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# Parallel

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*by shadowbyrd (shadowbyrd on LiveJournal)*

Torchwood, Classic Who | R | Toshiko/Fitz, Jack/Ianto | 37,000 words

*Whilst the team are trying to unravel a plot formed by Cardiff's alien underworld Toshiko mysteriously disappears, all available evidence pointing to a grisly death. Determined that her death is somehow connected to the plot the team follow its ringleaders to Liverpool, only to find Toshiko alive and well and with no memory of Torchwood.*

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Toshiko was still having trouble adjusting to the weather in Liverpool. It wasn't quite as wet as Cardiff, but it was unpredictable and the winds that blew in off the sea were harsh and more bitter than she was used to. She was going through scarves and umbrellas like nobody's business, much to Fitz's amusement.

This morning the sun was sat low and blinding on the horizon, but that could be a ruse. She let the building's front door swing shut heavily behind her as she peered skywards, checking for any suspicious-looking clouds. Her attention caught instead on the roof of the building. Squinting against the pale winter sun, it almost looked like there was someone standing there, just on the edge. She blinked hard a couple of times to get rid of the spots in her eyes and looked again. Nothing there. She shook her head and jogged to the crossing. Trick of the light.

She didn't give it another thought for the rest of the day, too absorbed in her work. While the weather patterns and layout of her new workplace continued to elude her, Toshiko had hit the ground running as far as the actual job was concerned. Three and a half weeks and her present project was almost starting to bore her and more often than not she ended up taking the scenic route to keep herself entertained. Same results, but through much more interesting means.

She probably shouldn't have been doing it as often as she was, though. Her supervisor was a Brentite who imagined himself more laidback than he was and preferred what he called a "hands on" approach when dealing with his staff, (Toshiko usually had to fake a coughing fit whenever she heard this – they had been big on the innuendoes in Cardiff and these days she heard them whether she wanted to or not) which would probably involve them having a "personal" and rather patronising chat, as when he realised this was the third time she'd got lost looking for the break room. Toshiko had spent the entire talk nodding appropriately and imagining bouncing stationery off his forehead.

Her attempts to stave off boredom aside from work were wonderfully, despairingly uneventful. Fitz was in Sheffield for the weekend on a course to teach him the importance of Powerpoint presentations and hotels with their own onsite bars, which left her with the run of the flat. Naturally the clocks had all conspired against her to make the time pass as slowly as possible. She eventually gave up on waiting for five o'clock and started packing up and shutting down at quarter to so she could leave bang on five.

And bang on five came the monsoon. After her umbrella turned inside out she made a detour to the Tesco in town for some essentials (milk, spring rolls, real coffee, ice cream) and a working umbrella. The rain seemed to die down a bit, only to return with a vengeance as she neared her building. She began rooting through her handbag as she approached, looking for her fob and, by chance, glanced up. She could just make out a shape on the edge of the flat roof.

She stopped dead, remembering the thing from that morning, trying to make out what it was. It looked like a person – it was hard to tell because she was squinting to stop the rain getting in her eyes, but the longer she looked the more sure she became. It was a person. Someone had climbed onto the roof and might well have been there since Toshiko had left for work at eight that morning.

She fumbled with the door to get in and find help; Nathan the security guard, anyone she could raise. Whoever they were they were standing on the edge, *right* on the edge, and with the heavens coming down around them they'd be over it and a red, thinly spread stain over the pavement before they knew anything had happened. What the hell were they thinking?

She got the door open, looked up again and –  
– and they were gone.

Toshiko backed up from the door, narrowing her eyes against the raindrops. Where did they go? There had been someone there, she was sure. But then this rain...

She stopped the door with her foot and pushed inside, resolved to find Nathan and tell him anyway, just on the off-chance there was some maniac wondering around on the roof. She glanced up one last time, just to double check. No one. She closed her umbrella and let the door glide shut behind her.

Nathan, normally up for a chat especially when it was with someone who could help him with his Sudoku, groaned the minute he saw her coming.

“No,” he said simply. “Don’t want to hear it, not from you as well.”

“Hear what?”

“I’ve been having complaints all day,” he went on as though he’d not heard her. “The students in eleven reckon there’s a strange man roaming the corridors that doesn’t live here, Harris from eighteen’s been trying to convince me that someone’s scaled the building in the middle of the night and Mrs Digweed in twenty-seven’s been trying to get me to sort out them dodgy pipes under her sink. That’s maintenance, that is – nothing to with me. That’s all Simon’s job, whenever the little git turns up. I swear, I don’t know what’s got into everyone today.” He sighed heavily, then seemed to remember Toshiko. “Sorry about, that, love. Having a bad day. What was it you wanted?”

Toshiko bit her lip, in half a mind after Nathan’s small tirade not to say anything. “Is there any work being done on the roof?” she asked carefully. “Any building work or anything?”

Nathan snorted. “If there were any building work being done, there’d be builders clogging up all the corridors with ladders and the lift would be broken. Why d’you ask?” he added, eyes turning weary.

Toshiko shrugged. “I thought I saw someone on the roof this morning when I went out. I thought it was just the light at first, but I think I saw them again just now.”

Nathan waved a hand. “This morning was probably me or Harris – checked the whole bloody roof for this mystery man who’s supposed to have climbed eight storeys up a sheer brick wall.” He huffed. “I tell you, that is *not* the kind of conversation I want to be having first thing in the morning.”

“You didn’t find anything?” Toshiko pressed.

“Nothing,” he said with an air of grim satisfaction. “You don’t want me to go up and check, do you? I can’t do heights, especially when it’s raining cats and dogs all ‘round me.”

Toshiko smiled and shook her head. “No. No, you’re right, it’s probably nothing.” She spotted the newspaper tucked under his arm. “Started the Sudoku yet?”

“Not yet. Not really in the mood, now, to be honest with you. That much excitement early on, messes you up for the rest of the day.” He frowned. “Twice though... I’ll do another check if I get any more complaints, okay?”

Toshiko nodded. “Okay.”

He took the paper and handed her the puzzle page. “Here you go. Probably won’t take you five minutes.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“And keep your eyes peeled for strange men in long coats,” he said, smiling slyly.

“Always do,” said Toshiko, no longer listening. This lot couldn’t all be coincidence, could it? Still, Toshiko reminded herself, there wasn’t much she could do about it but draw an extra bolt over the door. Which she did.

Once in the flat she went straight to the kitchen to unload the shopping, trying to decide between a marathon of *Life on Mars* or whatever random crappy film was showing on channel five. It was only when she walked through the living room to put the umbrella up in the bath to dry that she found the man in the long coat sitting on her sofa.

She jumped back with a wordless shout, dropping her bag and umbrella. The man stayed sprawled where he was, eyeing her with a hint of smile. It made Toshiko shudder.

“Who the hell are you?” she snapped. “And what are you doing in my house?”

The man stood – and he was tall. Broad, too. If it came down to physical force she wasn’t going to stand a chance. And he held out his hand for her to shake.

“Captain Jack Harkness. My friends call me Jack. Some of my enemies, too, when they’re trying that whole “I’m going to freak you out by acting like I know you intimately” thing.” He paused, then tucked the empty hand away into his pocket and smiled. “I’m here to see you. You’re a friend. You call me Jack.”

“Friend?” Toshiko repeated. “I’ve never seen you before in my life!”

“So you think.”

“What? Oh Jesus, not all this again. Look, if you’ve been sent here by that nutcase –”

The smile became a little more forced. “*Not*, actually.” He settled himself back on the sofa. “I just wanted to talk.”

Toshiko started to back slowly into the kitchen. “Well you picked the wrong time, *Jack*. My boyfriend’s going to be home any minute now.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really? Then how come you didn’t come home together? You finish work at about the same time, right?”

Toshiko paused. “Maybe we work in different parts of the city,” she said, cursing herself the moment “maybe” passed her lips.

“Or maybe he’s off on a weekend course in Sheffield,” said the man – Jack – re-arranging the front of his coat in a rather bored manner. “Lovely hotel he’s at, so Ianto tells me. I wouldn’t know, don’t get out to Sheffield much.”

Toshiko took another step back, her mind snagging on what he’d been saying about certain enemies a moment earlier. “I can scream,” she said in a small voice, trying to work out how quickly she could make it to the knife block. “There are plenty of people who’d hear me. They’d come looking.”

Jack nodded, looking grim. “I know. I’d rather you didn’t. I hadn’t planned on giving you anything to scream about.”

Toshiko paused mid-step. “What exactly are you here to talk to me about?”

“Your work in Cardiff.”

Toshiko scoffed, trying to appear confident. “I don’t talk about that with my family, let alone nutcases who break into my flat.”

“What about the boyfriend?” he asked, tapping his fingers on the sofa arm. “Fitz, right? You talk about it with him?”

“No!”

“You ever wonder why that is?”

Toshiko froze. It wasn’t working. She cleared her throat. “I wasn’t – I didn’t know anything important,” she said slowly. “I was in admin. Glorified paper pusher. I can’t give you anything, even if I wanted to.”

“It’s not because of government policy,” said Jack dismissively. “Well, it was, but that’s not the main reason.”

Toshiko just stared, unable to understand what he was saying, and frightened to try.

“You don’t talk about it,” he said, leaning forward as though about to reveal some great and terrible secret, “because you don’t remember it.”

There was a long silence. Toshiko tried to speak a couple of times, but the words simply failed her. Finally she managed a sharp, annoyed, “*What?*”

Jack looked unperturbed. “You were given a few generic memories of the workplace, names of people working there, and all these little memories were put on a loop to make up your working days, one after the other, all the same. A couple of anecdotes and stories to brighten it up a little, make it more believable. Only if you look closer, things don’t add up.” Jack let his head fall back in apparent defeat. “But you haven’t been looking too closely, have you? You’re too fixated on the new job, and the move to the new city with the lovely boyfriend – you’re too busy planning things and getting your new place in shape to think about Cardiff, and they’re counting on that.”

She shook her head. Reality seemed to have come unplugged somewhere along the line here – she was sure there was an episode of Spooks that went something like this. “And who are “they”?” Toshiko asked, sure that she wasn’t going to like the answer.

Jack lifted his head. “Aliens,” he said simply.

For a moment Toshiko couldn’t think, let alone speak. All trains of thought had come to a standstill.

Praying that this was all some wind-up of Fitz’s, Toshiko just said, “Aliens?”

“That used to be your job,” Jack said, impatience rising in his tone. “Hunting down aliens, figuring out the technology that they left behind.”

“In Cardiff?”

Jack smiled at her. The genuine warmth in it took her aback. “You had to do a two week stint with the London branch. You hated it.”

Toshiko raised her hands, wondering if she’d be able to make it to the knife block in time, starting to wonder if that was even a good idea. “I think you might have me mistaken with someone else,” she said gently. “I did used to work in Cardiff, but my job was... well, it was nothing like that. It was admin. Data collection. Nothing to do with... aliens.”

“It’s you,” he said, pointing.

“It’s not.” She forced a high-pitched laugh, shaking her head.

“Toshiko Sato, thirty-four years old, with a secret love of Mills and Boon, and a not so secret love of Pokemon, Tintin, Chinese food and John Simm.” He rubbed his nose. “And I suppose you think you’re in love with the boyfriend – Fitz, Fitz Kreiner?” He snorted quietly. “Boy, that’s a fake if ever I heard one –”

Toshiko had stopped listening. Her name, age and address – he could have picked those up anywhere, if he was good enough at hacking (or, more likely, if he had someone to do it for him). But as for the rest... how many people knew about her Mills & Boon collection? It had taken Fitz nearly two years to uncover her guilty pleasure. So how did this man... He'd searched the flat. He must have done. He'd broken in, found no one was there and had searched the place, found the the pile of Mills & Boon books stuffed under her bed and the plush Pikachu that Fitz had won for her at the fair; it was all simple deduction. He was just using it to freak her out like he'd been talking about earlier.

He was mad. Had to be mad. Jesus, what was she going to do now?

She cleared her throat and stepped back into the room, seating herself on the arm of one of the plush armchairs. "How is it you know so much about me?" she asked.

He steepled his fingers. "I'm a former colleague – well, former boss, actually."

Toshiko's eyebrows shot up. "In catching aliens?"

He considered this for a moment. "I'm more of a dispatcher, really," he said.

"You are?"

The stress on the "you" wasn't lost on him. "Yes."

"And you're still working there, now?"

"Yeah."

"And you're here on company time?"

"I'm the boss," Jack reminded her. "And we're not a company as such."

"Well what are you, then?"

He paused for a moment, and there was something about him that made Toshiko sure that it was for purely for dramatic effect. "Torchwood."

She couldn't help sniggering. "'Torchwood'? Seriously? You're a secret organisation that goes around Cardiff hunting aliens and you're called "Torchwood"?"

Jack looked defensive. "What's wrong with it?"

Toshiko shrugged, clearing her throat to hide her laugh. "Nothing, just – sounds a bit... tame. It's not particularly threatening, is it? You hear about these things in films and stuff it's usually something more... ominous."

Jack pursed his lips. "It was the name of the house in Scotland where the Institute was founded back in the 1880s," he said, sounding rather put out at her reaction.

Toshiko double-taked at that. "Do you mean to tell me that there's been an organisation hunting aliens since the nineteenth century?" she laughed. "And I suppose Queen Victoria came and did royal visits to see how they were getting on."

"Well of course she did," said Jack, nonplussed. "She was the one who founded it."

Toshiko opened her mouth, but thought better of it. "And I've worked there for what, three years?" she said instead.

"Coming up on four and a half, I think," he corrected.

"But I can't remember all of this due to some kind of alien interference?"

He nodded. "In a nutshell, yes."

Toshiko folded her arms. "Alright, then. Say you're right. Why did I leave?"

Jack paused, looking a little uncertain. "I can't say for sure. We're still trying to work out what their endgame is, and this is the first time any of us have had any contact with you since Owen found you –"

Toshiko was on her feet. "Owen? Owen Harper? You know him? Is he part of this?"

Jack seemed to sense he was on thin ice here. "He works at our branch of Torchwood. He was one of your colleagues –"

"He was just some nutter. Until a month ago I'd never seen him before in my life. Oh, I know, I know," Toshiko snapped, "I only *think* I've never seen him before in my life because the aliens have messed with my memories." She put her head in her hands. "Jesus *Christ*, why haven't I called the police?"

"Probably because they didn't want you to. If you even have an inkling of what's happening you can fight the possession." He frowned at her for a moment, affecting a politely confused expression. "I'm sorry, we haven't been able to distinguish identity yet – are you Raeth or Shaaran?"

Mad, thought Toshiko dizzily. "Right, that's it, I'm calling the police." She got up and started toward the kitchen again, but the room tilted sideways and she stumbled against the wall. Jack was on his feet in a second, steadying her.

"Are you okay?"

Suddenly breathless, Toshiko pressed a hand to her forehead, squeezing her eyes shut to stave off the dizziness. "What – what did you do?"

Instead of answering her he let go of her and took a few steps back. "And out she comes."

"What the hell are you –?"

Once again her flat and the annoying, *insane* American tipped sideways and everything went white.

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Knock knock knock.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Knock!Knock!Knock!

“C’min,,” Toshiko mumbled, trying to sit up. And then she took in the scene surrounding her. The stranger – Jack, he’d said to call him Jack – was lying in a rather awkward position not far from her, broken dishes and little puddles of blood laid out like stepping stones between them. She put her hands to the floor to push herself up, but her hands slipped and her head banged against one of the cupboards.

More knocking.

“I’m coming!” Toshiko called, trying again to get to her feet. She stopped dead. Her hands were covered in blood. Jack wasn’t moving. She staggered back into the counter, kicking one of Fitz’s (bloodied) kitchen knives skittering across the floor. Toshiko stared at it in horror and scrambled to Jack’s prone body. There was a deep puncture wound to the side of the neck.

More knocks.

“Just a minute!” Toshiko called, an octave too high. She grabbed a tea towel and tried to clean up her hands. Giving up on that she pulled on her coat and zipped it up over her bloodstained clothes. She stepped carefully over the body, though still tread on the coat and almost went skidding off her feet, and walked shaking to the front door, hooking the chain on before she opened it.

“Yes?”

She was faced with a young man almost a foot taller than her. Upon seeing her his face, which had carried a neutral, almost hard expression, broke into a helpful, almost charming smile.

“Hi there.” He spoke with a rich Welsh accent. “Er, sorry to bother you, I was just wondering if everything was alright. Only, I was just passing and I heard some rather loud noises –”

“Oh no, no, I’m – we’re fine!” said Toshiko putting on a smile and rolling her eyes. “Just having a bit of a domestic, you know what it’s like.” People walked away from domestics. But if he’d been the one knocking all that time... he could be hard to get rid of.

As it was he simply nodded and cocked his head, looking politely concerned. “Is your hand alright? It looks like it’s bleeding.”

“Oh, this?” Toshiko held up her hand for a split second, then shoved it out of sight. “I was just about to put a plaster on it. Thanks for checking in though, very thoughtful,” she added, flashing him a quick smile.

He smiled back and, genuine as it looked, instinct told her it was fake as hers. “Just making sure there are no murders going on. Have a good one.”

“Bye.” She shut the door quickly, waiting until the count of five before doing all the locks and letting herself sink to the floor and curl up there. She’d killed someone. She had actually – it had been self defence, though, hadn’t it? He’d broken into her flat and lain in wait for her, knowing that Fitz wasn’t going to be there. It must be self defence. Surely. She’d blacked out. He must have hit her on the head with something. Yeah. That was why she was feeling so dizzy and nauseous.

What the hell was she going to do with the body?

She peeled her coat off and hauled herself to her feet, half hoping it would have sorted itself out by the time she got to the kitchen.

They do say be careful what you wish for.

“Fuck!”

“Not just now, dear, I have a headache,” quipped Jack, sat upright against the kitchen units and rubbing tenderly at his very unwounded neck.

It was odd, Toshiko thought distantly, that she was more horrified by this than when she’d woken up believing she’d killed him. Not believed. She *had* killed him. There had been a bloody great hole in the side of his neck, for God’s sake! She mouthed wordlessly, pointing at him. He just sighed and rolled his eyes and said, with a rather put-upon air, “Go ahead. Say it.”



“You’re dead,” Toshiko whispered, finally finding her voice.

Jack shrugged. “After a fashion.” He stood slowly, stretching his arms and neck as he took in the state of the kitchen. “Bloody hell! Sure made a mess, didn’t we? You have a mop anywhere around here?”

“In the cupboard,” said Toshiko numbly. “What do you mean “after a fashion”? How are you alive now?”

Jack shook his head. “No idea. Bad habit I picked up somewhere. Can’t seem to break it, no matter how hard I try. Or how hard anyone else tries, for that matter.” He glanced around, hands on hips. “Which cupboard?”

Toshiko pointed. “The tall one over there. I – I stabbed you in the neck. I *killed* you.” And why was she standing here asking him things like that when he could turn around and kill *her*?

“You did and you didn’t,” he said, passing her the mop and peering into the cupboard. “Bucket, bucket – ah ha!” There certainly didn’t seem to be any hard feelings on his part. But still –

Toshiko cast around for the knife on the floor. Blood. So much blood. How the hell was he still standing? “How d’you mean I did and I didn’t? You’re either dead on the floor or you’re not!”

Jack pushed past her and dropped the bucket in the sink, filling it with warm water. “It wasn’t you,” he said in a low voice. “It was Raeth.”

Toshiko put her hands on her hips, trying to ignore the way the blood from her hands stained her jeans. “The alien possessing me?”

Jack held up a hand. “You said it, not me.”

Toshiko’s eyes narrowed. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you? You knew that she – that it would respond to those names, so you said them to provoke her –”

“You’re starting to accept the fact that you’re being possessed by an alien, then?”

“No, I – oh!” Toshiko threw her hands up in disgust.

Jack turned off the tap and then turned to face her, leaning back against the sink. “Seriously, have you ever had blackouts like that before? Gaps in your memory? I’m not talking about forgetting what you had for breakfast, or where you put the sugar bowl, I mean *big*.”

Before Toshiko could answer, or even begin to tell him where to go, there was a loud bang as the front door was kicked in.

“Jack?” a woman called. Welsh again.

Toshiko looked to Jack who rolled his eyes and dashed forward, but not in time to save the living room door. Two men appeared, each brandishing a gun. The taller, who turned out to be the young man who had come to the door earlier, rushed through the kitchen, lowering his gun when he saw Jack.

“We thought the Naequin had taken over. There was blood on her –” He stopped, catching sight of the floor.

“lanto!” said Jack with irritating cheer. “Just in time. I had a bit of an accident, if you wouldn’t mind –?” he held out the bucket.

“lanto” tucked his gun away, rolling his eyes and went straight to the tall cupboard, retrieving a bottle of floor cleaner before taking the bucket from Jack and the mop from Toshiko.

“C’mon,” said Jack, ushering her out into the living room. “We can talk in here.”

Toshiko, however, had stopped dead upon seeing the other man. “Oh no. Not you –”

Owen Harper raised his hands, in a manner that would have been far more placating had he put his gun away first. "Look, there's no need to –"

"No, I want you out!" She turned to Jack. "I want him out of my house right *now!*"

The Welsh woman joined them, putting her gun away whilst Owen tried again. "Listen you got the wrong end –"

"Just shut up and get the fuck out!"

Everyone went silent. In the kitchen Ianto had paused in his mopping.

After a moment of consideration Jack said, "Owen, go see if Ianto needs any help in the kitchen. I struggled a bit, so there might be some on the walls too."

Owen gave him a filthy look, but did as he was told, making sure to bump shoulders with Jack as he passed.

"I don't want him cleaning my kitchen, I want him *out* –"

"Let's just calm down a bit, yeah?" said the woman, trying to take her arm. Toshiko tugged it free and glared at her.

Jack sighed. "Look, we don't have a whole lot of time. If we could just sit down and talk about this?"

Toshiko looked from him to the woman as if some other option were about to leap out and announce itself. None did and so she seated herself in the armchair and motioned them to the sofa opposite. They sat down together, both leaning forward slightly in a way Toshiko found a little off putting.

"Introductions first." Jack gestured to the woman sat next to him. "Gwen Cooper."

She offered Toshiko a quick smile.

"You already know Owen Harper, and the suit cleaning your floor is Ianto Jones." He rubbed his hands together and nodded to her. "And before we were so rudely interrupted, we were talking about you having blackouts. Gaps in your memory. Things you should know, but can't remember."

Toshiko nodded slowly, feeling a little more reluctant to agree than she had five minutes ago. "The last two. Today's the first time I ever recall having a blackout, but that was purely down to you."

Gwen looked surprised and a little defensive on Jack's behalf, though Jack himself remained unmoved. "You ever sit down somewhere, in front of the TV, maybe, just to relax and then you come around and realise you've been asleep a couple of hours?"

Toshiko shrugged. "Sometimes. It's been like that for a while, though. I've not been sleeping well. I tend to stay up quite late; I'm fine in the morning, but by mid-afternoon I'm drained."

Jack nodded to himself. “And how long have you been having trouble sleeping exactly?”

Toshiko quirked an eyebrow. “Because this is somehow linked to my “possession”?”

He shrugged. “It’s entirely possible, especially if it happened six months ago.”

Toshiko felt her blood go cold.

“When *did* it start?” asked Gwen.

“About six months ago.” Toshiko looked from one to the other. “I thought it was just stress from the move here, what with our jobs –”

“What was your job in Cardiff?” asked Jack.

“According to you lot, giving aliens speeding tickets.”

“As far as you were concerned, what was your last job in Cardiff?”

“It was...” Toshiko paused. “It was confidential. I wasn’t supposed to talk to anyone about it, not friends or family – I told you, not even Fitz knows anything about it.”

“We’re not ordinary friends,” said Jack. “And it’s important we know. You said something about admin earlier. Data collection.”

“Yeah. Like I said, I was only in administration, but I still wasn’t supposed to talk about my work.”

“But what did go on there?” Jack asked.

Toshiko frowned. Why was it so hard to remember? “It was – surveillance, something to do with surveillance. It was my job to record what we gathered.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure about that?”

“What about your colleagues?” asked Gwen, looking at her intently.

Toshiko thought back, her eyes narrowing. It wasn’t so very long ago and these were fairly simple questions. Why was this so difficult? “I didn’t have many colleagues that I interacted with day-to-day. There was John. He was a year out of university, or – no wait, he was about that age, but he hadn’t been able to go. It was a family thing, I think.”

She wracked her brains trying to remember what it was, Gwen watching her closely. Jack, however, was looking past her, over her shoulder. She followed his gaze and saw that the young man, Ianto, had stopped dead, watching her almost warily.

Something pulled free and the wheels started turning again. “That was it. His dad had just died – or disappeared, maybe and the family needed his help with the business and arranging the funeral and things. Just happened out of the blue, apparently.”

An awkward silence descended on them, growing more and more uncomfortable as it went on.

“He was nice,” Toshiko added, feeling she had somehow said something wrong. “I really liked John.”

Jack smiled tightly and nodded. “Anyone else?”

“There was Susanne – she showed me the ropes when I first joined. She could be a bit moody sometimes, kinda cold if you got her at the wrong time, but she was lovely underneath it all.” Toshiko frowned. “It was the weirdest thing, though. A couple of weeks before I left, she disappeared. There in the morning, gone after lunch. I don’t know if she quit or if she was fired. Her replacement wasn’t as good with computers. Bit more personable, though.”

Gwen, if it was possible, leant further forward. “Do you remember her name, by any chance?”

Toshiko scowled. “No, she turned up three days before I left. Are we going to go through all my former colleagues like this? What can it tell you? According to you lot it’s all fake.”

“Well, for starters, it’s telling us how much trouble they’ve gone to to give you a new background, how they’ve gone about changing your memories,” said Jack.

“And how have they done it?” Toshiko asked.

“Quite poorly from the sounds of it,” said Jack. “They clearly didn’t expect this to be a long job. Not for you, anyway.”

Before Toshiko could ask him to elaborate on this curious little comment the doorbell went.

“Oh for God’s sake –” Toshiko started to get up, only to be shoved back into her seat by Jack, who’d drawn his gun along with Gwen, Owen and Ianto, who was also wielding a dripping mop.

“What are you doing?” Toshiko demanded.

Jack ignored her. “Owen.” He gestured to the side of the door, taking up position on the other side. Gwen covered Toshiko and Ianto took point. After an exchange of glances and nods Jack reached over and undid the chain and the bolt, then Owen reached over and pulled the door open.

“Hi darling, sorry I’m –” Fitz stopped dead on seeing Gwen and turned to make a run for it, but Jack slammed the door shut and stepped in between him and the front door, pointing his gun directly between Fitz’s eyes.

Toshiko was on her feet. “Don’t you dare – don’t you dare do anything –!”

“We’re not going to do anything,” said Jack, eyes fixed on Fitz. “Are we, Sharaan?”

Fitz stared at him and within a moment Jack was against the wall and bleeding, Owen with an arm around Fitz’s neck and Ianto trying to pry his hands from Jack’s throat. He turned his head and

Toshiko recoiled. His eyes were a terrible shade of red, but worse still was the look of hateful fury on his face.

“Raeth! Raeth, help me!”

Toshiko felt the hair stand up on the back of her neck and for a moment her sight clouded over. She almost lost her balance, grabbing on to Gwen’s arm to steady herself.

“Raeth, I need you now! Kill her!”

Toshiko’s hand flew up without her consent and grabbed Gwen’s other wrist, banging her hand against the wall again and again until she dropped her gun, all the time the edges of her vision blurring into black. Suddenly she was on her knees along with Gwen, one hand still gripping Gwen’s arm, the other at her throat. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Gwen’s gun go skidding across the floor.

“Raeth –!”

“I can’t!” she shouted back in a voice that had nothing to do with her. “I’m too weak – I can’t overpower her.”

“You’ve got t –” One of them punched Fitz hard in the face and Toshiko’s dizziness returned, a sharp pain blossoming behind her eyes. She screamed, tightening her grip on Gwen and dragging her down to the floor, heedless of the other woman’s struggles.

For a few moments she was helpless on her knees as something wrestled in her mind; it felt like something was trying to break free of her skull. And then it finally stopped, the pain disappearing and her sight returning to her in a great rush. She let go of Gwen and doubled over, breathing deeply. Someone put a hand on her back and a moment later pressed a glass of water into her hand.

She was bundled back into the armchair. Ianto perched himself on the arm next to her while Jack and Owen laid out Fitz on the sofa, Owen monitoring his pulse and breathing. “He should be around in a few minutes,” he said.

“Is this what happened before?” Toshiko asked Jack quietly. “Back in the kitchen?”

Jack shook his head. “Not quite. You were able to struggle with Raeth this time – you weren’t able to do that earlier; she was probably at full strength. That tends to be how these particular parasites operate; while the host is wide awake, doing whatever they do the parasite rests and saves its strength. They tend to try and take over when the host is tired or weak. It would have taken all her strength to take you over for even such a short period of time while you were awake.”

Toshiko looked across Fitz’s unconscious form. “And Fitz is one of them as well...”

“Probably the reason the two of you are together,” said Jack with a nod. Gwen, still rubbing her neck, gave him a sharp look.

Toshiko handed the empty glass back to Ianto. "Was Fitz at Torchwood too?"

Ianto shook his head. "No. We've had trouble trying to trace his files without you. We have some files that suggest he worked as a computer programmer in Birmingham, but we're not sure how genuine they are."

She sighed and put her head in her hands. "Oh shit, how am I supposed to explain this to him?"

"Explain what?"

Across the room Fitz was stirring, trying to sit up. He accepted Owen's help until he had come around enough to recognise him; he then shoved him away. "What the hell do you think you're doing here, you son of a bitch?" He tried to stand in order to further abuse Owen and would have ended up sprawled on the floor if Jack hadn't caught him.

"Who the hell – Tosh, what's he doing here? Who are all these people –" He stopped again upon taking her in and managed to take two steps toward her before falling to his knees. "Oh my God, what happened – all that blood. We need to get you to hospital!"

"It's alright," she said, putting her hands on his shoulders and smiling as though that alone could convince him. "I'm not hurt, I'm fine, really. It's not my blood."

This, unsurprisingly, didn't do much to comfort him. "Well then whose is it? What happened?"

"That's mine," said Jack, raising a hand. "She stabbed me in the neck. I'm fine now, though," he added, cheerfully.

Fitz slowly turned to Toshiko and gave her a lost look.

Beside her Ianto shot into action.

"I'll put the kettle on, shall I?"

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"So, let me get this straight; Toshiko and I are being possessed by aliens, and Toshiko's a member of your organisation – what was it called?"

"Torchwood," said Toshiko, squeezing his hand.

Fitz nodded. "Torchwood. And she helped you lot catch aliens. In Cardiff."

"Well, we're not purely in the alien catching business," said Jack, accepting a cup of tea from Ianto with a grateful nod. "We try to determine whether or not they're hostile before we take action. Usually we don't deal directly with aliens, but alien technology – working out what it does, if it's usable. We sometimes end up having to deal with people displaced in time. Like say, a soldier from

1918 ending up in 2008.” He glanced at Toshiko when he said this. Probably something else she was meant to have a particular reaction to. She was getting sick of those.

“People getting displaced in time?” said Fitz. He gave Toshiko a nudge and a weak smile. “Why ever did you leave that job?”

“There’s a fault line in the fabric of time and space that runs straight through Cardiff city. We call it the Rift. It’s the main reason Torchwood Three exists,” Ianto explained.

Fitz raised his eyebrows at Toshiko. “Torchwood *Three*?” he mouthed.

“Apparently,” Toshiko began, looking at Ianto to confirm this, “Torchwood has four branches. There’s an office in Glasgow and there were offices in London as well.”

“And you were at Cardiff?” Fitz was appalled. “Why weren’t you at London?”

Toshiko smirked. “Apparently, London wasn’t my style.”

“How much of it do you remember?”

“Not a thing,” Toshiko confessed. “But it makes sense, Fitz. Way more sense than it should.”

“I’ll say,” Fitz muttered.

“What about you?” Gwen asked. “Can you remember anything about your life before moving here?”

“I remember I lived here a bit,” said Fitz. “But – you remember all the trouble we had getting around when we first moved here? I didn’t know where anything was.”

“It was a while ago, though, wasn’t it?” said Toshiko uncertainly. “And you did say you didn’t live here long.”

“Not long enough to remember the street names?” Fitz asked pointedly.

“There are some streets in Cardiff I still don’t know the name of,” Toshiko pointed out.

“That’s different, though.”

“It’s a man thing apparently,” Gwen muttered to Toshiko, rolling her eyes.

“Speaking of Cardiff, where is this Rift, exactly?” Toshiko asked.

“Yeah. All this stuff you’re talking about, that’s got to be difficult to hush up,” Fitz remarked.

“I think you’d be genuinely surprised how little we need to cover up our activities,” said Jack smugly. “People tend to rationalise anything they see or hear, unless confronted with it in the manner which the two of you have been.”

“What’s more Sharaan and Raeth will probably have tried to repress and cover up any instances of alien life forms that you may recall to make you hostile to the idea of alien intervention with your lives,” said Owen. “Particularly in your case,” he added in Tosh’s general direction.

Fitz tightened his arm around Toshiko. “That whole... thing with you and Tosh, that was because you recognised her from before?”

The uncomfortable silence fell over them again.

Owen scratched the back of his head. “Something like that.”

Toshiko and Fitz waited for him to go on. When he didn’t, Toshiko asked, “How did you manage to find me? The first time I saw you you looked surprised to see me.”

Owen twitched. “Well, to be fair, I thought you were dead, so...”

Alarmed, Fitz and Toshiko looked at Jack. He sighed and held his empty mug out to Ianto. “If I’m telling this thing start to finish, I’m going to need a re-fill.”

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*The operation was fairly routine (and don’t you just know that something’s gone horribly wrong when the story starts with those words?): chase down the aliens, figure out how to stop them and take down said aliens. All without attracting too much attention from the general public.*

*The police had found a body in “unusual circumstances”; in this case bearing some particularly unusual burns, probably caused by some kind of alien weapon. Despite the police’s best efforts and Toshiko’s hacking skills they hadn’t been able to identify him. Owen had named him “dead before the credits”.*

*“Good to see you’re your usual sensitive self,” Gwen had said, folding her arms while Owen examined the body.*

*“Appropriate, though, don’t you think? I mean, look at him – if this were an episode of CSI he’d be in all the flashbacks.”*

*The title became yet more appropriate as, over the next couple of days, he was revealed to be only the first in a lengthening line of bodies. More worryingly, there seemed to be nothing to connect them; different ages, different genders, different ethnicities – and nor did there seem to be any common places or groups where they could have crossed over.*

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“Hold on – there’s a series of murders, and because they’ve got some weird patterns on them the police just hands things over to you?” asked Fitz.

“Outside the government, beyond the police,” said Toshiko, the explanation kicking in like a recording. “If they turn up the authorities have to turn things over to them whether they like it or not.”

Jack looked mildly surprised at this and an almost hopeful look passed through the team. Toshiko squeezed Fitz’s hand and tried to ignore it.

“So what about the aliens?” she asked. “How did you come across them?”

Jack’s face turned grim. “We had a survivor.”

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*The young man wasn’t as badly burnt as some of the other victims, though that was little comfort to him; when Gwen and Owen went to interview him he was hunched over in a corner of his room, face pressed against the wall, shaking his head violently and screaming as one of the nurses tried to pull him out. They conducted their interview sat there with him, though not too close – according to the nurse he’d lashed out at various members of staff. He hadn’t been able to recall his real name, where he lived, any family members – his life was just one big blank.*

*He could remember things, he told them; burning, people with red eyes and cruel faces. Ordinary people. One girl who he’d been talking to in the pub earlier. She had blue eyes then, he said. A nice smile.*

“Did she have any burns?” Owen asked, an idea forming.

*The man stiffened, but didn’t turn around. “What?”*

*“Did she have any burns like the ones you’ve –” Owen reached out and touched one of the man’s long burn marks and suddenly he whipped around and jumped on Owen, hitting and kicking and shouting. It had taken three nurses and a doctor to restrain him. He refused to answer any more of their questions, hissing and spitting at them when they tried.*

*“Sudden change of appearance and demeanour. Classic signs of a parasitic life form,” Owen had summarised as they took their seats in the boardroom.*

*“If that’s the case then what’s all the burning about?” Gwen had asked. “Is it some kind of ritual, or maybe an initiation? And if it is, then why are they leaving the people out afterwards?”*

*“The victims we’ve seen so far are probably failures,” Jack said, looking through one of the autopsy reports.*

*That had got everyone’s attention.*

*“Failures?”*

*“Most parasites gradually destroy the host body that they’re inhabiting, but they’re usually very reluctant to move on to another body because of the risks that come with it. A lot of species of parasite have had to move on to using humans because the species that they originally evolved to live off, often in a genuinely symbiotic way, were wiped out.”*

*Ianto raised his eyebrows. “All in one go?”*

*“Humans aren’t the only life forms that wage war,” Jack told him. “Anyway, these... relationships were meant to be permanent. No need to switch bodies. It’s something they’re still not used to and, understandably, try to avoid at all costs.”*

*“You think they could be doing this as some kind of test, to see if these people are worth inhabiting?” asked Tosh.*

*“Tougher the body is, longer it’s going to last, longer you can put off having to switch bodies.” Jack shrugged. “It’s common practice amongst certain parasites. Never seen trials quite like these, though,” he added, looking over the pictures Gwen had taken.*

*“But just testing any organism you’re thinking of possessing?” Toshiko said. “The latest victim described humans that were already possessed, right? Surely, if you know a given number of human bodies are fit for infestation, you’d just assume the whole race was probably the same, wouldn’t you?”*

*Jack narrowed his eyes. “Good question.” He stood and began to delegate. “Owen, Gwen, go back to the hospital, see if you can find out any more about this girl he was talking about. Toshiko, I want to know who this guy is, if he turns out to be the missing link. Ianto, with me. We’re researching parasites.”*

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*“So who were they?” asked Fitz.*

*Gwen frowned at him. “What do you mean “who”?”*

*“The aliens,” said Fitz as though this were obvious.*

*“They called themselves “Yasheal”,” Ianto told him. “But in the texts we uncovered during our research most other species refer to them as “Naequin”.”*

*Toshiko shuddered. Something about that word was familiar. Unhappy. Fitz looked uncomfortable too.*

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*“Species is called “Yasheal”, also called “Naequin”,” Jack began, slapping folders down in front of them. “Prefer humanoid species and when inhabiting tend to take full control when the host is tired or sick; it’s easier for them to dominate that way. As far as the host is concerned they fell asleep,*

*passed out, don't remember a thing. In some cases the hosts have gone for years without realising that they're infected."*

*"And as far as they're concerned, burning hosts is par for the course?" asked Owen.*

*"Since they've had to stoop to humans it has become fairly common practice amongst most of them. There are groups who prefer to avoid harming the potential host in any way, but they're pretty much the equivalent of animal rights activists; they're treated as deviants and hold little power or influence within society."*

*Tosh looked up from her folder. "So how do we stop them?"*

*Jack pretended to consider this. "Given the estimated size of the Cardiff community? With difficulty."*

*Gwen was flicking through the file. "Where did all this information come from? I mean, if it's enough of a problem to put all this research into it –"*

*Ianto took over. "Torchwood London looked into it in their area in the early nineties, had the other branches do the same. After some debate Torchwood One's command decided they weren't going to do anything about it."*

*"And we had to follow their lead," Jack added. "It was reckoned that the Naequin could themselves be useful sources of information."*

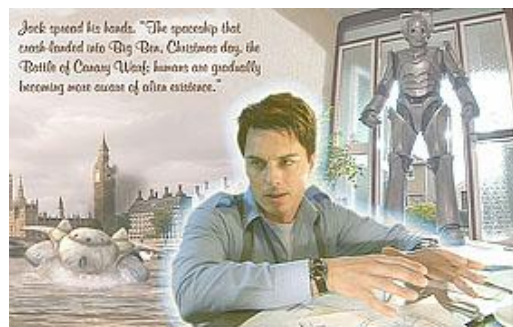
*"And were they?" asked Gwen, sounding dubious.*

*Jack nodded. "Oh yeah. Up until a couple of years ago it really paid off intelligence-wise. Always happy to help, especially if it meant tattling on other aliens. Of course, back then they were pretty disorganised, and their numbers were nothing like what they are now."*

*Gwen shook her head in disgust. "I can't believe it. That this has been going on right under our nose – I don't believe it."*

*"You said up until a couple of years ago," said Owen. "What happened then?"*

*Jack spread his hands. "The spaceship that crash-landed into Big Ben, Christmas day, the Battle of Canary Wharf; humans are gradually becoming more aware of alien existence. More open to the idea of it, at least. The Naequin figured that in a few more years the Institute would become public knowledge and we'd be forced into action regarding the alien community." He folded his arms. "It's a widely held view amongst aliens living here in plain sight, and after the way Christmas day was handled I can't blame them for assuming the worst. The Naequin believed that they'd be especially persecuted because they needed to possess*



humans in order to survive. It seems that with that in mind they've started to get more aggressive in their tactics."

"It seems?" Gwen repeated, less than impressed.

Jack shrugged. "They're not as open or co-operative as they used to be and they're making more of an effort to keep off the radar. It's been getting harder to keep track on them on top of everything else."

"But we are looking into this?" Gwen insisted.

"We are," Jack confirmed, getting to his feet. "First task, recon." He left the boardroom and with much eye-rolling and exchange of dark looks the team followed. "Pair up and see what you can find out. These guys have gotten more aggressive in their testing, means they need some particularly strong hosts. Something's coming, and we need to find out what."

"And where are you going?" asked Owen as Jack pulled his coat on.

Jack smiled. "Got to see a man about a horse." He paused. "And when I say "horse", I of course mean "intergalactic worm that takes over humanoid minds". Good luck!"

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"Ah, you're back," said Owen as Jack dismounted the lift. "Been a bit busy tonight; we've caged three rabid Weevils, been posing as CID and questioning members of the public – I nearly got beaten up on four separate occasions – and Ianto and I stopped some scumbag robbing a newsagents. Not our thing, but we were in the neighbourhood, we had guns, we thought "why not?". Anyway what's your night been... like?" Owen trailed off as he caught sight of the bloodstains on Jack's shirt.

Jack strode straight past him to Toshiko's workstation. "Tosh, I need you to get me everything you can on one loan Collins – that's loan spelt I – O – A – N."

"Got it." Tosh began typing.

"Who's loan Collins?" asked Gwen, coming to look over Tosh's shoulder, shuffling away from Jack after she noticed the stains.

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"The dying thing happens a lot then?" Tosh asked them.

Owen smirked down at Jack. "With embarrassing frequency."

"If I could get back to the story, time is of the essence," said Jack, the threatening tone ruined by the fact he was tucking into a bourbon cream.

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"According to sources the current host of one Raethan Greituk, known around the block as "Raeth"."

Owen quirked an eyebrow. "You even managed to get its name?"

Jack nodded grimly. "Apparently Raeth has quite the reputation amongst Cardiff's Naequin community. So much so a fair few members of the alien community in general have heard of her."

"You mean 'him'?" asked Gwen.

"I mean her," said Jack. "They don't have to take hosts of corresponding sex, though most prefer to and taking a host of the opposite sex is seen as something of a deviant act. That's why we need to find this guy. Raeth took him as a host out of desperation after her original received mortal wounds during a fight with some Weevils, but word is she's on the look out for a new host. And an excuse for a transfer."

"Got him!" said Tosh. "Ioan Collins, white male, aged thirty-two years, works in Waterstones bookshop. Lives in Hoel Coe Caed."

Jack beamed. "Fabulous," he said, dropping a kiss on top of Tosh's head. "Owen, Gwen, let's go."

"What are you going to do, knock on the door and say, 'Hello, we're members of a secret organisation visiting because we believe you're being possessed by an aggressive alien'?" said Owen sarcastically.

After a moment's thought Jack nodded. "Pretty much."

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"Good to know we're getting the standard Torchwood treatment." said Fitz. Toshiko elbowed him in the ribs.

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"When you say 'increased strength', what kind of strength are we talking about here?" asked Owen, parking the SUV outside Collins' house. "Is it really strong, but within the limits of humans' natural potential kind of strong or 'Hulk smash' kind of strong?"

The suburb was quiet tonight, blissfully devoid of drugged-up joyriding blowfish, though Jack had insisted it would be a four-man job to bring him in. He was only now elaborating on why.

"From what the files say, somewhere in between," said Jack. He climbed out of the car and opened the boot, removing a case as the others followed suit. "I don't want us discharging guns in there unless it's absolutely necessary. Unless I say otherwise we're using these."

Owen regarded the weapon he'd been handed with disgust. "Would someone please explain why we're going at this man with stun guns?"

"Oh come on," said Gwen. "Four of us with stun guns against an unarmed civilian? This is overkill even if he has got super strength."

*“How are we going about this?” asked Tosh. “I mean, all four of us just turning up at the front door –”*

*Jack nodded. “Would be a little conspicuous, yes. Which is why you’ll be turning up at the front door on your own. As a distraction while I’m taking the window to the side of the house and Gwen and Owen are taking the back door,” he added, registering the team’s alarm. “Don’t worry, you’re not going in alone.”*

*Toshiko moistened her lips. “If I do the “my car broke down” routine?”*

*Jack grinned. “Atta girl. Okay, let’s get into position.”*

*Tosh hung back for a few moments and watched the others slink around the side of the house, wondering vaguely how they were going to proceed with the plan if the police were called in to deal with a gang of prowlers by one of Collins’ neighbours. As the seconds gave way to minutes Toshiko began to fidget and pretended to examine the SUV’s tires, muttering curses under her breath for the benefit of anyone who might be watching.*

*Finally she heard Jack’s voice over her comm (“Okay. Work your magic.”) and straightened, making sure to slump her shoulders a bit. She glanced around and started toward Collins’ house, trying to affect a confused, defeated expression.*

*Collins answered after the third knock, regarding her with polite expectance. “Can I help you?”*

*Toshiko found herself slightly taken aback; he wasn’t as... rough around the edges as she had expected. Quite clean cut actually, and just the sort of person Toshiko would approach if she really had broken down.*

*“I said, can I help you?”*

*“Er, yeah,” said Tosh, giving herself a mental kick. “My car’s just packed in,” she gestured vaguely to the SUV, “and so naturally I’ve left my mobile charging at home. I was wondering if I might be able to use your phone?”*

*He stepped back and smiled. “By all means.”*

*It was a nice smile, Toshiko thought as he shut the door behind her. Not the smile of someone who went around picking fights with Weevils or beating people. Not that their smiles had been much different. She pushed the cannibals to the back of her mind and fought the urge to shudder.*

*“It’s just through there in the kitchen,” he motioned to the doorway at the end of the hallway.*

*“Thank you.” Praying that he wasn’t going to follow her in – but obviously he was, because that was what you did when strangers entered your house – Toshiko entered the kitchen and picked up the receiver. “I’m just going to call my boyfriend – he’ll know what to do with it. It might take me a few goes to reach him, though,” she said apologetically.*

*“Oh no, feel free.” As it turned out he hadn’t followed her; he was speaking to her from the hallway. Odd. “If you want a drink or anything while you wait, feel free. I’ve just got some work to be – what the he –” There was a loud yell and a louder crash. Tosh put the phone down as Gwen and Owen appeared through the back door, stun guns at the ready.*

*They rushed into the living room as one, though the scene they found was not the one they expected. Rather than Jack manhandling a poor, defenceless civilian, they found a red-eyed madman trying to strangle Jack.*

*Owen jumped at them, trying to pry him off Jack, but Collins lashed out and a glancing blow sent him flying across the room. Tosh went to help him and Gwen, switching her stun gun to a high setting, rushed at Collins, catching him with it on his side. He snarled and kicked out at her, though the distraction allowed Jack to throw him off and hit him in the spine with his stun gun. And then again when he started to get back up.*

*“Quick,” he said to Gwen, moving in to hold him down, “get the cuffs on him.”*

*It took three of them working together to bundle him into the back of the SUV while Owen rummaged in his bag for the sedatives.*

*“We don’t want a repeat performance of this when we need to get him out of the back and into the Hub,” said Jack, pinning him against the wall, while Owen injected him.*

*However, upon their return unloading him was the least of their problems.*

*“I was afraid of this. This is why I didn’t give them any tranquilisers,” said Owen, setting up the screens around Collins’ prone form. “It’s like he’s falling into a coma.”*

*“Could Raeth be doing this?” asked Tosh, wringing her hands. If they’d caused the parasite to try and self-destruct...*

*“Naequin do release toxins into the bloodstream over time,” said Ianto. “Best they could guess in the files it’s a side affect of the parasite adapting to human physiology – it usually takes years to build up, though.”*

*“Because they want to preserve the body they’re in. If they want to destroy it they might be able to flood the system with them,” said Jack.*

*“What’s the toxin doing, exactly?” asked Gwen, watching Owen from the railings. “Should we be taking him to hospital?”*

*“Oh yeah, ‘cause the head consultant’s got so much experience dealing with alien toxins,” said Owen sarcastically.*

*“I was only asking –” Gwen began.*

*“Whatever needs doing to him, Owen can do it to him here,” said Jack firmly. “We can’t risk her taking over another body if this one does die. She’s our best chance of finding out what’s going on.”*

*“And what about the body? What’s going to happen to loan?” Gwen demanded.*

*“We’ll do what we can for him,” said Jack. “It’s not much, but it’s more than anyone else will be able to do. Owen, if you go back over the files with Ianto, see if there’s anything you can use that we might have missed. We’ll take it in turns to keep an eye on him.”*

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Fitz and Toshiko exchanged glances, and his grip on her shoulder started to border on painful.

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*The first cycle of watches passed without event. A Weevil sighting interrupted the second round, while Jack took Ianto and Gwen to check it out and if necessary bring it in. When they returned (empty handed) Owen appeared to have made some kind of breakthrough.*

*“It’s a kind of anti-venom,” Tosh explained as Owen worked frantically below. “If Owen can get the ratios right it should be able to counter-act the toxins.”*

*“That’s the general idea, anyway,” said Owen, preparing a syringe. “Whether it actually works...” He pulled a face.*

*Jack nodded. “Do it.”*

*Owen nodded back and administered the injection. “Nothing to do now but wait and see what happens.”*

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*Rhys hadn’t been pleased at Gwen ringing to say she wouldn’t be home that night, though he admitted he was happy that she’d phoned. After ending the call she toyed with her mobile. She hated cases like this. She wanted to be at home with him watching Wife Swap or Top Gear or whatever it was he’d taped, and hear about his day and all the stories he had to tell.*

*“Gwen!” On hearing her name she snapped to attention. “Can you come down here for a second?”*

*Gwen dashed to the autopsy room and leaned over the railings. “What’s wrong? Has something happened -?”*

*“Not to him.” Tosh gestured to her laptop. “Something’s up with the system, I need to run a diagnostic from my terminal. You mind taking over?”*

*Gwen nodded. “Yeah, of course.”*

*Toshiko dashed past her, almost slipping on the stairs, catching herself and the laptop at the last minute and disappearing around the corner.*

*Gwen checked the screens, though she had no idea what any of them meant, and sat down, settling in for the long wait. Whatever Toshiko was doing was probably going to take a while.*

*Suddenly Gwen jerked awake as the monitors around Collins went haywire and Collins began to scream. She jumped up, trying to check his pulse, but he hit her across the face as he started to convulse. Gwen tried to pin an arm down to find his pulse.*

*“What happened?” Owen demanded, appearing out of nowhere and shoving her out of the way to check the monitors.*

*Gwen shook her head, hands fisted in her hair. “I don’t know, I just came in to check on him and then he started screaming and thrashing and I was – I went to hold him down and his heart just stopped.”*

*Jack turned from her and looked expectantly at Owen, who was taking the man’s pulse. Owen took his hand away and shook his head. “Heart failure. From the toxins probably.”*

*Jack turned back to Gwen. “And you were in here?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Alone?”*

*“Yeah, Tosh had to run a systems diagnostic or something, and she needed me to take over.”*

*“And you were right by the body at the time?”*

*“For God’s sake why are you –” The penny dropped. Gwen held up her hands and stepped back once, twice. “You think she switched to – No! I have not been compromised! There was no transfer, you can check the CCTV –”*

*Tosh appeared over the railing. “No we can’t. The CCTV’s packed in. All the footage from the last six hours has been erased.”*

*“How the hell’s that happened?” asked Owen.*

*Toshiko shook her head. “Some kind of computer virus. There was nothing I could do to stop it.”*

*Jack looked pointedly at Gwen.*

*“It wasn’t me!” she cried. “I have not been compromised!”*

*Jack sighed. “I really wish we could take your word for it.”*

*Twenty minutes later Gwen was secured in one of the cells, hammering on the Plexiglass. “You can’t just keep me in isolation like this!”*

*Jack raised his hands placatingly. "Look, this is just a precaution. You've seen how violent those things can get; if we just let you go you could wake up tomorrow and find Rhys dead on the floor."*

*At that Gwen's ears pricked. "Rhys – oh my God, what have you told him? He'll be expecting me back, I told him we wouldn't be long."*

*"Ianto's on the phone to him now. He's going to explain the situation."*

*Gwen hesitated. "Can I see him?"*

*Jack shook his head. "No. He comes here, he get involved. He gets involved while these guys are hanging around and he could die. He's not coming here, end of story." He strode away and Gwen gave the Plexiglass one last futile punch.*

*Jack found Tosh waiting for him at the top of the stairs. "How did she take it?"*

*Jack sighed. "Not well, oddly enough."*

*"She'll see sense." Toshiko paused, the kind of pause that drew attention to itself. Jack raised an eyebrow and she continued. "I was wondering. We've all been alone with him at some point, even Owen and Ianto – why aren't we all in quarantine? Impracticality aside, I mean. Surely, it could have infected any of us?"*

*Jack shook his head. "The records state that they switched hosts only when the old one dies. Otherwise they consider it too much of a risk. Gwen was the only one in the room when the host died. If Raeth's transferred to anyone it will be her."*

*"How sure are you?" Toshiko insisted. "If you're wrong and one of us has been infected you could be compromising the base."*

*Jack snorted. "'The base'? Have you and Ianto been having Stargate marathons behind my back again?"*

*Toshiko laughed along weakly. Jack put a hand on her shoulder. "All the sources say the same thing. If Raeth's transferred it will have been to Gwen. And if she has... well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it." He patted her shoulder. "Don't worry about it."*

*They went to join Owen who was sat at Toshiko's workstation surveying the many screens. "How exactly are we going to know whether or not she's being possessed?" he asked. "Even if Gwen doesn't know we're recording her, from the sounds of it this Raeth's been around the block a bit. Surely she's going to twig it."*

*Jack straddled the swivel chair next to him and shook his head. "It doesn't matter whether she knows we're watching or not. If she doesn't assert control within the first forty-eight hours it's going to be more difficult, possibly even damaging to try and take control later on; she's going to have to whether she wants to or not."*

*Ianto came to join them, resting a hand on Jack's shoulder. "How's she doing?"*

*"Pissy as hell, other than that, fine," said Owen.*

*"What did Rhys have to say?" asked Jack, turning to face Ianto.*

*Ianto rolled his eyes. "Skipping the majority of the insults, he's undeniably very upset at not being able to see her, but he calmed down a little when I promised him you'd personally give him hour by hour updates on her condition."*

*"That was kind of me," Jack remarked.*

*"He thought so too," said Ianto.*

*They took shifts in monitoring Gwen (and shifts sleeping on the couch). Two days passed, with no sign of Raeth. Gwen was in a poor mood upon being released and checked over until Ianto returned with Rhys in tow.*

*"Makes you want to be sick, doesn't it?" Owen muttered to Tosh as they watched the happy couple hug and kiss.*

*Tosh chuckled. "It's sweet," she protested. "And I thought you wanted to settle down now, give monogamy a chance?"*

*"Yeah, monogamy like settling down with one person who I like and can have intelligent conversations with, not someone I'm going to spend the rest of my life, such as it is, making goo-goo eyes at and calling them "darling" like I've forgotten their name."*

*Tosh frowned. "That's not what romance is all about, Owen."*

*"Well, it's not like I'm going to find out, is it?" asked Owen, removing his apron and gloves. "Even if I managed to find someone who I actually like and who actually likes me, it's not as if they're going to want me, is it? Not unless they're a closet necrophile."*

*Tosh pursed her lips and left Owen to it.*

*Gwen and Rhys left soon afterwards. Jack and Ianto sat around waiting for Owen to finish up in the autopsy room, then Ianto decided to take care of a few last minute jobs while Owen and Jack sat back and waited for him to finish.*

*"You guys going out?" asked Tosh, taking up position in front her of her computer.*

*"It's a boys' night out," said Jack.*

*"Yeah, Jack's just enjoying his relative wealth while he can." said Owen, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "I see a few rounds of Pseithan darts."*

*“Just so long as you’re not seen again,” said Ianto, swinging his coat on. “I’m really not comfortable retconning ten people in one night, especially when I have to buy them all drinks to go with the pills.” He turned to Tosh. “You staying late?”*

*Toshiko nodded. “Yeah, I just want to make sure the virus is sorted.”*

*“Fair enough,” said Ianto, starting with Owen towards the lift.*

*Jack paused by Toshiko’s workstation. “Remember to switch off the lights and lock the door when you go, okay?”*

*“Yes mother,” said Tosh. Jack pretended to box her ears.*

*“Will you be coming back when your little boy’s night out is done?” asked Toshiko, quirking an eyebrow.*

*Jack glanced across at Ianto and gave her a wide smile.*

*Tosh rolled her eyes. “Stupid question.”*

*Jack laughed and went to join the other two.*

*“Have fun,” Toshiko called, waving to them as the lift rose. “Try not to get into too much trouble.”*

*They laughed and Ianto waved back at her.*

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*The next morning Toshiko was late. This went largely unnoticed as Gwen and Owen were late too; the only reason Jack had made it in on time was because Ianto had bullied him into getting up and dressing. Owen and Gwen arrived within half an hour of each other, Gwen glowing and happy, Owen with his eyes screwed shut and the complaint that while living-death changed the after-effects of being submerged in cold water, it didn’t make them any less unpleasant. By lunchtime Jack and Owen had been called out and returned with a promising artefact and Toshiko had still not come in. When Jack and Owen re-entered the TIC Ianto was on the phone, while Gwen hovered next to him looking anxious.*

*“She still not in?” Owen asked. Gwen shook her head.*

*“I’ve been trying to get hold of her for the past half hour,” said Ianto, drumming his fingers on the countertop. “She’s not answering her house phone, or her mobile.”*

*Jack shrugged. “I’ll go around her flat, see if I can raise her.” He handed Owen the artefact and exited. “Order Chinese for when we get back,” he called over his shoulder.*

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*When he received no answer after several knocks Jack felt justified in kicking the door down. He was preparing to put this argument to Toshiko when she came storming out of her bedroom (or maybe the bathroom...) but she never came. He checked all over the flat but couldn't find hide nor hair of her. Upon entering the bedroom and finding the bed hadn't been slept in Jack started to worry in earnest. He checked her wardrobe, drawers and fridge. All fully stocked – it didn't seem that she had planned on going anywhere. Looking around he couldn't find the coat or bag she'd had yesterday.*

*He went through to the kitchen and picked up the phone.*

*"About time," said Ianto at the other end. "What's wrong, have you come down with something, or –"*

*"She's not here," said Jack.*

*"...what?"*

*"She's not here," Jack repeated, pulling her diary towards him and flicking it open. "Search the Hub."*

*There was a short silence from Ianto's end of the line. "She could just be having a day, like you and Owen do sometimes, just getting away from things for a bit –"*

*"Ianto. From the look of things she didn't come home last night."*

*"...we'll start a sweep of the Hub."*

*"I'll start checking the hospitals. Get Gwen to check in with the police, see if they met anyone matching Tosh's description last night." He put the phone down, took the diary and the spare keys from underneath the out of date apples in the fruit bowl and straightened out the lock.*

*All of their searches came up short. There was nothing to be found. Ianto looked through Toshiko's file to discreetly contact her next of kin, but found that their contact details had been erased. Gwen suggested that it might have been from the virus the other day. After extensive digging Ianto managed to get hold of her parents' number.*

*"They don't know where she is," he told Jack tiredly as he handed him a coffee. "And not only do they not know where she is, they haven't heard from her for the past three months. I know it can be difficult figuring out what to tell people, but three months?"*

*Jack shook his head. "There's no reading anything into that. It's part of the deal."*

*Ianto frowned. "What deal?"*

*Jack didn't look up. "That's between me and Toshiko. Wherever the hell she is."*

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*An answer of sorts came later in the evening, just as they were packing up to go home, when Gwen received a phone call from an old friend of hers in the police.*

*“She says there’s a crime scene we should look at. They’ve found some of Tosh’s things there.”*

*“What kind of crime scene?” asked Ianto.*

*Gwen shook her head. “It’s too early for them to determine –”*

*“Gwen,” said Owen.*

*She pursed her lips. “It looks like it may be a murder scene.”*

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*It was around the corner from the multi-story car park, near where they had picked up the beginning of John’s trail of destruction. Jack had seen a number of murder scenes in his time, both as the murderer and, in recent times, as the victim. There was no maybe about it; this was a murder scene. Whether or not it was Toshiko’s was a whole other matter.*

*There were two dead bodies, both having been savagely cut up, lots of blood spattered and pooled across the tarmac and, a short distance away as though dropped whilst fleeing the scene, Toshiko’s bag lay on its side, contents strewn out. Jack ducked under the tape to get a better look. Her purse, hair brush and emergency chocolate bar were still in the bag, though her make up, keys and the Mills and Boon he had seen her reading on the sly the other day had fallen out onto the pavement. Frowning Jack started to pick the pile apart when –*

*“Hey!”*

*He turned to see Detective Swanson storming towards him.*

*“You can put that down right now and get the hell off my crime scene, or I can arrest you here and now, Torchwood or not.”*

*“I need to check something,” he said, turning his back to her.*

*Swanson grabbed the shoulder of his coat and dragged him back around. “Who the fuck do you think you are, just waltzing in here onto a crime scene that has nothing to do with you and contaminating evidence?”*

*Jack stood, but the new height difference did little to intimidate her. “This crime scene has everything to do with us – which is why we were called in the first place.” He pointed at the discarded bag. “These belong to a member of my team, Toshiko Sato. She’s been missing for at least twelve hours now, and from the look of it was one of the victims –”*

*“Or an accomplice,” Swanson countered, hands on hips. “So far forensics have been able to confirm that this murder took place in the last two hours. Something of a co-incidence that your employee doesn’t turn up for work and is then placed at the scene of a double murder, don’t you think?”*

*“No,” said Jack coldly. “I don’t think.” He stalked away, ducking back under the tape to the SUV. Ianto was leaning against it, though there was no sign of Gwen or Owen. Spotting Jack, Ianto straightened.*

*“What did Swanson have to say?”*

*Jack sighed and shook his head. “At the moment she seems rather taken with the idea that Toshiko might have had a hand in all of this.”*

*Ianto stared. “What?”*

*“I can understand why she’d think it – from the look of it Tosh was running away from the scene, and she would have had her gun with her. It wasn’t there with her things.”*

*“Jack,” said Ianto. “We’re talking about Tosh.”*

*“You and me are; as far as the police are concerned we’re talking about a special ops agent who’s gone AWOL from work on the same day that her things were found at a murder scene. It’s not really that hard to see why they’re getting suspicious is it?”*

*Ianto shifted uncomfortably. “You don’t think she did anything though, do you?”*

*“I’d hope not.” Risking a glance at Ianto and catching the other man glaring at him he added, “It’s happened before. Not just with Suzie. And there’s almost never any warning.”*

*“You actually think she did it?” asked Ianto accusingly.*

*“I’m saying it’s a possibility.” Spotting Owen and Gwen Jack went to meet them. “Found anything out?”*

*“Give it a chance, I’ve only just taken the blood samples,” said Owen.*

*“They haven’t been able to find any witnesses yet,” Gwen said apologetically. “They’re checking for CCTV just now, but it’s not looking good. Most of the cameras they’ve checked so far have been damaged. They’re not sure how yet; they haven’t been smashed up or had the wires cut. You don’t think there’s an alien device that could scramble them somehow do you?”*

*“Probably.” Owen shrugged. “Tosh’d know.”*

*“What do we do now?” asked Gwen. “Are we taking over the investigation from here, or are we letting them get on with it?”*

*“We’ll let them get on with it,” said Jack. “We’re too close to this to do a thorough investigation. We’ll keep tabs on it and see what conclusions they come to.”*

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“And what conclusions did you come to?” asked Fitz, looking not a little suspicious.

Jack shook his head. “They didn’t have anything concrete. However, some of the blood did turn out to be Toshiko’s and the blood spatter patterns suggested defensive wounds. The police’s theory was that you came across the murder in progress and the killer gave chase.”

“We couldn’t find anything on you, and there was a spike in Rift energy around the time of the murder. We came to the conclusion that you’d been taken by the Rift. We kept a look out for you,” Gwen added hurriedly. “Checking the missing persons investigations and any Jane Does that had turned up in hospital, but...”

“Goes without saying we were rather surprised to find you alive and well in Liverpool,” said Ianto.

“How exactly did you find me?” asked Toshiko. “I mean, from the sounds of it, you thought me and... Raeth were dead.”

“That we did. We were tracking Sharaan.” Owen gestured to Fitz. “We managed to track him down and you just happened to be there with him.”

“But why would aliens come to Liverpool?” asked Fitz. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. Great city, lovely people, but what’s here that aliens’d be interested in?”

“There is something here,” said Jack, in that mysterious way that Toshiko was already getting bored of. “It’s the reason you two were abducted and brought here and the reason that there are so many gaps in your memories.”

“So, they don’t usually uproot their hosts?” said Fitz.

Gwen shook her head. “It seems the two of you were picked for very specific reasons.”

“Which was why we needed to get hold of you,” Owen added. “We’re still not sure what’s happening and we need all the help we can get.”

“Even if the help’s been compromised?” Toshiko asked.

There was an awkward silence. Finally, Fitz cleared his throat and got shakily to his feet.

“You said that they only come out at night. Are you going to be monitoring us or something?” he said in vaguely Owen’s direction.

Owen frowned and looked to Jack. Jack shrugged. Owen turned back to Fitz and nodded. “Better had do, just be to on the safe side.”

“In that case we’re having takeaway,” said Fitz making his way to the kitchen. “I refuse to cook for six people. Pizza alright with everyone?”

“We practically live on it back home,” said Ianto.

“I’ll get everyone some more tea,” Toshiko added, snatching up the mugs from the table. She didn’t want to be left alone with these people.

“I’ll help you,” said Ianto, standing up.

“No, no, that’s fine.”

“Are you sure, I could –”

“No, really. It’s *fine*.”

Ianto sank back onto his seat. Toshiko tried to smile and ducked quickly into the kitchen. Fitz was scrabbling around through one of the drawers.

He glanced up at her.

“Hey, there you are.”

Toshiko shut the door quietly behind her.

“You know where the menus are? I was sure I put them all in here, but they’ve gone.”

Toshiko looked at the floor. “Fitz –”

“See this is what happens when you move things around, you don’t know where they are when we need them.”

“Fitz –”

“I told you we should have kept them pinned on the corkboard, but no, they make it look untidy –”

Toshiko grabbed Fitz’s arm. He stilled. Toshiko pulled open the drawer to the left of the one he’d been digging through, revealing a variety of colourful takeaway menus.

“You don’t believe them, do you?” Toshiko asked.

“Quite the contrary.” He sighed, turning to look at her with sad eyes. “It’s like you said – it all makes too much sense.”

“What?”

“I didn’t – I mean there was so much going on with the move and our new jobs, and you were settling in so well –”

Toshiko’s brow furrowed. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Fitz swallowed, picking through the menus. “I’ve been having a lot of headaches recently.”

“And here was me thinking that you’d mixed up the Aspirin with the mints,” said Toshiko, rolling her eyes.

“I was having blackouts, too,” said Fitz quietly. He laughed. “It’s funny, actually, I was going to tell you about it after I got home from the course on Sunday. This girl from work was asking me about Cardiff – stuff I’d have known from a day trip there.”

“And?”

He shrugged. “I couldn’t answer any of her questions. I told her I was just tired, feeling a bit over-worked.”

Toshiko smiled. “Well. Under the circumstances, I’m a little relieved it’s alien possession.”

Fitz smiled back. “Only a little?”

“Well, the alien possession does put a dampener on things as far as the human race is concerned.”

“True, true.” He leant forward and gave her a kiss, then pulled back sharply. “You know, I’ve just thought of something.”

“I’ve warned you about that,” said Tosh playfully, dropping the teabags into the cups.

“No, I mean, by their logic,” he jerked his head in the direction of the door, “the two of us, we’re only together because the aliens possessing us needed to be in close contact with each other. It has nothing to do with love at all.”

There was a short silence.

“I notice you only realised after giving me a kiss,” said Toshiko.

“Ahem.” The door had opened at some point in their conversation and they were now faced with a rather embarrassed looking Ianto. “Er, I’m sorry to... interrupt, but I need to talk to the two of you.”

“Well?” asked Fitz. “Go on.”

Ianto looked uncertain, but continued. “We were thinking about what you said earlier,” he told Fitz, “and we’ve decided it might be for the best that you come back to base with us for the night, seeing as that’s when the Naequin are at the height of their power.”

“In case we try to overpower you lot, you mean?” Fitz scoffed. “Two of us, four of you. I’d think you’d manage.”

Toshiko pursed her lips, thinking of how she had apparently managed to overpower Jack.

“As I said, it’s for your safety as well as ours,” said Ianto.

Toshiko narrowed her eyes. “Why? Do you think someone might be coming around here for us?”

Ianto sighed. "It's almost certain that other Naequin agents in the area will know that you two live here. If any of them turn up here and find us –"

Toshiko nodded. "Of course."

"Who would we know that could be possessed?" asked Fitz.

"Chances are you probably won't even know them," said Jack, appearing in the doorway. Ianto took the hint and moved out of the way to begin making more tea. "They'll just be ordinary people like yourselves; you won't know them but the aliens pulling the strings will know each other. They could just turn up here to go over plans, pass on news."

"And wouldn't the fact that we weren't here alert them to the fact that something was going on?" asked Fitz.

"Only the fact that I wasn't here," Toshiko pointed out. "You're meant to be away in Sheffield, remember?"

"Yeah, but the course –" Fitz frowned. "The course was cancelled, wasn't it?"

Toshiko shrugged. "Why would I know?"

"I phoned to tell you, didn't I?"

"I've not had any calls or texts from you." She bit her lip. "I could have phoned you – well, Raeth –"

"When you killed him?" said Fitz, throwing Jack a suspicious look. "I still haven't quite got my head around that by the way –"

"It takes a while," Jack admitted.

"It makes sense," said Tosh.

"What, him coming back to life?"

"No, Raeth calling Sharaan; "Someone's on to us, get back here and help me deal with it"."

"If she had the chance to call someone then why not call another agent, someone closer to hand?" asked Fitz.

Jack shook his head. "I don't know. If she did call someone we'd probably know by now."

Fitz looked to Tosh. "Better check, just to be sure." He picked up the kitchen's cordless, checking the last numbers dialled. "Looks like you just called my mobile."

“She did, anyway,” said Tosh checking her mobile. “No calls or texts. It doesn’t look like she contacted anyone.”

Jack looked relieved. “Good. Still, best not take any chances. If you guys could run up a list of contacts for us, we can check them against known hosts.”

“And you’ve information on the alien community in Liverpool, have you?” asked Fitz, looking doubtful.

Jack smiled. “Like I said; the Naequin sing like birds.”

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As it turned out their “temporary base” was the Adelphi Hotel.

“We like to travel in style,” was Jack’s only comment.

“Even at the expense of practicality,” Ianto added with the verbal equivalent of an eyeroll.

“You managed to get four rooms here?” asked Fitz as they crowded into one of the lifts. “Where do people from beyond the government get your funding from, anyway?”

“Well, we didn’t strictly need four rooms,” said Jack, looping an arm around Ianto’s shoulders, much to the discomfort of everyone else in the lift. Including Ianto.

“How many rooms are there, then?” Toshiko asked Gwen.

“Two. We were going to split up boys and girls, but then...” Gwen trailed off.

“But then if Tosh goes psycho in the middle of the night you’re all on your own, whereas if I go psycho, I’ve got three strapping blokes to fight off?” asked Fitz.

There was another uncomfortable silence. “I’d hesitate to call Owen “strapping”,” said Gwen with a weak smile. “But otherwise, yes, that was our thinking. One of the boys will be sleeping in our room too.”

“Oh yeah?” Fitz turned to eye the three of them up and down. “Which one of the boys?”

Jack shrugged. “We haven’t drawn straws yet.”

Fitz gave him a dark look, and made a point of wrapping an arm around Toshiko. Much to the discomfort of everyone else in the lift. Fortunately moments later there was a quiet *ping*.

“Here’s our floor,” said Gwen, hurrying out through the doors.

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As it happened Fitz's group had the larger room. This was apparently not a compensation for the boys who would not get to spend a night in the girl's room, but with a view to keeping Toshiko away from the alien tech.

"So far as we know both you and Raeth have a much higher understanding of technology, alien and otherwise than your partners. No offence," He added to Fitz.

Fitz shrugged. "None taken. I'm still working on the digital alarm clock."

They had all congregated in the boys' room where Owen was helping Ianto set up some equipment, throwing him dirty looks all the while; it seemed Ianto had won the third bed in the girls' room.

"What is all this that you're setting up?" Fitz asked Gwen, eyeing a heavily wired headset nervously.

"That one monitors subconscious brain activity, doesn't it?" said Toshiko, pointing.

"Actually that's this one." said Owen, showing her a more streamlined piece of headgear.

"Close though," Jack informed her cheerfully, draping his coat over a chair in the corner and rolling up his sleeves. "We believe they came from the same planet. Probably different countries, or different time periods maybe, but still."

"Yeah. Great," Fitz muttered under his breath.

Tosh bit her lip. "I have the distinct feeling one of those is very unsafe."

"They're meant for messing with your head," said Fitz, folding his arms. "Name me one B movie where *that* didn't go horribly wrong."

Toshiko couldn't help noticing no one stepped in to try and put Fitz right, or even argue the point. She sat herself down on the arm of the chair he was sitting in, imagining the two of them making a run for it down the seemingly endless hotel corridors.

"We plan to use these to suppress the alien consciousnesses," Owen explained. "Outside your head the parasites look kinda like a slug, just a bit longer and thinner. This headset sends a small vibration through your head to the slug, hopefully knocking it out."

"Hopefully?" said Tosh and Fitz together.

"We're going to need to play around with the calibrations, make sure we get the right frequency," said Owen vaguely. "Make sure they're not... lethal."

"To us or the slug?" asked Fitz.

"From what we've seen so far if we kill one of you, both of you die," said Jack, ushering Ianto out of the way and moving to help Owen.

"What does that mean for us long-term?" Tosh asked Ianto.

He shook his head silently, quickly looking away to watch Jack and Owen.

“Okay, helmet’s done,” said Owen, shoving Jack out of his way. “Just need to get the monitors online and then we’re ready.”

“Which one of you would like to go first?” Gwen asked.

“Me,” said Tosh the same time as Fitz said, “I will.” They exchanged looks.

“I’m doing it,” said Tosh.

Fitz laid a heavy hand on her arm. “No. Look, I know I don’t usually act like it, but I’m the man. Just let me have some machismo, just this once.” Toshiko started to speak, but he cut her off. “And besides, if anything goes wrong, it’s better I’m the one it happens to. You’re the smart one.”

Tosh pushed him. “Shut up. If that stuff goes wrong you could –”

“Whatever.” Fitz stood, passing the headset to Owen so he could sit down. “Hook me up.”

Owen put the headset in place and started hooking him up to the various monitors.

“Maybe we should go through to the other room,” Gwen said to Tosh, trying to usher her out of the chair.

“No, I’m staying.”

“If you do and Sharaan becomes active, there’s a chance that Raeth could surface,” Jack told her. “Unless you want us to tie you down, go through to the other room with Gwen.”

Tosh glared at him, then turned and gave Fitz an encouraging smile. “Just be careful, yeah? And make sure that they don’t do anything stupid – they’re good at that.”

Fitz smirked back. As Toshiko turned and followed Gwen out she heard Ianto say, amused, “Sounds like she’s getting her memory back.”

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“So what’s this going to do really?” asked Fitz.

“Exactly what we said it was going to do,” said Jack, sitting down opposite him. “We’re just not sure that it’s safe, that’s all.”

“Right. We’re online, and ready to go,” said Owen, rubbing his hands together. “Ready when you are,” he said to Fitz.

Fitz nodded. “Do it.”

Owen typed a few commands into the laptop, powered up the headset and quickly stood back.

“How’s that feel?” Ianto asked. Fitz was screwing his eyes shut.

“I don’t –” Fitz blinked hard as though trying hold back tears or get rid of a piece of grit. “It’s – I don’t think it’s strong enough.”

Owen stood poised over the laptop’s keyboard. “What are you feeling?” he asked. Ianto watched Fitz closely.

“It’s like – like there’s something pushing against the back of my eyes,” he said.

Owen looked to Jack, who frowned.

“Adjust the settings,” he said.

Owen began typing. Ianto stepped closer to Fitz. “Jack –”

Fitz was slumping forwards, eyes fluttering.

“Ianto, get back,” said Jack, keeping his voice even. “Owen, employ the paralysis - nerve trapping... thing.”

Owen, typing a new series of commands, shot Jack a withering look. “Do you mean the Nerve Grip?”

Ianto rolled his eyes. “Why do we let you name anything?”

“Pardon me, little Miss Muffet, I didn’t realise you had an appropriate rhyme.”

“Boys,” said Jack.

Fitz’s eyes were now red, blinking at his immobile body. “What the hell is this?”

Jack stood up. “Sharaan. You remember me?”

Far from being the forceful, violent character they had encountered earlier, the Naequin seemed more subdued, flinching back from making eye contact with any of them.

“What did you bastards do?” he muttered, one of his hands trembling.

Owen turned to Jack. “What now?”

Jack pondered this for a moment. “Don’t make any adjustments. If he’s here we may as well get some questions answered.” Turning to Ianto, Jack jerked his head towards the door. “Stand by the door. I don’t want Toshiko seeing this.”

Ianto grimaced, but moved to man the door.

Jack towered in front of Sharaan. “I ask again, do you remember who I am?”

“You’re that bastard from Torchwood.”

Jack's mouth twitched. "That's right. You wanna answer some more questions for me?"

Sharaan spat at him.

Jack ignored it. "Excellent. Now, our starter for ten; what are you and your lovely partner doing here?"

"Being held hostage," Sharaan muttered. Jack jerked his head at Owen who adjusted the settings. Sharaan's eyes screwed shut and he growled. "Alright, fine – fine! We're here because it's almost finished."

"What's almost finished?"

"Turn it off!" Sharaan hissed, his voice stretched thin.

"When you answer the question," said Jack. "What's almost finished?"

"Our plans."

"What plans?"

"We're leaving! We've found a way out!"

Jack stopped. "What?"

"Stop the machine!" Sharaan whined.

"No, what do you mean, you've found a way out?" Jack demanded.

"Stop it!" the alien howled.

"Owen, adjust the machine!"

Sharaan's head jerked violently, teeth chattering. "We're leaving the planet!" His voice was choked tight and he was speaking as if against his will. "They found a way – way to transport us off."

Jack, Owen and Ianto all exchanged looks. "What about the hosts?" asked Owen quietly.

Jack turned back to Sharaan, looking merciless. "Good question – what do you plan to do about the hosts? Are you leaving them behind?"

"Can't. Need them." Sharaan now looked on the point of passing out.

"What are your – hey, look at me! What are your numbers?" Jack barked.

Sharaan's eyelids fluttered uselessly. Jack shook his head in frustration.

"Power it down," he said to Owen.

In the chair Sharaan went limp, head lolling back. Owen hurried to him and checked his vitals. "He's alright," he said.

"Thank God," Ianto muttered.

In the chair Fitz was starting to come around. "Bloody hell!" he hissed, one hand going to his head. "What happened?"

"We didn't manage to repress him," said Owen, unhooking Fitz from the various monitors and machines. "We did, however, manage to find out a few things from him."

"Torture on the sly, huh?" said Fitz, trying to stand and collapsing back into his chair. "Nice."

Ianto blinked in surprise and Owen and Jack exchanged glances.

"What makes you think it was torture?" asked Owen casually.

Fitz gave a humourless laugh. "That's the way it's done, isn't it? Getting answers." His eyes unfocused for a moment. "I think I got tortured once. Maybe. Should you be on the ceiling?" he asked Owen with vague concern, passing out before Owen could answer.

"He's fine," Owen assured them. "Just tired. Let him rest for a bit, he'll be... fine." He sighed.

"Where the hell did they get him from?" asked Ianto. "I did a deep background check – he's not SAS or anything like that."

"Yeah, no shit, Sherlock," said Owen.

Jack shrugged. "He's probably a bit confused, after the probe. His memories, Sharaan's memories – they're probably interchangeable at the moment." He gestured to Ianto. "Better get Tosh back in here, show her we aren't torturing her boyfriend."

"Nope. Already finished that," Ianto muttered, reaching for the door.

As if on cue the door creaked open and Gwen peered around. "Can I bring her back in? She's climbing the walls in there."

Before anyone could give her an answer Tosh nudged past her, gasping at the sight of Fitz. "What happened?" she asked, running to him.

"He's fine, he's fine," said Owen, holding up his hands. "Things just didn't quite go to plan, that's all." Over her head he threw Jack a "What now?" look, quickly shifting to a more innocuous expression when Toshiko looked up.

"You couldn't suppress the parasite?" she asked.

Ianto shook his head. "Not this time, no."

“Well then try it on me.” Toshiko sat herself in the chair and began to strap herself in. “You’ve been able to refine it, right?”

“No one’s trying anything,” said Owen firmly, pulling her out of the chair. “Not tonight, anyway. Let’s just... take some time to re-calibrate the instruments and such.”

Toshiko narrowed her eyes. Gwen quickly chipped in, “We’ve all had a long day. We might be better coming back to this after a good night’s sleep. Particularly Fitz.”

Toshiko looked from Fitz, still slumped on the sofa, to Jack. He considered this and nodded. “Agreed. We could all do with some rest.”

Toshiko frowned, but went over to help Fitz extricate himself from the sofa.

Jack motioned Gwen closer, leading her to where Owen and Ianto were packing up the equipment. “Take turns keeping watch,” he muttered, just loud enough so they could all hear. “If either of them look like escaping, shoot to wound.”

“And if they threaten anyone else?” asked Owen.

Jack’s face was grim. “Don’t bother trying to talk them around. There won’t be time. Shoot to kill.”

Before any of them could say anything, Jack turned and said to Tosh in a loud, clear voice, “Just dump him on the bed. You go on through to your room with Gwen.”

Toshiko nodded, distracted, and resumed helping a semi-conscious Fitz down onto the bed. When Jack turned back the rest of the team were all giving him disgusted looks, but Jack held firm.

“The situation may have changed, but we still have a duty to carry out,” he said in an undertone.

Gwen smiled encouragingly to Toshiko, holding out an arm. As soon as Toshiko was around the door, her smile soured and she glared at Jack.

“She’s our *friend*,” she mouthed.

Jack just stared back, waiting until Gwen left before looking away.

~\*~\*~\*~

Around two in the morning Ianto made himself a cup of tea to keep himself awake. Ever since they had discovered that Toshiko was still alive he’d felt horribly afraid for her. Even if she managed to survive whatever Raeth and the Naequin had planned, there were her old colleagues; Jack had been very adamant that they would do whatever they had to in order to stop the Naequin...

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“What do we do now?” asked Gwen. “Are we taking over the investigation from here?”

*“That’s what I’ve been wondering,” said Swanson, approaching them. “Do I still have an investigation, or are you covering it up?” she asked Jack, folding her arms.*

*“We’re taking over from here,” said Jack. “Toshiko Sato’s an agent of Torchwood and therefore is our responsibility.”*

*“And if she’s guilty?” asked Swanson.*

*“Then she’ll be dealt with,” said Jack, not batting an eyelid. “By whatever means necessary.”*

*Swanson stared at Jack, eyes widening. She hurriedly walked them through the evidence collected so far, passed along names of the people they’d need to step on to get hold of the evidence and walked away looking unnerved. As did the rest of the team.*

*““By any means necessary?”” Owen repeated, eyes narrowing.*

*Jack’s face was hard. “We’re not having a repeat of what happened with Suzie. If she has snapped, this could just be the beginning.”*

*“Jack, it’s Tosh,” said Gwen. “You don’t seriously think she’s capable of this, do you?”*

*“We’re all capable of this, given the right reason,” said Jack.*

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While that conviction had been when they thought Toshiko to be acting of her own free will, Ianto doubted that he would back down from that promise even if she was coerced. If things came to a head Jack would shoot her to kill Raeth, just as he would shoot Fitz to kill Sharaan.

But that wasn’t going to happen; because now that they were here they were going to prevent Raeth from taking her over.

He poured out his tea, rattling the sugar packets before tearing them open and emptying them, reflecting that he really didn’t like staying in hotels.

“Ianto?”

Ianto turned around. Toshiko was stood there in her pyjamas looking apprehensive.

“What’s wrong? Is it Raeth?”

She shook her head, crossing the room to join him. “No, nothing like that. I just – I was thinking earlier. Trying to remember things. From before. About Torchwood –”

It was Ianto’s turn to shake his head. “Look, whatever the others have said there’s no point in forcing yourself to remember, that’s not why we’re here –”

She held up a hand. "Let me finish. I was thinking about my old work. Well, what I thought was my old work, anyway. I couldn't remember much about the people there, except for that man I was telling you all about earlier. John."

She laid the hand on his chest and Ianto felt his breath catch. *Don't get your hopes up.* She looked up at him with sad dark eyes. "That was you, wasn't it? Your Dad – he just disappeared one night and you couldn't carry on the business, couldn't keep to a job anywhere else." She gripped his arms. "That was *you*. You're John." Her face fell suddenly. "And you told me all that in confidence, and I've just – God, I'm so sorry!" She pulled him closer into a tight hug. Ianto hugged back, resting his head on top of hers in sweet relief. She'd remembered. If nothing else, she remembered him.

"It's alright," he told her, rubbing her shoulder.

"No, it's not," she said, and there was something odd about the way she said it, too forceful. "I really am sorry."

Ianto pulled back to look her, to try and understand what she was trying to tell him. Toshiko drew away from him too, a hand in the middle of his chest shoving him backward hard, while the other raised his gun to point at his head. Her eyes flashed red.

Ianto raised his hands in a placating gesture, then lunged forward to make a grab for the gun. Only to be grabbed from behind by Fitz/Sharaan, pinning his arms to his sides and raising him just slightly off the ground. He started to struggle, coming to a dead stop as Toshiko stepped forward, flicking the safety off. Somewhere behind her another two guns cocked.

Raeth rolled her eyes. "Gwen, Owen, you're not going to shoot me. Not at the risk of killing her," she drawled. By the bed, Gwen and Owen exchanged looks, Gwen glancing across to Jack who was blocking the doorway.

"Jack, if you kill Toshiko and me, Sharaan will just break Ianto's neck," Raeth continued. "We'll both be down two men, but then that won't mean too much for our side – there are others who can take our place." She glanced at Jack over her shoulder. "I doubt somehow the same is true of you."

Jack glared, tightening the grip on his revolver. Sharaan's arm tightened around Ianto's middle, apparently heedless of Ianto's attempts at struggling, while his hand settled around Ianto's throat, clenching slowly. Jack sighed and raised his gun.

"Drop it," Raeth commanded.

Jack opened his hand and let the revolver fall to the ground.

"Kick it over here." Raeth gestured to Gwen and Owen. "You two as well."

They complied, Raeth sliding each of the guns further out of reach. "Right. You're all going to move over to that wall there," she gestured to the wall furthest from the door. "And out of our way. I don't think I need to elaborate on the way things are going to go if you don't."

They edged to stand against the far wall, though Jack was slow to do so. Raeth backed out of the room first, Sharaan holding Ianto up as a kind of human shield in case any of them made a lunge for their guns. As they reached the threshold Jack took a half-step forward.

“Whatever you’re planning, it’s not going to work. Whatever you’re digging for has probably already been uncovered and taken. You might as well just cut your losses and leave.”

Raeth pretended to consider. “Sounds like an idea. Sharaan.”

Sharaan released Ianto, only to grab him by the shoulders, lift him clean off his feet and hurl him at the window. Jack was halfway across the room by the time the glass had shattered.

Part of Ianto was sure he probably shouldn’t have been screaming – it was going to attract far too much attention, never mind the fact that he was falling from the window of a famous hotel, on the edge of the centre of a big city. On the other hand, Ianto was only human and he didn’t really want to die.

Fortunately, or unfortunately because when you’re in mid-air these things can go either way, he had a guardian angel in a grey military coat heading his way. It had apparently taken Jack all of two seconds to swan dive out of the window after him. This was a lot more aerodynamic than Ianto’s flailing limbs approach and he had soon caught up enough to grab onto Ianto and swing him upwards and out of harm’s way, just before they hit the ground. Jack’s neck snapped instantly, which saw his head bounce up and into Ianto’s, rendering him unconscious.

A moment later, while a few passers by gathered to peer over the wall to see if what they thought they’d seen was true, Jack’s neck cracked back into place, and he sat up gasping for air. After checking for any injuries he set Ianto to one side and sighed.

“If this doesn’t make the papers tomorrow it’s going to be a miracle.”

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Once Gwen and Owen had established that Jack was taking care of Ianto they went after Raeth and Sharaan, though by the time they’d reached the stairs they had clearly lost them.

“We should check each of the rooms as well,” said Gwen. They were now checking all the corridors working their way down to the ground floor.

“Take too long,” said Owen. “Even on the off chance they were still in the building we wouldn’t stand a chance of finding them.”

Their comms crackled into life. “Gwen? Owen?”

“Jack, are you two alright?”

“Broke my neck in a couple of places but I’m good now. Ianto’s definitely going to need looking over, though.”

"I'll be down in a moment," said Owen. "We're just clearing the corridors."

"Waste of time, they're already long gone. Owen, meet us in reception, Gwen, go see if you can't sweet talk security into showing you the CCTV."

Owen came down to reception to find Ianto dumped in one of the large plush chairs with Jack and the two members of hotel staff on duty hovering around him. Owen shoved past them. "Out the way. Excuse me, I'm a doctor. Can you give me some room to work, here, please? It's not going to do him any good to have a load of people gawping at him."

Ianto was very pale and currently in the middle of blaming himself.

"— I should have at least considered the possibility that it was a trick."

"You said her eyes weren't red," Jack pointed out. "What reason would you have had to suspect that it was a trick?"

Owen paused. "Her eyes weren't red? But Raeth was still in control?"

"Definitely," said Ianto. He was clutching his side and his breathing was shallow. "She was too strong. They both were."

Owen exchanged a glance with Jack. "You think that they're able to take full mental control without any physical manifestations of it?"

"I think Ianto needs to go hospital," said Jack. He patted Owen on the shoulder. "Check him out, I'll go help Gwen."

Owen nodded and got to work. Jack meanwhile went to the receptionist hovering nearby and asked to be shown to the security office. Gwen was already spooling through the tapes with the security guards.

"Found 'em yet?" asked Jack.

Gwen shook her head, eyes not leaving the screens. "Not yet."

"Should we be calling the police about these two?" asked one of the guards nervously. "She said they threw someone out of one of the top floor windows. Don't like to think of them wandering around the city centre."

"No one does," said Jack, taking a moment to glare at Gwen and add the security guard's names to the retcon list. "We'll inform them of the situation in case they apprehend them, but I'd rather they weren't involved. If they do catch up to them they'll just keep on calling for backup and the whole thing will turn into a circus. Police have better and more effective ways of using their time on a Friday night." Jack patted Gwen on the shoulder. "You make the call, I'll see what I can find here."

Gwen nodded with some reluctance and borrowed the phone whilst Jack took up her in front of the screens.

“I was thinking,” one of the guards began. “She’s had us looking at the exits and the stairwells and what have you.”

“Yeah, and?”

“Well, I used to work at St John’s. We had all kinds of trouble with the kids there, whenever you had to chase one of them down the others would try and slow you up, and you’d have them doubling back and –”

“I’m sorry, could you please just cut to the chase?”

“Well, I was wondering – we’ve not looked at the footage from your floor yet. The camera should show outside your door.”

Jack sat back. “Show me.”

The first security guard pointed as one of the previously blank screens flickered into life. After some fast forwarding and then some frantic rewinding they managed to find the time window they were looking for.

“Here’s them coming out now,” said the second security guard.

Sharaan and Raeth dashed out into the corridor, Raeth reaching into her pyjama pocket and removing some kind of device which she then suckered onto the nearest door.

“What the bloody hell’s that?”

Jack covered his face with a hand and murmured, “Lock picker.”

After a moment the door swung open and Sharaan pushed Raeth into the room, prising the lock pick off the door before following her. Moments later Gwen and Owen stumbled out, guns at the ready. They marched up and down the corridor and then went down the stairs.

By now Gwen had joined them. “I knew we should have checked the rooms,” she said grimly.

Onscreen the door opened a crack and then all the way as Sharaan and Raeth exited, Raeth covered in more blood.

Gwen put her head in hands and Jack groaned. “Oh for God’s sake, not again.”

The first security guard stood, shoving past Gwen to get to the phone. “I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to call the police now.”

“And then I’ll call them and tell them that Torchwood is dealing with it,” said Jack, attention not leaving the footage. Sharaan and Raeth exchanged a few words and then made back for the room, exiting a few moments later with a few bulging bags.

Gwen stared. “Jack. Jack, are those our —”

Jack nodded numbly. “Yeah.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Yeah, I think that about sums it up.”

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“I’m sorry, sir, but I’m afraid we can’t release the bodies to you for investigation.”

The detective exiting the hotel room turned crime scene looked Gwen up and down with raised eyebrows. “And who are you, exactly?”

Gwen sighed and pulled her ID badge. The detective took it, looked it over. “Torchwood, eh? Heard of you lot.” He handed it back to her. “You might be able to do what you want in Cardiff, but you’ve not got any authority up here. Now shift yourself.”

Gwen pursed her lips. “With all due respect, sir —”

“Detective... Matthews, isn’t it?” Jack had materialised behind her. “Captain Jack Harkness, I’m in charge here,” Detective Matthews started to object, but Jack pressed on. “If you’d be so good as to check with your superiors I think you’ll find we’ve as much right to be here as you – more in fact as the murderer in question is part of our current investigation.”

The detective glared at him. Jack stared back, using his extra four inches in height to full advantage. Matthews looked away, glancing pointedly at the body bags being wheeled past them. “Looks like you’ve done a bang-up job so far.” He turned on his heel and stalked off down the corridor, pulling his mobile out of his pocket.

Jack rubbed at his eyes and sighed.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Gwen asked him, folding her arms. “Publicly, we’ve got a double murder, all the signs of someone being thrown from the one of the topmost windows but apparently no body. And on top of that we’ve lost our only leads, we’ve none of the tech that we needed, and we’re two men down.”

Jack tried to smile. “It would seem that the chips are down,” he said, in a particularly bad Texan accent. Sobering he said, “I need you to try and contain this, if you can. If not, damage control.” He turned to leave and Gwen stared, her arms falling to her sides as she started after him.

“Wh – you’re not *leaving* me here?”

“You said it yourself; we’re short on manpower.”

“But –”

“You’re Torchwood, as soon as their superiors confirm that order they have to listen to you.”

“This is Liverpool, Jack! We have enough trouble in Cardiff, and they’re used to us coming in and –”

Jack stopped and spun around so suddenly Gwen almost ran into him. “Gwen, listen to me; we do not have time for this. Okay? God knows, if we were in Cardiff I wouldn’t even bother with clean up... I need you to contain as much of this as you can, as quickly as you can, then come and join me, alright?” Gwen hesitated and Jack gripped her shoulders, making her focus on him. “You can do this. I wouldn’t be leaving you here if I didn’t think so.”

Gwen would have pointed out that this last part was something of a lie, but decided to refrain from doing so. Jack was right; there wasn’t time.

She nodded, somewhat reluctantly, and Jack beamed at her. “Good girl. I’ll call you over the comms when we get something.” He turned again and made for the stairs before she could answer.

Gwen remained frozen in the corridor. She was alone. Completely alone.

“Oi! Torchwood!”

Startled, Gwen looked around and saw Detective Matthews looking at her expectantly.

“Seems you’re in charge of the crime scene, unless that friend of yours in the fancy coat is around. What do we do next?”

Gwen took a breath and squared her shoulders. No time for self-doubt. There was work to be done.

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“They certainly have some interesting toys,” Raeth remarked, rummaging through one of the bags they’d liberated from Torchwood’s rooms.

Sharaan frowned, pulling out a diadem and holding it up to his partner “And you’re telling me that they just pick this up off the ground?” he scoffed. “Some species have all the luck.”

Raeth smirked at him. “Not this time.”

Sharaan smiled back, stuffing the mind probe back into the holdall and sitting back on his haunches. “What now? Should we risk reporting in for further orders?”

“Not from Taranku. As long as they have the name of her host we must assume she’s been compromised.”

“Haethru’s closest,” Sharaan said.

Raeth nodded, handing him the other bag. "I'll try to contact her now. In the meantime see if you can find anything amongst this that could be useful. Every circuit counts."

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It was pandemonium in the A&E waiting room – one of the universal effects of a Friday night – and no amount of badge-waving, "Torchwood" name dropping or access codes would allow them to jump the queue. However, once Owen uttered the magic words "broken ribs" and "possible internal bleeding" Ianto found himself the next in line for a cubicle. It did little to ease his guilt.

"We shouldn't be able to jump the queue like this," Ianto muttered into his coat. His vision had blurred a couple of times during the walk from the waiting room to the cubicle.

"Oh shut up. C'mon, we need to get your story straight. Can't tell them you were thrown out a window."

Ianto shrugged his good shoulder. "I could just say I tripped and fell on the stairs, or walked into a particularly nasty door."

Owen scoffed. "Oh, thanks very much. You trying to get me arrested? You know what that means in A&E, especially when you've got a forceful, strong looking man hanging around –"

Ianto couldn't help the snort of laughter, though he regretted it almost immediately. "First of all, I think it's obvious I'd win in a fight –"

"What? If you cast your obviously concussed mind back to the last time we were on the floor, I came out on top."

Ianto pressed his hands firmly against his side. "Seriously, don't. Hurts to laugh." He let out a long sigh. "You should be getting back to Jack and Gwen. Help them track Tosh down."

And at that moment; "Owen? Are you there?"

Casting Ianto a suspicious look Owen activated his comm. "Here. What's up?"

"Things have taken a turn for the worse back here. How's Ianto?"

Ianto activated his own comm. "I'll live."

"We've got him into a cubicle at least," Owen added. "It'll probably be another half hour or so before a doctor sees him, though. What's happened?"

"Sharaan and Raeth doubled back after you and Gwen left. They've stolen most of our equipment."

Owen kicked one of the legs of the hospital bed and Ianto growled, letting his head fall back. "Any more good news?" asked Owen through gritted teeth.

"I've had to leave Gwen at the hotel. While they were getting away Raeth killed two hotel guests."

Owen and Ianto exchanged a look.

“Where am I meeting you?” Owen asked Jack.

“Just get to the SUV,” Jack told him.

Owen clapped Ianto on the shoulder and dived out into the corridor, weaving in and out of the staff and patients.

“I’ll re-join you all as soon I can,” Ianto promised. “And Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

There was a buzz of static in his ear as Jack sighed. “Not your fault. Trust me on this one.”

Ianto reached up to deactivate his comm and settled down. Nothing to do now but wait.

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Owen climbed into the driver’s seat and shut the door. “Okay, where am I going?”

“Back seat.”

Owen slapped the steering wheel. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“I need contacts from Toshiko and Fitz’s mobiles – I need to know the most called numbers, any addresses you can give me in connection to them.”

Owen climbed into the back and fired up the computers. “Okay. Ianto took their numbers, and the number of their home phone, so call history should be easy. Can’t you just try doing a scan for alien tech or something with your wrist... thing,” he asked.

“Already tried.” Jack sounded frustrated. “The screen’s lit up like a damned Christmas tree.”

Owen drummed his fingers on the keyboard. “We were right about them gathering here, then?”

“I’m trying to attune it to certain species and time period so I can pinpoint them, but it’s taking too much time. You got any names for me, yet?”

“Give me a chance!” Owen muttered, typing furiously. “Give me alien intestines any day... Ah! Got something!”

“Yeah?”

“Most dialled number by the flat and Tosh is... Joanna Cartland.” Owen frowned. “They never said anything about a Joanna.”

“Probably don’t know her. Co-ordinates?”

“Patching them through now.” Owen sat back, frowning. “Y’know that sounds a lot less stupid when Tosh and Ianto say it.”

“More conviction next time.” There was an insistent beep at Jack’s end. “Got them!”

Owen opened the back door and stepped out. “Am I meeting you there?”

“I’ll race you,” said Jack, deactivating his comm.

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Sharaan looked up. “What did she say?” he asked. Raeth looked unhappy.

She sighed. “Haethru had already received two communications which implied that Taranku should be considered compromised.”

Sharaan swore. “What now?”

“Until we receive more information regarding Taranku’s current status, Haethru has placed me in charge,” said Raeth, face blank.

Sharaan grinned. “But that’s wonderful!”

“No it’s not,” said Raeth. “It means the success of this arm of the migration rests entirely with us.”

Sharaan raised an eyebrow. “Oh, it’s us is it?”

“Wherever I go, you go, remember?” said Raeth, favouring him with a genuine, if tired smile. She gestured to the bags of tech. “Have you come up with anything?”

“No, but I am seriously starting to regret writing our own vows,” said Sharaan. He flashed her a quick smile. “Just kidding. This bag’s for you.” He pushed the smaller bag towards her. “Has a couple of things that might be useless, but I don’t know, you might be able to find something to do with them.”

“And what about this stuff?” asked Raeth, nudging the other bag with her foot. “Junk?”

“Nothing for the moment,” Sharaan said with a shrug. “Some of it might be useful when we get to the other side.”

Raeth wrinkled her nose. “Get it to Lineiden. He can look after it until we’re ready.”

“There are some weapons in here too. What do you want me to do with them?”

Raeth considered it for a moment. "Pass them on to Lineiden," she said finally. "Haethru tells me UNIT are not a problem, and I can't see Torchwood giving us too much trouble. Not in their current condition."

Sharaan straightened, slinging the "useless" bag over his shoulder. "You are armed, right?"

Raeth rolled her eyes. "In the highly unlikely event that I'm going to need it, yes."

Sharaan nodded. "Good. Where do we rendezvous?"

"The transporter," said Raeth. "Send anyone you meet there too, we need every mind and pair of hands we can get."

Sharaan's eyes widened. "We're activating?" he murmured.

"As soon as possible," said Raeth "While I have assured Haethru that Torchwood does not present a viable threat, she is concerned about the attention that we have attracted. While none of our agents within UNIT have been discovered, a few of our civilians have had a few run ins with them. She wants us to bring our leg of the migration forward."

Sharaan breathed out. "Can we do it?" he asked in an excited whisper.

Raeth's smile was nervous, but hopeful. "I think we can."

Sharaan laughed, hoisting the bag up onto his shoulder. "No more Earth!"

Raeth beamed and shook her head. Sharaan laughed again and walked off into the night. Raeth smiled after him and then picked up her own, smaller bag, glancing about her. "No more Earth."

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It took a little while for Jack and Owen to work out exactly how to get to Joanna's flat – there being several entry points from the car park, all leading different sections of the building.

"So much for the element of surprise," muttered Owen. "I'm surprised the whole building doesn't know we're here. Any more stairs?"

"Two more flights."

Owen groaned loudly. "Why couldn't we have taken the lift up? Seriously, give me a reason."

"What's the matter, Owen? Out of shape?"

"I'm dead, you sick bastard, I'm not in *any* shape!"

Jack raised a hand, flattening himself against the wall of the stairwell. Owen followed suit. Someone was passing the door, an imposing silhouette against the frosted glass window. It passed out of sight

and Jack ducked down, crawling up the last four steps and putting an ear to the door. He straightened up, drew out his gun and beckoned Owen.

They slipped through the door and Jack checked each end before holstering his gun.

“What are we going to do exactly, if some innocent bystander, who genuinely has no idea what’s going on, happens along and sees you with your revolver out?”

Jack smirked and Owen rolled his eyes.

“Then I act drunk, lean on you a lot, make some inappropriate remarks, and we’re coming home from a fancy dress party.” Jack paused, looking Owen up and down. “You didn’t dress up.”

“No kidding.”

They continued along the corridor – too well lit to be in keeping with the atmosphere – until they reached number twenty-six. Jack took one side and Owen, pulling out his gun, took the other. Jack reached into his coat, rummaging in one of the inner pockets, and produced a small strange object which looked something like a handleless spinning top. He then suckered it onto the door by the door handle, turning the two small rings around the point.

Owen frowned. “What’s that thing?” he whispered.

Jack ignored him until the rings had been set to his satisfaction. “It’s going to weaken the wood – should only take one kick to get the door down.”

“One kick?” Owen repeated. “Where the hell’s the lock pick thing Suzie fished out of the bay?”

“In with the equipment they stole, and how they were able to murder the two hotel guests,” Jack whispered shortly.

Owen stared. “They have the lock pick? But that was in the bag with – Jesus Christ the lock pick, the Dalek gun, the mind probes... you mind telling me what equipment we *do* have?”

Jack gestured to the backpack he’d pulled out of the back of the SUV. “Everything we’re going to need is in here.”

Owen stared at it, then at Jack, then let his head fall back against the wall. “Oh, thank God for that. For a minute there I actually thought we were in *trouble*.”

“Us? Never.” Jack grinned and pulled the artefact off the door. The wood seemed to have caved inward a little. Jack nodded toward the door. “Owen, if you’d care to do the honours.”

Owen shook his head, but got in position. Jack knew he wasn’t about to say no to knocking a door down.

“So much for the subtle approach,” Owen muttered, then gave the door an almighty kick. The wood creaked in warning, but the door didn’t budge.

Jack rolled his eyes and shoved Owen out of the way, using a weaker, but well-placed kick. The door swung open neatly and Jack was inside, gun raised. Owen followed, shutting the door behind them and leaning against it to keep it shut.

Jack was peering into the first room when the hall lights flickered on, announcing the presence of a skinny-looking woman in her thirties, armed with a baseball bat.

She stared wide-eyed at the two of them. “Wh - who the hell are you? What do you want?”

Jack tossed the rucksack back to Owen and approached her slowly, hands raised placatingly.

Joanna raised the bat. “Don’t come any nearer!”

Jack ignored her. “We just want to have a few words with your partner, okay?”

Joanna stared at him. “What – I don’t have a partner.”

“How about friends?” asked Jack, continuing to advance as Joanna started to back away. “You have any friends by the name of Sharaan? Raeth?”

Joanna stopped dead, her face hardening and her eyes flickering red. Across the room Owen began to rummage in his bag for the sedatives.

“They seem to be friends with you. Never mentioned your name, though.” Jack paused a few steps from her. “Who are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

For a moment Owen was sure she had taken Jack’s head off. As far as he knew that had never come up, but surely even Jack couldn’t get back up from that. Then he realised that it was just a broken neck which left his head at a particularly unnatural angle. Owen winced. Some days it really didn’t pay to be Jack. He then noticed Joanna, eyes now blazing red, stepping over his deader than usual boss, advancing with bat raised. Owen tossed the bag to one side, regretting it instantly, and tore the plastic off the syringe. He only had the one shot at this now. Had to make it count.

She swung the bat. Owen ducked. There was suddenly a large dent in the wall and a syringe sticking out of Joanna’s right arm. Owen double-checked he had a vein and pushed it in, quickly stepping back and out of harm’s way when she started to struggle. However, Owen had used the strong stuff and in a matter of minutes Joanna and the bat went down with a heavy thud.

Jack returned while Owen was tying her up, with a great deal of gasping and bone cracking. He got to his feet quickly, having to lean against the wall for support. “Speaking with over a hundred years’ experience in having my neck broken; that was just *nasty*.” He took a couple of deep breaths. “You got her?”

“Sedated,” Owen confirmed. “If she weren’t a host she shouldn’t come around for another four hours.”

“But because she is she’ll come around...?”

Owen shrugged. “No idea.”

Jack sighed. “Great. Get the drip set up, I’ll find a chair.”

Owen started to unpack the medication, but paused. “What we are gonna do to her exactly? The “this room, as long as it takes” speech? ‘Cause no offence, all the wall-slammings you need to do for that –”

“Don’t have time for it,” said Jack shortly, returning from the kitchen, chair in hand. “No armrests – she’s going to be uncomfortable.”

“Well, then what are we doing?”

Jack picked up the backpack that Owen flung across the room and pulled out a headset.

“Not as fine-tuned as the Catellian, but it should have much the same effect.”

“And what are we going to do with it?” asked Owen warily. “Play “chicken”? I don’t know if you remember but we barely got anything out of Sharaan.”

“After a fashion – some of these babies can prove fatal to parasites.”

“So, we put it on her, and threaten to activate it if she doesn’t answer our questions? What happens if she’s not affected by it?”

Jack, already fitting the head gear, paused to consider. “Then we’re going to have to be creative. Improvise.” He smirked at Owen. “We’re good at that, right?”

Owen, slowly setting up the drip, didn’t say anything. Until Jack sat her in the chair and began re-arranging her ropes to hold her in place.

“You say this isn’t as precise as the one we were using on Fitz. More unpredictable. What are the chances of her getting hurt? Joanna, I mean?”

Jack kept working. “Best case scenario she’s got a little internal bleeding, will be getting a lot of migraines over the coming weeks.”

“And worst case?”

Jack paused. Owen covered his eyes.

“It’ll be quick,” Jack said, in a way that was probably meant to reassure. “She won’t feel anything.”

Owen lifted his head and stared at him. "We were going to do this to *Tosh*?"

Jack straightened slowly. "It would have been a last resort; if nothing else worked, if there was no other way, no matter who we did it to. And we'd have done so under tightly controlled conditions – we wouldn't be tying her to the kitchen chair."

Owen stared at Joanna's prone form. "And when we find her again? How are we going to get her back?"

"We'll find a way," Jack promised. Owen hated how thoughtless it sounded. "Let's get her hooked up and see what she can tell us."

Owen obeyed, inserting the IV tube into her hand – tied into the ropes about her legs rather than together behind her back so they could see them – while Jack set up the laptop from Owen's bag to record the interrogation.

"She has a fit it's going to be a nightmare to get her out of all of this," Owen muttered.

Jack refrained from passing comment. "You ready?"

Owen nodded.

"Okay. Let's do this."

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The doctor had been very insistent about the painkillers, though Ianto was equally (politely) insistent that he would be fine. Once deemed broken his ribs had been taped, he was advised against doing anything too strenuous (that was his work and sex life on hold for the next few weeks), checked briefly for concussion and a sprained neck and then asked if there was anyone they could call for him. Taking the hint Ianto left his cubicle to some poor sod who appeared to have at least broken his nose and left arm.

Once outside he activated his comm. "Gwen? You there?"

"Yeah, right here. Are you still in A&E?"

"Just got out now. What's going on your end?"

"Well, so far I've had an argument with every other senior officer in the vicinity, offended half of Merseyside CID and I punched a reporter."

"Very rock star."

"It's not my fault – he was trespassing on a crime scene and he would not leave. Anyway, as far as the police are concerned everything's about wrapped up here; confiscated the evidence and the

bodies – I say confiscated, I’ve had to ask them to hold on to them for now. God, you should have seen the lead detective’s face when I said that.”

“What about as far as the public’s concerned? Interviewing and retconning witnesses, cover story, that kind of thing?”

“Not even started yet. You know where Jack and Owen are? I’ve not been able to reach either of them.”

“No idea. Give me fifteen minutes, I’ll be right there with you.”

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Despite what others would say Owen was, by and large, a complete novice when it came to torture (unless it meant making someone forcibly sit through *Grease 1 and 2* – that would have anyone willingly screwing matchsticks in their own eyes in no time), but even he could tell their first round of questioning hadn’t gone well. They had warmed up by using the headset to give her a series of increasingly painful electric shocks. Their prisoner was made of stern stuff and beyond letting her name slip she didn’t drop a word.

“You’re not going to harm me,” she had told them calmly between electric shocks. “You might be willing to rough up the human I’m sitting in, but you won’t risk harming her.”

She was now slumped forward from the sedatives, straining a little against the ropes. Owen checked her vitals while Jack straddled another kitchen chair, thinking.

“Are we just going to keep doing this until she cracks?” asked Owen. “I thought we were going to try and force her like we did with Sharaan.”

Jack shook his head. “But that was based on her feeling pain, and she’s not reacting to it. She’s been trained for this. It doesn’t matter how much we turn it up – we’d just end up breaking her. She’d say anything then.”

Owen rubbed his eyes, unable to help feeling a little unnerved about the depth of Jack’s knowledge. “Do we have any other options?”

“Y’know, I think we just might.” Jack got to his feet and went straight for the phone, thumbing through the small address book that sat next to it. Selecting a page apparently at random he began to dial.

“What the hell are you doing?” Owen hissed.

Jack gave him a wide smile. “Improvising.” At the other end someone picked up and Jack put on a distressed voice, adding some heavy breathing for affect. “Hello? Hello? Can you hear me? This is Turanku... I need help – someone knows about us... They came here – I had to switch bodies, but

something's wrong... Please... As soon as possible." Jack put the phone down and turned to Owen. "What did you think? Too much?"

Owen rolled his eyes. "Who did you call?"

Jack showed him the address book. "Someone listed in here as "Lineiden". Sounds like some kind of medic."

"What makes you say that?"

Jack shrugged. "Just sounded like one. They tend to have a way of talking to the shocked or panicked that makes things worse."

Owen punched him on the arm. "And they're coming straight over?" He frowned. "That didn't take much."

Jack nodded slowly. "They were making for the door the minute I mentioned switching bodies. Either they know it's not her, or she's a very important lady."

They both paused to consider the small figure in the Snoopy pyjamas fastened into the chair.

"I'll get some more sedatives from the SUV," said Owen.

Upon Owen's return Jack had tied an extra set of ropes around Turanku, set up an extra chair for their visitor and laid out an array of kitchen knives on a tea towel. He had also turned off all of the lights and kept smacking Owen's hands away from the switches.

"Don't you think that they're going to get a bit suspicious when they get here and find all the lights off?" asked Owen, pointedly rubbing his hand.

Jack shook his head. "The files indicated that new hosts were prone to photosensitivity. It would be suspicious if the lights were on."

The lift at the end of the hall pinged, ominously loud. Gesturing for Owen to get back, Jack leant forward and peered through the peephole. As he watched, a nervous looking young man strode down the hallway toward their door. Jack gestured again at Owen to lie low. The young man stopped outside the door and knocked.

He shook his shoulders loose, took a deep breath, and pressed against the door. "Who's there?" he hissed, making his breath uneven. "Lineiden, is that you?"

"Of course it's me," a voice hissed back. "Let me in."

Checking again that Owen was out of sight, Jack opened the door and dragged the young man in, slamming the door and pinning him to it.

The man grabbed Jack's shoulders, narrowed eyes glowing red. "Taranku?"

Jack breathed a heavy gasp and smiled thinly. "Oh, thank God you're here." He released Lineiden and stepped back into the room. "I've had a breach."

"Is that why...?" Lineiden gestured to Jack's body.

Jack grimaced and nodded. "This bastard charged in here with a friend, took me by surprise." He smirked and gestured vaguely to Joanna's limp body. "Tried to torture me."

Lineiden laughed. "Idiots."

Jack scoffed companionably, waving discreetly to Owen, who lay down on the floor and played dead. "Ended up killing my host. This one got close enough for me to jump. Broke that one's neck." He pointed to Owen.

Lineiden looked. "Who were they?"

"I'm not sure. Still trying to penetrate this one's mind," he said, tapping the side of his head. "Some kind of group. Alien catchers."

Lineiden looked mildly concerned. "Any connection to UNIT?"

Jack shook his head. "Not that I've been able to find so far. Have you heard anything?"

Lineiden seated himself, taking Jack's arm and gesturing for him to do the same. Remembering he was meant to be playing the part of frail, exhausted escapee, Jack sank onto the sofa.

"I was speaking with Caoi just before you contacted me. Haethru's getting itchy feet. Apparently they've had a few close calls with UNIT on continent. And what with Raeth taking that bitch from Torchwood, I think she's getting paranoid about us attracting attention to ourselves."

"I'm starting to think she's got a point," said Jack, slumping. "These two – they could be from Torchwood."

Lineiden stood. "Should I call it in, or –"

Jack had been about to employ his (admittedly limited) acting skills to fake some kind of medical attack. Owen, however, had taken things into his own hands and dived forward and tackled Lineiden to the ground.

Jack quickly jumped into the fray and grabbed Lineiden in a headlock, prising him off Owen and squeezing. Within seconds Lineiden had gone limp.

"What the hell was that?" he hissed at Owen.

"Improvising," said Owen, wiping his mouth.

“We could have found out more from him without doing anything!” Jack snapped.

“And how long would that have gone on before he twigged?” Owen snapped back.

“I don’t know, but that’s the time you tackle him!”

“Listen – he’s just a grunt, right? Hook him up. Ask him the questions, he’ll crack. Especially if we threaten to do something to her.” He jerked his head in Joanna’s direction.

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Getting into this, aren’t you?” he said.

“I did say “threaten”.” Owen stressed, giving Jack a filthy look. He jumped to his feet and dashed through to the kitchen, returning with another chair.

Jack heaved Lineiden up and sat him down, pinning his arms behind the chair back while Owen got the rope and tied them in place.

Owen stood, taking a moment to admire his handiwork, and then turned back to Joanna. “What if – if I kept her dosed, put her in the other room, you could keep pretending to be her. Say she needs to question him about something.”

For a moment, Jack didn’t answer, crouched in front of Lineiden, staring into his slack face. He smiled and glanced up at Owen. “Sounds like an idea.”

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When Ianto arrived back at the hotel, the police presence had lessened considerably. Gwen was in the lobby talking with two trench coated detectives. Spotting Ianto she wrapped up with them and hurried over.

“Hey. How are you feeling?”

“Curiously like I’ve been thrown out of a window,” said Ianto, breathing shallowly to avoid the pain in his ribs. “But if I can survive that taxi ride I’ll cope until the painkillers kick in. How are things looking here?”

Gwen sighed. “I’ve managed to clear most of uniforms out – it’s Friday night; they’ve got better things to do than stand around getting cold and moving civilians on.”

“What about the two Sam Spade fans?” asked Ianto jerking his head in the detectives’ direction.

“Oh, well of course they’re not going anywhere,” Gwen muttered. “They’ve had a double murder happen on their turf and we’re trying to sweep it under the carpet. The only reason that they’re co-operating as much as they are is because we know who the killer is and we’re in the process of chasing them down.”

Ianto bit his lip. “Any press sniffing around yet?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been so busy trying to keep this lot sweet I’ve not been looking out for them. I’ve only seen the one so far, and that’s because he got up in my face when I told him to get behind the cordons.”

“Right. You keep keeping them sweet, I’ll sort out the journalists.”

Gwen smirked. “Rather you than me.”

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“What’s going on? What have you done?” Lineiden demanded.

Jack ignored him in favour of fiddling with the electrodes. Owen was in the next room with Joanna, ensuring that she and Taranku remained unconscious for the duration.

Jack activated the electrodes and adjusted the settings so that the pain would build gradually. It would make Lineiden that bit easier to break.

“Taranku? Please, what’s going on –”

“Shut up!” Jack snapped. He crossed to the sofa, removed his coat and draped it over the back. He turned back to Lineiden and folded his arms, sure to look down his nose at him. “Do you know why I was attacked tonight, Lineiden?”

“I –”

“I was attacked because someone,” Jack cast his prisoner a significant and filthy look, “has been talking. This group, Torchwood, know that we’re here. They know what we’re doing. And it’s only going to be a matter of time before they know how to stop us.”

“What?” Lineiden burst into nervous, terrified laughter. “You don’t mean to say – you can’t think that I’m the one who told them?”

Jack remained silent, looking pointedly at Lineiden.

“I didn’t, I promise you. If anyone, it will have been Raeth – she was the one that wanted to infiltrate them!”

For a moment Jack fumbled his poker face. They had wanted to get in? The whole thing must have been a ruse. But why go to all that trouble?

Happily the Naequin was getting too caught up in defending himself to notice his interrogator’s lapse.

“I never wanted the plan to go ahead, you know I didn’t! It’s gone exactly like I said, they came looking for her. They were never going to believe that she’d been murdered based on one shoddily put together crime scene! I always said –”

“I don’t want to hear about Raeth!” Jack growled, planting an arm either side of Lineiden. He still presumed that Jack had the super strength Naequin possessing a human did. He just had to keep him scared. “I want to hear about you. What you’ve been doing to draw attention to yourself.”

“But I haven’t done anything! No one in the command has ever had reason to question me, not about the warehouse, about the Nankamae, nothing!” Tired by his rather long-winded outburst, or, if he were more intelligent, realising that impassioned speeches weren’t getting him anywhere he said, more reasonably, “Please. Just, please, untie me.”

Jack turned his back to him, taking the chance to glance into the kitchen. Joanna was still blissfully unaware of what was going on in her flat, while Owen was scrawling something down on paper. Realising he had Jack’s attention, he held it up briefly so Jack could see; a list of all the things Lineiden had mentioned.

Jack gave him the slightest of nods and he turned back to his prisoner, continuing to radiate displeasure and disgust.

“You make mention of these things so quickly,” he said, voice icy. “And you’re trying to tell me you aren’t careless? I could be a spy, someone just pretending to be me, did you ever think of that?”

“No, I – I mean that – it’s you,” said Lineiden uncertainly. “You’re our leader, you know all this –”

Jack grimaced inwardly and quickly switched topics before Lineiden could put too much thought into that and pair it with the realisation that Jack’s eyes hadn’t once been red.

“And what of the Nankamae? Can I at least trust you with them?”

The look Lineiden gave him almost made Jack step back, the intense mix of offence, anger and grief catching him off guard.

“I was one of the ones to find them!” he said, voice trembling “I was there when it was realised that we had found a way home! Do you think I don’t understand what’s at stake?”

Jack floundered for a moment, unsure of what to say next. He’d never tried that tack during any of his interrogations. He’d never really had any opportunity to.

He tilted his head. “Perhaps you’re telling the truth.”

Lineiden nodded. “I am. I promise you, I am.”

“Tell me then, where have you put them?”

Lineiden frowned, for the first time in pain or worry, but confusion. “You know where they are...”

“Tell me,” Jack pressed, using every ounce of menace he could muster, hoping it might distract Lineiden.

The Naequin continued to stare at him and Jack saw the realisation gleam dully in his eyes; this was not his commander and he had let some very significant things slip.

“Who are you?” he demanded, not a trace of fear in voice this time. “Who the hell are you and what have you done with her?”

Jack allows himself cruel smile. “Well, now. It seems the game is up. Who do you think I am?”

Lineiden’s eyes, now bright red, narrowed. “Torchwood,” he spat.

Jack’s smile widened. “Very good. Now, I wonder if you could elaborate on a few facts for me.”

“Go to hell!” Lineiden growled.

“Cute,” Jack said. “Hope you show your superiors more respect.”

Lineiden eyes widened, suddenly very afraid. About time. “Where is she? What have you done with her?”

“Well, seeing as you asked so nicely.” Jack nodded at Owen, who dragged Joanna – still out cold – through on her chair.

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing wrong with her,” said Jack. “Not yet anyway,” he added with probably a touch too much relish.

“You bastard!” Lineiden hissed.

“You’re too kind,” said Jack, sitting himself down. “Now, I think you mentioned something about “Nankamae” ...”

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“Gwen, are you reading me?”

About bloody time. Gwen had been pacing the lobby for nearly half an hour now. She wouldn’t have minded, but the two detectives were starting to make smart remarks.

“Go ahead, Owen.”

“If he’s with you, grab Ianto and go to Chinatown. There’s a warehouse by the arch. Don’t. Go. In. Me and Jack will meet you both there.”

“Hang on, why aren’t we going in, what’s in there?” asked Gwen.

“Naequin,” said Owen. “Loads of them. And whatever it is they think is going to take them home.”

“Are we storming it?”

“No!” Jack’s voice crackled through her ear. “That’s the last thing we need.” There was curious background noise – a scraping and someone mumbling.

“What’s going on there?” asked Gwen.

“Never you mind, just get yourselves down there and keep a low profile,” Jack snapped, before deactivating his comm.

Gwen sighed, irritated. “Ianto, are you there?”

“Here,” said Ianto, over the comm.

“How’s the clear up going?” she asked.

“Well, after receiving a significant sum of money to replace their windows, the hotel won’t be throwing us out and have boarded the windows up. And after being promised smaller sums to make up for personal inconvenience, the staff have all promised not to talk to any of the papers.”

Gwen smiled. “Excellent. What about our things?”

“All still there,” Ianto confirmed. “And I’ve obtained all the keys to the rooms, copies included.”

“Good. Get your gun, any other kit that might be useful for a scouting party, and meet me in the lobby. Jack and Owen have got something.”

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Uphill from the Chinese arch – one of the largest in the UK, Ianto informed Gwen – was a long building, which seemed to have been spilt into rooms for one of the local universities, and flats. At the bottom of the street by the traffic lights there were a couple of stone benches where Gwen and Ianto were now perched.

“Do you feel like we’re a bit conspicuous here?” asked Gwen, wrapping her arms around herself for warmth.

Ianto shook his head. “I don’t think there are going to be that many people here to notice us.” He frowned. “I feel a bit exposed though.”

Gwen nodded, glancing about them. “What’s taking them so long? You think something might have happened?”

Ianto pursed his lips. “They’re probably just caught up in traffic.” Gwen shot him a look. “What? It could happen.”

Gwen sighed, clasping her hands together in front of her and tapping her foot.

Ianto rolled his eyes. “Why don’t you take a walk up the hill? Go have a look at the cathedral? You’ll be no good on the stake out if you’re this restless.”

Gwen pouted, but got to her feet, and then quickly turned around, side stepping in front of Ianto.

“What are —” Ianto began. Gwen clamped a hand over his mouth, gesturing over her shoulder with the other one.

“It’s Tosh!” she hissed.

Ianto shot his feet, jerking the hand from his mouth and tucking it into his arm, walking them very determinedly up the street and away from the direction where she had been pointing. He glanced back over his shoulder and Gwen – appearances be damned – followed suit.

And there, passing under one of the yellow street lights, quite clearly making her way towards the warehouse, was Toshiko.

Beside Gwen Ianto cursed. “If they come here, now – if she sees them...”

Gwen squeezed his arm. They had come to a halt, hiding in the building’s long shadow.

“Looks like she’s got a bag,” Gwen whispered. As though Tosh – as though Raeth could somehow hear her, some thirty metres down the street and across a road, for God’s sake.

“Our tech, probably.” Ianto pulled out a small pair of binoculars out of his coat pocket and peered through them. He passed them to Gwen. “Have a look.”

Through the binoculars (which Ianto had thoughtfully put on night vision) Gwen could see Raeth and could just about make out her bag. It was significantly smaller than either of the two that Ianto had so carefully packed and Raeth and Sharaan had so cunningly disappeared with.

“Did you see the bag?” Gwen muttered to Ianto. “We had more stuff than that.”

Ianto grunted in agreement. “Question is, where’s the rest of it gone?”

Gwen lowered the binoculars. “I can’t see her anymore. I think she’s gone inside.”

“You pervs!”

Gwen and Ianto both jumped out of their skins and whipped around, only to see Owen looking at the binoculars, his face oddly torn between amusement and disapproval.

Jack was barely two steps behind him, bearing a similar expression. “Guys, I know compared with some we’re not as... ”professional” as we should be, but come on.” He set his hands on his hips, looking at the binoculars in Gwen’s hands and then up at each of them. “Inconspicuous. You know what that means, right? ‘Cause the answer isn’t being arrested for being a peeping tom —”

“We saw Tosh,” Gwen interrupted. “She was approaching the warehouse with a bag. We presume it contained some of our equipment.”

“Some?” Jack said.

"It wasn't anywhere near big enough to carry half of the stuff they took," said Gwen.

"And she was alone?"

"No sign of Fitz," said Ianto.

"What about you two, what did you find out?" asked Gwen.

"Apparently Tosh was purposefully recruited. Fitz too," said Owen.

"Why Fitz?" Ianto asked. "Tosh is understandable, she's an expert in alien technology, but Fitz – he's not even a real computer programmer, what use could he be?"

"According to those in the know he has, and I quote; "substantial extra-terrestrial knowledge"," said Jack.

"Fitz?" Gwen scrunched her nose. "Where have they got that from?"

Jack shrugged. "They didn't say. Though they apparently went to a lot of trouble to get him."

"Let's not think about it too much for the time being," said Gwen. "What else did you find out?"

"Our two favourite alien parasites are pretty high up in the chain of command," said Jack. "If anything were to happen to the head of operations –"

"Like say she got kidnapped and tortured for information," Owen said in low tone.

"– they both have the authority to lead the exodus."

"How are they going to do it, though?" Gwen looked around at the warehouse. "I suppose it's big enough for a space ship, but how would they get it in?"

"A ship would take too long," said Jack. "They're constructing a transmat."

"Transmat?" Gwen repeated.

"Like a teleporter," Ianto explained. "At Torchwood One Yvonne tried to replace the lifts with them."

Jack scoffed. "She would."

"One of our senior scientists was vaporised in the attempt," Ianto told Gwen. "We didn't bother with the idea so much after that."

"He probably got teleported to the other side of the universe," said Jack, tucking his hands into his coat pockets. "They're dangerous things to mess around with if you don't know what you're doing."

"And unfortunately, they do know what they're doing," Owen said. "They've unearthed loads of tech around here recently with all the construction work going on, including these crystals called... what were they called?"

“Nankamae,” Jack said.

“Yeah. They’re a common power source, like batteries, only more powerful. With those they’ve managed to build a transmat of their own.”

“Oh, what?” Gwen grimaced.

Jack nodded. “And with the stuff they’ve taken from us, and Toshiko to put it together –”

“They’re probably going to have it finished in no time at all,” Ianto finished.

“And with the head of operations... out of the way,” said Gwen, not looking at Jack and Owen. “They could start the migration as soon as they were finished.”

Jack gritted his teeth. “Not quite.”

Gwen arched her eyes. “What’s “not quite”?”

“This lot here aren’t the only ones,” said Owen. “They’re all over the world – some in Europe, Australia, China, North Africa, the Americas.”

Gwen was reeling. “That many? But then – all those people...”

Ianto’s fists flexed. “Why haven’t UNIT picked up on this?”

Jack held up a hand. “I’ve put a call through, forwarded them everything I know. From the sound of it they’ve had a few suspicions, just not been able to piece them together.”

“They probably didn’t have a colleague snatched,” Ianto muttered.

“Point being,” said Jack, talking over him. “That they won’t be able to make the move with receiving confirmation from their superiors. They’re going to try to co-ordinate the jump. They have to, or else the hosts aren’t going to survive long on the other side.”

“Since their home planet was destroyed they’ve had to find another with more suitable hosts,” said Owen. “And if a human were to be sent there before the necessary preparations to alter the atmosphere worked their science magic – human jam.”

“Oh God.” Gwen put a hand to her mouth. “You think we could talk to them? Ask them to send the human hosts back through once they’ve got wherever they’re going and have upgraded to more suitable hosts?” she asked Jack.

He sighed. “Unlikely. They’ve been nothing but hostile so far. And we don’t have enough fire or manpower to threaten them with.”

“Maybe they’d respond better to reason,” Gwen said. “We should at least give it a try, shouldn’t we?”

Jack nodded absently. "Yeah. Wouldn't get your hopes too high, though." He jerked his head toward the warehouse. "C'mon. Let's go scout."

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Sneaking in was much easier than expected. Security consisted of a surly man with a tyre iron slung over his shoulder, who appeared at the door once or twice to tell some hoodies loitering nearby to "fuck off".

Owen huffed. "Fits in a treat, doesn't he?"

"Shouldn't be too hard to get past," said Jack. "But that could alert them to our presence prematurely. What we really need is someone to go in undercover." He turned to Gwen. "You wanna take another stab at inconspicuous?"

"Why me?" Gwen hissed.

"Because I'm too memorable, Owen's a walking corpse and Ianto looks like one of the men in black."

"I don't hear you complaining usually," said Ianto mildly.

Owen rummaged in his bag and pulled out what looked like a cube that had been slashed in half. "Here, put that in your bag, show to him when you go in."

Gwen took it hesitantly. "What is it?"

Jack craned past Owen to take a look. "Alien GPS. Pretty much useless since we never put the trackers on Fitz and Tosh. That's not the point, though – it has circuit boards. They're gonna need lots of circuit boards."

Gwen nodded, tucking it into her shoulder bag.

"Just go, keep the guard distracted for a few moments, and then go in. Keep your head down, make sure Toshiko doesn't see you."

Gwen rolled her eyes. "I blagged my way into the Hub, didn't I?"

Owen snorted and Ianto tipped his head in consideration, pointedly silent.

"What? Gwen snapped.

Jack shrugged. "It was a slow night. It was funny."

Gwen scoffed in disgust and stalked off up the main street. As the others watched, she re-appeared walking up the side street, looking here and there about her as though she was lost.

As she approached the warehouse's side door, the man with the tyre iron appeared, looking her up and down suspiciously. However, after talking with him for a moment and showing him the tech he

nodded and opened the door, stepping back to let her pass. Gwen stopped talking to him for a few moments.

“Okay, boys,” said Jack. “Showtime.”

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“I’ve brought this.” said Gwen trying (and she suspected, failing miserably) to sound Northern. She held the GPS up for him to see. “I don’t know if it’s going to be much use, but there’s plenty of circuits.”

The man looked it over, grip shifting on the tyre iron and he jerked his head toward the door. “Take it through to Dimata,” he said, Scouse accent strong. “He’s wearing a teenage lad, ginger, so high.”

Gwen nodded, making to go in, then pausing as if she’d forgotten something. “I don’t suppose you know if Sharaan’s here, yet, do you?”

The man shook his head. “Not yet. Mind you, there aren’t many here at the moment. I think he’s gone to round them up.”

“Oh.” Gwen nodded, with an exaggerated expression of interest. “Do you know... how far along it is?” she asked, pausing while she was trying to think of how to phrase the question.

The man didn’t smile exactly, but there was a sudden brightness about his eyes. He jerked his head at the door again. “Go have a look.”

She smiled, hoping she didn’t look too nervous and walked in, trying not to jump when the door slammed behind her. She was in a small, narrow hallway. She leant back and squashed her ear against the door, trying to hear what was happening. All she could hear was a few grunts and a meaty thud that went straight through her. There was a short silence and Gwen stepped back just in time to avoid being smacked with the door by Jack.

“How is he?” she asked.

“Out cold,” said Jack. He pointed down the hallway. “You go on ahead. If we’re found out, just go with the flow, don’t give yourself away.”

Gwen nodded and continued down the corridor and in through the door to the main area. The space was crowded with crates and containers from the docks.

There was a folding table set up near the door being manned by a tall, lanky kid with tufty dark red hair. The table was covered in scraps of alien machinery, circuit boards, lengths of wire.

Toshiko would be in her element amongst all of this, Gwen thought with an absent smile. It then occurred to her that Tosh was in her element, and that was the entire problem.

The boy had his back to her, busy prying the casing off what looked like some kind of food mixer. She cleared her throat to get his attention, to no avail. Considering for a moment how she got through to Toshiko when the latter was in such depths of concentration, Gwen withdrew the GPS from her bag and dropped it onto the table with a loud thunk.

“Hey, hey, hey!” the kid (Dimata?) snapped, hurriedly setting the food mixer down to cradle Gwen’s GPS. “Don’t do that, you’re gonna break it!”

Gwen put on her best pout and shrugged. “Just a bit of tat I picked up. I thought you could use the circuit boards.”

The door behind them opened, admitting Owen and then Ianto who slunk past them and out of sight. Dimata was too busy checking the GPS over to even notice.

“Which won’t be any good if it’s broken!” he said as though she were mentally subnormal. He peered at it more closely. “This looks useful, where did you get it?”

“Ah...” Gwen hesitated. Spotting Jack sneaking in she quickly came up with, “On the motorway. On my way up here.”

“What, in a lay-by?” he asked, turning his head just in time to completely miss Jack pass him and give Gwen the thumbs up.

Gwen smiled. “Yeah, actually. Just stopped to have a break from driving, take a quick stroll – there it was.”

Dimata nodded in sympathy. “I hated having to drive. It was so uncomfortable. I’m amazed they’ve suffered them this long and not invented some kind of teleporter.”

Gwen pulled her face into a cruel smile and nodded. “Here’s hoping you can do better.”

“Hope’s for those who depend on luck,” said Dimata smugly. “Rest assured, we are going to be off this sad little mudheap in a matter of days.”

Gwen laughed weakly. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Doubt it. Too many cooks or whatever the saying is,” said Dimata, starting to take the GPS apart. “Most of the ones that are here so far are just getting some rest, having something to eat – getting their hosts ready for the journey.”

Gwen nodded, starting to feel sick. “How far are things from being finished, by the way?” she asked. “If there’s time, I was thinking... some of us could go out, make the most of our last night here.”

Dimata laughed loudly. “Good one.” Unfortunately he looked up before Gwen could school her expression. “Oh. You were being serious.” He sounded genuinely surprised. “And what exactly would you send the your last day doing?”

Gwen shrugged. "Screwing?"

There was a small noise from behind the crates, which to Gwen's ears sounded suspiciously like a muffled snigger.

Dimata pulled a face. "You actually liked doing that? I found it rather tedious."

"Well. Might just go – get some food. Rest up, all that," said Gwen.

"Sure," said Dimata vacantly, engrossed by the mess of wiring he'd just exposed. "Good work bringing this in."

Gwen nodded again and turned away quickly. Once out of Dimata's sight (should he choose to actually take in his surroundings) Gwen ducked behind the row of containers. The boys were waiting for her. "What now?"

"Well, if you're still up for the screwing..." said Owen hopefully. Ianto snickered.

"Oh, shut up. Jack, what are we up to?"

Jack considered. "Go hang around with the other hosts, see what you can pick up. Owen, go with her. Make excuses for her if anyone starts asking questions about her asking questions."

Gwen rolled her eyes. "And what if Tosh sees us?" she asked. "We could explain away one of us ending up here, but two –"

"No need," Owen explained. "Looks like there's another room through there where all the work's going on."

"Wouldn't want any of the grunts getting in the way of things, stepping on all the important parts," Ianto remarked. "Speaking of which, what are we up to?" he asked Jack.

Jack smirked. "You and I are going kidnapping."

"Oh wonderful," Ianto deadpanned.

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Unfortunately for Sharaan, Lineiden wasn't at home. Nor was he answering his phone. Deciding he couldn't be bothered extending the search for the useless medic any further, Sharaan dumped the remaining tech back at Tosh and Fitz's now empty flat. If Raeth decided that they needed them they could easily come back and get them. And if not – well, Torchwood could have them back when they came to get their friend's things.

Which wouldn't be long now, he realised. They were almost there.

Delighted as the idea made him, he was also becoming anxious. Suppose something went wrong, or they left someone behind?

In order to quell this feeling of paranoia he decided to give Raeth a ring. She'd probably be a bit snappy with him, but no matter.

She answered with a curt. "What is it?"

"How's it going at your end?"

"Swimmingly. If I could go on without any more interruptions, we should be ready within a day."

"Good. Good. I was wondering, what should we do about Taranku? I haven't been able to find Lineiden either."

Raeth sighed, more he suspected in frustration at having to draw her attention away from the transporter rather than at the problems the situation presented.

"I haven't had any orders concerning them," she said finally. "Call Haethru, see what she has to say on the matter."

"Understood," he said. "Keep up the good work on your end."

She laughed. It was a nice, warm sound. "Oh, I intend to. You keep it up, too."

Sharaan smiled and hung up.

Some thirty minutes later he was locking the flat door behind him (partly out of habit, partly to make it that bit harder for Torchwood when they eventually stopped by). He felt a little disquieted by his new orders, but he could see the sense in them. Compromised could mean anything, and they didn't have time to find out more. Not now.

He checked his watch. Half four in the morning. More of them should be arriving in the city. He set off for the warehouse and began sending texts, informing the others of Haethru's instructions. It really wouldn't do to have anyone pick up their former leader on their way to the rendezvous.

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"Do you actually have a plan here, or are you just making this up as you go along?" Ianto asked, shifting his feet and wincing. Pins and needles had set in.

"I prefer improvising," said Jack.

Ianto snorted. "And what are we going to do after we lift him? No one seems too bothered that those two you were questioning haven't turned up, I doubt holding him hostage is going to work."

"He should still be weak after that attempt at suppressing him. Especially when he took total control so soon after. Shouldn't have had too much time to rest up – unlike those sloths in there."

Ianto stared at him, incredulous. "You want to try breaking him? Do we even have any of the headsets?"

“In the SUV, but I’m not sure we’ve got that kind of time,” said Jack.

Ianto grimaced. Crouching around in the cold and damp wasn’t doing a lot for his injuries. “You think Fitz is strong enough?”

“He’ll have to be.” There was something about Jack’s voice that sent a chill up Ianto’s spine. “If we can get him to overpower Sharaan we can send him in there and he can help us recover Toshiko. Once we’ve got her back on side, stopping the migration should be easy.”

“And dealing with the warehouse full of angry aliens?” asked Ianto.

Jack tipped his head. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. And maybe have a quick look at the map for alternate routes.”

Ianto huffed. Then grabbed Jack’s arm. “Here we go.”

Across the small yard, Sharaan was making his way towards the now unguarded door.

“No more tech,” Jack remarked. “That’s interesting. Ianto, go distract the nice man.”

“You say the sweetest things,” said Ianto, getting gracelessly to his feet.

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Upon seeing him, Sharaan stopped dead. “You...”

“I know.” Ianto continued walking, trying to give Jack as much cover as possible. “It’s usually my boss and “better” half people have the trouble with. Must be catching.”

Sharaan growled and lunged at him. Jack jumped into the fray a second later. Unhappily not quickly enough to prevent Sharaan rugby-tackling Ianto. It would have hurt were he perfectly fit and well. Having been thrown out of a window only hours earlier made it agony.

Ianto was in a daze, wheezing with barely enough breath to yell in pain, while Jack struggled with the Naequin. It was only when Ianto remembered Toshiko smiling at him through a barely open door, blood on her hands, that he realised Jack was probably going to need some help.

With what felt like a Herculean effort Ianto picked up the tyre iron that Jack had relieved the guard of and swung it at the back of Sharaan’s legs. He needed two swings to bring him down on his knees, but Jack did the rest.

A few moments later, Sharaan, now unconscious, was dropped next to Ianto and Jack knelt beside him. “Are you alright?”

“I just need to get my breath back,” said Ianto, trying not to breathe too deeply.

Jack nodded encouragingly. “Hurry, we’ve got to get moving, and I don’t think I’m going to be able to carry both of you.”

Ianto scoffed, and struggled into a sitting position. "Might need some help," he said, wincing a little. Jack grabbed his hands and pulled him up.

"Okay?"

Ianto nodded weakly.

"Good." Jack scooped Sharaan up and settled the weight across his shoulders. "C'mon, let's go."

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"What was that?" one of the Naequin asked of Gwen.

Gwen shrugged, clueless smile in place. "What was what?"

"I was sure I heard a noise just now," the Naequin continued. "From outside. Did no one else hear anything?" she asked, turning her question on the group in general.

"Probably just your host," said Owen. As Jack had predicted he seemed to be doing a better job of fitting in amongst the Naequin. Something about their wry, cynical attitude, Gwen thought darkly. "Don't you find the senses a little limited?"

There were several murmurs of agreement.

"Optics," one of them, a handsome but tired looking man, said, pointing at his eyes. "Pathetic. If I want to look at anything close up I have to wear these." He reached into his coat and pulled out a pair of reading glasses.

The first Naequin scoffed. "That's nothing. I have these all the time," she said, jiggling her glasses. "Bloody inconvenient when you're running and climbing, I can tell you."

"And their bodies are so slow at regenerating," another said, cracking his knuckles. "It's unbelievable. My hormones barely speed it up."

Gwen clenched her teeth. She hated people cracking their knuckles. The sound seemed to go straight through her. "Some of the habits are a bit weird, too," she remarked.

"Tell me about it," said Owen, evidently getting into the role. "I mean, biting the nails. Why?"

A few of the others laughed.

"I'm going to miss the food, though," Knuckle-cracker said, looking at the empty pizza box with faint longing.

"I'm sure there's someone who wound up in Italy who'll be able make some for you," said glasses girl with a snide smile.

Owen fidgeted. "I can't hack this," he said. "Isn't there anything we do? Y'know, make all this go a bit faster?"

"It's going as fast as it can," said the long-sighted Naequin. "They've apparently got everyone and everything they need. All we need is time."

"But with everything that's happened," said glasses girl, frowning. "That group Torchwood are in the city – they tried to kidnap two of us. And Taranku and Lineiden have been compromised – the order came through not long ago to consider them dead!"

"Really?! Gwen said.

Knuckle-cracker rolled his eyes. "Didn't you get the alert?" he asked, holding up his phone.

She shook her head. "Lost it."

"How did you know to come here?"

"Sharaan sent me," Gwen lied.

"Point being," said glasses girl, throwing Gwen a look, "that we should surely be gone by now."

"We have to synchronise, don't we?" said Owen, as though she was stupid. Really, though Gwen, he might as well have come in on his own, and she be helping Jack and Ianto. Glasses girl was right (if on the wrong side); sitting tight was not the way to get things done. Until then...

"And we needn't worry about Torchwood," said Gwen. "I have it on good authority from Sharaan that they're still running around clearing up some mess he and Raeth made. And they're two men down."

"All the same," said glasses girl. "I heard UNIT were alerted to our presence on the continent. It is worrying."

Gwen and a few others nodded vaguely.

"I'm sure it will be alright," said the long sighted Naequin.

I'm sure it will be, Gwen thought.

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Ianto leant back against the open door of the SUV, arms folded and an unlit cigarette between his lips, hopefully looking enough like trouble for anyone in the cathedral car park to make an effort to avoid him.

Ianto removed the cigarette and asked, without turning. "Are we sure that this is going to work?"

"Not a clue," said Jack from the other side of the car. "That's why we need to try it."

Ianto stuck the cigarette back his mouth, rolling it between his lips. "I thought you'd tried it on those two that you and Owen questioned earlier."

There was an audible pause from Jack's side, but a moment later he resumed work without a word.

Ianto removed the cigarette again and turned. "Jack?" When the silence continued he stooped down and stared at Jack, affixing the headset to an unconscious Fitz who'd been placed on the backseat. "Jack. What happened to the two that you and Owen questioned?"

Jack glanced up, meeting his eyes easily, but looked away again quickly and concentrated instead on calibrating the headset. "One of the Naequin was badly injured enough for his host to fight back and take control, and we managed to successfully suppress the other."

"Really?" asked Ianto. Perhaps there was hope after all.

"Yeah. Unfortunately we rendered the poor woman acting as host unconscious, and God only knows what kind of damage it might have done. We had the other guy call an ambulance and wake one of the neighbours to stay with them until it got there, but still." He looked back up at Ianto. He looked tired.

Ianto sighed and turned away again, twirling the cigarette between his fingers. "If this goes wrong..."

"It's not going to," Jack snapped. "Not this time. We can't afford for it to. And I think I know what went wrong last time."

Ianto shook his head and climbed into the SUV, throwing the cigarette away and slamming the door after him. He swivelled in his seat. "Should we gag him?"

"Ianto, not while we're working."

Ianto smiled reluctantly and watched as Jack hooked the headset up to Toshiko's computer terminal.

"Okay, it's online," said Jack, tapping a few keys. "Get ready..."

Fitz's face twitched. Once. Then twice. His face tensed as though he were in pain, and he began to spasm.

Ianto jumped out of the front of the SUV and climbed into the back to help Jack hold him still.

"Is this supposed to be happening?" he asked, just dodging one of Fitz's fists, and then his elbow.

"I'm not sure," Jack admitted, adjusting the settings.

Fitz got worse, flailing and convulsing as though he was having a fit.

“Jack, turn it down!” lanto yelled, trying to pin Fitz’s arms down and keep him from hitting the computer terminal.

“Not yet, just wait!” said Jack, watching the screen. lanto was unable to make the readings out for trying to keep Fitz from doing himself injury (or lanto further injury – Jack, lanto had decided, was on his own in this instance).

And then, Fitz suddenly went still – completely rigid. When lanto checked his pulse was completely normal.

It knows what we’re doing, lanto thought. It’s going to lash out, any minute now –

“Jack –” he said.

“Just wait!” said Jack, watching Fitz intently.

For a short while, nothing happened. Then Fitz began coughing, great hacking coughs that caused him to double over, as though he were choking.

“lanto, get a jar! Quickly!” Jack ordered.

Taking a moment to think, lanto clambered out of the back and opened the boot to fetch Owen’s medical kit, deciding to get some more pain killers while he was at it.

He brought the bag back around to Jack, holding out a small sample jar.

“Bigger!” said Jack. “Hurry up, it’s coming!”

Finally understanding what he meant, lanto rummaged through the bag and found the jar that Owen sometimes used for rats. He passed it Jack, who unscrewed the lid and pressed it to Fitz’s open mouth.

There was a series of disgusting gurgles, which made lanto feel nauseous himself, and Fitz retched into the jar. Viscous, translucent pink fluid splashed against the glass, settling an inch thick on the bottom.

“We’ve got to get Owen,” said lanto, pointing, torn between concern and disgust. “That’s not –”

“Wait for it,” said Jack, holding up a hand almost with the air of a showman.

lanto tried to make a grab for Fitz’s shoulder before the disgust won out. “Jack’s he’s –”

Fitz doubled over and retched again and for a moment lanto thought that it was his tongue he was throwing up. However it soon became apparent it was too long to be a tongue; from what lanto could make out through the slim covered glass it was almost eight inches long. And clearly, did not like being in a jar. It thrashed against the sides, making a high pitched squealing noise. Jack quickly shoved the lid over the top of the jar and screwed it down.

Watching its efforts slowly deteriorate Jack grinned and held the jar out to Ianto. "I think you two have already met; Ianto Jones, Sharaan. Sharaan, Ianto Jones."

"That is disgusting," Ianto choked.

"Now, now. Some would say the same of you," Jack tutted. "Obviously some with no taste, but still."

"What's happening to it?" asked Ianto, watching it go still at the bottom of the jar.

"Going into emergency hibernation. Maintain warmth and so on," said Jack gazing at it.

Ianto swallowed. "Is it... dying?" he asked, not sure he really wanted to know.

"It'll go into hibernation, for anything from eight to twenty-four hours. Although the state this one's in, he might only manage five," Jack answered, staring at it as though enraptured by it.

"And then?"

"And if a host has not been made available to it by then, it makes an attempt to acquire one for itself. And if it can't..." Jack trailed off ominously.

Even given what it had done to him – what it and its kind had done to Toshiko, Ianto couldn't help but feel a little sorry for it, curled up hopelessly in an over-sized jam jar like an earthworm.

He was broken out of his moment of ill-judged sympathy when Fitz began coughing again, spitting up more of the thick liquid, causing Jack to flinch away.

"Watch him," said Jack, ducking out of the car and shutting the door, jar in hand.

Ianto glared at Jack's side of the car and took hold of Fitz's shoulders in the hope of making sure that he didn't choke on whatever the foul stuff was.

Ianto almost jumped out of his skin when Fitz grabbed his arm and the front of his jacket, slamming him up against the door.

Fitz looked around him, wild eyes finally fixing on Ianto. "Who are you?" he demanded, voice sounding very different to how it had when and Toshiko had been entertaining them earlier that evening. He looked different too; his face was far more expressive and yet also guarded.

"Ianto. You met me earlier, Ianto Jones," said Ianto, trying to look as inoffensive and harmless as possible.

"When earlier?" asked Fitz, sounding suspicious but...speculative as well. As though the idea of waking up next to someone who he didn't know, but claimed to have met him wasn't out of his experience. Then again, thinking about it that way it probably wasn't that far out Owen's experience either.

"Earlier," was all Ianto could think to say. "Sometime this evening. You'd just come back to your flat."

“Right. And where are we now?” asked Fitz.

“The car park of the Anglican Cathedral,” said Ianto.

“Liverpool,” Jack clarified from behind them. Fitz whirled around, still keeping Ianto pinned to the car door. “I don’t think you’re from around here, are you?”

Fitz stared at Jack. “You,” he said, pointing at Jack, other hand not moving from Ianto’s chest. “I know you from somewhere.”

“I tend to get around,” Jack admitted, leaning on his car door as if he and Fitz were simply discussing directions. “Name’s Jack Harkness. Might not have been called that when we met.”

What colour had been in Fitz’s face promptly vanished. “Oh no,” he said. “I remember you.”

He then shoved Ianto forwards into the other door and opened it with his free hand, spilling them out onto the tarmac. When Ianto tried to grab on to him Fitz punched him sloppily to make him let go. Ianto tried to hold on to him until Jack got him, but Fitz caught him in the ribs and managed to wrench himself free.

By the time Ianto was sitting up, Jack had Fitz pinned to the ground.

“As soon as this case is over, I’m having a week off in bed.”

Jack smirked at him and raised an eyebrow, easily pinning Fitz’s arms to the ground. “Now where are you going?” Jack asked.

“Away from you!” Fitz growled, struggling in earnest and getting nowhere.

Jack smiled charmingly. “And why would you want to do that?”

Fitz’s struggles subsided, glancing from Jack to Ianto. “You’re Torchwood, aren’t you?”

Jack exchanged an alarmed look with Ianto.

“How do you know about us?” asked Ianto.

“Your lot tried to kidnap me in London,” Fitz panted. “I was told to watch out for you lot in Cardiff.”

“We’re nothing to do with London,” said Jack, face grim. He let Fitz’s arms go and climbed off him. “I don’t know why they’d want to kidnap you, but I can promise you that’s not what we need you for.”

Jack stepped back and Fitz sat up slowly, eyeing them both warily.

“You’re Torchwood,” he said again. “Tosh... where’s Toshiko?”

“Raeth’s taken control of her,” said Jack. “You know who she is, right?”

Fitz was on his feet. “The Naequin!” He seized Jack’s shoulders. “They were building some teleportation device – they’re all going to transport themselves at once, thousands of people!”

“We know –” Jack began.

“How far along are their plans?” Fitz demanded, releasing Jack. “And what are you doing to prevent them? That is your job, isn’t it?”

“They’re completing their teleportation device as we speak. They have a destination picked out – a planet with more suitable hosts than humans,” said Jack. “And it’s only a matter of time before they get there.”

“Oh God,” Fitz hissed.

“Exactly,” said Jack. “And right now, we need your help.”

“Oh yeah?” asked Fitz. “What with?”

“They don’t know that anything’s happened to your parasite,” said Jack. “Have you retained any knowledge from it?”

Fitz nodded. “Some.”

“Then you’ll be able to go in and gain access to the equipment, disable it somehow,” said Ianto, only just getting to his feet.

“My parasite never dealt with any of the heavy technical stuff,” Fitz ran a hand through his hair. “I wouldn’t be able to disable it safely.”

“Safely?” Jack repeated.

“Yeah. Something goes wrong with the transporter thing it can emit a frequency, like the one in that bloody headset,” he said, giving Jack a dirty look. “Wrong pitch could kill the parasite and the host all in one go. Pull the wrong wire –” Fitz threw up his hands.

“Who would know how to take it apart safely?” asked Ianto.

“Anyone who was involved in putting it together.” Fitz shrugged. “Raeth would certainly be able to.”

“Likewise Toshiko,” murmured Jack.

“If you went in, pretending to be Sharaan you could try and persuade her to hold off, say you need to dismantle it for some reason,” Ianto suggested.

Fitz shook his head. “Never work. I’d never be able to persuade her to put it off, not for anything.”

“On the other hand, you would be able to get her alone. Suppose you managed to get the headset on her,” Jack suggested.

“At which point she’d realise that I wasn’t possessed anymore and she could quite merrily wipe the floor with me for trying anything,” said Fitz.

“Does anyone have any better ideas?” asked Jack.

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“This is a complete waste of time,” said the Naequin with glasses.

“Oh, don’t start,” Gwen muttered, eyeing the door at the other end of the room. She’d been going over all the available exits in her head several times now.

“I’m just saying,” said the girl. “I mean, what’s the point of us all being here, waiting around while they get their acts together with the machinery.”

Knuckle-cracker snorted in what Gwen hoped was derision, but looked unhappily like agreement.

“It feels like they’re just jerking us around, doesn’t it?” said one of the newcomers. There were almost thirty of them here now. Various phone calls reported that there were a further fifty in the city on their way. And, it was estimated, a further sixty or so who had yet to make their way there, most of whom it seemed hadn’t heard about Taranku.

“The absence of our leader is rather sudden and suspicious,” the long sighted Naequin remarked.

“It’s probably down to Torchwood,” said Gwen, looking across at Owen.

“I thought you said you’d had it on good authority from Sharaan that they wouldn’t be bothering us,” said Knuckle-cracker.

“Where is he, anyway?” asked another newcomer, a red-haired woman who kept biting her nails. “You’d think he’d be here by now.”

“You’d think,” said the long-sighted Naequin.

“Maybe he’s got cold feet,” said glasses girl, sounding rather pleased by the idea.

“Or getting rid of evidence,” said the first newcomer darkly.

“What d’you mean?” asked Owen.

The Naequin shrugged. “Well, we’ve only got their word for it haven’t we? And they’ve always been... ambitious. Particularly her.”

“But not enough to do away with our leader, not now when we’re getting ready to leave this mud heap for good, surely,” said Owen.

“No! Course not,” said the long-sighted Naequin, as though this were laughable. “Certainly she’ll be delighted to take the job. I can’t see her murdering to get there.”

“She wouldn’t have to,” said the red-haired woman. “She’s possessing a member of Torchwood, right? She could have told them about Taranku. They’d have believed her.”

Gwen snorted. “I doubt it. As far as they’re concerned she’s been missing for months. Raeth will probably have tried to fake her death to keep them off her trail,” she said, trying to sound convincing.

Glasses girl raised an eyebrow at her, but didn’t say anything.

“Hello? Anyone here?”

The long-sighted Naequin straightened. “Who’s that?”

Gwen jumped to her feet. That was Fitz’s voice. She exchanged a worried look with Owen. What had happened to Jack and Ianto?

Her question was answered a moment later when Jack and Ianto entered the room, hands behind their heads. Following a few paces behind was Fitz, holding Jack’s revolver to the back of Ianto’s head. Catching her eye, Jack raised his eyebrows and shrugged a shoulder. Far too casual given the situation.

Gwen sat down, willing herself to relax. Jack obviously had a plan. She’d just need to watch for it.

A few of the Naequin were standing now.

“What’s going on?”

“What is all this?”

“These two,” Sharaan gave Ianto a sharp shove forward so that he was level with Jack. “Are with Torchwood. I found them skulking around outside, looking for a way to sneak in.”

For a moment he looked directly at Owen, but didn’t point him out to the others, or indeed draw any attention to him. Gwen blinked. Sharaan wasn’t in control. It was Fitz! That was one more person on their side when things turned nasty.

“On your knees!” Fitz barked, giving them each a swift, but gentle kick in the back of their legs.

Ianto dropped to his knees and almost overbalanced, face strained. Gwen winced on his behalf. Jack sank slowly to his knees, an air of defiant pride about him.

Fitz caught her eye and jerked his head. “You. Over here, now.”

Gwen quickly got to her feet and went to him, making sure not to make eye contact with either Ianto or Jack. Fitz dragged her in place behind them and pushed the revolver into her hand.

“Keep an eye on them. This one, particularly.” He gave Jack a shove in the back. “He even looks like he’s going to make trouble, shoot him in head. I need to speak with Raeth.”

He stormed away into the other room, slamming the door behind him.

The girl with glasses laughed. "Oh listen to him; I must speak with —"

"Oh, shut up, or I'll shoot you," Gwen snapped, without much heat.

A few of the others laughed, though a few continued muttering about Sharaan. Dimata appeared a few moments later with a bag stuffed full of tech. Seeing Gwen holding the gun on Jack and Ianto he sighed.

"I always miss the fun." He set the bag down carefully next to glasses girl, whom he gave a dirty look in warning and turned to Gwen. "I saw Sharaan coming through with these two just now. What's gone on?"

"Torchwood," said Gwen simply, poking Jack in the back of his head.

Dimata scoffed. "Those bastards." He gave Ianto a swift (and none too gentle) kick in the side, which saw him curling up on the floor.

"Hey!" Gwen yelled, momentarily pointing the gun at him, ready to fire. She came to her senses and trained the gun back on Jack quick enough to make it look as though she'd just been pointing with it.

Knuckle-cracker laughed. "You're not trying to tell me that this lot are a danger to us?"

Glasses girl shrugged. "That's what Sharaan and Raeth say."

"We're not abusing them."

"Why not?" asked Dimata, calmly.

"T-they could be useful," said Gwen, scrabbling for a plan "Spare hosts. Shields if the other members of their team turn up."

"That's not likely, is it?" Dimata was standing over Ianto, and the red haired woman had gotten to her feet, apparently to get a better view. "There are only four of them now and as far as we know there are at least two down for the count."

Knuckle-cracker stood up, cracking his knuckles and clicking his neck as he approached. Gwen almost recoiled. He was built almost as big as Jack. When things got nasty (and it was very much a when now, no if need apply), it was going to get very difficult.

"I mean it," snapped Gwen, trying to sound authoritative and just coming off desperate. "Leave them alone!"

Owen was on his feet now, looking over the scene anxiously. Gwen could understand his apprehension; even if they did manage to quell this lot it would be a hell of a struggle. Owen was bound to get some damage.

Knuckle-cracker gave Jack a nasty smile and leant over Ianto. "Let's put another one down, shall we?"

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Fitz slammed the door connecting the work room and the larger space being used as a waiting area. Almost at once three different people, including the lady herself, shushed him before continuing their work.

It reminded him a little of the TARDIS; there was a wide column erected in the middle of the room, with a row of screens encircling the top. Below each screen was a beam, each pointing at a grey rectangle about the size of a doormat. On the other side of the column there what looked like a control panel, which most of the workers were gathered around. Upon spotting him, Raeth/Toshiko broke away from the group and crossed the room to harangue him.

"Really, there's no need for that kind of racket," she said, coming to stand beside him. "Anything to report?"

"I've managed to apprehend two of the Torchwood team," he said.

If he had been expecting praise, he was to be disappointed; her face was set in a look of bemusement. "And you brought them here?" asked Raeth, raising an eyebrow.

Fitz shrugged, relaxing his body into a slouch. "I thought we could kill before we went. One last blast, as it were."

Raeth smiled fondly at him. Fitz grinned back. They could say what they liked about him (not that he was going to consider the "they" in question too closely), but he had a real talent for bullshitting, even before his days as a TARDIS passenger.

"It's a sweet thought, but I don't think we'll have time," she said, turning around to supervise another Naequin's work. "We need to press on so we can synchronize with the others. Unlike us they haven't had annoying "alien catchers" breathing down their necks."

"Some have all the luck, eh?" said Fitz. "How are things going?"

Raeth pushed a hand through her hair. "We're close," she said. "You know when you have that feeling, you almost want to just stop there, there's so little to go?"

Fitz forced his face into a smile with ease. "Mind if I have a look?" he asked, gesturing to the control panel.

Raeth craned her neck. "Looks like they've finished with it. For the moment anyway. Come on, then."

Fitz reached into his pocket, fondling the palmtop he'd received earlier. They'd set it all up for him before they'd gone in. All he had to do was key in the command and that – wasn't quite that, but certainly a step in the right direction.

Raeth showed him the co-ordinates that had been programmed in and Fitz watched the other technicians. They were going to be troublesome to get rid of. Unless...

“Suppose it activated now,” he said, toying with one of the joysticks that angled the beams overhead “Without all the information entered in. What would happen then?”

Raeth elbowed him. “Thank you so much for the confidence! As to that, we’ve created a failsafe. I say failsafe, it just won’t transport anyone anywhere and there’ll be a small explosion.”

“Sounds exciting,” Fitz remarked, switching to another joy stick. He watched as overhead two of the beams crossed and let go the controller. When he looked Raeth had turned away to examine another part of the machine. He pulled the headset out of his coat. “Got something else for you.”

“Oh yeah? What would that –” Fitz slammed her against the control column and hit the activation button for the two crossed beams.

The explosion sent them to the floor, the other standing under the beams that were crossed went flying into the wall. Fitz shoved the headset on Raeth, pulled out the palmtop and keyed in the code, just like Ianto had showed him.

The headset kicked in immediately. Toshiko screwed her eyes shut, mouth opening wide in a silent scream.

Fitz grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “Tosh, Toshiko! Tosh, open your eyes for me, c’mon on look at me!”

Toshiko’s eyes squinted open, staring at him in confusion. “Who –”

“Listen, we don’t have a lot time. My name’s Fitz. I’m helping you and your team the Naequin – d’you remember who they are?”

Toshiko frowned, but nodded weakly.

“Good, okay, now you know how this thing works, you need to set it will start transmitting, it’s the only way we can –”

One of the technicians had come to and, crawling over on their hands and knees, now had him in a headlock. Fitz rolled them and managed to wrestle other guy off him, banging his head once against the floor and knocking him out cold.

That was when he heard the noise next door, like a riot had started.

He turned to Tosh, still slumped glassy eyed against the control column. “Just hold on, I’ll be right back!” he called, making a dash for the door.

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Apparently a gun in the face wasn't enough of a deterrent as far as Knuckle-cracker was concerned. When he, along with Dimata, reached for Ianto, Jack jumped up, blocking Gwen's line of fire. When she moved to get one of the Naequin in her sights, she was picked up and thrown backwards.

The moment her head hit the floor she was out. She came around, what was probably only a few moments later, to find that Owen and a number of the Naequin were joining in. Gwen tried to get to her feet – it would only be a matter of time before they were overwhelmed, when someone grabbed her wrist.

“Human!” yelled glasses girl, hefting a half-conscious Gwen up by her arm.

Naequin hosts, thought Gwen, remembering the burns from those reports they'd looked through weeks ago. After possession they became more durable. A Naequin wouldn't have been knocked out by that.

Shit-

She was thrown down to the floor again, but not before she managed to kick out, knocking glasses girl's glasses clean off her face.

She tried to get to her feet, but before she knew it there were another two on her, grabbing her arms, and another snatching up her legs.

“This one too!” She looked around just in time to see Knuckle-cracker hoisting Owen up by the scruff of his neck. Owen hung, immobile, clearly unable to decide whether fighting back was worth the risk. There were five pinning down Jack and another two were crouched by Ianto, prodding and poking at him.

“What the hell -” Fitz had run through from the other chamber, voice trailing off when he saw the crowds. “Stop this!” he yelled, any authority all but gone. “Stop this right now!”

“Grab him!” Knuckle-cracker yelled. “He might be human too!”

“This whole thing's been one big trap, hasn't it?” Glasses Girl growled, smacking Gwen around the face.

“Someone get the girl posing as Raeth, too,” said the long-sighted Naequin as he and another two pinned Fitz. “She's going to pay for this.”

“No! Don't you dare! Don't you lay a fing -” Fitz screamed, before being punched in the face, once, twice, tree times.

And that was when the screams began in earnest.

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Toshiko blinked. Her mind felt sluggish, almost viscous.

Fitz – she remembered Fitz, he was the person she was living with – had disappeared what felt like ages ago. She pulled herself up, knocking the headset askew.

There was a hateful, painful surge of memory and thought, desperation to get home, home that was so far away.

Toshiko panicked. Those weren't her thoughts. She pulled the headset straight again and they disappeared.

"Torchwood", he'd said. They were here – they'd picked her up to get rid of the Naequin, all those hateful thoughts that weren't hers. With the headset. The frequency. She pulled herself up on the control panel.

Around her on the floor there were people lying unconscious on the floor. Through in the next room people were yelling.

He wasn't coming back. Fitz wasn't coming to help her.

She stared at the control panel, willing herself to remember. She knew this. She knew that if she removed this crystal and replaced it here –

Her knees buckled and she grabbed onto the control panel to keep herself upright. This – what was she doing here? She should be in Hub, what was she doing -?

She shook her head, trying to get rid of the conflicting memories, focus on the control panel.

The people on the floor were screaming now, and thrashing around. Horrifying. But. She had to keep going.

She pulled the cover off, trying to shake off the random drunken nights and childhood holidays that keep firing in her head, and began rewiring, reprogramming. No cut in time and space. Not transmitting particles, matter, but a frequency.

She slammed the buttons down and for a moment her vision went white.

She doubled over, retching violently. She cupped her hands over her mouth, felt the slimy thing pushing out of her throat. She grabbed it and pulled it all the way out, spitting and coughing on the slime that followed. In her hands the worm barely moved. She dropped it to the floor and stared down at the long fat worm, and grinned, looking over at the others, coughing up their Naequin too.

She'd done it. She'd bloody done it!

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The SUV was parked up in the Hospital car park. Jack sat half in and half out of the car, staring into his thermos cup.

One team member back from the dead, as it were, but badly injured, with a fragmented memory and probably zero desire to return to her post.

Another team member badly beaten, currently high as a kite on the good stuff and with at least a month of bed rest ahead of him.

Just over a hundred dead Naequin, five dead humans that they knew of so far. And elsewhere in the world some five thousand people who were now halfway across the universe, probably dead if the Naequin had discovered more suitable hosts. People that would die alone, millions of miles from home.

All in all, not quite the result that he had been hoping for.

He drank his tea down and checked his watch.

“You’re still going along, then?” asked Gwen, folding her arms and leaning against the car.

Jack replaced the thermos cup and said nothing.

Gwen sighed. “You really think this is a good idea? Maybe if you went along later, let it settle down first. She might come back to us on her own.”

“And go where in the meantime?” asked Jack.

Gwen shrugged. “Friends? Her family would put her up for a while, surely.”

Jack bit his tongue, then shoved the thermos away in the glove compartment and stood up, shutting the door. Gwen rolled her eyes.

“Or you could just ignore me completely,” she muttered in a long suffering tone, pushing off the car and starting back towards the hospital.

“What have they said about Ianto?” he asked.

Gwen stopped and turned. “It’s quite bad, but he’s stabilising.”

“I know, I know, plenty of bed rest and he’ll be as good as new. I mean about transporting him.”

Gwen shrugged. “They were reluctant. Owen was persuasive. Provided he’s still doing well tomorrow night they’ve agreed to move him.” A smile crept across her face. “And, if any of them ask, we work for the government.”

Jack pretended to scoff. “What, you couldn’t have at least said with?”

Gwen held up her hands. “Complaints go to Owen.”

“No change there!” said Jack with a grin.

Gwen laughed and turned away.

“Gwen!”

Gwen, still thinking they were playing, heaved a terrific sigh before whirling around, trying to look weary and hard done by, and making a bad job of it.

Jack’s mouth twitched into a smile. “You did good work. Owen, too. Tell him on the drive home tonight, okay?”

Gwen slowly returned the smile and nodded. “I will.”

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Tosh and Fitz sat on one of the benches dotted along the waterfront, taking it in turns with the paper.

“It seems no one knows what happened the other night,” Toshiko said finally.

Fitz nodded slowly. “It’s like that. Usually only the ones who accept it are the ones who were willing to believe you in the first place. The rest just resent you for trying to tell them there’s more to this universe than the sphere of their precious little lives and will do everything they can to forget about it once you’re out of their sight.”

Tosh reached out – she hesitated – and then closed her hand over his.

Fitz glanced at her and smiled wearily. “I know how they feel,” he went on, looking out over the river and gripping her hand tightly. “I’ve done it before; the running and the impossible plans and the being tied up in weird places and the last minute rescues. It’s amazing and terrifying and –” He sighed. “It’s not that you get bored. You just run out of juice. Old before your time.”

Toshiko nodded, turning to stare at the grey muddle of buildings on the other side of the river. “I know what you mean.”

“Can’t look the other way, though,” said Fitz. “Once you’ve twigged that the suit who gave that old bird with the violin two quid’s an alien, that’s it. Even if you do stop, it’s just so you can look around and think *why the hell’s no one else noticed?*”

Toshiko laughed. Looking across at Fitz she sobered quickly. “And where did you get that?”

“The Doctor,” said Fitz. “You know him?”

Toshiko’s brows furrowed. “I think I might have met him. Only in passing, though. Is that why you left him? You got tired?”

“No. The Doctor you met – if he’s the one I think he is – he wasn’t mine. Not the one I travelled with all those years. You know about the regeneration?”

Toshiko shook her head.

“It’s this way he’s got of cheating death – he changes. Body, personality – the memories are usually still there, but... It’s just not the same. It’s like you’re with a stranger, some friend of a friend who knows about everything you did.”

All rather like what’s happened now, thought Toshiko. She could tell Fitz was thinking the same thing, but he didn’t say anything. Instead he said, “Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

“About what?”

“Torchwood. Staying or going?”

Toshiko bit her lip. “I’m not entirely sure that’s my decision to make.”

Fitz frowned at her. “What d’you mean?”

“Sorry to interrupt.”

They looked up and saw Jack.

“Speak of the devil and he doth appear,” Fitz muttered, adjusting his fedora.

“I was wondering if I could talk to Toshiko for a few minutes. Do you mind?” he asked, directing the question to Fitz.

He smiled tightly. “Not at all.” He swept to his feet and gestured Jack to the bench with exaggerated grace. Jack, raising an eyebrow at Toshiko, sat down.

Fitz turned to her. “I’ll see you later, yeah?”

Toshiko nodded and smiled, trying to ignore the look he was giving her. “I’ll come find you.”

Fitz nodded and walked off, jerking his coat collar up against the wind. As soon as he was out of earshot Jack scoffed.

“Okay, I know you two have been brainwashed into thinking you’re madly in love for the past however many months, but you look me in the eye and tell me that you don’t think he can be a little bit pretentious.”

Toshiko’s eyebrows jumped. “Not as bad as some,” she said, giving Jack’s shirt a pointed look.

“This isn’t being pretentious – this is just sticking with a look.”

“Which went out of fashion, what forty years ago?”

“Hey, I was there at the time.”

“So was Fitz.” Tosh smirked at the look on Jack’s face. “He’s from the 60s. Well, I suppose I should say forties – that’s when he was born.”

“And his parents called him “Fitz”?” asked Jack, face screwed up in disgust.

“His dad was German,” Tosh explained.

“Bet he had a fun time at school,” Jack muttered. “And he came through the Rift?”

Tosh started to say “No”, but then smiled and nodded quickly. “That’s right.”

“He seems to have adjusted fairly well,” Jack remarked.

Tosh shrugged. “I imagine the lack of prejudice made him warm to the time quite a bit.” She smiled. “He reminds me a bit of you, actually. Whatever were to happen to him I can’t imagine him not landing on his feet.”

Jack smiled thinly. “And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Have you decided what you’re going to do now?”

“I didn’t realise I had a choice in the matter.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I have an agreement with you, don’t I? Five years, I think you said. Now how long ago was that?”

“About four and a half years ago,” Jack said. “It’s six months. If you want to go off and do something else I wouldn’t blame you – especially after all of this. I can wave it away if you want.”

Toshiko swallowed. “Are things always... this scale? I mean, thousands of people’s lives at stake, potential destruction of Earth, “needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few” type decisions?”

“Sometimes,” Jack admitted. “It’s usually only a couple of people, sometimes hundred, but these things crop up every now and then.”

Toshiko winced in sympathy. “You weren’t at your best this time, were you?”

Jack smiled at her. “One man down from the beginning.”

“So next time things might be better?”

“It’s been a bad day. But we get a lot of them in our line of work. Sometimes we get bad weeks. If we’re really unlucky, bad months.”

Toshiko leant back, favouring him with a wry smile. "I seem to recall you describing it as "a little danger"."

Jack leaned forward, mimicking her smile. "I also recall telling you that it was a work in progress."

"That you did. How has it progressed since then?"

Jack's expression froze. He looked away. "Not all that well," he admitted.

"You never told me when you offered me the job. What exactly were you hoping to achieve?"

"Being able to protect people. Not just hoard away tech and round up stuff washed up through the Rift like we were set up to, but being able to protect people from all the things they can't see, that they don't know are there. And I mean people," he added. "Not just humans; sometimes they're the ones who need to be protected from us."

Toshiko nodded slowly, staring into the distance as though she could see it, or something like.

"Sounds like a good ambition to have."

Jack smiled. "I like to think so."

"But you don't think you're there yet?"

Jack laughed sourly. "I know we're not there yet. And we're a long way from being there."

Toshiko considered him for a moment. "It sounds like a good ambition to have," she said again. "I think I'd quite like to be there when you get there."

Jack stared at her. "Are you serious?"

Toshiko rolled her eyes. "I think so, yes."

"It's going to be dangerous."

"I'll manage somehow."

"It's – You'll be out on call all day, every day. That doesn't really leave a lot of time for personal relationships."

Toshiko nodded, smile fading. "I remember." She smirked. "Are you trying to talk me out of this?"

Jack held up a hand. "I just want to make sure you know what you're getting into. Looking back I don't think I made it clear enough the last time."

"After all this?" She tapped the newspaper that Fitz had abandoned. "I think I'll manage somehow."

Jack turned, craning his neck to look down the walkway Fitz had taken. "And what would Mr Kreiner have to say about it?"

Toshiko smiled wryly. “Probably that I’m mad. After all this I can’t really blame him.”

Jack smiled and held out a hand. “Good to have you back on the team, Miss Sato.”

Toshiko shook it. “The pleasure’s all mine Captain.”

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“You’re mad,” said Fitz frankly.

Toshiko couldn’t help but smile. “I knew you were going to say that.”

Fitz sighed and leant back on the railings. “Still, if you’ve been there four and a half years, you must be doing something right.”

“Here’s hoping,” said Toshiko, crossing her fingers. She continued, a little more uncertainly, “I’d have thought that you’d try to talk me out of it.”

Fitz shrugged. “It’s your job. And from the sounds of it you’re bloody good at it. Hardly my place to stand in the way of that.”

Toshiko shrugged, leaning on the railings next to him. “Could have been,” she muttered, peering out over the water.

Fitz laughed. “Oh really? If I told you to, you’d just drop it all, would you? I wouldn’t dare to presume.”

Toshiko sniggered. “I just mean – I don’t know what I mean.” She glanced up. “You could – if you wanted, you could come back to Cardiff with me. If you fancied giving things a try without the alien mind control.”

Fitz pursed his lips. “I don’t think that would be such a great idea. Maybe not right away, anyway.”

Toshiko visibly perked. “Really?”

Fitz shrugged. “Well, I mean like you say. Alien mind control and all that. I don’t know about you but I could do with a bit of alone time to remember what’s what.”

“Well obviously,” said Toshiko.

“And we’ll have a lot on for a while. You getting to grips with the job again. Me – remembering where I live and what I was doing for a living this time.”

Toshiko grimaced inwardly. She hadn’t thought to ask him about all that. “But listen, if you do need anything –”

Fitz waved a hand. "I'll be fine. Captain America back there gave me a list of people he knows who can put me up. And his number in case any of them need reminding why they owe him one." He smirked. "He's quite a guy, isn't he?"

Toshiko nodded absently. "You know the Doctor? Not your Doctor, but the one he turned into? Jack travelled with him."

Fitz's surprised expression cleared and he nodded knowingly. "He seems like his type," he remarked tightly.

"He got left behind. When that Doctor was changing. He just took his craft and marooned Jack somewhere in the far future."

Fitz nodded again, this time more weary. "It happens to us all in the end, whether we mean it to or not."

"Was it worth it?" Toshiko asked.

Fitz glanced at her. "Is this job of yours worth it? All the danger and isolation?"

Toshiko tipped her head. "Touché."

Fitz smirked. "Y'know, sometimes, seeing the number of us that came and went, knowing what we could do, I wonder sometimes if he wasn't training us," he mused. "Like he was thinking ahead to when he ran out of bodies, ran out of time. We'd be alone to defend ourselves. And some of us would know what to do."

He smiled down at her and pulled her into a tight hug. "Take care of yourself, won't you? None of this heroic lark."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Toshiko lied.