

Jack and the Doctor

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Jack spent most nights this way, wandering through the darkness alongside one road or another. On this particular evening, he travelled a country lane outside a village in West Sussex. He hadn't bothered to learn its name.

Gravel crunched beneath his boots and a crisp wind swirled through the trees. Jack felt those trees looking down upon him in judgement as he passed, his head bowed as the leaves whispered their condemnation. He welcomed it. The trees with their bitter recriminations had become his sole companions in these last few months and Jack drank in their wordless accusations like a man dying of thirst. Perhaps if he could build within him so much shame, he could will himself to death.

His body would never allow him that escape though. Jack had died on so many occasions, and each time his body had restored itself. Each time he awoke with a loud gasp, sucking in a ragged breath that mocked his right to life. Jack didn't deserve to live.

His boots ground the gravel to dust beneath his feet as he stopped. *No*, he corrected himself. *I don't deserve to die.*

Jack accepted this as his personal truth and resumed his aimless wandering, not noticing the lone streetlamp that flickered and died as he passed beneath it.

The Doctor had called him a fixed point in time and space. That knowledge had sent the Time Lord running as fast as he could – although at the time, Jack hadn't known that this

was the reason the Doctor had abandoned him. It was more than a hundred years before Jack managed to track down the Doctor again. By that time, he had already figured out that he couldn't die. Jack had launched himself at the TARDIS, clinging to that blue box like a life raft as it hurtled through the Time Vortex, chasing the Doctor for answers and if possible, a cure. He'd found neither.

Jack had seen the fear and repulsion in the Doctor's eyes even before the Time Lord confessed his ignorance. Jack had died on Satellite 5 and Rose had brought him back – permanently. That was all they would ever know.

Over the years, they had made their peace, even saved the world together a time or two. But the Doctor still thought him an abomination – and one that could not be remedied.

The Doctor had been Jack's last hope.

Jack had never been a praying kind of man. Wandering alone in the dark, he would have prayed then though – if he thought it would make any difference. Not to some cosmic force or a deity for which Jack had no name. No, if Jack had been a praying man he would have prayed for the Doctor, strange as that may seem. The Time Lord might not be able to fix him, but the Doctor had it within his power to change some things.

Lights raced up behind him, stretching Jack's shadow out along the uneven path. He moved over, away from the road, and turned to squint into the approaching headlights. Jack hated reassuring drivers that his own car hadn't broken down along the road somewhere. It meant making small talk, and the locals here loved to banter. Banter had been his thing once. Not anymore.

The car barely even slowed. It rumbled by, an old Jaguar that kicked up a few stones as it passed. He watched the taillights shrink and fade away into the night, and Jack wished that he could do the same. But the night did not claim him.

Instead, the wind picked up, creeping beneath Jack's World War II greatcoat. Rather

than drawing the coat around him tighter, Jack let himself feel the cold. The night air gusted about him, ruffling his hair and creating an odd rushing noise in his ears. He smiled grimly, the sound making him think of a wild ocean crashing around his head, drowning him, drawing him down and away from this world. And from within this cavern of imagined demise, another sound – one that ebbed and flowed like a giant rusty pendulum swinging back and forth, growing louder.

His heart skipped a beat.

Up ahead the air shimmered, the wind intensifying into a ferocious squall that stopped him in his tracks. The trees in the distance became pale ghosts as the night in front of them gave way to an ethereal shape slowly appearing a few yards away. The large silhouette pulsed in and out of existence, its rhythm matching that of the squealing and groaning sound filling his ears. Wind snapped at Jack's coat and stung his eyes as he watched a large object materialising in the space before him. With a final deep thrum, the noise died away and the box became solid.

Jack stared at the TARDIS, relief rushing out of him in a torrent that almost brought him to his knees.

The bright blue police box stood imposing against the blackness beyond. The lamp on top created a small pool of light that pushed at the edges of that darkness, keeping it at bay – a light to replace the gutted streetlamp behind him.

Jack watched the doors, not breathing. One of those doors opened with a humble creak, loud in the newfound silence. Jack felt his whole body go rigid with anticipation. He forced a smile of greeting, the expression failing to meet his eyes, but even that half-hearted attempt fell away as a figure stepped into the open doorway.

This man was younger and slightly shorter than the one he had been expecting. Broad across the shoulders where his friend had been so skinny. Deep set eyes where his friend's

had been wild and expressive. A foppish hairstyle where *his* Doctor had a fringe that stuck out in all directions. This man wore a face Jack had never seen before.

“Captain Jack Harkness,” the stranger said, saluting casually with two fingers. “Still a difficult man, I see. The TARDIS didn’t want to land anywhere near the likes of you. I had to... coax her somewhat.”

Jack said nothing.

“Truth be told, I wasn’t even sure if I could get her here at all,” the stranger continued, hopping out of the TARDIS with a little jump and letting the door swing shut behind him. “I’ve had an easier time landing in the middle of time distortions and paradox storms.” He laughed a full-throated chortle. “Now that was a ride! You should have been there. There’s nothing quite like bouncing off a wall of temporal energy. Really makes you feel alive!” He thumped his chest.

Jack frowned, not sure how to respond to the jabbering man now brushing off his jacket and straightening his bow tie.

“How long has it been... for you?” Jack finally asked. For Jack it had only been a few short years.

The flouncy man glanced down, suddenly finding a spot near his feet extremely interesting. “Oh, two or three centuries, give or take,” he answered with a nonchalant wave.

Jack clenched his jaw. “Two or three...” He took a deep breath and counted to five in his head. “Where have you been?”

The man looked up, no longer avoiding Jack’s gaze. He stood straighter and dragged one hand through his floppy hair. “I’ve been busy.”

And with those words, Jack saw him – the uncompromising, defiant old man shining out of these young, green eyes. The Doctor. He had regenerated again. A different face and yet still the same man.

“You were busy,” Jack repeated slowly, scorn creeping into his voice. He’d thought they had moved past these brusque, emotionally unavailable exchanges. “We needed you, Doctor. Do you have any idea what happened here? What this planet has just gone through?”

The Doctor flinched. “I’m sorry. The 456…”

“So you know about the 456?” Jack interrupted, his eyes narrowing.

“I know *of* the species you call the 456, yes. Gruesome lot with more crimes to their name than I could ever hope to hold them accountable for.”

Jack stared. His stomach clenched and his fists screwed into tight balls. Eventually he found his voice.

“We had to deal with them – alone. *I* had to deal with them.”

Jack closed his eyes, unsought memories replaying in his mind – children rounded up from schools, screaming, running, parents crying and throwing themselves at buses as soldiers took their children away.

Jack’s eyes flashed open, cutting off the images.

“Steven,” he said flatly. “I killed…” Jack’s voice cracked and broke off. He blew air out of his cheeks in an effort to pull himself together.

“I killed him. My own grandson. I used him to transmit a frequency to kill the 456 and save one tenth of the children on this planet. What do you say to that hey, Doctor?”

The Doctor’s lips compressed into a grim line. The silence dragged out.

“Well, what do you say?” Jack demanded. “I did the only thing I could do, to save them all. Do you approve?”

The Doctor folded his arms, lowering his chin so that he looked at Jack from beneath his eyebrows. When he finally spoke, his tone was hard.

“There wasn’t another way?”

Jack’s nostrils flared.

“Another way?” he said, voice rising. “Another way? Don’t you think I would have done something – *anything* – else if I could? You are the one who finds another way, Doctor. *You* are the one who pulls an impossible solution out of thin air. You weren’t here!”

“I told you. I was busy.”

Jack recoiled as though slapped.

“Doing what? Saving a damsel in distress? Chasing a skirt across the galaxy?”

The Doctor stood silent, arms still folded tightly across his chest, his face dark. Jack ignored the flicker of emotion in the Doctor’s eyes. “Maybe some mystery caught your attention for a couple of centuries? Is that what it was? You find a new species of bug, Doctor?”

The Doctor stomped forward but pulled himself up short. “Jack...”

“No!” Jack shouted, turning and squaring his shoulders. “Where were you?”

“I was rebooting the universe!” the Doctor snapped, throwing his hands into the air. “I was jumping into my own timeline. Oh, but not before repairing another shattered timeline that risked all of reality. Entire worlds – dying!” he shouted while walking around in little circles and waving his hands about. He stopped and jabbed a finger in Jack’s direction. “You have no idea what I’ve been doing!”

Jack braced himself, refusing to be cowed by the Doctor’s burning glare. When the Doctor didn’t elaborate, Jack took a deep breath, releasing it slowly.

“There are always bigger things for you, isn’t there. Always a bigger picture. Something more important,” he said, eyes glistening.

“I can’t be every-when at once,” the Doctor replied evenly.

“No. But you have the TARDIS. You can go back. Change things...”

But the Doctor was already shaking his head. “You know it doesn’t work like that,” he said quietly, his anger spent.

“Why not?” Jack reached out to the man standing in front of the machine that enabled the Doctor to rewrite history. “Doctor, please...”

He let his hand drop when the Time Lord made no move to accept his plea.

“You’re not a god,” Jack said softly. “Who are you to withhold the kind of power you have?”

“No, not a god – a Time Lord,” the Doctor countered. “I help where I can. Save as many as possible. But I won’t decide who lives and dies, Jack. That would make me a monster.”

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, squeezing his eyes shut. “Don’t pretend that you don’t make that decision every day, Doctor,” Jack said bitterly. “Don’t you dare.”

The Doctor sighed, the sound sweeping away into the wind. Jack slumped, letting his head fall forward.

“What if I could go back and save your grandson?” the Doctor said and Jack’s head snapped up, “Where would I stop?” he continued before Jack could speak. “Gray? Susie? Tosh? Owen?” The Doctor paused. “Ianto?”

Jack’s eyes brimmed and he clenched his jaw to keep the tears from falling. *Ianto*. The guilt tore at him.

“You could prevent the 456 from ever coming here...” Jack trailed off. He should have known that nothing could spare him the deaths that weighed upon his shoulders. His actions had caused them, even if he could think of no way that things might have been different.

Jack glanced up. The Time Lord’s eyes had softened around the edges and Jack allowed himself to look into them, to see the man standing before him. The half-smile he gave the Doctor held no humour.

“You could have tried,” Jack said quietly.

The Doctor was probably the only man in the universe who understood the burdens Jack carried. He understood what it was like to lose the people he loved, and still to continue on. And yet the Doctor couldn't – or wouldn't – help him. Jack shook his head, despairing at the irony.

“I'm a Time Lord,” the Doctor said again. “I know when events are fixed.”

Jack felt an empty chasm open up inside his chest.

“I'm sorry, Jack.”

Jack turned away, the wind drying the tear on his lashes before it fell. Without realising it, Jack had once again allowed the Doctor to become his last hope. And once again the Doctor had denied him. But that was what Doctor always did – for Jack at least.

He knew it wasn't the Doctor's fault, but Jack stubbornly refused to acknowledge it. In that moment, and not for the first time, Jack found himself wishing he had never met the Time Lord. Wherever he travelled, the Doctor brought hope and healing, although paradoxically his arrival often caused the pain and destruction to begin with.

“Why did you come here, Doctor?” Jack asked suddenly.

The two men looked at one another. Around them, the night darkened as clouds drifted in front of the waning moon. Even the lamp atop the TARDIS seemed to dim a little.

The Doctor did not answer immediately but something in his eyes made Jack feel distinctly uncomfortable. A cold thread wormed its way into him, the chill beginning to spread.

“To say goodbye.”

Jack opened his mouth to speak, to ask what he meant. The Doctor watched him carefully through unfathomable eyes and suddenly Jack wanted to laugh and demand what he was up to. This mad Doctor with his insane plans and wild ruses, what was he playing at

now?

No sound came out. Jack felt so cold.

“I’ve been running for such a long time, Jack,” the Doctor said, and the words sounded dull in his ears. Jack was drowning again, the words filtering through the ocean waves above his head.

“...Running from things. Running to things,” the Doctor was saying. “But there are some things even I can’t run from anymore.”

Jack shook his head, a weak gesture.

“No...”

“I don’t know when it will happen precisely,” the Doctor went on. “But I thought you should know. With everything you’ve gone through – well, I don’t want you to spend eternity looking for me.”

Eternity.

The cold was on his cheeks now, the wind struggling to evaporate the evidence of his distress.

“But – but you’ll regenerate,” Jack mumbled, knowing even as he said it that this time would be different.

“I’m on my last,” the Doctor confirmed. “And I’m heading to Trenzalore.”

The ice forming over his heart splintered. “Well, don’t go!” Jack snapped. “If this Trenzalore place is where you...” The word stuck behind the lump in his throat. “Just don’t go.”

The Doctor smiled ruefully, the resignation in his eyes revealing more about his personal feelings than the Doctor’s words ever would.

“Oh, I’m not ever planning to go,” the Doctor told him. “But I will find myself on Trenzalore, one way or another.”

“Then let me come with you.” Jack said, and he reached beneath his coat to check his revolver. He scrubbed one arm across his face and composed himself. “Let’s go.”

He moved towards the TARDIS but the Doctor stepped in front of him, blocking the way.

“No, Jack. There’s nothing you can do.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Jack retorted, trying to step around the Doctor. The Doctor placed one hand firmly on his shoulder and Jack froze. It was the first time this new Doctor had touched him and the sensation punctured his armour, liberating all of Jack’s darkest fears.

“You can’t just give in,” Jack pleaded. “You were there at the beginning of me. You’re the only one who understands what I am, even if you hate it.”

The Doctor shifted uneasily.

“I don’t...”

“It’s okay,” Jack interrupted. “I know why you don’t visit. Time Lord stuff. I get it.”

He didn’t. Not really. Pain flashed in his chest and his voice trembled. “But I need to know that you’re out there somewhere.”

He faltered as the ice slid through his veins, finally taking over his body completely. Jack clutched at the hand on his shoulder, gripping it tightly and cherishing the solid reality of the Doctor’s hand beneath his own. Jack’s face crumpled.

“Doctor, please...”

The Doctor drew his hand away and Jack languished. But instead of stepping away, the Doctor reached out and cradled Jack’s face between his hands, something his last two incarnations would never have done. The Time Lord’s hands felt uncharacteristically warm against his chilled, damp cheeks.

The Doctor’s unexpected and long desired tenderness undid him. Jack closed his eyes

and the tears finally fell freely from beneath his lashes.

“Please... don’t leave me alone.”

Guilt etched tiny lines around the Doctor’s eyes. He let them close and leaned forward, gently resting his forehead against Jack’s.

“Captain Jack – alone?” he said with a faint smile. “Never gonna happen.”

Jack couldn’t smile. Instead he reached up and pushed his fingers into the Doctor’s unfamiliar hair, lacing them behind his head.

Any family that Jack once had, now despised him. He had left lovers to protect them from his immortality. He’d outlived friends or watched them die because Captain Jack Harkness was a dangerous man. *Ianto*... Ianto had come as close to knowing Jack as anyone possibly could but only the Doctor could ever truly understand. The Time Lord could literally feel what he was. Yet even with that knowledge, even standing this close, the Doctor felt distant and alien. Jack was an open book to him. The Doctor, unknown.

“I hate you sometimes,” Jack confessed in a low whisper. “Things were easier before I met you.”

“I hear that a lot,” the Doctor said with a wistful smile.

Jack blinked and the Doctor ran his thumbs lightly across Jack’s cheeks, brushing away tears. The simple act only served to break his heart all over again. He raised shimmering blue eyes to meet steady green ones.

“You are the one who finds another way,” Jack said, determination slipping into his voice. “You are the one who pulls an impossible solution out of thin air. Find a way, Doctor. We need you.” He pressed his forehead even harder into the Doctor’s, his fingers curled tightly in his hair. “*I need you.*”

The corners of the Doctor’s mouth edged downwards and he stepped back, gently extracting himself from Jack. Jack ached as the Doctor’s hands slipped away from him.

“There is a time to live and a time to sleep, Jack.”

“Not for me there isn’t,” Jack whispered, despair threatening to cripple him. “Promise me you’ll find a way. That you’ll at least try.”

“I can’t make that promise,” the Doctor replied. “Not if it means you spend all your days searching for me.”

“The whole universe would shudder if you died. I would know!”

The Doctor didn’t respond. He stood silent, one side of his body enveloped in shadow, and although he remained as still as a statue, Jack could feel the Time Lord withdrawing from him.

Please... Jack could not even voice the thought. It was over.

He flashed a smile, one of his best. Jack would not let the Doctor remember him as a defeated wreck.

“Hey, Doctor,” he said, fighting to lighten his tone. “If you’re so sure that this is the end, how about spending it with me?” He winked flirtatiously.

The Doctor’s face split into a wide smile, all sign of his awkwardness vanishing.

“Stop iiiit!” he said, tone identical to that used by his previous incarnation, his grin loaded with meaning.

In that moment, Jack understood. The Doctor remembered the times they had spent together and they had meant something to him too. It was all Jack would ever have, and it would have to be enough.

“Goodbye, Doctor.”

The Doctor lunged forward and swept his old friend up in a tight hug. For long moments the two men stood like that in the night, the chill wind circling around them both as they embraced beneath the light of the TARDIS. Eventually the Doctor drew back, smiling sadly at his one-time travelling companion.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, Jack had kissed the Doctor in farewell, certain that he was going to his death. Now the Doctor leaned in to place a chaste kiss on Jack's frozen lips.

“Goodbye, Jack,” the Doctor whispered.

Jack smiled sadly, the tightness in his throat preventing him from saying anything more. The Doctor turned away. He opened the TARDIS door and disappeared inside without looking back.

With a loud thrum and the familiar sound of squealing and groaning, the TARDIS began to dematerialise. Released from the need to maintain his mask, Jack gasped and dropped to one knee, sucking in shaky breaths as he watched it, and the Doctor, disappear from his life forever.

The moon had moved halfway across the sky by the time Jack managed to get to his feet. He checked his revolver and wrapped his coat around himself tighter, shielding himself from the freezing cold. Every part of him ached.

With one last look at the empty space in front of him, the gravel compressed into the perfect shape of a square, Jack turned away. Placing one foot in front of the other, Jack began the long journey back to Cardiff. He needed to say one last goodbye – before he left this planet for good.