't be the Agency with supplies.

The strangers came into view. That wasn't her father, and the other two weren't Jenny and John. She sighed in disappointment. She almost missed the body language, how the one in the middle placed a hand casually on a weapon.

"Oh no."

The hand made a liquid motion, grabbed the gun and fired a deadly beam from the sonic blaster into the air menacingly. Someone screamed. No-one moved to fight or run, not yet, not frozen in fear. The two figures flanking the one in the centre had their own weapons out and at the ready.

"Just to make things clear. I'm in charge now," said Gerta.

## Chapter Six

"Most revolutions fail. Everyone involved is killed, imprisoned, or silenced, and no-one else ever knows. The first time I remember dying, I died standing up to an unbeatable foe against impossible odds, and that's how I learned the truth. It's not about winning. It's about choosing the good fight because it's the right thing to do." - from "Me: An Autobiography"

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Jenny rested against the cleanest wall in the alleyway. Opposite her, music pounded from the club and smells she didn't care to identify drifted out.

*"It's a popular spot,"* Jack's voice said in her ear. *"We used to go there all the time."* She heard Hart's throaty chuckle, and immediately she felt dirtier than if she'd leaned against the other wall.

*"We should join her. Bring back old times."*

*"Can you guarantee we're not in the pub right now? You want to poke a hole through space-time just to get a drink? All right, then."*

Jenny hid her own chuckle. No-one chided Hart quite the way Jack did. Movement caught her eye. Sure enough, the back door opened, and a figure staggered out. Neither of her companions, check. Agency support staff uniform, somewhat worse for wear after a night of carousing, check. Drunk or stoned off his/her/its/zir arse, check. She would only be able to ascertain whether identification was present with a physical search of the uniform.

She smiled, even as the stench of slightly used alcohol and stomach acids filled the alley. She estimated a blow to the back of the neck in a

particular spot would mean a 98% chance of unconsciousness on the part of her chosen victim, with only a 0.2% chance of death.

Jenny liked those odds.

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Two kilometres or so out from the Thames House colony, Ianto rehearsed the report he would present. If it was just Harry and Flora, he'd give them the list of dates he'd been given for the past four Agency visits to the neighbouring colonies, which had also ended abruptly. The aeroplane survivors were sending out a team to the next colony over to see if they knew anything; the closer colony would be sending two people to the Aeros to begin talks. Ianto had agreed to come back in a week's time with more members of his own group in order to begin building an alliance among all the colonies. If the Time Agency had abandoned them, they no longer had any reason to follow their guidelines about contact, and a loose community of a few thousand might have a better shot at long-term survival once they set up trade and communications.

His head buzzing with plans, Ianto didn't notice at first the lack of activity in the fields. When he finally realised that it wasn't a rest day, wasn't a mealtime, and not even the hardest workers were outside, he slowed his pace, watching his surroundings warily.

Crazy scenarios went through his mind. Someone had snapped and killed everyone. They'd all come down with the sheep 'flu and died. The Time Agency had returned in his absence and taken the lot to another planet. That one led to the thought that maybe they'd come for the other colonies while he'd been on

the way back here, and he'd been left behind, the last man alive on this world.

Really, finding out the colony had been taken over by renegade Time Agents came as somewhat of a relief, comparatively speaking.

-----

Alice slept in the dormitory during her brief sleep-shifts. Flora and Harry were being held -- alive, as far as they could tell -- at the nursery where the colony had a large number of other hostages to their good behaviour. Even those who hadn't any children didn't want to be responsible for their deaths, not after Gerta had taken two people at random and shot them in front of everyone. Alice didn't recognise either one, which made her glad, and also angry at herself for being glad. The infirmary, in the same building as the nursery, was currently staffed by only one of the five people in the colony with medical training, and she had been allowed to try to save them. One had lived.

A skeleton crew maintained the fields, three doing the work of twenty from dawn to dusk. Only two members of the child care staff, Chrissy and a man Alice didn't know, were permitted to come and go from the nursery. Mothers who could prove they were lactating were allowed to feed their own babies under supervision. The male Time Agent Trem had suggested they round up three or four mothers, keep them at the nursery, and make them feed the lot. Blays, the other female Time Agent, had overruled that as impractical and Gerta, who was indeed in charge, agreed.

Everyone who wasn't in the field or taking care of children had been put on Gerta's pet project. The Town Hall was converted to a

makeshift factory, and the colonists were told how to take apart every piece of technology left by the Time Agency to turn it into weaponry for Gerta's plan to take over this tiny world, and after that, everywhere.

Alice shivered, and settled her thin shirt more firmly around her shoulders. She could too easily picture the whole of humanity, reduced to pockets of survivors on outlying worlds like this one, coming under the boot heel of someone as amoral as Gerta.

Gerta had been five seconds from shooting Ianto dead when he'd come back to the colony. Instead, Trem had beaten him and taken the information he'd gathered from the other colonies. The intel had saved Ianto's life and doomed their neighbours. As soon as he was upright from the beating, bruises purpling all over, he'd been forced to join the rest of them in stripping the machines that ran the colony into parts to take over the galaxy. He'd avoided Alice and, as far as she knew, not spoken to a soul since.

Twice, Alice tried to steal small parts from the pieces of machinery in front of her, but both times she went to do it just as Trem or Blays was watching her. Malik was the first to complete one of the new weapons. Gary, working next to him, had seized the opportunity and tried to turn the gun on their captors, but couldn't work the controls fast enough. Trem shot him in the shoulder, and Gerta executed him right before supper that night in front of everyone.

No-one had tried since.

She looked down at the machine parts in her hands. Mum had taught her from childhood that anything could be a weapon. She'd made

Alice practise with hairspray and with pens and she'd shown her how to break glass in order to get a shard for a crude knife. Her father had trained her on gun use and safety, and told her fond stories about how when Mum had still been with Torchwood, she'd once killed a rampaging Gr'nak by stabbing it in the eye with her own toothbrush. Jenny had never met Alice's mum, but she knew how to use almost every firearm ever developed by human technology, and once Alice watched her regretfully assassinate the mad leader of a planetary-wide cult using nothing more than Alice's fingernail scissors.

Considering this, Alice slipped four unremarkable parts into the long sleeves of her work shirt just as Blays called time for supper.

Alice took her normal seat near the back of the room and began wolfing down her thin soup. If she ate it quickly, she didn't have to taste it. To her surprise, Chrissy took the seat next to her. She tucked into her own meal, saying quietly, "Saw Flora today. Couldn't talk to her."

Alice spooned the soup more slowly into her mouth.

"Haven't seen Harry, not for days. I think he's dead. Mouthed off to that Trem."

She closed her eyes. "Would you fight?" she asked around her spoon.

"Yeah. Don't know how, though." Trem walked over towards them, and Chrissy shoved more food into her mouth as fast as Alice had earlier. Trem kept walking. "They've had people in. Give 'em info, see your baby."

"Spies."

"Could be anyone."

"You're trusting me."

"You don't have a baby. And you're new. Different."

She let it pass. "Can you tell us who the spies are?" She was already thinking of this as an "us." Probably not good.

"Sally. Keith. I think there's more."

"Thanks." Alice got up from her seat and took her tray back. She paused to look around her. Nearly a hundred people, all armed with trays and bowls and spoons. If they all rose up together, they'd make short work of the three Agents. But no-one wanted to risk it all alone.

When she passed Ianto's table, she met his eyes.

-----

The guard took a passing look at Jenny's stolen ID and waved her through the gate with barely a glance. She let out a deep breath once she passed him. Her memory of their previous visit led her to the beginning of the corridor maze. "*You'll want to take a left,*" said Hart's lazy drawl in her ear. "*Or was it a right?*"

"Stop being an idiot," Jenny hissed.

*"Just having some fun. Left. Definitely left."*

"Your definition of 'fun' leaves much to be desired." She went left. When she reached the next hallway, she paused. "Now where?"

"This way."

She spun. Jack was behind her, back in his uniform, and striding along the corridor as though he'd never left. Jenny sprinted to reach him, grabbed his shirt collar, and pushed him up against the wall. His eyebrows shot up in

surprise at her strength, and she allowed herself a moment of quiet pride.

"What part of 'stay with the ship' did you fail to comprehend?" She let him go, and he stepped away from the wall, readjusting his uniform as if he hadn't just been beaten up by a girl.

*"Did Gorgeous catch up with you?"*

"Relax. I was out on missions all the time. The likelihood that I'm here right now is ... "

"One hundred percent," Jenny said, and grabbed his head and kissed him, hard. Disturbingly, after a moment of stuttering surprise, he started to get into the kiss, jaw moving against hers, tongue flickering naughtily against her lips before sliding inside. Her senses screamed in pain, synapses screeching to get away from the terrible Wrongness currently attached to her mouth. The part of her that was woven from Gallifreyan cloth recoiled in revulsion from his hands over her shoulders, the hurricane feel of his breath.

From behind the awful Fact, she heard a very familiar voice say, "Hey, no making out in this corridor, unless I'm invited."

Jack choked, while Jenny made an obscene gesture behind his back at his younger self.

"Is that a promise?" She repeated the gesture. "Fine, fine. I know when I'm not wanted." Footsteps walked away, and Jenny finally broke the kiss.

"No. No you don't," she replied five thousand years later, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"I'd say I'm sorry, but ... "

"You could have caused a rip in space-time being here. Do not start with me." She walked away in the direction he'd been headed. She hoped.

He made an amused noise in his throat.

"You're a good kisser."

"Your daughter thinks so."

She didn't let herself look to see his reaction.

-----

He was happy, safe, and surrounded by friends, so Ianto knew he was dreaming. He and Jack were holding Christmas at their house this year. Rhiannon was over, and Gwen and Rhys had brought the twins, and Lisa called to say she was going to be late, but not to worry. He kept making excuses to hold her on the line, asking her about her day, but the phone beeped to say he had another call.

"You should answer that," she said, and rang off.

The other line was Toshiko, who said, "Ianto, it's time."

"Time for what?" Ianto wasn't sure where this was going, but Jack was rubbing his shoulder, hard.

"You sleep like a damned log. No wonder you can put up with his snoring."

He opened his eyes onto a dim room. Someone was in front of him, shaking his shoulders. Alice.

"What are you doing here?" He looked around. The other beds were empty, though he wasn't surprised. Paul and Wayne had been nipping off together for weeks, and were just waiting

for a house to open up, whereas Malik was seeing Sally and had probably gone off in a quiet corner somewhere with her. It was the best comfort any of them had now.

"If anyone asks," she said, sliding onto the bed with him, "having mad, passionate sex with you." She pulled the blanket over herself as Ianto thanked any handy deities that he was wearing pyjamas. "We need to talk."

"Talk."

"We have to make a plan. You're the only other person here who remembers how to use a gun."

"Do you have a gun?"

"No."

"Not much purpose in knowing how to use one, then." He rolled over and away from her. The last woman he'd shared a bed with had been Lisa, too many years ago. With Alice this close, he could feel her warmth and breathe in the hint of perfume that followed her everywhere. This was all familiar and weird and wrong.

"Don't be obtuse. Look, we're being held by three people. We could easily take them if we all banded together."

"Yes. But they'll likely kill a number of us before we succeed." He'd gone over the scenarios in his head. None of them ended with everyone still alive, and most ended with bodies littering the ground.

"If we had weapons, we could do it."

He granted her that. "If we had weapons, and enough people trained on using them, yes. I

remind you of point one. We don't have any weapons."

"I've stolen some parts. We could steal more, get the others involved. You've got experience with alien and future tech. Build something."

"I'm not a technician." Malik was, though. If they could bring him in ... No.

"You're Torchwood."

"Retired."

"So was my Mum, and she could kill a man with his own shoe."

He tried to picture this. The visual was consistent with the stories about Lucia which had made it into Jack's book. "I think I would have liked to have met your mother."

He felt her shrug beside him. "She'd have hated you. Nothing personal." She shifted again. "Ianto, I know about Torchwood. The training you receive. The things you can do. They're letting us handle the pieces. I'm surprised you haven't already made something."

"I told you, I'm not a tech."

"Field agents aren't stupid."

"I was the secretary." He looked up at the ceiling.

"You were what?"

"I was the secretary. General support, admin, records keeper, personal assistant, and janitor. I was only a field agent when we were down people." When Jack was missing. When Owen died the first time. When he died the second time and Tosh was gone, too.

Alice sighed. "So?"

"What do you mean 'So?'"

"So you were the secretary. You were still Torchwood. Still used a gun, still played with alien bits and bobs. I majored in Art History, and Jenny and I have started nine revolutions and stopped twelve civil wars."

"Fine. Assuming I'm your best bet, which I'm not, I'm still not in."

"Why in the hell not?" Her voice rose, and he worried they'd be heard. Of course, that would just help her chosen cover story.

"Because!" He lay back on his pillow. "I have to protect you."

She laughed a lot harder than he felt was justified. "You really don't."

"I really do. If anything happens to you, Jack will never forgive me, and 'never' is literal in his case."

"You really don't, and if he were that worried, he'd have shown up by now. Everyone here is in danger, lanto. She's holding children hostage. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" He refused to answer. "You're going to let Gerta and her mates walk all over the last surviving humans in the galaxy because you're a coward."

Which, while cruel, was entirely true.

"I killed them."

"Killed who?" she asked, annoyed.

He closed his eyes. This was the thing he hated to think about, the thing he'd managed to set aside for years until having it shoved back in his

face every day here. "Thames House. These people. I killed them all."

"No, you didn't. It was the 456. Killed you, too." Her voice caught.

"I talked Jack into going in. He wasn't going to do it. He was going to sit back and see what happened because we had nothing. No real plan, no real assets. And I convinced him to take on the 456 anyway, and we all died for it because I screwed up." He turned onto his side, facing her. "Alice, every person in this colony died once already because of me. Call me a coward. Call me anything you'd like, but I can't risk that all over again. I won't."

The door opened, and they froze. Malik slipped in through the crack and closed it again, tiptoeing his way to bed.

Alice coughed. Malik froze. "Sorry, mate. I can wait outside."

"I was just leaving," said Alice, making as if she was pulling her trousers back on, although she'd remained dressed. Her voice dropped a register, and it trickled down his spine in a way he normally associated with a different member of her family. "See you later."

"Good night," he said in a tone he hoped was as sexy, and then he tried not to laugh. The scent of her lingered on his sheets and pillow, and he knew it would rob him of sleep tonight, if her words hadn't already guaranteed the same.

Malik crawled into his own bed. "Thought you said Alice was family."

"We'd be family by marriage."

He could see Malik's nod in the dim light. "And old marriages don't matter here."

"Something like that." They'd never got around to getting married, not that Ianto could remember. Perhaps the Agency took that from him the way they'd taken it from everyone else. Malik had lost five months or so off the end of his own former life. Ianto wondered how much he'd lose off the end of this one.

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John was bored. Bored bored bored bored bored bored bored. And also bored. Jack had gone after that bird Jenny as soon as she'd found herself some identification, because Jack was even less capable of dealing with boredom than John was. Five years of living with someone who had to be entertained constantly made John aware of just how much Jack's immortality was a punishment from some deeply twisted goddess. If John ever found out which goddess, he'd be sure to show up at her nearest temple with a bottle of booze and a selection of upscale sex toys. She sounded like his kind of woman.

Religious questions aside, he was still bored. He'd told Jenny how to gran the Agency's computer system properly this time, but he was sure Jack would fuck it up somehow.

He ought to take the ship as his payment, and just get the hell out of here.

"Hey, beautiful," he purred to the ship's AI. "I'd love to show you the moons of Calligos."

"I saw the moons of Calligos," said the AI. "Alice and Jenny rescued the child-empress of Calligos from pirates."

"Ah. Well then, I'll bet you've never seen the lava fields of Poriala Nine."

"Jenny is still technically President for Life on Poriala Nine, thanks to her intervention in the election woes they had in the year 418."

John blinked. He'd heard the stories of the fabled President for Life, but he'd disregarded them as standard rising-hero claptrap. "What about the crystal falls of Lampeth?"

"Oh, we go there quite a lot," said the ship happily. "There's a tradition to name all the firstborn daughters in a family line after Alice. Would you like to know why?"

"No." Losing hope, he said, "How about the singing trees of Aladan?"

The ship paused. "I would quite like to visit the singing trees of Aladan."

John grinned. "Perfect! So how about you and I take a quick little trip, bit of a holiday, yeah?"

"Not without Jenny and Alice. Our friend Daff is the Head Magistrate on Aladan, and they'd like to visit him, too."

He growled in annoyance. Then he flipped open the spare control panel and began punching in a course. He could find somewhere they hadn't been, lie low for awhile, and then ...

"Unauthorised access," said the AI.

"Just putting in coordinates for when we go."

"Negative. You are attempting to hijack me."

"Bright girl."

"If you do not cease from this behaviour, I will electrocute you. As you are not immortal, you will die. You have the count of three. Two. One."

His hands flew off as the charge filled the panel. He heard the hum, and knew if his hands were still there, the current across his heart would have stopped it dead. "All right, no need to be pushy."

"Touch me again and I'll kill you," the AI said sweetly.

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So far, Alice had recruited Chrissy, Tanya, Sahira and Steve. Chrissy couldn't gather parts, but she could keep her eyes open for traitors. The rest of them kept their heads down and took pieces as they dared. Alice opted to stash everything in her room. If someone was going to be found out and executed, she'd stand there first.

Two people walked from the neighbouring colony to start the negotiations Ianto had suggested. Gerta shot them both.

Three weeks into their new dictatorship, the Agents announced the colonists could have a rest day. Alice suspected Blays had had words with the other two about exhaustion; while she was as quick to threaten as her friends, Alice was beginning to see through the bluster, and thought there might be a way in after all.

Once, she'd stopped in her work when Blays was beside her. "You know this is wrong," Alice had said quietly. "What she's doing, what she's planning."

"Keep working," Blays had replied, but her eyes had been hooded.

The familiar bonfire didn't cheer them, but it did help with the cold. Autumn was coming upon them, and with the shorter days came the prospect of winter and starvation if they

didn't get the crops harvested. Alice thought the Agents wouldn't let them starve, would allow the harvest, but then, they might also use that threat to get people to work faster. The cache of weaponry was growing slowly. Alice wondered if, should winter come, they'd hold the invasion until spring.

Alice warmed her hands by the fire, catching Sahira's eye as she leaned against her husband.

Suddenly there were arms around hers, and she tensed, ready to strike, when a chin dropped to her shoulder and a voice whispered in her ear, "Don't."

Ianto was warm against her, which admittedly was quite nice with the fire before her. "What are you doing?"

"Helping." He pressed his hand against hers, palming three firing pins to her as he bent in and kissed her hair.

"We'll need more people."

"I've talked to Malik and Kris. They're in."

She didn't tell him her people. Best to keep the groups tiny in case someone was compromised. "Can you build something?"

"No. But Malik can." He hugged her closer. "We should keep the parts in my room. If we're found out, they can kill me."

"I'll bring what I have tonight." She leaned over and kissed him lightly in case anyone was watching, then stepped nimbly out of his arms to head back to her room to plan.

-----

They took a wrong turn, and then another. Over the comm, John mocked them as he

guided them back towards the secure areas. Jack would snark right back, but then, John was the only one who could help them now.

"You shouldn't be here," Jenny said again.

"I hate sitting around doing nothing."

"Your preferences were not taken into account for formulating the plan." He glared at the back of her head, wondering if he could increase the size of her headache by thinking hard.

He said in a lower voice, "Two people I care a lot about are in trouble. I want to do what I can to save them."

Jenny stopped. "Care about?"

"What?"

"Your daughter is missing, and you can't even say you love her?" For a second, Jack was certain he wasn't the one Jenny was actually angry with, and then her eyes focused on him.

"Alice knows I love her. So does Ianto."

She made a disgusted motion with her hand and walked faster. He hurried to catch up.

"What?"

"You. You have the most ridiculous relationship with love I've ever seen."

"I wouldn't call it ridiculous."

"You love everyone. You love my father."

"I'm getting over that."

"No, you're not." Probably true. "You love Alice and Ianto."

"That's right."

"You also love Dungbeetle back there on my ship. And I'd be surprised if you didn't love me a bit as well."

"What's wrong with that?" His opinion had always been that more of something tended to be a good thing when it came to matters of love and sex.

"Nothing. But it's not special to you. Alice is your child. But you've had dozens of children. Can you even remember all their names?"

"It hasn't been dozens. Fewer than thirty." And he'd undertaken his book as a means of reminding himself, hadn't he? Sons and daughters (and the three who'd been both, and one who'd been a gender only found on ser home planet) peppered his book with their names, their stories as he could remember them. "They were all special."

"But did they all feel special? Or did they know they were numbers on a long list? And that certainly doesn't touch the list of your spouses, or of your lovers."

\*

*"So do I even get to know my number?" His eyes are hooded tonight, lost in old memories of his own. Jack is often lonely here on this little world, but he has forever ahead of him to be out among people again; for Ianto, the isolation is hellish whenever he lets himself think about it, and Jack can't always distract him in time.*

*Jack doesn't always have patience enough for both of them, but this time he does, and he coaxes Ianto back into his clothes and outside into the chilly night. This isn't the first time Jack has pulled this corny trick, and he hopes he hasn't pulled it on Ianto in the past and*

*forgotten about it. He points up. "That star is part of a twin system, with a gas giant acting as a third small star in the orbit. Over here, this one is a nice medium-sized star with two habitable worlds. One's got a primitive society just now, but the other is a trading port for dozens of other worlds." He points out stars one by one, naming those he can remember while lanto shivers beside him. "That one just past the tree top. No, over there. Yeah. That one's Sol. Earth's system."*

*"I know what Sol is." His teeth are chattering. It's kinda cute.*

*"Just because there are a lot of them doesn't mean they're not special. And I'm going to remember the best ones for a long, long time. Okay?"*

*They go inside, where it's warm and pleasant, and the shadows lift from lanto's face again even as Jack feels a bit like a heel because of the times he's said these same words to other people to try to get them to understand. Later, when lanto is sleeping, Jack gets out of bed and returns to his study and he writes, pinning these moments to paper, knowing that he has nothing more to offer than his own memory.*

\*

"They're special to me. They know they're special."

But Jenny didn't look convinced.

-----

Malik looked up from the pile of debris on lanto's bedspread. "We're two pieces short."

"Which two?" asked Alice.

"I don't know their names. I can draw a picture, though." lanto found paper and pen, and Malik did two hasty sketches.

"I recognise this," lanto said, pointing to the first sketch. "The equipment I'm working on has one. I'll get it tomorrow."

No-one recognised the second piece. lanto and Kris committed the picture to memory, and Alice took it to show her own people later.

"All right," said Alice. "Assume we find both pieces. How long will it take you to assemble?"

"A night. Less. I can get most of these pieces together now and save the rest for when we've got the last bits."

"Do it," said lanto, when he noticed the rest were staring at him for approval. He didn't know why; this was Alice's plan. He was never anyone's leader, merely a loyal lieutenant to the end.

Alice said, "We're going to have to get the word out."

Malik said, "We can trust Sheldon and Ben. I'll tell them tomorrow." He'd been saddened to find out Sally'd been compromised, but Sally had a little boy in the nursery.

Kris nodded. "Forrest is in. I think Laurie is safe to tell."

"Bring them in," said Alice. "Show them the part we need. Have them get it to me or lanto. Don't give anyone else's name."

lanto saw everyone out but Malik, and when Paul and Wayne came in, they broke the news. "The two of you may want to find a new place to stay," lanto told them at the end.

Malik said, "If they find out, we're all in trouble."

The pair shared a look. "We're in," said Paul.

lanto slept that night with the parts under his pillow. He dreamed uneasily about children whose faces he couldn't make out.

-----

They passed various staff members as they made their way through the hallways, and Jack made sure to smirk at, flirt with, or studiously ignore each one as befitted his typical personality back then. Granted, he should probably stay out of sight, or better yet, go back to the ship right now rather than risk running into himself again, but everything he was screamed he had to be here in the middle of the action.

Speaking of action, two Agents were having a row. Jack and Jenny came upon them suddenly, becoming part of a rapidly-growing crowd of pretending-not-to-be onlookers.

"*Straight ahead*," said John in their ears, but Jack already knew where he was.

"Blocked," he said quietly.

"You lying sack of shit!" shouted one Agent. She looked familiar, but didn't everyone?

"I don't know what's worse about you, that you're psychotic, or that you're too stupid to know how psychotic you are," said the other. What was his name?

"You fucker!"

"Klaust!" Jack said, happily.

"What?" said Klaust angrily. Heads turned towards Jack.

"Nothing." As everyone turned back to the argument, Jack leaned over to Jenny. "Klaust always was a weird one. Turns out, he has three temporal fugitives locked up at his place." Beside him, someone else gasped. Jack turned to see another Time Agent: a stocky, short woman with dull red hair. Uh oh. "I mean, I heard he did."

"From who?" Her eyes were wide and shocked.

"Georgn. Somebody told him."

"Thanks," she said, and nudged her way through the crowd to the other female Agent, whispering in her ear.

"You! You've been nobbing fuges?!"

Klaust went pale.

Jenny grabbed Jack's hand. "Come on, then."

"Yeah." As they hurried away, he remembered the two women, finally. The redhead was one of the very few legacy Agents, allowed in because her mother had been an Agent. The shrieking blonde was her best friend. Jack had slept with them both a couple of times -- hell, they'd all slept with each other a couple of times, it was what just what they did -- but the blonde, whatever her name was, she'd been vicious. She'd made a habit of gathering a set of followers around her, because there was always someone scared enough or dumb enough to hang out with the mean ones.

Jack had never been part of her clique, but he recalled, perhaps in the fondness of time, that only a few of her hangers-on had been as actively cruel. The red-haired woman, for example, had a pattern of getting involved with stronger-willed personalities, and she wasn't

bright enough to walk away. Now if only he could remember her name, or the other woman's name. He remembered Klaust because Ianto had told him about the time he'd learned what "getting fired" meant in the Time Agency. The story had gone into the book, but so much from his days here at the Agency could not be dredged out of his memories. Names were gone.

"Are you all right?" Jenny asked, as they found the room with the right terminals.

"Yeah. Just feeling old."

On the planet with the red house, he'd essentially been retired. He only worked on what he chose, ate and slept as he pleased, and wrote his life story, just like the very old man he was. Out here, his heart raced and his palms sweated and they kept fleeing danger, and wasn't this what life was supposed to be about? At least while he was still spry enough to enjoy it?

Spry. Now there was an old man word.

"Let me do this."

"Hart told me how to hack it." Jenny went to work, and sure enough, a minute later, she was in.

"You're good."

"'Brilliant' would also be appropriate, under the circumstances."

"Did you just tell a joke?"

"Maybe." She wore a pleased expression as she searched the files. "This one looks promising."

Jack stood behind her and read over her shoulder. "No. Wrong planet of origin. See?"

"You're right." She kept digging. Jack's fingers itched to grab the input from her, but he'd set off the alarm last time in his haste and they didn't dare that again. "How about this one?"

He scanned the record. "That looks right. Try cross-referencing it for additional acquisitions."

"Four more colonies, same time period, all on one planet. Six thousand years from now."

He wanted to take the info and run, but if they were wrong, they wouldn't get a third chance. "Keep searching. We have to be sure."

-----

Tanya brought Alice the final piece two days later. "Get Harry out of there," she said, fear and sorrow on her face. Tanya was a horsy-looking woman, broad at the shoulders and not conventionally pretty. In the old days, Harry probably wouldn't have looked twice at her, and she'd have spent her nights thinking about men who were too busy chasing tiny things in short skirts to notice she was alive. None of them could have guessed how life would turn out, could they?

That night, they watched Malik finish their first and only weapon. Alice and Ianto took the first turns testing the heft and balance, neither daring to fire it yet.

Alice said, "We've got this, they've got more. We need to find a time when there's just one of them watching. Shoot, take their guns, and we'll go after the other two."

Ianto said, "The timing has to be right. I don't want to go after anyone as long as they're guarding the nursery."

"Leave that to me," said Chrissy. "Let me know when you want them out, and I can get them out."

Alice nodded. "Tomorrow at lunch, then. Spread the word tonight."

-----

Ianto woke with an urge to pee and a gun in his face. Trem said, "Get up."

Ianto kept his eyes on Trem, wondering if he could dive for the gun under his pillow before he was shot. This would be the perfect chance.

Gerta stood in the doorway, her own gun held casually. "Wakey wakey," she said, and as Malik, Paul and Wayne woke, Trem brought them into the sights of his gun.

"Who else is involved?" Gerta asked.

"Just us," said Malik.

"They're lying," said Trem. "The woman, that dark-haired one. She's been seen with them."

"She's my girlfriend," Ianto said. "She's not involved."

"Pity," said Gerta, and in the hallway, Ianto could see Blays guarding Alice and her roommates. With a gesture, they were led into the room with the men. Two of the women blinked, yawning and confused and scared. Alice stayed steady, while the fourth woman appeared to comprehend exactly what was going on, an angry tilt to her mouth.

Gerta said, "Just so you know, I will be making an example of all of you, but if you'd like to spare the others some needless pain, the ringleader may feel free to step forward."

"It's me," said Ianto, just as Malik said, "I am."

Alice said nothing. Ianto was grateful that she would let him protect her that much. Then she smiled, and his stomach dropped. He knew that smile.

Before he could shout, before he could stop her, Alice dove for his pillow and pulled out the weapon. She fired at Gerta, who managed to duck the blast, but barely. Alice fired again, wounding Blays.

Trem shot her. Alice was dead before she hit the floor.

## Chapter Seven

"We decided the birth should be in the Hub. Lucia wanted a friendly face to be her doctor. I was worried that my unique genetic code might be problematic in hospital. Of course the Rift went crazy in the middle of the delivery, and everyone who wasn't having a baby or delivering one had to deal with it. Five hours after my daughter was born, I finally got to hold her.

The moment I touched her, she started to cry."  
- from "Me: An Autobiography"

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Hilda came in with her cloak engaged. Jenny examined the readouts. "Five colonies. The largest has five hundred humans." They'd set their arrival for a few years after the colony's founding date. They could fine-tune the rescue from there, Jack had said. Jenny suspected that they couldn't, actually, because of setting timelines into being, but Jack had a habit of overriding objections.

"Light arms only," Jenny told them. "If there's trouble," this was to Hart, "we defend ourselves, nothing more." The part of her that always heard her father's voice chided her for bringing even these. The part of her that worried for Alice told him to shut up.

She glanced at the men. They were in their Agent uniforms, while she had opted for her fatigues. Jack and Jenny had agreed that the locals would respond best to the imagery of authority. She'd noticed privately that while Hart seemed half-naked in anything, Jack stood taller and spoke with more command when he wore clothing that gave him power. Thinking back to the various encounters they'd had, and

his common choice of periods military, she estimated an 82% chance that Jack already knew this, with an 18% chance that he did it anyway without understanding why.

"Let's go."

The first colony they chose was not the correct one. When Jack mentioned Ianto's name, the man they spoke to, the closest the colony had to a mayor, broke into a grin. "The diplomat? You're looking for the Thames colony. They're twenty kilometres away. It's a long walk."

"We'll manage," said Jenny, and took the directions carefully.

"When will you be returning to regular supply runs? We're running low on sugar, and there are preserves to get in."

Jack offered him a reassuring smile. "We're on intermittent service right now. Tell your people to expect regular shipments to this world starting in the Spring."

"The Spring? But that's so far away!"

The lie sat uneasily with Jenny, but when the man turned to her for confirmation, she nodded along with the false hopes. Jack's reasoning was sound: convince them they must survive the winter, that good times were just around the corner, and they would see things through for long enough to prove to themselves they could manage without help.

"You're one of the lucky ones, mate," said Hart. "Most colonies aren't getting their regular shipments back until late summer of next year."

The man's eyes grew big. "Well then, thank you. I'll let everyone know." He made a grimace. "Why did you say you were looking for Ianto? He's not got himself into trouble, has he?"

"No," Jack said. "Not at all."

-----

Ianto was in trouble. Intellectually, he knew it in the way he was being manhandled, the way the rest looked upon him as the leader of their short, failed rebellion. They were going to die, all of them, but he was already singled out to die messily, and if Malik didn't stop trying to divert the Agents' attention, he'd meet the same fate.

And none of it mattered. Alice was dead, her eyes looking sightlessly at the open door, and Ianto could not even bend down to close them.

But then, why not? How many times could they kill him after all?

He shrugged off the hand on his arm and kneeled beside the body. "Don't move!" Trem snarled.

Ianto ignored him, even as his shoulder was roughly grabbed. He took Alice's hands and folded them, then closed her eyes. He looked around, uselessly, for some water. Cleaning and disposal of dead bodies, that was him. He'd cleaned Lisa's body. Bodies. His last act for her had been the most loving he'd been able to give, before they'd locked her away in the cold darkness. He'd prepared Jack's body after Abaddon, lingering as he did, scrutinising in vain for the faintest sign of life. If he'd been in the room with Jack when Steven had died, he would have been the one to clean the mess and wash the poor dead child. But there was

no water in this room, nothing to wipe the blood from Alice's face, and Trem dragged him to his feet again.

"I'm so sorry," Malik whispered, as they were led out.

"No talking," Gerta said. She tended to Blays' wound. "Go to the infirmary." Blays lowered her head and scuttled off.

"They're not with us," Wayne said, nodding to the women. Trem hit him with his weapon, and Wayne shut up as they were led outside.

Trem and Gerta kept their weapons trained on the small group. The morning sun was just peeking over the edge of the horizon, turning the ripened fields to an orange-gold. Out beyond them in the pastures, Ianto could hear the lowing of the animals stirring to wakefulness. Gerta and Trem led the captives to a storage barn, empty of the grain which needed to be harvested, and left them locked in with almost nothing else. Two broken shovels wouldn't be enough to fight with when their captors came back with blasters.

Ianto sat on the ground, hands clasped around his knees. Paul and Wayne sat together against a wall, while Malik and one of the women -- Ianto didn't know her name -- searched the barn for an exit or a weapon.

One of the other women had cried quietly on their walk here. Ianto wanted to ask if she was frightened for herself or sad because Alice was gone, but his throat was too dry to speak. His bladder poked at him uncomfortably, and since he'd rather not die pissing himself, he got to his feet and found a quiet corner like an animal.

"We're all going to die," Paul said, his voice hollow. Wayne said something quietly comforting.

Ianto redid his trousers. They were all already dead. They'd died together once. They were going to die again. Alice never made it home because Alice was dead here, now, thousands of years after her birth, thousands of years after her son. Pointless deaths, all of them, always.

He turned, and he looked at the people he'd killed. Malik was clever and brave, and Paul was shy and strong, and Wayne was... Actually, he didn't know Wayne very well. The three women unfortunate enough to have roomed with Alice, he didn't know them at all, nameless to him as the day they'd awakened back on Narda. But everyone here had been nameless to him once, and they'd all had people who'd loved them, all left families behind, and now he was one of them again.

"I have an idea," he said. "It's not a good one."

"Any idea is better than none," said Malik.

"No, this idea is probably worse than no idea. No idea means just the seven of us are going to be executed." The woman who was sobbing cried harder. "This idea could in fact get everyone killed in the colony."

"We trust you," said Alice's friend.

"You shouldn't. I'm the reason you're here now." He went to Malik, and held out his hand. Confused, Malik took it. "Ianto Jones, Torchwood."

Wayne's eyes narrowed. "I know that word."

"We came in. We tried to intimidate the 456." At the confused looks from everyone who

didn't know about the monster on the top floor, he added, "The aliens that were mind-controlling the children. They were in Thames House. They responded to our threat by killing everyone in the building. I died with you, but you died because of me." He didn't even try to say he was sorry. No apology was possible.

He took a breath, met everyone's eyes in turn. He read confusion, dawning to comprehension.

"Who was Alice?" Her friend stared back at him.

"Her son was murdered the following day because of the 456."

The woman nodded sadly. "She was one of us, then."

"What's the plan?" asked Malik. Ianto turned to him, saw the trust on his face. Wayne still looked unconvinced, but the rest listened eagerly, as if he was going to spout off something that made sense, as if he was about to rescue them with a miracle. This would be the point where Alice gave everyone a rousing speech about dignity and humanity and also the secret to winning a fight when one was outgunned by psychopaths, but Alice wasn't here.

If he did survive this, which he doubted, he swore to himself he'd give her a proper funeral, and if he didn't, he swore he'd try to take her killers with him.

"We're going to do what we should have done in the first place. But before that, I want to know your names."

-----

Hilda set them down in silence four kilometres out. Jack checked his gun and holstered it.

This should be an easy in and out job: swagger in, flash some Agency ID, get Alice and Ianto, no muss, no fuss. They passed through pastures wet with dew and redolent with dung. Jack had to drag John away from a sheep, but only the once, so it was a lovely morning stroll.

It was after they reached the edge of the pasture and the beginning of the ploughed fields that the vague unease he'd been experiencing blossomed into full-grown worry. "If this is one big farm, where are the farmers?"

"They're not shagging the sheep," John said irritably, but he watched around them warily.

"Wait," said Jenny. "Listen!"

They halted, and Jack strained his ears to hear what she did. He picked up one voice, coming from the direction of the village. He couldn't make out the words.

Jenny blanched. "Run!" She dashed towards the village without waiting, and Jack hurried to keep up with her. At a flat run over the short hills and through the stalks, Jenny was fast, her gun raised and her eyes blazing.

John ran behind them both, probably wondering if now would be a good time to vanish.

"What is it?"

"I made out the words 'rebels' and 'execution.' I didn't want to wait to hear more." She pushed through the rows and then stopped abruptly as they burst through the last one. Jack just prevented himself from ploughing into her, then John's full momentum hit him and that was a lost cause. Jenny nimbly stepped ahead as the two men fell to the ground behind her.

Jack scrambled back to his feet. Before them, all the colony's adults were assembled. In the centre, on a small platform, two Time Agents stood with their weapons drawn. Beside them were seven people with their hands tied. One of them was Ianto. Joy at seeing him alive mingled with horror at what was surely an execution, and Jack struggled to keep both emotions at bay. He searched the crowd for signs of Alice, saw nothing.

"All right," said Jenny in a low voice. "Here's the plan. On the count of three, you two wade in there, and demand an equal cut of the pie. While they're distracted ... "

"ATTACK!" The scream went up from the crowd, and suddenly all hundred-odd colonists were shouting and running at the two Agents.

Jenny blinked. "This is also an acceptable distraction."

John said, "I'll go get Eye Candy, you two find your girl."

Jack opened his mouth to object. Jenny said, "Good plan." She grabbed Jack's hand. "Come on!"

-----

A plan hinging on convincing the two Agents that Wendy and Debbie weren't with them was doomed to fail. So when the attack was shouted anyway by someone he couldn't identify among the other colonists, Ianto stood still in shock for a crucial moment. Then he saw Trem turn his weapon from the prisoners and towards the crowd, and that broke the moment. Ianto rushed him head-first, thanking his ancestors for his hard skull as he did. The shot went wild, and he refused to think about where it had landed.

Malik and Wayne went after Gerta, who was less distractible than Trem. She fired precisely, hitting them both.

Ianto had no free hands to struggle for Trem's gun, could only use his weight and desperation to pin him. People crowded them now, feet crushing and kicking. Trem fired again, and someone screamed. Ianto smacked his head into Trem's with a sharp, agonising crack, as someone's arm came down and pulled on the weapon.

He couldn't see Gerta, couldn't see anything. Feet trying to reach Trem kicked his head, sending shooting pain through his skull. Stars exploded in front of his eyes, and still he pushed himself to keep all his weight on his enemy.

Two strong hands reached down and lifted him off Trem. Ianto struggled, but then, Gerta was over towards the nursery, retreating behind cover fire. People were falling under her blasts. So much death.

"Hello, Eye Candy," said the obnoxious voice. Ianto turned his head. Hart smiled at him, his hands still wrapped around Ianto's arms. "We leave you alone for five minutes and you start a civil war."

"It was three months!"

Hart's smile lingered, even as a chair was brought down on his head and he collapsed. Paul lifted the chair, ready to bring it down again.

"Wait!" Ianto said. "He's not one of them."

"He's wearing their uniform!" Anger filled his voice.

"He's an Agent. But he's with me. Sort of." Ianto disregarded Hart for a moment, seeking out Gerta. "Who got Trem's gun? We have to stop her." Shots fired his way and he ducked down. Paul untied his hands, and Ianto immediately went through Hart's loathsome pockets, looking for anything he could use, anything at all. His first pass turned up two guns, a knife, the small metal thing Alice had given Hart, a phial with glittery bits inside, two communication-looking devices Ianto couldn't identify, and something sticky wrapped in a serviette.

He handed the knife to Paul and the spare gun to Alice's friend Frieda, and shoved everything except the metal thing and the sticky into his own pockets in case he needed them. The shots had stopped. He stood. People were crying and shouting. Those still on their feet pounded on the door to the nursery.

Across the way, he saw Jack and Jenny headed towards him. He paled. Ianto turned away, and told Paul, "I'm going in after Gerta. Frieda, can you cover the outside?" She nodded. "If she comes out, shoot her. If she tries to negotiate, shoot her. She doesn't walk out of here."

"What about Trem?" Tanya had reached them. Trem was unconscious and battered. Hart was already waking.

"I don't care," he said, and meant it. There were standards for treating prisoners. The colonists would have to decide what their own standards were. Ianto wasn't planning on walking out of the nursery alive to find out.

He jumped off the platform and went to the door. Of course it was locked. He kicked at the lock, but the door held tight. Frustration built

up inside him. Gerta was the type to systematically murder a building full of children just for fun. Inside, he heard shots.

Behind him, he heard Jack say in an odd voice, "There you are."

Jenny said, "This will be easiest if we do it together."

The last memory of Jack that Ianto had, they were shouting at each other. Jack wanted Ianto to leave the planet, leave him, get the hell out while he was still able to enjoy it, and when Ianto balked, Jack had called him stupid and childish and everything else to make him angry, and it had worked. Ianto told himself none of that mattered now.

An image of Alice dead on the floor appeared before him. When Jack's hand touched his shoulder and rested on his back, it brought no comfort.

"Count of three," said Jenny. "One, two, three!"

Together, they kicked the door, shattering the wood at the lock. Ianto had Hart's gun in his hand and he pushed in ahead of the others.

Gerta waited for them, her blaster pointed at the nearest child. Ianto took in the scene rapidly: Chrissy was unconscious or dead on the floor. Flora's body was draped over a cot. Harry was nowhere to be seen. Ianto and Jenny levelled their guns at her, while Jack's stayed loose.

"Don't come any closer," Gerta said. Her mouth pulled into a little moue. "Jarron. And Georgn. I wasn't expecting to see the two of you again." Ianto felt Hart walk into the room behind them.

Hart said, "We heard you were onto a good thing here and wanted in. Set ourselves up as gods in a bottleneck? Fantastic."

Jack put on his best You Can Trust Me Smile. "We'll even help you clean up the last of the rabble." His gun did move now, to point directly at Ianto. "There are four more colonies on this planet. Wipe one out, take the kids, and it's a whole new party."

She laughed. "With you? You broke the Agency, asshole. You're the reason we don't have anything left."

Jack's smile didn't slip. "Can you blame me? I wanted to get what was mine."

"We swiped plenty of tech," said Hart. "Even the magic sparklies." Sparklies? Ianto frowned. That was familiar. Why?

"You're going to need them," Gerta said. She held up her vortex manipulator. "I've set it to overload in about five minutes. Either the stock surrenders, or losing their brats will be the least of their worries."

Jack said, "Seems a little overkill." He spread his hands. "Anyway, we're here now to help you."

"Your help I can do without," Gerta said, and she turned her gun on him and fired. Jack went down without a sound. She laughed again. "What, no horrified outcries? Georgn, I thought you cared."

Hart shrugged. "Give him a minute." Ianto didn't let anything show on his face. Jack hadn't died in front of him in years. Good to know the stomach-clenching fear hadn't changed a whit. Jenny showed only mild annoyance.

"You want in? Fine. Shoot this shoe scraping," Gerta indicated lanto, "and then round up the rest of the units for me. Blays and I will execute them."

"We will?"

From the door leading to the infirmary, Blays limped, her eyes bleary with whatever medicine she'd been given. lanto wondered at that. Had he been the medic on duty, he'd likely have poisoned her.

"Get over here," Gerta said, annoyed. "You've missed all the fun."

Blays looked down at the bodies on the floor. "You said we were only going to execute the ringleaders. The woman's already dead, the other's in front of you." Jenny flinched at her words, looking to lanto for confirmation. He couldn't meet her eyes, knew his face said enough.

"The natives were noisy." Gerta sounded bored.

Blays looked at the dead bodies again. Her eyes lingered on Flora. "You said there wasn't going to be any more killing. You said we were going to live like queens."

Hart said, "Did she promise you could nob all the units you wanted? That was what I did."

Jack gasped to life at their feet. Gerta and Blays both dropped their attention to him, stunned. Jenny rushed Gerta, kicking her in the side and tumbling to the ground with her when Gerta blocked. Both guns went spinning across the floor as fists and elbows and knees collided. lanto aimed his weapon at them, but he couldn't risk shooting Jenny as they fought.

A blaster shot echoed through the room, lighting up the two women. They both went still.

Gerta rolled off of Jenny, and kept rolling as Jenny shoved her body away. lanto offered a hand up, as all eyes went to Blays, who held her blaster in trembling hands.

"She said!"

"Yes, she did, love," said Hart, far more gently than lanto would have guessed. "She promised, didn't she?" He reached out and took the blaster from her unresisting grip. lanto held her with his own weapon, but had the feeling he didn't need it anymore.

A noise came from Gerta's corpse. Jenny knelt down and removed the dead woman's VM from her wrist. "She said 'overload.' That can't be good."

"Let me see," said Jack, taking it from her. "Oh, this isn't so bad." He started manipulating the controls. "Gerta's locked us out." He looked at Hart, who went pale.

"I need a ship," Jack said, starting to babble in fear. "Or a transmat. Give me your strap. If I can get this far enough away from the colony before it goes ... " His eyes darted, met lanto's. lanto read an entire chapter of "Oh God, not again," in his gaze, and felt it right back.

Hart stood and swiped the strap from Jack. "Give me that." He moved the controls, much faster than Jack's hands. "Please. You never did know how to work one of these things properly. A little torque on the choral array, and ... "

The whine from the strap sharpened, and then all the breath was pushed from lanto's body as

Jack shoved him to the ground, covering him. All he could see was the fine wood grain of the floor, all he could feel was Jack. Their hands reached for each other and clasped, as the room filled with a weird sound like the inside of a drum bonged by a giant hand.

Then nothing.

When lanto was sure he wasn't dead he turned his face to Jack's. His mouth was close enough to kiss, and the way Jack's breath caught told him he was thinking the same thing. Jack's free hand drifted over the curve of newly-firm muscle appreciatively. lanto would be annoyed that Jack, upon dealing with a life or death situation, immediately turned his thoughts to sex, but lanto's mind was already there, so he couldn't complain.

Then the events of the last hour (had it only been that short a while?) caught up with him, and he gently but firmly pushed Jack away. Jack's eyes asked questions lanto couldn't answer.

"Where's Hart?" Jenny asked, getting to her own feet.

Jack frowned and searched the area. Then he got down to look at the floor where Hart had stood moments before. "If it went on overload, it would have killed everyone. He must have taken it somewhere before it blew." His face contorted. "It'll have killed him." Jack always carried his failures. lanto placed a hand on his shoulder.

Jenny shook her head. "He hasn't met Alice and me yet. I'm not feeling a paradox ripping through the fabric of space. Wherever he is, he's still alive."

Something that she said, something that Hart said. lanto dug into his pocket, wrapped his fingers around the glittering phial he'd taken.

"I have to go," he said, and dashed out, just as Chrissy started to come around.

-----

Numb, Jack watched lanto sprint out the door and away. "What the hell?"

"Stay here," Jenny ordered Blays, and she told the woman who was waking up, "Keep an eye on her. Don't harm her. She saved you." She grabbed Jack's hand and led him out to follow lanto, heedless of the other colonists.

Jack hadn't seen Alice anywhere, and his worry grew with every passing step. Was she locked up? Maybe she hadn't even been sent to this colony, and they'd have to start their search all over again for her. And then lanto ducked into a building that screamed "dormitory," and ran down a corridor, and into a room that smelled of blood.

Jack reared back at the sight of Alice, broken and still on the floor.

"No ... "

Jenny squeezed his hand, and where he should have seen the same shock, he saw only sympathy and grief. She'd already known. He let go and went to his knees beside his daughter's motionless form, took her cold hand.

lanto sat at the other side. Jenny joined him. "She was leading our little rebellion," he said. "We had a plan, but someone must have told. When they came for us, she fought."

Jack choked back a sob of pride, as Jenny said quietly, "She always fought."

Ianto held out his hand. "I pulled this off of Hart. But I don't know how to make it work." His voice was small, pleading, and it took Jack a long moment to recognise the item in his palm. For a second, his heart stopped.

He took the phial from Ianto. "You know what these are?"

"They brought you back from the dead once. They brought all these people back."

Technology the Agency wasn't supposed to have, stolen from a dead race and used only under the strictest of watches because immortality in a bottle was not something to be idly left around. Jack uncapped it, let the golden dancing pinpricks, like fireflies on a July night, settle over his hand. They could do their work without him, but as the Doctor had once said, a bit of parental DNA never hurt. The nanogenes floated over Alice in a cloud and settled on her, repairing with tiny tools every imperfection they found.

Hell of a thing.

Alice gasped into life, her eyes flying open, and Jenny was the first one she latched onto as Jack tickled the genes back into their bottle. "What happened?" she asked, when she could breathe.

"We won," Ianto said, with a relieved smile, though his eyes were on Jack.

Jack watched her silently, unable to speak, satisfied himself with touching her hand again. She didn't pull away.

-----

The colonists didn't trust Jack in his Agent's uniform, but Jenny noticed they all gathered around Ianto and Alice easily. The dead and wounded were brought into the infirmary one by one, and one by one they were cured, those who could be. The man called Harry had died days ago, and was beyond their reach. Four others had also died too early for the nanogenes to revive them. No-one brought Gerta and Trem to be healed.

Those from the colony who had died under Gerta's rule were given heroes' funerals later that day, while two who'd been murdered from a neighbouring colony were readied for return to their home. Jack buried the bodies of the two Agents alone in the evening as the first stars come out.

Jenny herself made sure she was never far from Alice. Having lost her once was quite enough. While Ianto handled the nanogenes, Alice organised the colonists, setting up a small cleanup crew among the able-bodied and getting the rest back to work on the harvest before the frost came. Jack pulled off his uniform and pitched in to help, probably (94% certainty) to allay their distrust. Jenny busied herself with showing a few of them how to reassemble the computer systems they'd deconstructed, but she kept her eyes on her friend.

"You're brilliant, you know," Jenny told Alice in a free moment. Alice just blushed.

When Jack was back from his work, and Ianto had healed his last patient, and Alice had handed the reins back to a newly-revived woman named Flora, they sat together at the dining hall for a very late tea. Flora joined them, her daughter half-asleep in her lap, sitting next to Alice. The other colonists left

them space, although as they passed by, friendly hands brushed against Alice's and Ianto's chairs.

Ianto slid a piece of paper over to Flora. "This is everything I can tell you about the other colonies. You'll have to find another ambassador."

Jenny said, "Blays will need a trial, a fair one."

Flora nodded. "She'll get one. I'll see to it." Her eyes went to Alice. "Now that we really are on our own, we could use your help."

Alice took Flora's hand reassuringly. "You're going to do fine."

"We'd do better with you here. All of you," she added, taking in the rest of them, but her hand stayed with Alice. Jenny felt an unfamiliar emotion bubble inside of her.

"We can't," Jenny said shortly.

"I really can't," Alice said, more kindly. "I've been out there. I can't stay in one place when I have that chance again." She bent in and kissed Flora on the cheek. Again Jenny felt strange, as though the human woman was really a Hath in disguise. Suddenly she wanted to give her a nickname, a nasty or impertinent one for choice.

Then Alice pulled back, and Jenny noticed that she'd moved just a hair away from Flora and just that much closer to her, and the desire to show up the other woman faded, to be replaced with thoughts of where they could go next after this mess was finally sorted.

Jack said, "We can stay the night." Which, Jenny found out a few short hours later, meant, "We'll sneak out when you're asleep so there are no lengthy goodbyes." At the

moment, all she saw was how he took Ianto's hand and held it tightly, and how Ianto squeezed back just as hard.

-----

Winter was setting in fast this year, Malik thought. Five years since the founding of the colony, and the winters got tougher each time. Maybe that was just his imagination. Everything had seemed harder, at first, after the Time Agency had abandoned them.

Still, as he finished straightening up his office for the night, he mused that things could be worse. The crops had failed last year, but they'd traded with the other colonies for enough food to survive, and this year, they had a surplus to trade out for the cotton the Aeros grew. Wool was warm, but Malik was more than ready for a pair of boxers made from something less scratchy. Cotton would make nicer baby clothes as well, he thought, for when Flora's little one -- her third and the second with that mad wife of hers -- arrived and Flora could get back to helping him run this quaint little insane asylum.

The door opened from outside. Curious, Malik went to see who was coming in at this hour.

He stopped, staring. A man who looked a lot like someone who couldn't possibly be there, only younger, stood in the doorway with two little kids Malik had never seen before. The kids were crying, clearly scared.

"Is this the colony from London? MI-5 building?"

Malik nodded slowly. Surely Ianto recognised him?

Ianto thrust the kids at him roughly. "Take care of them." Then he turned and walked away.

Malik's mouth opened and shut again.

"Hello, kids," he said in a friendly if cracked voice, kneeling down to their level. The children began to cry harder. "It's okay. You're safe here."

The door opened again. Ianto hurried in. This Ianto looked like the one he remembered. Behind him, Malik saw Alice and the two people who'd come suddenly and vanished again. They were all wearing the same clothes he remembered from that day, he noticed, his common sense screaming at him inside his head that this was *wrong*.

Ianto said, "Did I just ... ?" He saw the children. "Oh good. Thank you for keeping an eye on them." He grabbed the little hands and led the kids back to the doorway where Alice picked up one and the tall man the other.

Ianto paused, and then came back, helping Malik to his feet. His touch didn't burn, but it was warmer than he'd expect for someone who walked outside in the snow.

"Ianto?"

"It's all right. I can't explain now. Just tell everyone we said hello." Malik nodded again. Ianto clasped his arm. "Good man. Take care." And they were gone again.

Malik blinked. Having been dead twice and brought thousands of years into the future, this was not the strangest thing that had ever happened to him. However, since the first death was Ianto's fault and the second time, Ianto had been the one who'd wakened him, he had to admit the weirdest changes in his life

revolved around a quiet Welsh fellow who liked to go on walks.

"It's a sign of good fortune," Chrissy would say later, as Malik described what had happened incredulously. "They're our guardian angels, I knew it all along," and when she said it, heads would nod in agreement. Malik's mother had told him about angels. He'd never much believed in them, but then he'd met a man who could bring people back from the dead. (Blays said she'd seen a man who came back from the dead all on his own, but that was Blays: nice enough when you got to know her but never quite there in the head.) As it was, the colony's children were often tucked in with nightly blessings that Auntie Alice would protect them in their sleep. Malik's littlest one always slept the night through when Sally said the words.

He still wasn't sure about angels, but Malik was pretty certain he knew a legend starting when he saw one.

-----

Alice's heart did not break when she handed the child in her arms to Kamb, nor when Jack handed the other child to Kamb's husband. She didn't start to cry when the twins' siblings gathered around them, stroking and touching their hair in awe, then laughing and playing as though the family had never been broken. There was no lump in her throat to talk past, as Kamb embraced her gratefully, as Kamb and her husband offered their forgiveness to the men who'd stolen their children, as Alice declined for all of them Kamb's offer that everyone stay to celebrate the joyous return.

She didn't tremble as the four of them walked back to Hilda together, Jack's hand warmly on

her shoulder, nor as they took off, the viewscreen focused on the new buildings of the village until they were gone from sight. Her voice didn't break wishing her father and his husband a good night when they went to their small cabin for some well-earned sleep.

Only after, when the lights dimmed in the main cabin and Jenny sat down beside her, a calm presence against her side, neither looking at the other, only then did Alice weep.

-----

Jack felt tired, but in a good way, and hot and sticky, in an exceptionally good way. He hummed quietly in his throat as lanto settled close against him in the narrow bunk, both heartbeats slowly returning to normal. Jack had only missed him for two days, but lanto had said they'd lived at the colony for months. The changes in his physique lent credence to the time frame, and Jack already had charted with delight the new planes and curves on lanto's otherwise familiar body. Someday, Jack would have to outline all the time slips they'd experienced in their long relationship, put them as another chart in his book.

He was positive lanto wasn't psychic and still he wasn't surprised when lanto said, "Any idea how you'll work this into the book?"

"You said I wasn't allowed to go into detail about our sex life."

A snort. "Time travel. Kidnapping. Prison. Alice. This may be ringing a bell."

"I'm sure I'll think of a way to make it sound exciting. All that 'running for our lives' stuff should punch up the boring bits about farming."

"I'll have you know that farming is very interesting. I've developed a new appreciation for plants."

"Remind me to introduce you to some Delvians."

lanto sighed, and the sigh turned into a sleepy yawn. "Plant people?"

"Only species I've ever met who use sun lamps as sex toys."

He made a noise that Jack translated as either "You are so full of shit" or "Going to sleep now." Jack took the opportunity to steal a soft kiss.

lanto was quiet for a long time. "Jack?"

"Hm?"

"We had a fight. A big one. It would have been a couple of years ago."

He thought back. They'd had a few big arguments, but Jack's time sense wasn't as good as it had been, and he really couldn't remember which one had been two years ago, and which had been ten. Pondering now, he might also be remembering a fight or two he'd had with Jeanne, or even with N'ndy or Tel. "Assume I remember."

"How did we work it out?"

"What do you mean?"

"The Agency wiped my memories, I think to erase the time they thought I was on Narda with you. The last thing I remember, we were fighting, and I was considering leaving you the next time a supply ship came through, and you wanted me to go."

Jack remembered now. It had been a hard winter, and they'd been forced to close quarters even more than usual. Jack had been writing about a particularly difficult period in his life, full of old pain and bitter loss, and he'd been moody reliving the memories. In other times, Ianto would have been a listening ear and a quiet shoulder, but he'd been caught up in one of his own occasional bouts of self-doubt, feeling worthless as a kept man stuck on a planet with no real purpose. Two snippy, sullen people with no-one else to talk to, of course they'd taken it out on each other, saying things neither one meant, and worse, things they did mean but normally wouldn't say.

Ianto shivered against Jack, but didn't pull away. "I've been trying to picture how we got past that."

"Oh. Well." They'd stopped speaking entirely. Jack had taken to sleeping in his study. They moved around each other in the house, not staying in the same room any longer than necessary, nursing their grudges for weeks. And then ... "When you first saw me at the colony, what did you think?"

"Oh God, I got Alice killed."

Jack's stomach tightened. With an effort, he relaxed. "After that. When she was better."

"I thought I was so pleased to see you, I could burst."

"Me too." He pressed his lips against Ianto's shoulder. "We got over it. All right?"

"All right." Something in his eyes flickered, and Jack thought he might still be obsessing on the past. Then he said, "When she woke up, I thought you were going to cry."

"Almost did. Still respect me?"

"I have to respect you now?" Ianto's smile teased, but the distant look was still in his eyes. "I can't remember the last time I saw you that happy."

"Oh, I can think of a few times," Jack said as he let his hands wander, but Ianto's expression didn't change even as Jack stole a quick kiss. "You okay?"

Instead of replying, Ianto returned and deepened the kiss, taking Jack's breath away. When they finally broke, panting and ready for more, Jack said, "Not complaining, but what was that for?"

"Two years to make up for, yeah?"

Jack felt his mouth move into a grin. "Yeah."

-----

Ianto had always wanted to visit a floating city. The constant rush of high winds outside the dome was a bit much, and he should have anticipated the vertigo when he'd made the mistake of looking over the edge into the clouds, but seeing Jack jump around like he was home made it all worth the trip.

"We're five hundred years past the time where we picked you up," Jenny had said last night when they'd docked to refuel and take on supplies. "There aren't any records of you in the intervening time." She hadn't said, "And we're dropping you off here," but that part was understood. Jack had wandered off while the rest of them had slept, and had come back hours later to say he needed to show them something in another part of the space port.

"Do you like her?" Jack was dancing on the balls of his feet again, nervous and eager.

lanto took in the bulky, ungraceful lines of the ship. Her? "Not very *Star Trek*, is it?"

"*Star Trek* was made up. This is the real deal. No time circuit, obviously. We can't all steal Chula tech." This was aimed at Jenny, who shrugged it off as she inspected the ship's landing gear. "But she's got hyperspace capability, a renewable-source engine, and a cloak in case we get into trouble." Which was Jack-speak for, "When I get bored and cause some."

lanto stared at Jack suspiciously. "You've already bought it, haven't you?" Five hundred extra years of compound interest had not hurt Jack's accounts at all. Yesterday they'd gone on a shopping spree to restock Hilda and to outfit themselves more appropriately for the time period. Fashions for men leaned towards fitted trousers, long sleeves and black or brown loose waistcoats. lanto felt ridiculously Han Soloish, but the appreciative looks Jack was giving him more than made up for it.

"I got a really good price. You're gonna love her." lanto let Jack lead him into the cockpit (and never let it be said that Jack let an innuendo opportunity like that slip away unnoticed) where he explained to lanto all the various controls. "I know how to soup up this engine type, won't take but a few adjustments once we find the parts. There's a salvage planet about a week from here that should have everything we need. Then I can really show you what she's made of."

As Jack started describing the modifications he wanted to make, years fell away from his face. This was the Jack who'd shone through in so many stories in his book, the one who stole a ship -- aeroplane or sailboat or star schooner -- and found adventure time and again. Of all the

Jacks he'd met, lanto had only seen this one out here amongst the stars.

For a man lanto had known more than half his life, it was fascinating to find someone new under the surface who'd been there all along.

Jack's hands sketched out navigational concepts in the air, and lanto nodded without comprehension. He'd have to learn this eventually, but he was willing to sit back for now and watch as the man he loved came alive in a way that was nothing like a resurrection and was entirely the same thing.

"You're gonna be a natural at vector calculation once you get the hang of it."

"Setting aside the book for a while, then?"

That grin. "Thought we could find material for some additional chapters." His attitude was all seduction-by-starship, but Jack's eyes were focused on the journey ahead, the alien shores yet to be reached. Given the most rickety of craft to pilot, Jack was free.

He hadn't missed the "we," either. Jack wasn't just showing lanto his dream. He was also inviting him along. lanto couldn't imagine what would happen if he said no, but he also had no intentions of finding out. There were worse fates than being offered a role in one of Jack's dreams.

"And a star to steer her by."

"Hm?"

"Nothing." He took Jack's hand. "When do we go?"

Jack grinned. Then he looked out the viewscreen to see Alice and Jenny still waiting

in the hangar, and his smile slipped. "Soon. We'll go soon."

'Soon' meant after a lavish supper at the best restaurant in the port, where the four of them were waited on hand and foot by half the staff as soon as Jack's credit was scanned. Ianto hadn't been to a proper restaurant where he himself wasn't an employee since his twenty-sixth birthday, and that only because Gwen had insisted she could watch things while Jack took him out. He turned the memory around in his head as they ate dishes which Jack tried to translate for them, and Jenny regaled them with the histories of the planets on which the foods developed. Stygian hare, fried wint leaves, baked bimpa, noodle dishes in white sauce, crisp breads to snap and dip, cool and refreshing soups between, it was a joy. Course after course came out, and even though Alice and Ianto had been on short rations these past few weeks, they were soon full up. Jack's eyes sparkled as he insisted on at least sampling the house wines and making a quick survey of the desserts. Ianto refused any of his own, but did take a taste of what Jack ordered: a creamy, lemony confection that was butter-light on the tongue.

As stalling tactics went, this was a winner.

Jack knew he would see Alice again, but he couldn't know if she would ever see him, if she would fly out of this floating city and be killed tomorrow. He was selfish enough to want to delay that just a bit longer, especially on a rare day when he was in her good graces, and Ianto could not possibly begrudge him. Jack was always happiest when surrounded by the people he loved, and every time, he lost them again. Sometimes, just sometimes, he was offered a second chance at getting things right.

Ianto's hand dropped below the table, and brushed reassuringly against the hard lump in his outside pocket. The secret of a proper second chance was recognising when and how to take it.

While the waiters cleared away the dishes, Jenny asked, "Where will you go first?"

"Salvage planet," Jack said. "Fix her up a little. I don't know after that."

"We could visit your home planet," Ianto suggested. He saw Jack's face tighten. "Or, you know, we could go somewhere else. Earth, even."

"No," Jack said, his expression warming slowly to the idea. "We can go to my home world. It's been long enough. I can show you where I learned to swim." And find out about his family, because Ianto knew Jack was dying to discover what had become of his mother after he'd fled the Agency so long ago.

Alice said, "The words 'skinny-dipping' are about to be spoken, aren't they?"

"Depends," Ianto said. "Smacking, yes or no?" They shared a laugh, which only grew at Jack and Jenny's matched perplexed faces.

When the bill was paid, and also the gratuity (made more generous after prodding from someone who'd had to live on tips more than once) they made their way outside to the constant false day of the spaceport, and there was nothing else Jack could use to stall. He spent a long time hugging Alice goodbye, and then Ianto pulled her into a hug as well while Jack shook hands with Jenny.

"I don't think I'll see you again," Alice said into his hair.

"Probably not." He moved his hand deftly.

"Take care of him for me. For as long as you can."

He nodded as they pulled away from the embrace. "It's my job."

-----

Alice watched until the other ship was a tiny twinkle among the stars, and then she watched the place it had disappeared, pretending she could still see the lights long after she knew they were gone. Living non-linear meant she never knew if she would see him again, while knowing he would see her. Times and places throughout history she recalled, and every time she found him, by accident or design, he had a smile for her, and utter love. She had siblings, scattered across time and galaxies, but Alice was the one who poked into his timeline, the one he remembered when whole civilisations were becoming wisps in his mind.

Part of her would always hate him. Part of her would always love him. And no matter how many beings he loved and children he sired and worlds he protected and lifetimes he lived, part of him would place her highest in his heart whenever they met.

There was a cool hand on her arm.

"Tea?" Jenny's smile offered company or silence or both.

Alice took the tea and rested her head against Jenny's shoulder. "I don't deserve you, you know."

"There are a number of philosophical and religious schools of thought which claim proof of divine mercy in the fact that none of us gets what we deserve."

Alice watched the place where the lights had vanished, just there between two dim stars.

"What do you think?"

"I think we all get better than we deserve in the people around us, and that's as close to divinity as you'll find." Jenny played with Alice's hair until Alice snorted and sat up and drank her tea, and felt a little better.

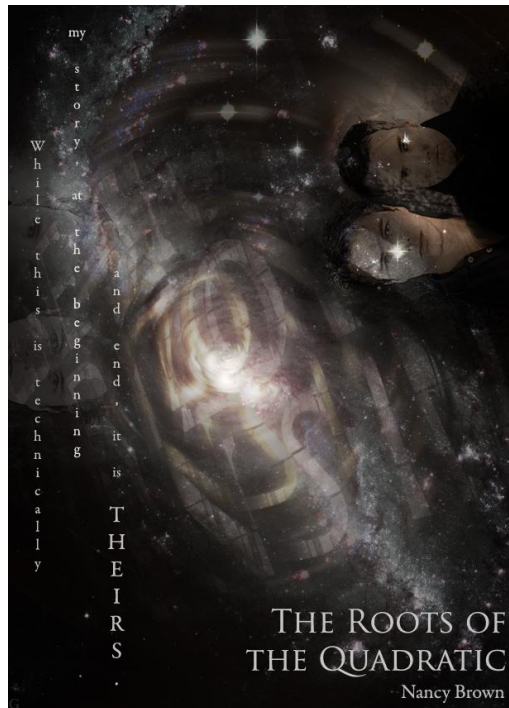
Later, when Hilda had turned the lights down for a sleep cycle, Alice went to remove her shirt and felt something in her pocket. There'd been a small bump when they'd hugged goodbye, and she hadn't thought anything, but now her fingers closed on something cold and smooth.

The phial lay in her palm, carefully sealed, its golden, glittery occupants visible through the polymer and bumping against it like fireflies. A folded note had been secreted with it:

*Just because Jack saw someone die doesn't mean it stuck. - I.*

Alice stared at the tiny bottle of nanogenes, and hope splashed through her, like water in a desert.

## Epilogue



"I'm going to live a long, long time. I write this now to remember the names and faces of the people I've loved, every one of them. While this is technically my story, at the beginning and end, it is theirs. [See, Ianto? I told you I could write a decent dedication without naming names. NTS - remember to delete bracketed editing notes before publication.]

I was born on the Boeshane Peninsula in the second half of the fifty-first century. The day my parents met ..." - from "Me: An Autobiography"

(reprinted from the 893rd edition)

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Timelag was an utter, utter bitch. John had materialised in vacuum, and only the emergency settings on his Vortex Manipulator saved him from a quick, cold death, whisking him almost instantly to the nearest habitable

planet. Gerta's VM detonated alone. John spent a day puking and another day checking out the local populace to determine where and when he was. On the third day, he'd started working a job, convincing the locals he was here from the central authority and that they ought to wine and dine him to gain a favourable report.

He was arrested a week in. Being in custody meant sleeping indoors and eating regular meals, so John was rarely upset at these short holidays, especially when no-one mentioned the death penalty. Hell, he looked forward to the frisking.

The gasp when the law officer pulled the trinket from his pocket, now that didn't sound good.

The translated voice on his VM spat out things he didn't understand as the officer held the tiny metal statue in a kind of awe. He wasn't shocked at the renewed interest in keeping him restrained and under guard. Apparently whatever the hell the thing was, someone thought it was important. Pity he hadn't thought to sell it faster.

Three days and twelve meals later, John stood in the foyer of a far-too-familiar room aboard a far-too-familiar spaceship, getting the evil eye from a gangly orange alien. "His August Personage will see you now," said the alien, with a particular sneer that translated well.

John affected not to care as he was half-pushed, half-dragged into the room. The hanging curtains he remembered were gone, replaced by shelves and shelves of books. He only recognised a third of the languages. Tentacle-head probably made his little nothings read him bedtime stories.

"I see you redecorated."

"Jarron Harper. You have not been in this room for ten thousand years."

The telepathy creeped him out. Bad enough that he heard the voice of the bloody Face in his brain, but he'd entertained plenty of fantasies about cracking the smoky fishtank just to watch the tentacled alien squirm. Thinking about that would likely get him killed sooner rather than later, so he clamped down on his shields, feeling a tickle in his mind of ... amusement?

Stupid bloody Face.

"Going by Hart these days."

"Ah yes. John Hart." More amusement.

"Sir," said the orange major-domo, and again John felt a brush against his mind, this time, a slight, if affectionate, annoyance. "This piece of interstellar scum was found with a priceless artefact in his possession." Orange displayed the metal trinket. "The law officer recognised its age, although I was the one who identified the piece as part of your antique *kalaya* set."

Again John sensed the gentle annoyance.

"Antique is another way of saying old. My *kalaya* set was a gift, given to me almost a million years ago by a dear friend. Please bring it here. Leave the piece."

Orange bowed, then nodded to the guards who stayed at John's sides.

John said, "I didn't take the *kalaya* piece. Some bird handed it to me." Not that it ever worked as a defence in any other situation, but John felt if he was being accused of Grand Theft Pawn, he ought to set the record straight.

"Does this avian have a name?" And damned if the head in the jar wasn't laughing, just a little, inside John's head.

"Alice."

"Alice," the mental voice repeated, and John stepped back at the force of a love that washed through him and was gone. "Your reputation precedes you, John Hart. You were a great *kalaya* player in your time."

John shrugged. "I do my best."

"No other remembers how to play. I have taught my acolytes, but they shy away at the strategy."

"Hard to lie when your boss is in your head," John said, as Orange came back, a heavy board in zir arms.

"Sir," said Orange tremulously. "The set. The piece is not missing."

"No," said the Face. "I thought not."

"Accept my apologies, Benign One. I would have staked my life on it."

"Then be glad you did not." Still the amusement. John had been brought up on charges before the Face of Boe plenty of times in plenty of eras, and every time, there was this tickle, almost like he was being allowed to share in a private joke. John just couldn't figure out the punch line. "John Hart, as you are not guilty of theft, this once, would you prefer to take your leave now, or would you consider remaining here for an hour or two in order to play a game?"

As the guards released his wrists, he very nearly made a run for it, but something stopped him. That something was probably

the patina of age and the previously-spoken words "priceless artefact," but nevertheless, John let himself be escorted to a more comfortable chair than he'd been allowed these last few days, as Orange, clearly out of sorts, set up the board.

"You may go first," said the Face.

John began with an easy gambit, but within a few moves, they were both cheating outrageously as Orange looked on with disapproval. Just for that, John decided he'd stay for at least another game.

Besides, by the look of these pieces, they *were* valuable. He'd have to swipe one before he left.

## Coda

He is older than she has ever known him. He has lost more than she can possibly imagine. Now that Alice has seen his end, she can imagine quite a lot. He is a fixed point, a constant, and these things mean, against all her childhood experience, "stability." Her wandering life is no place for a child.

All second chances have a price.

"I'll come visit," she promises, hearing Jack's own echo in the words. "As often as I can. Be good. Both of you."

"We will," he says, holding Steven's small hand. She knows he will never let go.

***The End***

