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Break and Brace

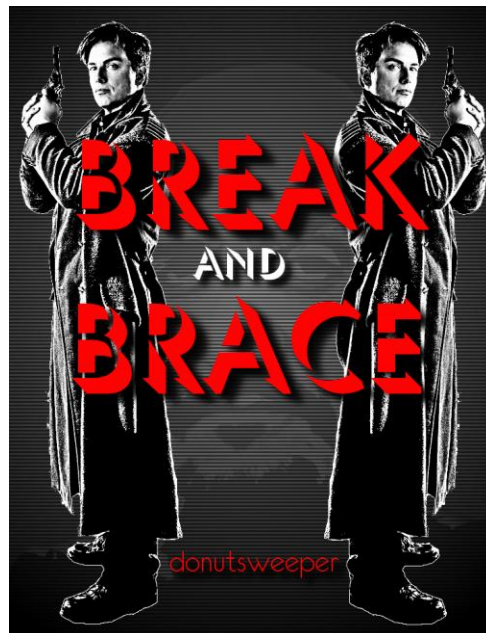
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With the rift unusually active, the Torchwood team struggles to find a pattern in what has come through and determine who or what is behind it.

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We must use time as a tool, not as a crutch.

John F. Kennedy

"So." Jack leaned in the doorway to the conference room. "Anything blow up yet?"

Gwen gave him a hard look over the piles and piles of rift debris currently taking over the table. "You could help, you know."

Jack held up his hands. "It's not like I've been sitting back, twiddling my thumbs here. I've catalogued over 100 different pieces of alien and future technology in the past four days alone. And that's not counting all the time I've spent out in the field collecting them."

"I know, I know," she muttered, running a hand through her hair and offering him a tired smile. "Sorry. Sorry, it's just been a long couple of weeks."

"Hasn't it just?" Tosh stepped around Jack to enter the room, carrying a bunch of printouts and news clippings. "I'm still running a few more computations, but I haven't been able to pinpoint any reason for this sudden increase in rift activity."

"Bloody good thing it's been mostly junk so far," Owen commented a minute later as he walked in, drying his hands on a towel. "Finished the autopsy on the kendravole. Most likely coming through the rift killed it, or maybe the big old splat when it hit the ground. Either way, I don't think there's anything to worry about. It was completely clean, relatively speaking. There were no viruses or pathogens or little insect hitchhikers to get loose into the native population."

"This whole thing is very odd." Ianto balanced the tray of coffees carefully as he stepped over some of the boxes on the floor of things that had been identified, catalogued, but not yet archived. "The way these things are coming from everywhere."

"And everywhen," Jack added, snagging a coffee as Ianto walked by him.

"I can't find a single reference to a time we've had so many localized rift incidents that were from so many different points of origin." Tosh shifted through her papers, pausing to take her coffee from Ianto. "Thanks. There have been two hundred and fifty-three rift openings that we've managed to track within the past two weeks alone. The items that have slipped through have ranged in size from what is the thirty-first century's equivalent of paperclip to what we believe to be full samurai battle armor dating back to the Kenmu restoration period in Japan. And there doesn't appear to be any rhyme or reason to the era that any of these things come from. So far we've established dates of origination as being from about two thousand years ago to hundreds of thousands of years from now."

Gwen gave a nod of thanks as Ianto placed her coffee on the table before bringing up a map on the plasma. There was a spattering of blue dots over the countryside with a greater and greater number as

they approached Cardiff. "The only pattern so far is that everything's crashed here within a twenty kilometer radius of the Hub."

"Which tells us what? The rift's here, isn't it?" Owen said, tossing the towel into the rubbish bin before grabbing his coffee. "Cheers, mate."

"Well, yes. While technically that is true, remember that the last time the rift went haywire even though the epicenter of the chaos was here the cracks and splinters of temporal shifts were seen around the world. Now, it's only happening here."

"Good point, Tosh," Jack said, nodding. "Go on, Gwen."

Gwen clicked a few buttons and the dots changed to various shades of red with a few black ones interspersed. "Using black for as of yet unidentified items this chart shows the year the items traveled from with light pink being the earliest and dark red the oldest. But, as you can see, there is no discernable pattern." With another few clicks the red dots changed to various shades of yellow. "And here we see the identified items' places of origin, the lighter the color signifying the further from Earth they traveled. And again, no pattern."

"Great, so we got a fat load of nothing," Owen complained as he drained his coffee.

Ianto, however, walked up to the plasma. After studying it for a few minutes he turned and asked, "Jack, how many of these were we able to identify because you recognized them?"

Jack frowned, and considered the question. "A fair few I suppose, why?"

"Gwen, how many were catalogued due to information from the archives?" Ianto asked, pondering the map.

"Not that many. Maybe a dozen or so?"

"Ianto?" Jack asked, but Ianto was concentrating on the list so strongly he didn't respond. Jack walked up and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "What are you thinking?"

"It may not amount to anything," Ianto cautioned.

"Which'll be different than where we are now, *how*?"

"Owen's right, Ianto. My computer simulations can only tell us so much. Any additional data we can plug into the equations would be very helpful." Tosh carefully cleared off a chair by moving the pile of papers on it into an empty box before sitting down.

"Of course I'm right," Owen said, sitting down himself, shoving the three smashed up fifty-first century goggles that had been grouped together on the chair onto the floor.

Ianto looked over at Jack, who nodded and made a *go on* gesture, and took a deep breath. "You've always been a great resource, Jack. You've been with Torchwood a long time and had a long and varied career in," he smiled a little sheepishly, "other endeavors, shall we say. But even with all your knowledge and skill you're usually only familiar with a fraction of the things that come through the rift, yet this time you managed to identify somewhere between seventy-five and eighty-five percent? Doesn't that seem a bit unusual to you?"

"So what," Gwen interrupted, "Are you suggesting the rift being more active has something to do with Jack? Who he is or where he's been?"

Ianto shrugged. "I don't know, but I do think we should explore that possibility."

"You may be onto something here, Ianto." Tosh reached over and grabbed the plasma's remote from off the table, bringing up the list of rift items collected and began scrolling through it. "There's a big difference between recognizing something, like, oh, an abacus, because you've seen a picture as opposed to knowing what it is because you were actually in ancient China and used one." She brought up a picture of the first bit of rift debris. "This came through fifteen days ago and Jack, you recognized it right away as a credit bar from the 'Fourth Great and Bountiful Human Empire' practically right away."

"Yeah, about that," Owen said, "*Fourth Great and Bountiful Human Empire*? That implies there's a first, second and third, doesn't it? So, when are they? And why'd you waggle your eyebrows like that when said it? Out of all the stories you're constantly telling us you never go into details about those sorts of things."

"Owen," Gwen warned, "This is not the time or the place for that sort of discussion. Go on, Tosh."

"Right. So, Jack, what I was wondering was how exactly it is that you knew all these things? Was it because you saw descriptions in books or data crystals or remembered them from what you've read in the archives or...." Tosh trailed off and took a deep breath, as if she was unsure how to ask the next part of her question.

Jack crossed his arms and looked at his team and weighed his answer for a minute before saying, "For the most part, I was there. I used credit bars like that. I owned a set of goggles similar to the ones over there. I shot plasma rifles like the ones we found, only mine hadn't been flattened by rift travel." He smiled. "I was even bitten by a kendravole once, although it was a baby, not like the full grown one that came through and Owen dissected in the morgue. I have a scar." He started to unbutton his left sleeve before stopping with a quick laugh. "Never mind, since it's just on my arm I suppose you're really not all that interested in seeing it. Now if it were on my hip, then that would be a different story, right?"

"Of course, sir. All the difference in the world since you wouldn't have hesitated, it being an excuse to drop your trousers in public and all."

"You never told us," Gwen said, her tone a cross between hurt and accusatory.

"You knew I wasn't from around here," Jack gave a small shake of his head and huffed softly.

"Figuratively, literally, or linearly. All of the above. I never made that a secret about me."

"Anyway," Owen said, "back to the minor problem of Cardiff being bombarded with rift debris. All this stuff comes from places and times you've been then, Jack?"

"A lot of it, yes. But just because that happens to be the case doesn't necessarily mean these things showing up here now has anything to do with me."

"Maybe if you gave us a list of all the places you've been, and when you were there, we might have enough data points to extrapolate some sort of pattern to these incidents?"

"Tosh," Jack said gently, shaking his head. "A list like that? It'll take days to put together. Weeks maybe."

"You sure got around, didn't you, Jack?" Owen asked, not quite hiding a leer.

"It's a wide, wide universe out there, Owen. I had a job that took me to a lot of it. And I," he paused, thinking of the right word, "enjoyed seeing the sights."

"And dabbling I assume, sir," Ianto said with a smile.

Jack laughed. "Oh yes. I dabbled with the best of them."

"Jack!" Gwen gave Jack a horrified glare. "Now is not the time or the place for that."

"True, true." Jack winked at Ianto. "We'll table this discussion until later. Okay," he rubbed his hands together. "So, where were we?"

"Things are falling through the rift and they seem to correlate to places in time and space that you have been. But, we are no closer to figuring why this is, or how it's happening, or anyway of tracing what will come next or when, let alone discovering any way of stopping things from coming through the first place."

"Well, that cleared it right up, didn't it?"

"No need to be a prat, Owen. Tosh was just laying it all out for us. Just ignore him and go on with what you were saying, Tosh."

Tosh gave Gwen a quick smile before continuing. "That's all we have really, I'm afraid. I can tweak some of parameters in the rift monitoring program to see we can pin anything else down, but that's a long shot."

"Long shot's better than nothing, thanks, Tosh," Jack said, shooing her on her way. "All right, Gwen, follow up with your contacts in the police, make sure they call us in on any suspicious looking parcels they come across, unexplained refuse piles, or even unusual looking plant pots."

"Got it!" she called out over her shoulder as she headed out of the room.

"Owen, not too much organic material has come through. Are there any other tests you can run, looking for frequencies, radiation levels, anything that might show some sort of tie between them or me?"

Owen shrugged, but got to his feet. "Not much a chance of me finding anything that didn't show up earlier, but I'll give it a shot."

"Thanks," Jack said, waiting for him to leave before turning to Ianto. "So. You really think this has something to do with me?"

"I really do."

"How come no one saw it before today?"

Ianto shrugged. "I had noticed that you seemed to recognize a lot of what we were collecting, but I never really stopped to think of just how many things you had recognized until I was looking at the map today. Besides, it's not like we've had a lot of time for considering the issue. It's been rather busy around here lately."

"That it has, you've practically been living here as a result." Jack walked over and put a hand on Ianto's shoulder. "Sorry about that."

"Not your fault, sir."

"If you're right about all this somehow being connected to me then I am responsible in some way."

"Jack."

Ianto turned, opening his mouth to say something else but Jack just waved it off with a quick, "It's not really the same thing, being connected and being at fault, I know. It's just," Jack sighed. "So far, these rift incidents have been more of an annoyance than anything else, but I want to get to the bottom of them before anyone gets hurt." He headed for the door, but paused, looking at how many things were still strewn randomly around the room and added, almost as an afterthought, "Or the archives get full."

"Could always put some things up on Ebay. Only the stuff that was harmless, innocuous, of course. It'd clear a lot out the archives and maybe even make a little money for the Torchwood coffers. Think of what a great way it would be of shoring up that coffee fund you were always talking about. We could finally purchase some of those more expensive beans you've been dreaming of: Jamaican Blue Mountain, Hacienda la Esmeralda Geisha from Panama, Island of St. Helena Coffee Company, even the extremely rare and ridiculously expensive Indonesian Kopi Luwak coffee. Sell a few trinkets and the £50 needed for 100 grams could be yours in no time at all," Ianto teased.

With a devilish grin on his face and far away look in his eye Jack said, "Coffee made from beans extracted from the droppings of the palm civet, just what I've always wanted."

Ianto cracked his knuckles. "So, should I set us up an account?"

"It's a great idea, but why don't we keep that as a backup plan. Just for now."

"All right, Jack," Ianto said with an exaggerated sigh, "if you insist."

"I do, indeed," Jack said airily as he left.

"Spoilsport!" Ianto retorted.

"I heard that!" Jack shouted back with a quick wave, and walked over to autopsy with Ianto's laughter trailing after him.

"Owen? Anything so far?" Jack leaned against the wall, his arms crossed.

"Not yet, but it's been," Owen looked up from the samples he'd been taking and checked his watch, "a whole five minutes. Maybe if you give me, oh, I don't know, an hour? Then, just maybe, I'd actually be able to run some tests *and* have a chance to get their results?"

"Are you implying that I'm being unreasonable?" Jack put his hand to his heart and staggered back a few steps, as if mortally wounded.

"Me? No," Owen dragged out the word as he shook his head. "Well, maybe. Just a little."

"Fine. An hour. Far be it for me to be even the slightest bit unreasonable."

"Oh, right. What was I thinking?" Owen gestured to the vials he'd been working on. "Now are you going to badger me some more or can I get back to work?"

"By all means, get back to work. I'm not the type to prevent you from doing your duly appointed duties," Jack said, pushing off the wall and giving Owen a slap on the arse as he walked past. "I'll go see how Gwen's coming with her police inquiries."

"And I bet she'll really appreciate that," Owen muttered as Jack left.

Jack didn't get a chance to check on Gwen. When he was walking past Tosh's work station the rift alarms went off, signaling something else was coming through. He bit back a curse before asking, "What have we got, Tosh?"

"Rift activity." She clicked a few buttons before answering, "It looks like only one thing this time, but it's a bit bigger than the last few things that have come through."

"All right, I'll go and bring it in. Can you feed the coordinates to the SUV?"

"Doing it right now," she said as she typed.

"Thanks, Tosh." Jack turned to the rest of the team. "Ianto, you're with me. The rest of you stay here and see if you can come up with anything while I'm gone."

~*~*~*~*~

The conversation between Ianto and Jack in the SUV was practically nonexistent, basically limited to "turn here" and "continue straight for a bit longer, sir" as Ianto directed them to the coordinates Tosh had sent them until Jack asked, "Any guesses on what it'll be this time? A bottle of hypervodka would be too small, a spitfire too large. Now a-"

"On your right," Ianto interrupted, "Tosh's readings pinpoint the source of the rift activity just up ahead, another hundred meters or so."

"Got it," Jack said as they pulled up to a car park, long abandoned and half overgrown with weeds a moment later.

"We're here, Tosh," Ianto said into his earpiece. "But I don't see, oh wait," he trailed off as Jack nudged him and pointed to a mound hidden partially by the shadows. "There it is. We'll check it out and send the scans back to you in a few minutes."

"Only the one thing, just like she said, but," Jack reached over and grabbed Ianto's arm to prevent him from getting out of the car. "The initial scans come back as it being organic. Even though everything else has been clean, doesn't necessarily mean this one is. It probably wouldn't be a bad idea if I take a look alone and get some more readings, just to be on the safe side."

Ianto considered Jack's suggestion for a minute and then nodded. "Not a bad idea at all. Take the kit and make sure you keep your radio on. After initial tests, if it all comes back clean, I'll help you with containing the site."

Jack opened the door and gave a sloppy salute before getting out. He dug into his coat and slipped on his earpiece and gave it a tap to activate it. "Reading me all right, Ianto?"

"Loud and clear, Jack."

Slowly, Jack walked across the car park, his coat billowing in the wind. "Whatever it is, it hasn't been here that long, there's only a fine layer of dust and pollen on it." Jack took a sweeping look of the car park. "Good thing about this place being so empty. There are no witnesses to worry about."

"Since when has Torchwood worried about witnesses?" Ianto's soft laugh could be barely heard over the radio. "You know for a secret government agency we don't really go out of our way to make sure we keep a low profile."

"Well, when you look as good as me," Jack started to joke when his scanner beeped interrupting him. "Damn it, scans say it registers as human. We have our first fatality here; you'd better let the others know."

"Got it," Ianto replied. "Switching frequencies now, back in a second."

Jack grunted his assent, busy studying the readings. The scan of the corpse and the immediate area didn't show any thing that might be dangerous to the team, in fact everything so far had come back negative across the board. He walked up to the body to get a better look; who knew, maybe the poor bastard had been dead for years before being pulled through the rift? Unlikely, but possible.

He approached cautiously, pulling out his camera to preserve the scene. He took some wide shots of the entire car park, panning the camera slowly across before zooming in on the body. It was in a heap, like a pile of laundry that had been dumped straight out of the hamper. The clothing had not survived the trip through the rift all that well, badly torn and sporting burn marks, therefore giving no clues as to the planet or time of origin. The victim was male, judging by the hair and overall build. The face wasn't visible, but in general, from what Jack could see the victim wasn't terribly young or all that old, mostly likely whatever accounted for middle aged where ever he came from.

Squatting down, filming with one hand he reached out with the other and grabbed the jacket and gave it a strong tug. The body uncurled, giving Jack a good look at its face. He dropped the camera in surprise, took several steps back and cursed loudly.

"Jack," Ianto called over the radio, "Owen said that the..." Ianto trailed off when Jack gave no response. "Jack?"

Jack didn't answer. He just stood there, completely frozen, staring at the body.

"Jack? What's wrong?" When there was still no reply, he added, "Talk to me, Jack," sounding a bit worried.

Scrubbing a hand across his face, Jack cleared his throat and activated his radio. "It's safe to come out." He swallowed audibly. "And there's, there's something you really need to see."

Complying quickly Ianto hopped out of the SUV and was within a few steps of Jack before he stopped with a sharp, "Oh my god, Jack," when he saw the body.

"Yeah," Jack said, wryly. "Pretty much my reaction exactly."

"But, Jack." Ianto couldn't cover the shock in his voice. "It's, he's *you*."

Jack swallowed roughly. "Yeah. Yeah, he is."

They stood in silence for a few minutes staring at the body. "So, what does this mean? Will he," Ianto made a vague, dismissive gesture, "You know, like you do?"

Jack leaned forward a bit to examine the dead man a bit better. "He looks like an older version of me. So, yeah, probably. No idea how long it'll take though. I assume going through the rift would cause a lot of trauma."

"Not to mention the landing."

"Ah, yes. That too. Good point."

Ianto stepped forward. "We really shouldn't leave him out here. Torchwood could do without the unwanted attraction of a reanimating corpse."

At that Jack swept his eyes over the car park again. "I suppose we've been lucky with me so far on that front. Although," he started to say, bringing up his scanner again, "I wonder. I have the strangest sensation of-" but he was interrupted when the dead version of himself came to life with a loud gasp.

"Steady, steady." Ianto got down on his haunches, next to the reviving man. "It's all right, I've got you. You're all right."

Coming alive and awake in one fell swoop, he rolled to his feet, taking a defensive stance against Jack and Ianto. "What happened?" he shouted, "Where am I?" then he looked, really looked at Ianto and Jack and in a much smaller voice asked, "*When* am I?"

"You fell through the rift. You're on Earth," Ianto answered softly, as calmly as possible. "Wales, or Cardiff to be more specific. And the year is 2008."

"2008," the other Jack said, hunching his shoulders as if to make himself a smaller target. Despite looking drawn and exhausted, his face was carefully blank.

"When are you from? Where-"

"Ianto," Jack interrupted quickly. "No, don't ask." He looked over at his other self. "And don't you even think about telling him anything."

"I wasn't going to," the other Jack sighed tiredly. "I know better than that."

"We'd better get you back to the Hub. Ianto, help him up. The sooner we get out of here, the better."

Ianto reached out slowly, the other Jack skittishly jerking away for a minute before giving himself some sort of mental shake and allowing the helping hand. "Sorry," he murmured as Ianto helped him to his feet. "The rift. I'm a little," he waved his other hand in a shaky, flittery way.

"It's understandable." Ianto supported much of the other man's weight. "Bit of a rough patch, this is."

Jack bounded to his feet and strode ahead of them to the SUV, calling the Hub on the radio on his way. "Owen? I'll need you to meet us when we come in."

"I'm preparing for the autopsy now, Jack."

"No, forget that. There's no need."

"*No need?* What do you mean, no need?"

"It's too hard to explain over the comm, just be waiting for us. Oh, and Gwen and Tosh will need to be there too."

There was a slight scrabble of conversation back at the Hub before Owen got back on to say, "Tosh says all rift activity's stopped dead. It's just gone, like nothing ever went wrong in the first place."

"Can't say I'm surprised to hear that."

"What? Why?"

"Never mind. It's just a theory. I'll explain later. Make sure you're there when we pull in, Owen. Jack out." He opened the door to make it easier for Ianto to help the other Jack inside and then slipped behind the wheel. Using the rearview mirror he looked his other self in the eye. "We're in for it now, aren't we?" The other Jack grimaced slightly and shrugged.

"Jack?" Ianto asked, looking back and forth between the two men.

"We'll figure this out," Jack said as he started up the car. "We have to."

Ianto nodded and turned to the rear seats to address their passenger as Jack pulled away from the car park to drive them home. "Are you all right? We'll be back at the Hub in a few minutes and I can get you anything you need."

Keeping his eyes on the floor, the other Jack smiled sadly at that. "Change of clothes would be nice," he said, fingering what was left of his trousers after his trip through the rift. "These are about done in."

"Not a problem. I'm sure you can borrow something of Jack's. It would fit you, wouldn't it?" When, even after a few minutes, there was no answer from the other Jack, Ianto shifted back into his seat and buckled his seatbelt. "Never took you as the quiet sort, Jack. Sir. You, Jack, I mean, my current boss Jack, Jack." He ran a hand over his face. "This is going to get confusing."

"You mean it's not already?" Jack joked as he switched lanes, approaching the turn off for the Hub.

Chuckling, Ianto continued, "We can't have two Jack Harknesses running around. And most of the qualifiers are just ridiculous: future Jack, older Jack, rift Jack, current Jack, Captain Jack, leader Jack, now Jack... Wait, which one of you is older?"

"I am," the Jack in the backseat answered with quiet certainty.

"We need to figure out this name situation before we get back to the Hub, god knows what sort of names Owen might think up for the two of you. Any suggestions?"

The two Jacks exchanged a look. "The last alias I used was Captain James Harper," Jack said softly after thinking about it for a moment. "And I suppose you could say it was under similar circumstances as these, oddly enough."

"James Harper... from the 71st squadron?" The other Jack gave a tired smile at the nod of affirmation. "That could work."

"Similar circumstances? What do you mean? How?"

"Time slip through the rift." Jack's eyebrows raised. "Tosh did check, didn't she? We're certain that there's no way this is Bilis playing his games with us again?"

"No, no, Jack. It's not Bilis. It can't be." Ianto reached out and laid a hand on Jack's arm. "You killed Abaddon. We don't know what happened to Bilis, but even if he isn't dead he would never risk coming back after us again."

Jack nodded, but he didn't look terribly convinced.

Speaking up from the back seat, 'James' said, "It's not Bilis. Or at least I don't think so. It felt completely different, going through the rift this time, I mean."

"Tosh's report said she hadn't even realized you two had crossed into 1941 until suddenly there were people everywhere. This time, it looked a little more... noteworthy." Ianto winced at his wording choice when he saw James shudder in response.

"I think that would be putting it mildly," Jack said dryly.

The rest of the ride to the Hub was made in a tense silence; as drove Jack he gripped the steering so tightly that his knuckles turned white. Ianto spent the ride typing up notes based on the readings they had taken while shooting concerned glances into the back seat while James stared out the window, worrying his bottom lip.

Owen, Gwen and Tosh were waiting for them inside.

"Jack?" Owen called out as the cog door opened up. "I've got all my supplies out, but you didn't let me know anything specific about what you'd need."

Jack walked in first followed a few feet behind him by Ianto, who was helping James inside. Physically, the support was most likely unnecessary; coming back to life had left him tired, but in perfect health, just as it always did. Emotionally, however, the man was obviously battered and bewildered and seemed

to need Ianto's assistance. But once in the Hub, James froze. Eyes wide and darting everywhere, like he was trying to look at everything, all at once. "It's all right," Ianto whispered, his tone calm and soothing. "You're among friends. And don't worry, we'll figure this out and then get you home, soon as we can."

"Ianto?" Jack called. "Would you mind going and getting our guest a change of clothing? I'd like Owen to examine him first, but it'd be nice if he had something other than scrubs to put on afterwards."

"Of course, Jack." Ianto gave James a reassuring tap on the arm before he slipped past him and headed to Jack's quarters.

"Jack," Gwen pushed forward, arms crossed and looking annoyed. "What is going on? First you report a dead body and then you say 'Oh, never mind, my mistake' and you waltz back here..." She trailed off as she looked past Jack and saw James. "What? Who?"

"Come on, Gwen, you should recognize him. He's me. Well, obviously I am me, but he's me from another time. And do *not* ask him when. Or what happened to you or who won the Premier League this year or the next World Cup. I mean it. Oh, and on the ride back we decided to call him James, since it would just be too confusing if there were two Jack Harknesses in the Hub."

"But-" Gwen started to ask another question when Jack interrupted her.

"In case you don't remember that's Gwen," Jack pointed to her, making introductions of the team one by one for James. "Owen, and Toshiko. And everyone, meet the newly christened James Harper."

Looking more than a little overwhelmed, James gave a nervous smile to the team.

Tosh tilted her head and smiled at Jack. "As in Captain James Harper? Very appropriate." She walked up to James and offered her hand. "Welcome to Torchwood, James."

Very, very slowly, James accepted the hand gave it an tentative shake. "Tosh," he said before clearing his throat when his voice broke. "It's good to see you again. You're looking wonderful."

"Hey, hey. No flirting with anyone who looks like me who isn't me. Or is me, but isn't me right now. Whatever, you know what I mean," Jack said laughing. He gave Owen a little push towards James.

"Owen, give James here a full check up. Make sure the trip through the rift didn't leave him with any unfortunate side effects, hitchhikers or problems."

"All right, come on then, Ja-James. Let's take a look at you." Owen reached out and grabbed James by the arm, but stopped and released him when James flinched away from him. "James?" Owen asked as he threw Jack a confused look.

"Sorry." James scrubbed a hand over his face. "It's been," he started to say before breaking off into a deep sigh.

"A really long day, I'm sure. Yeah, we get a lot of those around here." Owen waited a minute, until James seemed to have collected himself, and then waved him towards autopsy. "Come on, I don't bite. Let's see what those tests can tell us."

James looked over at Jack before moving. "There are some things I should...."

"Go on," Jack said. "We'll talk after Owen's cleared you."

"Okay," James said quietly, giving a quick nod before following behind Owen.

With a quick clap of his hands, Jack got Tosh and Gwen's attention. "While they're busy, we have work to do. Gwen, put together a list of all the rift debris we have catalogued to show James, collated by where and when it came from."

"You've got a theory?" she asked as she turned to head up to the conference room.

"I do indeed," he said with a grin. "I'll explain everything later, when there's a chance to confirm it. Off you go." He waited until she'd gone before turning to Tosh. "What are the rift readings now?"

"Completely normal." She walked over to her workstation and brought up several screens.

"What kind of normal?" Seeing Tosh's confusion, Jack reworded his question, "I mean, like they were before all this craziness started?"

After a few more clicks she nodded. "There's the typical quivers, but on the whole the rift is quieter than we've recorded in a long time."

"Like James coming through cause it to go back to its typical settings?" Jack crossed his arms and leaned up against the wall, seemingly lost in thought.

"Now that you mention it, yes. You might be right."

Jack nodded, her answer obviously expected. "When exactly did the rift tremors and insanity stop? Can you tell?"

"Well, of course," she replied, a little affronted. "The data we've collected seems to indicate it happened," she stopped typing suddenly and looked over at Jack, "shortly after the most recent event, about five minutes after James came though."

Jack closed his eyes and sighed. "That's what I was afraid of."

"Sorry? I don't understand. Why?"

"I'll explain later," Jack interrupted. He rubbed his forehead for a moment before opening his eyes and stepping away. "Listen, can you do me a favor? Would you gather the CCTV footage of that car park

where we found James and it's immediate area and check for any anomalies? Use a time stamp of, umm, make it a half an hour before James came through until after we left?"

"Of course," Tosh said, going back to the computer.

"Then pick a few of the sites where we found other rift debris from this current set of craziness, using the same timestamp and see if there are any similarities. Look for anything that seems out of place or wrong or unusual, or... well, just anything that you or the computer can pick up on that might help us. Okay?"

"Any hints on what I should be looking for?"

"Nope, I'll know it when you find it."

"Oh, of course," she said, with a snort of sarcasm.

Jack laughed. "How long will it take for you to pull it all together?"

"It shouldn't take more than ten minutes or so, Jack."

"Great. I'm going to go check on James and Owen. Meet us up in the conference room once you get everything together. With any luck, Gwen'll be done by then too."

Before Jack could leave Tosh called out to him, "Jack? Are you okay with all of this? With *him* being here and all?"

"You know me, Tosh," Jack said with a sad smile, "I'm always okay."

"You don't have to be," she said as he walked away. "You know that, don't you?"

But the only answer she got was a wave of his hand as he made his way to autopsy.

"Owen," Jack cleared his throat just outside the doorway, "knock, knock."

"Hang on a second, Jack," Owen replied, speaking over the rustle of fabric. "All right, come on in."

Jack walked in slowly, nervously. "How's he doing?" he asked Owen.

Owen gave his patient a quick look, relaxing when James nodded his assent. "All his tests came back clean. Nearly exactly like yours, as a matter of fact." He shrugged. "Not that I thought that was unexpected, of course. Near as I can tell he's a little older, although he won't tell me how much. But, he made it through the rift and resurrection without any noticeable damage."

"You'll sign off on him?"

"Can't see any reason not to," Owen said, distractedly while jotting down some notes on his clipboard.

"Well, that's something then." Jack looked over at James who was nervously fingering the blanket he was half hiding under. "You holding up okay?"

"Oh yeah," James said quietly, "I'm just peachy."

"Right, well let's get you some clothes then. lanto?" Jack called over his shoulder. "What's taking so long with the-"

"Right here, Jack," lanto said, having walking up behind Jack unnoticed.

Jack spun around. "Don't do that!" he mock chastised.

lanto smirked. "Sorry, sir." Arms full, he gestured with the clothing. "Ready for these then, James?"

"Yes," James said, his voice still barely above a whisper, "Thank you."

Owen frowned at James's shyness. "Go on," he teased, "No live people in my morgue now. Get some clothes on and get out of here."

Handing over the pile of clothes and Jack's spare pair of boots, lanto looked over James with a concerned eye. "Good thing I brought you a pair of braces, you're much thinner than our Jack."

"Hey, are you suggesting I'm fat?" Jack straightened up and ran his hands down his side.

Owen laughed. "If the shoe fits. I mean," he started to backtrack after seeing the glare Jack was sending him. "Not at all. You are well within the fitness parameters for Torchwood, Jack." He jerked his thumb at James. "This one's a little too thin, actually. I'm surprised your medic, whether it's me or whoever's working here when you're from, hasn't called you on it."

James just shrugged as he slipped on the clothes he could while keeping the blanket wrapped around him, somehow managing pants, trousers and t-shirt without showing more than a few inches of bare flesh. He finally let the blanket drop to the exam table after he tugged on his shirt and needed both hands to button it up. Sensing the others' eyes on him he looked up, letting a cocked eyebrow show both his accusation and his confusion.

"Sorry, we shouldn't have been staring," lanto spoke up as he handed over a pair of boots, "It's ... it's just."

"It's all right," James said as he put the boots on and laced them up. "I understand, really I do." He pointed to Jack. "We're the same, but very different."

"And you already knew we were rude buggers," Owen added.

Smiling lightly at that James said, "That too."

"Tosh and Gwen are putting together some data for us to look at. I've a theory or two that I'd like to test out. So, if we're all done here," Jack looked at everyone, waiting for their nods of affirmation, "let's head on up to the conference room and see what they've come up with."

Owen led the way, followed by a hesitant James. Ianto held back, waiting until they were out of earshot, and then turned to Jack. "What's going on?"

"I can't be certain. Not yet." Jack sighed. "Not until I see the result of Tosh's data. I'll explain everything then, all right?"

"It's bad, isn't it?" Ianto asked, as they made their way down the hall.

"Probably. But then again, when is it not?"

Ianto laughed. "Fair point."

"All right, team," Jack said, entering the conference room, "Show me what you got! Gwen, you're up first."

"Right. James, over the past two weeks hundreds of items have come through the rift. Jack was able to catalogue most of it, a rather high percentage actually. But we were wondering if you were familiar with the rest of it." She pointed to the seat at the table next to hers and passed James the laptop she'd been working on when he sat down in it. "These are the items we haven't been able to label yet."

"And I was wondering if you could," Jack added, sitting down next to Tosh, across the table from James and Gwen.

"I don't..." James started to say, looking around the room at the various bits of rift debris that were still in piles everywhere. "Thank you," he said as Ianto passed coffee around to everyone.

"Thanks, mate." Owen snagged his coffee and plunked down at the head of the table, putting his feet up on the table and tilting his chair back.

"You don't actually have to catalogue it all now, James, just tell us if you would be able to." Jack leaned forward and caught James' eye. "Please, it's important."

They exchanged glances for a moment before James looked down to peruse the list. "The ones you were able to label, you knew them because they were from places and times you'd been?" He grunted at Jack's nod. "Same here. Although," he passed over the laptop and pointed to the item he'd highlighted, "kind of surprised you missed this one."

Jack laughed. "Oh yeah, whoops." He motioned Ianto over, waiting for him to sit down before tilting the screen to show what James had pointed out. Ianto immediately turned bright red and sputtered into his coffee.

"Do two you have something to share with the rest of the class?" Owen teased, only to yelp when Tosh swept his feet off the table.

"Be nice," she hissed at Owen before turning her attention back to James. "So Jack was right? You can identify everything?"

"I can't be sure," he said softly, "but yeah, I think so. Just about anyway."

Jack scrubbed a hand over his face. "Right. Okay, Tosh. What did you find?"

Tosh clicked on the plasma screen. "Jack had me run a sweep of the area where James was found, as well as looking again at some of the other sites where the rift dropped debris over the last two weeks. Now, while he didn't specify what he was looking for, the fact that the rift anomalies stopped shortly after James arrived does indicate that all of this recent rift activity was in some way related to his arrival."

"But how?" Owen interrupted. "And, why?"

"We don't know yet, Owen," Jack said. He wasn't exactly glaring at Owen, but it was close. "Maybe if we let her finish we'll be able to figure it out."

"Thank you, Jack." Tosh brought up a still frame of the car park where Ianto and Jack had found James. "I did discover something interesting. Compare this CCTV shot, taken a half an hour before James arrived," she brought up a second picture, "to this one, taken an hour later."

Gwen leaned forward, squinting at the screen. "I see an abandoned car park."

"Yeah, me too," Owen agreed with a slight huff. "With lots of weeds."

"Jack?" Tosh asked. "Ianto?"

Jack was still studying the pictures when Ianto jumped out of his seat saying, "Oh, I see what you mean."

Tosh beamed at Ianto. "You'd never notice it if you weren't looking specifically for it, would you?"

"No, not at all," he replied.

"This is worse than those magic eye books that were so popular back when." Gwen tilted her head and squinted some more. "I still don't see anything."

"Exactly!" Tosh exclaimed.

"What?" Owen was sounding rather annoyed. "Exactly, what?"

"Here." With a few clicks Tosh isolated the bottom portion of the first picture, cleaned it up and enlarged it. "What do you see?"

"Some weeds, and a lamppost, and the cement support beam for the neighboring building, and... oh." Jack's gaze slid from one picture to the other and back again before stopping.

James, spotting the same thing Jack had seen, put his head in his hands. "Oh no."

"Oh, indeed," Tosh agreed, and brought up the same portion of the second picture. "See it yet?" she asked Gwen and Owen.

Owen's finger went back and forth from picture to picture as he pursed his lips and tried to figure it out. "Hey, wait a second, what happened to the lamppost?"

"It's gone," Tosh said happily.

"But... how?" Gwen asked.

"Some sort of perception filter maybe?" Ianto suggested. "Like the one we use for the lift?"

"It's possible. Honestly, I have no idea. But," Tosh brought up pictures from four other rift debris dump sites and then clicked open a second picture of each site. "There's something similar missing, or added I suppose, depending how you look at it, on each and every one of these. And not just these, every single place we collected things from in the past two weeks has something there. All of them. Lampposts, support beams, kiosks, all sorts of things. The only similarity is that they blend in. You don't notice that anything is there, or is not there, whichever the case may be, unless you're actually looking for it. "

"You don't think?" James started to ask before Jack cut him off with a quick,

"No." The two men stared at each other over the table.

"Well, then," Ianto said after a few moments of silence. "The presence of this, whatever it is, suggests that the recent spike in rift activity was for a specific reason. And, since it all stopped immediately after James came through, I think it's safe to say that this," he waved his hand to take in all the rift debris in the room, "was all done just to bring you here. The only question is why."

"And how," Owen added.

"The kind of technology needed for something like that is way beyond anything we're capable of," Tosh said, clicking off the plasma. "I don't think I've ever even seen references in the archives to a machine capable of manipulating the rift with that sort of precision."

"There isn't," Ianto said with certainty.

"Doesn't mean it doesn't exist, though," Gwen pointed out. "Somewhere. After all, something used the rift to bring all this stuff here. To bring James here."

"All right," Jack spoke up. "There's no point in tying ourselves up in knots trying to figure out everything right now. The rift is calm for the moment, and it looks like it'll stay that way until we've figured out where to go from here or the next big step in this grand plan of whatever this is gets revealed. It's late. Go home. Spend some time with your loved ones, watch the telly, toss the things in your kitchen that are about to evolve sentience, do something to enjoy yourselves even if it's only having a beer and relaxing. We'll pick this up in the morning."

"If you insist!" Owen jumped to his feet immediately. "Come on, Tosh," he said, grabbing her wrist and pulling her towards the door. "I'm buying."

"But," she started to say, "What about-"

"Leave it!" Owen admonished, and the rest of what they said to each other faded out as they made their way down the hall.

"Jack?" Gwen reached over to grab her laptop.

"Go on," he told her, handing it to her. "Go home and see Rhys before you forget what he looks like."

"If you're sure," she said with a hesitant smile.

"I'm sure." He shoed her off. "Go."

"Don't have to tell me twice," she joked as she gathered up her things.

"Actually, I did. Three times in fact." Looking over she glared at him and he laughed. "Have fun."

"Thanks, Jack!" she shouted over her shoulder as she left.

"Ianto?" Jack asked, when after a while Ianto had shown no sign of picking up his things, let alone leaving.

"I'd," Ianto started to say, keeping his eyes on the table, careful not to look at Jack or James, "I'd like to stay. If you don't mind. Either of you," he added quickly.

James fiddled with a pair of goggles he'd picked up from somewhere. "Maybe me and, well, me, could talk a bit by ourselves first?" he asked, so quietly he was nearly inaudible.

"I've an idea. We'll need something to eat, after the craziness of all this rift activity we've practically been living here and our typical provisions are nearly depleted. If you wouldn't mind, Ianto, maybe you could go on a supplies run? Pick up enough to restock the pantry besides dinner? James? Would that work for you?"

Still intent on the goggles, James didn't say anything, but after a moment he nodded.

"Not a problem, Jack. How long do you think the shopping will need to take?"

"Oh, I don't know," Jack said, giving Ianto a thankful glance. "No more than an hour would be my guess."

"Right. An hour it is. Any requests on what I should bring back for dinner? Pizza? Chinese? Curry?"

"James?" Jack asked, but James seemed overwhelmed by it all and just shrugged. "Whatever is easiest for you, I think, Ianto. All right?"

Ianto nodded. "I'll surprise you then. James, you haven't developed any allergies or anything that I should know about, have you?"

James looked up, startled by the question. "No," he said quietly, "Anything would be fine."

"See you both in about an hour then." He paused in the doorway. "No dabbling while I'm gone, yeah?"

"Ianto," Jack chastised, but there was no heat behind it. "There is nothing to worry about on that front. Nothing at all. Now, shoo."

Still in the doorway, Ianto hesitated. "I'll have my mobile, just in case."

"It's okay, Ianto," James spoke up, "I'll be here when you get back."

"Oh. Right. Well, of course you will be. In an hour then," Ianto gave them both a quick nod before leaving.

Waiting until he heard the cog door close shut, signaling Ianto's departure from the Hub, Jack turned to James, "Okay. We're alone now. Time to tell me what's going on."

James twined the goggles around his fingers, seeming to focus all his attention on them. "I don't know."

"James. Jack. Come on, you know as well as I do what the disappearing reappearing lampposts and kiosks and whatnots mean." Jack might not have been yelling, but his tone was less than kind.

"That doesn't mean I know any more than you do!" James' voice cracked as he looked over at Jack before quickly ducking his head to hide his quivering lip.

"Hey, hey. I'm sorry. This has," Jack scraped his hands over his face, "This has got to be tough for you. I didn't even ask how you were doing with all this. Other than physically, which, of course, is a useless parameter for you, or me. Us. For us."

James took a stuttering breath. "It's just so," he started to say as he clenched his hands into fists. "I haven't jumped about in time in a while. I forgot what it was like."

"What what was like?" Jack asked gently.

"It's different," James cleared his throat, "looking at a photograph. The memories are still there but there's this distance- they're in the past, in the back when, and not..." he trailed off with a sigh.

"Not in the here and now," Jack said with a nod. Swallowing thickly he added, "I assume, in the time you're from, they're all gone?" He held a hand up. "Obviously you can't tell me how. Or when. It'll be bad enough to have to live through it when it does happen. I have no desire to be dreading that moment every day until then, starting from today. I'd like to think they all died of old age in their beds. Or in someone's bed. But I know Torchwood. And I know that's not the way things happen here."

James replied with a half shrug and a sad smile that didn't specify a thing, but still said far too much.

"Losing people never gets easier, does it?" Jack asked, but continued without waiting for an answer, "and I am sorry- that it happened and you have to relieve it- but we have to figure this out and figure it out now. You were brought here for a specific reason and I'm sure it's not to bring endless sunshine and happiness to the world."

"We could make a killing in the sunglasses market if that were the case."

Crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair, Jack said, "stock options are the way of the future, eh?"

"How else am I going to afford gold bathtubs?"

"What, marble's not good enough for you? Too old fashioned?"

James snickered. "Completely passé."

"Good to know, good to know," Jack joked before the two men slipped into silence for a few moments, Jack pretending to study the list of rift debris while James played with the goggles.

"So," James said, carefully avoiding looking Jack in the eye.

"So," Jack mimicked. "Disappearing lampposts," he added.

"Doesn't necessarily mean..."

Jack held up a hand to stop James. "Yes it does. We have a Time Lord with a fully capable TARDIS on his or her hands."

"If it's a TARDIS with a working chameleon circuit then we know it can't be the Doctor."

"She's still a police box in your day?"

James shrugged. "The Doctor likes her that way."

"I always wondered if maybe he just doesn't know how to fix it," Jack pointed out.

"That's... entirely possible as well," James admitted with a wry grin. "But, what about the Time War? They're all gone."

"They are supposed to be, yes. But since when do Time Lords do what they're supposed to?"

"Fair point."

"Besides, isn't the Doctor always talking about how time is non-linear? And really, really complicated? Why couldn't that be the case here? Some Time Lord from the past, from before the war, somehow got caught up in the rift and then wound up here?"

"Is that even possible?"

"Honestly, I have no idea. But this is the rift we're talking about. It excels in doing things we didn't think were possible."

Wide-eyed James looked up at Jack. "Do you know what this means? For him? He wouldn't be alone anymore."

"Wait a second," Jack held up a hand. "Let's not put the cart before the horse here. First off, we don't know this is a Time Lord. Not for certain. It could be something completely different. And even if it *is* a Time Lord, we have to ask ourselves- just what are they doing? Think about it. There they are, happily minding their own business, and then suddenly *BAM*, they're in a new time, a new place and everything's changed. Gallifrey is gone. All the Time Lords except one are gone. And instead of searching out that one remaining Time Lord they hatch some massive plan to bring two of us together?"

"What if they don't know Gallifrey is gone?" James asked when Jack stopped to take a breath.

"I don't know. Could they not know? How could they not know?"

"Maybe they do. Maybe they're okay with that. Maybe, just maybe it's-"

"No. He's dead." Jack left no room for argument.

"If we had to, we could always ask-"

"No," Jack cut him off. "No, we can't. The others wouldn't understand, not considering who he is. We deal with this ourselves. You, me, the team, we don't need to go running for help for every little thing."

James gave a weak shrug. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I'm right. I mean we're right," he corrected himself. After scrubbing his face, Jack grabbed a pen and the closest piece of paper, a take away menu from a curry place that closed over a decade ago, flipped it over and wrote *A TARDIS?* "You agree?"

"Can't be certain, but, yeah, it does seem likely."

"Okay, now that we got that somewhat figured out, let's put aside the who for the moment and focus on the what. Someone has purposely targeted places and times we've been in an attempt to have another time's version of myself, ourselves? Anyway, what it boils down is that someone wanted to have another Jack Harkness slip through the rift. Now, a good question might be, did they intend to have a post-game station, fixed point in time and space version or a mortal version come through?"

"A mortal version of us wouldn't have survived a trip like that," James pointed out.

"True. Well, you didn't survive, not technically, but I know what you mean. The person we were before the Game Station would have died coming through and remained dead."

"Were they trying to kill us?"

Jack cocked an eyebrow. "Now, that is a very good question. If they'd pulled us out of our Time Agency days and we'd died as a result then we wouldn't be here running Torchwood today. Unless were talking alternate dimensions or things like that as well."

"Which we're not. Right?"

"Right. As far as we know, at least."

"There's a lot we don't know."

"True. However." Jack grabbed the menu, adding '*Two Jack Harknesses*' to his notes and underlined it twice. "That," he said tapping it with the pen, "is one thing we do know."

"Which doesn't tell us much. What possible reason could there be for needing two Jack Harknesses?" James asked, snagging a pen of his own.

"What possible reason, indeed?" Jack muttered. "What if..." he started to say, only to be drowned out by the rift alarms going off. "Rift activity. Damn it!" He jumped to his feet and headed to Tosh's workstation.

James followed, but at a slightly more sedate pace. "I thought she said the rift went back to normal after I came through."

"She did. It had," Jack said as he started typing. "It's not likely, but there is a chance that this rift activity has nothing to do with you or the recent craziness. Could just be a coincidence."

James shook his head, sitting down next to where Jack was working. "I'm not a big believer in coincidences."

Skimming over the data the computer was providing Jack sighed. "And you'd be right, the signature is similar. Maybe not exactly the same, but pretty close."

"Are you," James began hesitantly, "should we call in the rest of the team?"

After thinking about it for a moment, Jack shook his head. "No, let them have their night off. The past two weeks have been insane, they could use the break. It's a pretty small rift event, and, besides, there are two of us, we can handle it ourselves. I'm going to send the coordinates to the SUV, we'll swing by the armory to get you kitted up properly, and then we'll be good to go."

"But..." James trailed off, biting his bottom lip.

Jack stood up and turned to James. "But what?" he asked gently.

"Ianto." James gestured to the cog door that Ianto had gone through earlier. "He. He went out for food. If we go, he'll come back, and. And."

"And we won't be here." Jack smiled. "Ianto's a big boy, trust me on that, he can handle being left behind. But, if you're that worried, here. Catch." Jack threw James his phone, who fumbled it a bit before catching it. "Give him a call. That way he can back us up from here. I really don't think he'll have a problem with that."

Staring at the phone clutched tightly in his hand James grimaced. "Of course. Right. I'm being stupid, aren't I?"

"Yes," Jack said, crossing his arms, leaning back to look at James. "But," he added, "Go ahead. Give him a call if you want to; his number's programmed in. Let him know we're going on a quick run and should be back in thirty, forty minutes on the outside." Turning, he finished at the computer and walked off explaining, "I'll be right back with some firepower, regulation does state you can't go out in the field without being properly armed, after all. Got any preferences?"

"Um, no," James said, looking up quickly. "Anything's fine. I'm qualified with everything you have there."

"That's my boy," Jack joked, practically beaming. "I knew I wouldn't let those skills get rusty!"

Jack picked out a Glock and an HK before backtracking to grab his spare Webley and holster, for old time's sake. "Hey, look what I got for you!" he called out as he headed back to where he'd left James, holding the Webley out. "What happened to yours, anyway? You weren't wearing it when you came through the rift. You still have one at least, don't you?"

James, however, was on the phone, and ignored Jack completely. "Yes. No, three, actually." Looking over when Jack nudged him he started walking to the cog door, "Well, of course he did, wasn't even up for debate. Yes, I will. You too," he added after a second's pause and then closed the phone.

"Of course I did, what?" Jack asked as he offered James his choice of the guns as they headed to the SUV.

"The Webley. That you got the spare Webley out of storage for me." James gave a small smile as he took it and strapped it on.

"I'm beginning to think Ianto knows me a little too well," Jack said with a laugh.

"Not such a bad thing."

"No, I suppose it's not. Come on, I'm driving, so you're navigating. Think you can do that?"

James nodded, climbing in the SUV. "I think I can manage that," he said as he set to work bringing up the necessary details from the onboard computer.

"Good." Jack nodded as he pulled out of the garage. "Didn't know how much had changed between now and when you're from."

"More than you'd like." James shrugged. "Less than you'd think."

"Sounds about what I expected. Take this left up ahead?"

"Yeah," James said as he typed, "then it'll be straight on for a while."

After riding in silence for a few minutes Jack looked over at James. "You know, when we get there you could, if you wanted...."

"No." James shook his head quickly. "I'm not staying in the car."

Jack snorted. "How'd you know I was going to ask you that?"

"I *am* you, remember? I. I know I seem a little a little off my game, but I can do this." James wasn't pleading, his tone was flat and calm.

Jack held up a hand. "Hey, no arguments from me. I can't think of anyone else I'd rather have watching my back than me. I always thought I was one of the most capable people I know."

Quirking his eyebrow, James looked at Jack. "That is the most surreal statement I've heard in a long time."

"What can I say, I excel at self-promotion. Even if it's not my actual self that I'm self-promoting."

"You do realize that sentence made very little sense."

"I like confusing people. Keeps them on their toes."

James smiled. "Sounds familiar. Okay, take the second right and then we'll be there."

Jack maneuvered the SUV around the sharp turn and pulled in front of a disused warehouse that looked in danger of collapsing at any moment. Entire sections of the roof were missing, probably blown away in a storm at some point, a number of the windows were broken, and others were boarded up. "What do the scans say?"

"Umm," James said as he typed, "it looks like three small items came through."

"Any witnesses around?" There didn't appear to be anything but abandoned buildings in various states of disrepair within sight, but it was always better safe than sorry.

"Nope, nothing to worry about on that front. Not a soul around."

"Excellent!" Jack rubbed his hands together, an excited glint in his eyes. "So, what do you say? Ready for some field work? You, me, random rift garbage?"

"Can't wait," James said with dry enthusiasm.

"Ianto?" Jack called into the radio.

"Here, Jack," was the immediate reply.

"We're at the coordinates. Looks like an easy pickup. We'll send you back some scans in a few minutes."

"I will be awaiting them with bated breath."

Jack snickered. "Hey, wait a minute, how'd you know it was me and not James?"

"I know you too well."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Use your imagination, sir."

"Have you been thinking the worst of me again? You wound me, you know that Ianto?" Jack could hear Ianto's laughter over the radio. "We'll check back with you in a bit. Jack out."

James, listening to Jack's part of the exchange, had a sad smile on his face. "Ianto giving you trouble?"

"No more than usual." He looked over at James. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

James pulled out the Glock and made a show of checking it over. "Try and stop me."

"O-kay," Jack said, drawing out the word. "Then, let's go." He opened the door, grabbing the scanner before getting out.

"There's no one around, you really think we need this kind of firepower?" He motioned to the three weapons Jack had given him earlier. "You only had the Webley and a scanner when you came for me."

Jack laughed. "Valid point. All right, I've got the Glock, just in case, but you can lock the HK up. But you have to take the Webley. It's tradition. Period military makes me look good, and I'm not having you spoil that image of me while you're here."

"Aye, aye, Captain," James said as he snapped a sharp salute to Jack before taking a second to secure the HK in the weapon lockbox.

Jack looked at the empty warehouses and weed-filled lots that lined the street. "No lights coming from any of them," he said. "Just the lampposts. Don't even know if there's power inside. I'd better grab torches for us." He pulled out two, tossing one to James, and then made sure the SUV's locks and alarms were set before walking towards the building where they'd traced that the signal was coming from.

"Jack," James said warily, "Did you check the CCTV footage for any disappearing, reappearing inanimate objects?"

"I tried. I didn't see anything, but with all these warehouses it was hard to tell. Can't hurt for us to be on our toes though."

"Always," James responded, with a nod.

"No one's been here in months, if not years," Jack said, pointing to the crumbling front steps, covered in dust and dead leaves. Looking back, he could see that their footsteps leading from the SUV were obvious along the path.

"Nothing that's come in or out the front door, anyway," James corrected.

"Ah, right. There are plenty of other ways to get inside, especially if you've got a TARDIS. Is the scanner picking up anything?"

"Just the residual rift energy left over from a typical rift event," James said with a shake of his head. "It's showing a few small things came through, books maybe?"

"Nothing else?"

"Nope."

"All right, send the preliminary scans back to Ianto and then we'll head on in and retrieve the rift debris." He waited until James finished typing and nodded that he was ready before pulling out his gun and, with a carefree grin, slowly opening the door.

Jack went through first, just taking two steps in with James staying in the doorway to guard their flank. Despite the broken windows and holes in the roof letting in



a little light from the lampposts on the street the warehouse was still fairly dark. Flicking on his torch, Jack panned it around trying to see into the far corners. The room was so cavernous that the beam didn't reach to the other side. It played off boxes, a pile of broken chairs, packing crates, random bits of garbage and discarded coffee cups that were strewn about.

"I don't see anything that looks like it came through the rift," he said over his shoulder to James as he walked deeper into the warehouse, his torch sweeping back and forth across the floor. "I'm going to explore a bit. You stay here and see if you can pinpoint the reading."

"The rift signature's still as strong as ever." Slowly moving the scanner around James walked in a bit before he could get a clearer reading. "Looks like it's coming from the far left corner."

Jack headed over in the direction James indicated, the beam of his torch on the ground ahead of him. "Huh." He stopped abruptly. "There are some footprints here. They start about a meter from this pile of newspapers and end randomly in the middle of-" He spun around. "Get out of here, James. It's a trap!"

James took one step towards the door when a gunshot rang out and he fell. Dead. Shot through the head.

"James!" Immediately dropping the torch to pull his Glock, Jack ran over to provide cover. But there was no one to provide cover from. The shot had come from a completely empty section of the warehouse.

"Put down the weapons, Captain," a cultured voice called out from nowhere. "I won't hesitate to shoot you as well."

"If you'd wanted to shoot me you would've done it already," Jack said, trying to get a response. The more he could get the other man to talk the better a chance Jack had of figuring out where he was hiding.

"Oh, I have no qualms about killing you, Captain. But I do abhor making messes unnecessarily."

"Then why did you kill James?" Using exaggeratedly slow movements Jack slid the Glock into his pocket, reaching for his radio and trying to turn it on without being obvious. "Lots of blood and gore with a head shot."

"I couldn't let him escape, could I? Not after all the trouble I went through to bring him here. Hand out of your pocket, Captain. There is no need for the rest of your lovely team to be made aware of your situation just yet." A bullet smashed into the ground right next to Jack's foot. "I need your hands where I can see them. Now. I'm afraid I must insist."

Jack slowly pulled his hand out, spreading it wide to show it was empty. The radio remained in his pocket, but he was fairly sure he'd managed to turn it on. With any luck, Ianto would be able to overhear something and send the cavalry soon.

"Place your other gun on the floor. And do it slowly, if you would be so kind."

"I don't suppose there's any way I can convince you to let us go?" Jack asked as he pulled the Webley out of its holster and placed it down by his feet.

A deep laughter resonated from the far side of the warehouse. "Oh, my dear Captain. You are quite the amusing one, aren't you?"

"Even when I have a gun pointed at me I aim to please." Jack spoke a little louder than usual, attempting to be overheard on the radio.

"And here it was my understanding that pleasing people was something that you were always proud to excel at; guns notwithstanding, of course."

"Why are you threatening me with one then?"

"How can you be certain that I am?"

"I considered the bullets being fired at me to be a fairly strong clue."

"My, aren't you the clever one. Not clever enough, I'm afraid."

From the way the echoes bounced around the room, Jack was pretty sure he'd narrowed down where the other man was standing. He shifted, reaching down for the Webley on the floor.

"I don't think so," the voice called out as a gun fired, hitting Jack squarely in the chest and sending him sprawling a few feet from where James still lay. "I expected more from you."

Jack struggled to roll over, to get to his gun, but the pain made it impossible. He was dying, and he knew it, but he was going to fight against it as long as he could. There was the sound of footsteps approaching and he struggled to keep his eyes opened to see who was behind everything. "Who are you?"

"You haven't figured it out?" The man's laugh rang through the warehouse again. "Oh, Captain, I have to say. I am so disappointed in you."

Jack was going to try for a witty rejoinder, but, before he could come up with one, he lost the fight against the pain and passed out.

~*~*~*~*~

With a gasp, Jack came back to life.

"It's all right, Jack," he heard himself, James, call out to him. "Everything is okay."

Jack opened his eyes to find he was lying on the floor of a prison cell, his face pressed against the cold concrete. Through the bars he could see James in the adjoining cell, sitting on the bench that ran against

the back wall and looking no worse for wear after his most recent death. "Great, a cell, just what I'd always wanted." Jack pushed himself up on all fours with a groan and then, once his balance was back, got to his feet. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, lot of experience with that."

"Dying or getting shot in the head?"

"Both."

Snorting, Jack said, "Why does that not fill me with enthusiasm for what my future holds?"

"Is what it is."

Jack looked down at his wrist and then at James'. "He didn't take our vortex manipulators?" Jack asked, opening his up.

"No need. Already tried mine." James gave a half-shrug. "Must have installed some kind of time shielding. Not easy, but doable."

"Guess he thought of everything."

"Or tried to." James laughed. "There's a clean shirt you can change into on the bench behind you. If you're interested."

"If I'm interested?" Jack mocked, tugging off the torn and stained shirt and giving it a disdainful sniff. "I don't even want to think about what was on that warehouse floor or how long it had been there." Grabbing the clean shirt, he put it on and buttoned it up. "Awfully nice of our captor to get the size right."

"Wasn't it just?"

"Speaking of our friendly megalomaniac, has he made an appearance yet?"

"No. But-" James pointed to the cameras on either end of the hallway outside their cells.

"So it's smile, we're on candid camera then, hmm? May as well give him a show." Jack waved cheerily at them before turning to James. "Well, what are you thinking?"

"Walked into a trap," James said succinctly.

"No, really? What was your first clue? When he faked that rift activity that led us to the warehouse or when he shot you dead and knew you'd recover? Sorry," Jack held up a conciliatory hand, "Sorry. Just blowing off some steam here, I know this isn't your fault. I led us right into it, didn't I?" He put his hand to his chest, tapping it. "My team, my world, my time. My fault."

"There's no way you could have known."

"I should have." Jack scrubbed a hand across his chin.

"No. It would be like trying to beat someone at their own game when you didn't even have a clue what the board was supposed to look like."

Crossing his arms, Jack shrugged. "Maybe," he conceded. "But I still feel like we're missing something. I never saw the shooter, did you?"

"No."

"And the scanner didn't show anything either, did it? Just the same reading the whole time of the small rift event and the three books, or whatever it was, that came through."

"Except they didn't."

"But the scanner *thought* that they did," Jack pointed out with a sigh. "It was being tricked somehow."

"How?" James leaned forward, head tilted and eyebrows raised.

"What do you know that pretends to be one thing when it's something else entirely? Something with a chameleon circuit that's capable of disguising itself as any number of things?"

"You think we were right then."

"I do indeed." Jack lounged against the wall, his arms still crossed, the picture of nonchalance. "What we have, my friend, is a TARDIS."

"A TARDIS," James echoed with a sigh.

"Yep. Which means that the person pulling the strings in this game is a Time Lord."

"And that," the refined voice from the warehouse said as he turned the corner, approaching their cages, "Would be me. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Captains Jack Harkness. Allow me to introduce myself. You may call me the Master."

Both Jack and James instantly jumped to their feet. This was not the man they had known as the Master, but rather an earlier, or perhaps somehow, later, regeneration. Still a fairly short man, perhaps five feet seven or eight, but sporting a beard- not a full one, but instead a goatee and mustache with a touch of gray gracing the corners. Dark hair, combed back, accentuated his wide brow and hook nose. Cultured.

A man who looked at them without his typical twisted glee. Without any recognition at all. It was eerie.

"The Master?" Jack looked at James, then being careful to keep his face blank, turned to their captor.

"Ah, my fame precedes me, excellent." A Cheshire cat-like grin appeared. "Torchwood may not have the expertise that UNIT claims to possess, but I must applaud your initiative. Saving the Crown from threats beyond imagination is simply a wonderful charter, isn't it? Queen Victoria was such a dear sweet woman; she certainly saw the Doctor for what he was, a menace to her time and place."

"That was a misunderstanding on her part," Jack said, standing stiffly and as close to the bars as he could.

"Now, now. I am not one to quibble, but the Torchwood Foundation Charter of 1879 named the Doctor *specifically* as an enemy of the Crown." James opened his mouth to protest, but the Master cut him off with a cocked eyebrow. "What sort of friendly megalomaniac would I be if I did not do the necessary research? The, what is it you call it? The internet? So many wonderful things that can be discovered with a few simple clicks."

"I'm glad you're finding my time to your liking," Jack drawled. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in telling me why you've chosen to stay in the here and now? Or what was the reasoning behind bringing another version of me here? Or why you concocted this... ruse to capture me and my future self?"

"All in good time, my dear Captains," he practically purred, "All in good time. Now, if you will excuse me, I have things I must attend to." And then, after offering another one of his grins, he turned and walked back down the hall.

Waiting until the footsteps faded away Jack turned to James. "So."

"The Master."

"Yeah, how 'bout that," Jack said coldly, repressing a shudder; his time as the Master's prisoner aboard the *Valiant* was far too fresh in his mind.

"Gotta say, I did not see that coming."

"Me either." Jack walked up to the bars separating him and James, gesturing for James to come over.

"Well, the man certainly did his research, I have to give him that. Quoting from both the Torchwood charter and Queen Victoria's speech? A little overly dramatic, if you ask me." He dropped his voice to barely above a whisper. "It's a good thing that we never made any official record of what happened in the year that wasn't, if you know what I mean. I hate to think...." Jack trailed off with a shudder.

"It's over," James said softly. "We survived it."

"Yeah, we did." Jack smiled. "And we'll survive this too. Although, what do you say we try to make this experience a tad shorter than the last?"

James raised an eyebrow. "As in let's blow this popsicle joint?"

"You have anything better to do? Manicure appointment or something?"

Giving a shy, half smile, James shrugged. "Pedicure actually."

"Aha! I knew it!" Jack said with a laugh. "So, how are your lock picking skills? I haven't let them get rusty, have I, old man?"

"Old man?" James snorted. "What does that make you, a young whippersnapper?"

"This young whippersnapper can still pick a lock faster than you!" Jack laughed. "It was awful nice of the Master to provide us with cufflinks, wasn't it?" Jack walked over to the front of his cage, stopping in front of the door. "Now, we'll have to be quick, thanks to those cameras there." He waited for James to approach the lock on his own cage before offering a smile. "So, we'll do it together on three. One." The cufflink was off and he began picking the lock with it. "Two." The tell-tale snick of the mechanism getting tripped was barely audible, but he could feel it as it happened. "Three!" he shouted, swinging the door open, only to turn and see James' door was open as well.

"Took you long enough," James said, almost smugly.

"Oh, rub it in why don't you." The two men fell into a matching stride, not exactly a run, but faster than a brisk walk. "Besides, it wasn't a fair bet. You've had more time to practice."

They had no choice but to follow the hallway as it curved to the right, in the direction they'd seen the Master go: there were no windows or doors, no ventilation shafts, no way to escape other than to travel down the hallway itself.

They finally came to a stop when the hall abruptly stopped in front of an unlatched fire exit. "This feels wrong." James reached out tentatively to touch the door, examining for booby traps, but finding none.

"Yeah, it does," Jack agreed, "but what other choice do we have? You want to go back and hang out in the cells for a while?"

"No, but...." James trailed off with a shrug.

"Then we go forward." Jack looked to James, waiting until he nodded his assent, and then opened the door.

The room was dark, smelling vaguely of chemicals and ash. Entering cautiously, they walked as carefully as possible, heading towards a small crack of light coming from a door or window on the opposite wall.

"Ah, Captains," the Master called out as the fire door swung shut behind them with a loud bang.

"Welcome."

The overhead lights turned on then, illuminating the room with a weak glow. They looked around, realizing they were in a laboratory of some sort, with a computer taking up nearly an entire wall to their left. The other walls were bare breeze block, freshly painted a soft white. In the center of the room were two metal rods coming out of the cement floor topped with bronze domes. The fire door that they'd entered the room through had closed flush to the wall, with no handle or knob and the light they had thought was an exit was actually a strategically placed strip of florescent tape on the far wall.

An observation booth was cut into the far wall, starting at about shoulder height and continuing up to the raised ceiling. The Master was standing there, arms crossed, and looking down at them with a slight smile on his face behind a thick sheet of what appeared to be bulletproof glass.

"So good of you to finally join me."

"We aim to please," Jack drawled.

"I must admit, I am a little disappointed in how long it took for you to make your way here. I expected you," he checked his watch, "more than five minutes ago."

Jack wandered over to the computer. "Our apologies if we accidentally messed up your timetable," he said as he let his fingers ghost over the keys.

"Oh, no, no, no. I was merely concerned that you'd miss the show." There a touch of manic delight to the Master's voice that Jack had grown to know, and fear, during his year as the Master's prisoner. "And we certainly couldn't have that."

"The show?" James asked nervously. "Not sure I like the sound of that."

"Now, now, I set it up for your benefit. I am positive you shall appreciate it." A not too terribly comforting grin slowly made its way across the Master's face.

"Somehow, I don't think we will." Jack couldn't hide the annoyance in his voice and he began pressing buttons on the computer to have something to do, but there was no reaction from it. The screen remained blank.

"Without the proper password, I'm afraid that will do you no good," the Master explained patiently, as if talking to a child.

"I'm sure we could figure it out," Jack said calmly, refusing to sound defensive. "We're smarter than you give us credit for, right, James?"

"Oh, absolutely," was James' solemn reply.

"Really?" The Master steepled his fingers under his chin. "Pray tell."

"Well, to start with," Jack said as he wandered away from the computer to approach the Master's glass fortress. "Your reason for bring a future version of me here is quite obvious."

Laughing at that, the Master said, "Oh, do enlighten me. After the questions you asked earlier I'm sure your feeble attempts to understand the situation will be rather entertaining."

"Blinovitch Limitation Effect," James and Jack said in unison. And then both burst out laughing at the look of shock that flittered by on the Master's face before his mask of indifference slammed back into place.

"Very clever. I must admit, Captain, perhaps you *are* more intelligent than I gave you credit for." He tilted his head, giving a slight nod as if he had decided something. "Care to apprise me further on the rest of my plan?"

Jack looked at James who offered a 'go on' motion with his hand so Jack took the lead. "All right, assuming for a minute here that you actually are the incredibly brilliant man that all the UNIT records and reports made you out to be--"

"Oh, that would be a safe assumption for you to make."

"Although, I have to say, I never expected you to be so modest," Jack added with a wry smile before continuing. "Now, one of the wonders about the Blinovitch Limitation Effect is that there will be an extremely powerful and dangerous energy discharge if two versions of the same person, who are from different time lines, were to come into contact with each other. I believe a fairly obvious assumption to make is that since you went through so much effort to bring a future version of me here, instead of settling for some person on the street, there is something about my unique nature that would increase its effects. Otherwise, why bother tangling with Torchwood and drawing us into your scheme in the first place?"

"You can not think of another reason as to why I might have chosen you?" The Master sneered as he brought his hands down and casually slipped them into his pockets.

Jack imitated the Master, making a point to appear relaxed and uninterested in the fact he and James were trapped, and leaned lightly against the computer, arms crossed lazily across his chest. "There is the minor fact that pulling someone through the rift isn't the simplest of maneuvers, even for someone with your special talents. There was a very good chance the subject wouldn't survive either the journey or the landing and one of the key aspects to the Blinovitch Limitation Effect actually occurring is that the two temporal versions need to be alive."

"Why, yes," the Master admitted with a touch of aplomb, "That might help."

"But, lucky for you, no matter how rough the trip, you knew any future version of me would survive it."

"Yes, lucky for me."

"So, we're left with two questions."

"Oh, don't leave me on pins and needles now. You're doing so well. Go on. What two questions?"

"I believe my past self is referring to is the why and the how," James said, speaking up from the back of the room, where he had been examining the door they'd entered through.

"After all you've told me just now, I find it difficult to believe you haven't figured out those for yourself as well."

"Oh, I have. As for the why," Jack smiled, "your TARDIS appears to be functioning to some extent. From what we could see of her in the CCTV footage her chameleon circuit was still working properly and she obviously was able to move around somewhat, but I'm going to go out on a limb and make the brash suggestion that she does have something wrong with her. And it most likely involves her time traveling capabilities."

"Brash? You, Captain? Hardly typical for you."

Jack grinned widely, his white teeth sparkling in the dim light. "I've been called worse, isn't that right?" He looked over at James, who gave an affirmative nod, before turning his attention back to the Master. "So. How am I doing so far?"

"Surprisingly competent."

"I aim to please," he said disarmingly, spreading his hands out wide. "So what happened? Were you trying to get to Earth, or away from Earth, and somehow got grabbed by the rift? I bet the TARDIS didn't like that. She likes to travel under her own power. She doesn't tend to be the biggest fan of being yanked off in unusual directions with no say in the matter."

The Master had an odd look on his face, a touch of admiration mixed with a slight sneer and bemused smile. "You are an expert on the TARDIS as well? My, my, my."

"I have hidden depths."

"Indeed."

"But, I'm sure there is quite a bit more to the story other than what I've deduced, isn't there?"

"You would be correct."

"I don't suppose you would care to enlighten us as to the rest of it?"

"Might be a little less contrary then," James drawled.

The Master shook his head with a laugh. "I must admit your contrariness is not something that overly concerns me. I'm quite positive I shall have no difficulty in obtaining your cooperation."

"Really?" Jack asked with a laugh. "You seem awfully sure of yourself on that front, but I hate to let you in on a little secret here: Neither me nor my future self," he pointed to himself and then James in turn, "have any desire to help you in any plan of yours. Whether it involves world domination or simply part of your new formula for picking the ponies, I am not interested."

The Master stood there for a moment, looking down at Jack, before saying, "You should be."

"Oooh, I'm quaking in my boots, Master. That almost sounded like a threat. Didn't that sound like that might have been a threat?"

"It did," James replied succinctly.

"It was," the Master said.

"What are you going to do to a guy who can't die? Poison me? Shoot me? Been there, done that. Electrocutation, suffocation, radiation? Experienced it all. Can't think of anything you could threaten to do to me that would result in my helping you today."

The resulting laugh from the Master echoed through the room. "Oh, excuse me," he said, hand on his chest as he tried to contain his laughter. "You thought that I was actually threatening *you*? I'm almost disappointed that you thought so little of me."

Jack looked nervously over at James, who bit his lip and seemed to hunch in on himself at the news. "So, who," Jack said, clearing his throat carefully and making an effort to keep his voice steady, "Who *were* you threatening then?"

"I've heard it said that a picture is worth a thousand words. So why don't I show you?" With a flair for the dramatic, the Master's hands, which had been empty a minute before, suddenly held a thin silver remote, seemingly appearing out of thin air. "Shall we see what's behind door number one?" he asked, pressing the button.

The large screen above the computer flickered to life. A picture slowly came into focus. A staircase with a railing. High ceiling. Some desks.

"But, that's, that's the Hub," James said nervously, approaching the screen to get a better look.

"Why, yes it is. Imagine that," the Master said dryly before snorting.

"You bugged us?" Jack squawked, indignantly.

"I like to call it strategic information gathering. And don't be too hard on yourself, my dear Captain. This was by no means the first time I have implemented such a technique. There was a wonderful World Peace Conference when I had such fun toying with Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart and those lovely UNIT troops of his. I always found that dealing with the Brigadier was rather entertaining. I do so hope that I will find my time with you to be similarly so."

"I'll do my best," Jack replied through a clenched jaw.

"Well, I appreciate the intent. Now," the Master raised his eyebrows, "if you would be so kind to take a little look at what I consider to be your motivation?" The Master smiled and clicked another button.

The picture on the screen changed. It showed Ianto in the boardroom clearing enough rift junk off the table to create some space for the Chinese food he'd brought back.

"So precise and studious that one is, don't you agree, Captains? Just look at how careful he is, keeping like with like; even the broken pieces are grouped together. But I suppose that is the archivist in him coming out." They watched as Ianto consulted the inventory of rift debris and added a few items to one of the boxes based on what he'd just read. He'd just opened the lid to a different box when his mobile rang.

Snapping the phone open, Ianto immediately said into it, "Jack?" without pausing to check the display. "Oh." His face fell and his eyes closed for a moment. "Owen. No, I still haven't heard back from them. I know you said that I was worrying over nothing but- What? Really? And the SUV was just left there? Well, if it was locked that probably means Jack and James never left that warehouse. Did you go in and check- no, no, of course I know you did that. Sorry, I'm just." Ianto sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "How much blood? I suppose we're lucky that 'fatal' and Jack don't go hand in hand then. Right. No, that's fine. As long as the SUV gets back here, I don't think it matters much which one of you drove it. No, that's not necessary. We've got plenty of Chinese here, even if Jack and James show back up." There was a long pause as Ianto listened to whatever Owen was saying. "Gwen's already on her way. She'll probably get here before you. All right." He nodded. "See you then."

The Master clicked a button and the feed from the camera froze. "Your team seems rather lost in your absence, Captain. Such a pity, I looked forward to being able to butt heads with Torchwood to see how it would compare with my experiences with UNIT. But I must admit, I find myself terribly disappointed in your organization so far."

"We figured you out, didn't we?"

The Master tilted his head. "I shall concede to you on that point, however that was not *Torchwood* per se, but in actuality, it was you who ascertained the specifics behind my capturing you, not your team."

"You really shouldn't underestimate my team, Master. Those who have done so in the past haven't fared so well." Jack put the slightest bit of a threat behind his words.

"I shall consider myself duly warned. However," the Master laughed. "I think I shall take my chances."

Jack shrugged, caught James' eye and gave him a 'Hey, I tried' look. James merely sighed in response.

The Master smiled as he watched their exchange. Then, with another dramatic flourish, he turned back on the camera feed. Ianto was still sorting and cleaning off the table.

"Now, what do you think he's going to do when he finds- Oh, dear me- that note you wrote, it does appear that he has." With another click the camera zoomed in on Ianto, his forehead crinkling as he read it.

"A TARDIS?" Ianto put the paper down for a moment and shook his head. "No, it can't be."

"Considering Torchwood's charter, and given young Mr. Jones' experiences at Canary Wharf with Torchwood One, his assumption that a TARDIS would mean the presence of the Doctor is rather understandable, is it not?"

"Ianto?" Gwen called out from somewhere off camera in the Hub.

"In the conference room," Ianto replied without looking up from the note.

"Has there been any word from Owen? It'd be nice if," Gwen trailed off as she entered and saw the look on Ianto's face. "Ianto, what's wrong?"

"If the Doctor was here, Jack's Doctor, he'd have told us, right?"

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sure he would have." Gwen saw the paper rustle in Ianto's hand, but she didn't comment on it. "Owen and Tosh on their way then?"

"Yeah, they're bringing the SUV and some samples they collected at that warehouse where we lost Jack and James."

Gwen reached out and laid a hand on Ianto's arm. "We'll find them, Ianto. And we'll bring them home."

The screen clicked off. "Such a touching little scene. Interesting though, that his first assumption was that you were keeping secrets from him, was it not?"

"Yes. Utterly fascinating," Jack said dryly. He crossed his arms, allowing his annoyance to be seen. "Can we move things along now? We both saw the show. We laughed. We cried. Now what?"

"I am surprised you have to ask." The Master gestured to the metal rods in the center of the room.

"Well, it's obvious you managed to plant a few cameras in the Hub. Congratulations on managing to breach our security. That's not an easy task, but by no means beyond a man of your skills. But I fail to see what the point behind this little demonstration was."

The Master shook his head, his disappointment evident. "You really believe that I would go through the effort of acquiring admittance to your facility and only leave cameras in my wake? Captain. You can not be that stupid or naive."

"I'm not." Jack looked over at James. "*We* are not," he corrected himself.

"Have you ever seen one of these before?" the Master asked, holding up a small silver cartridge. "Very effective for the quick and sudden release of a multitude of gases. Care to guess how many of these I hid inside your lovely headquarters? Or which gas I chose to fill them with?" He laughed at the look on their faces. "I thought not. Now, about you two, those rods and the Blinovitch Limitation Effect. I assume I might find you a bit more cooperative now?"

James spoke up, "What exactly do you need from us?"

"Just a little of your energy for my ship. When the rift grabbed the TARDIS out of time and space a significant amount of its power was drained while, at the same time, severing the link to the time vortex therefore preventing the TARDIS from recharging. Now, I could of course use my own energy to facilitate a jump back to a more amiable time and space, but," the Master laughed. "Why would I want to do that when I had such a convenient power source right here in Cardiff available to me?"

"And by power source," Jack said dryly, "You mean me."

"Exactly," the Master replied, stroking his beard. "One can not help but be enthralled by all that lovely vortex energy running through you."

"Right." Jack said, stepping up closer to the Master's viewing booth. "Running through *me*. And I was right here this whole time. Why not just kidnap me and drain my energy? Why go through all this rigamarole opening rift events to pull a future version of me here? It must have used up some of your precious power to manhandle the rift with such precision like that."

The Master waved away Jack's question. "Simple questions from simple minds," he said dismissively. "You have no sense of propriety. There is a certain manner in which things must be done."

"Seems like you were risking a lot though. What if you'd brought an earlier version of me? One that didn't have my special... gifts?"

Laughing, the Master shook his head. "You consider yourself familiar with Time Lords and yet you ask such a thing? I'm almost disappointed in you, I would have thought that you realized I have a better concept of transdimensional physics than that."

"Perhaps you do, but it didn't stop you from getting sucked through the rift now did it?"

"That will be enough!" The Master held up the remote. "It would do you well to remember that the fate of your team lies in my hands, Captain. Do not test me."

"No, I suppose altruism is not a part of your nature."

"It is not something I have ever been accused of, no. Now, if you would be so kind as to take your positions? I think the current Captain Harkness should stand," he pointed to the metal rod on the right side of the room, closer to the computer, "over there and if the future version would stand next to the other rod." He paused, giving the two Captains pointed looks as he waited for them to obey.

Jack looked over at James, who bit his lip and then shrugged. Jack replied with a wry smile and a shrug of his own. They didn't have a much of a choice here, not with the team potentially at risk.

"See, now that wasn't truly all that difficult, was it?" The Master laughed. "Now, each of you place your hand on the dome top of the rod please." Seeing how they hesitated he added, "All the domes will do is gather the energy that is released when you touch and channel it down the rod and to my TARDIS. Come on, Captains, either the easy way or the hard way, your choice." He waved the remote back and forth a few times.

"Fine." Jack walked over to his 'assigned' bronze dome and rested his hand on top. "Let's get this over with." The sooner they powered back up the TARDIS the faster the Master would go back to his own time line; good riddance.

James nodded. "Right," he said, going to the other dome and placing his hand on top of it as well.

"Ready and waiting for your next order, Master," Jack said, not even trying to hide his snide tone.

"Excellent." The Master was smiling a not terribly comforting smile. "Now to test the strength of the Blinovitch Limitation Effect between two fixed points in time and space. I need you to turn and face each other." Jack and James complied, they were standing just over an arm's length apart. "Reach out your free hands, please. But do not touch, not yet." By keeping their elbows bent they stopped just shy of touching one another.

Jack looked at James. "Somehow, I have a feeling this is going to hurt."

James nodded, biting his bottom lip, but didn't say anything.

"Just keep your eyes on me," Jack said, unsure exactly what was bothering his older self or why, "It's okay. We'll get through this. We'll get the team through this. No one is going to die today. Not permanently, anyway."

"Yes, not permanently, anyway," the Master said, laughing. "Isn't that such a wonderful talent of yours? And here I thought Time Lords had the ultimate trick when it came to cheating death with our lovely ability to regenerate. But, even we are limited in that regard, while you will just keep coming back. Again and again and again. And yet, still human." He shuddered, looking slightly disgusted.

"Well, if that wasn't the case, all your hard work here." Jack motioned to the set up of the lab and to James,"would have been for nothing, wouldn't it? You might actually be stuck here with your less than perfectly functioning TARDIS with no convenient power source to jumpstart it. And what would you do then? I know you've read the Torchwood and UNIT files so you have to be aware that there's no Gallifrey with its helpful High Council of Time Lords to render their assistance and therefore you would be left with only one option. The Doctor. And, perhaps I'm mistaken, but something tells me you really would rather not be indebted to him." Jack paused to smile sweetly at the before continuing with a slightly harsher tone. "I'd think you'd be grateful for my immortality."

The Master glared down at Jack, his eyes narrowing and mouth forming a thin line. "Do not attempt to pressure me, Captain. You will not like the result. Now, no more wasting time. Have your hands resting firmly on the domes and reach out and, when I count to three, press your palms together."

With a sigh, Jack and James assumed their positions, one hand on the dome and the other inches from touching their counterpart. "See you on the flip side," Jack said to James with a grin.

"One." The Master ignored Jack's comments. "Two. Three."

The two Captains touched, releasing a blinding light and massive electric discharge that crackled and arced through the air even as the bronze domes fed the power down the metal poles. Their palms, the contact point between them, sizzled for a moment as the electricity coursed through them, causing them to twitch uncontrollably as it fried their synapses. Then the energy exploded and the two men went flying. James was slammed into the wall behind him while Jack crashed into the computer before falling to the floor, flat on his face.

~*~*~*~*~*~

The room smelled like ozone and burnt barbeque. Jack had come back from the dead to the stench of burned flesh before, but it was never a pleasant experience. With a groan he pushed himself off the floor. A quick look let him know that the observation booth where the Master had been issuing his orders from was now dark, the window showing a spider web of light cracks. Still a little dizzy from the death, and staggering a bit, Jack made it to his feet and lurched over to where James lay, sprawled against the wall.

"James?" he called out softly, checking him over as carefully as he could without risking skin to skin contact with the other man. "Jack? Can you hear me?"

James groaned, brow furrowing. He opened his eyes and blinked blearily up at Jack a few times before lifting a hand to shakily rub over his face. After a moment he said, "I don't think I'm much of a fan of the Blinovitch Limitation Effect."

Jack laughed, relaxing a bit as he leaned back on his haunches. "You know something? Neither am I."

"He gone?" James jerked his thumb toward the observation booth.

"Don't know, I'm afraid. He might be. Gone for good or at least off checking on his TARDIS. All I can say is that there's no sign of him at least," Jack said with a shrug. "It was dark up there when I woke up."

"Think he went after the team?"

"Doubt it. All he wanted was to get out of here and back to his proper time line. I don't think he's the type for pointless revenge. At least not yet."

"I hope you're right." Using the wall for leverage, James got himself sitting up. "Did you die too?"

"Oh, yeah. Smashing into the computer. Can't say I'm sorry to see I pretty much destroyed it," Jack admitted with a laugh.

James looked over and saw the broken remnants of the computer and grinned. "Can't say I am either."

"Feeling up for some reconnoitering?"

"What do you have in mind?"

With a smile, Jack said, "What do you say, do you think you have it in you for another jailbreak?"

"Always."

"We know we followed the Master down the hall and into this room, so there has to be a way out. We just didn't have a chance to find it before." Jack pushed off the floor, getting to his feet. "I'd offer you a hand to help you up, but ..." Jack shrugged. "I don't think you'd find it all that helpful, under the circumstances."

"Probably not," James admitted. He used the wall to steady himself as he stood up carefully.

"You okay?" Jack asked after seeing James sway slightly.

James answered with a quick, "I'm all right."

"Of course you are," Jack said with a knowing smile. "Jack Harkness, in all his incarnations, always is. I saw you looking at the fire door we came through earlier. Is there any chance of us getting out that way?"

"Nope." James gave the door a dismissive wave. "Steel frame, metal door, no handle and the hinges are on the other side."

"Well, so much for that exit, then. So, since the Master did manage to escape this room and get into the observation booth we need to figure out how. I didn't hear a TARDIS, did you?"

James closed his eyes, thinking for a moment. "Nope."

"Well, if he didn't use his TARDIS, the Master must have had some sort of physical way of getting out of here and up there. A secret door, or latch or something. We just need to find it for ourselves." Jack looked around, his eye settling on the remains of the computer. "Let's hope that the computer didn't hold any secrets that we desperately needed or we are going to be really out of luck here."

"Let's hope," James agreed.

"Okay, the floor is cement. Solid except for where the rods come out." Jack lay down flat, his cheek on the floor and examined it carefully, looking at it from every angle. "Completely flat, completely even. No lines, no creases, no raised portions. Ergo, no hidden way out through the floor."

"The walls then?"

Jack nodded and rubbed his hands together. "Excellent idea. Let's get act on the road." Jack began running his fingers along the breeze blocks on the wall opposite the computer; tapping every few inches, pressing in some places and scratching in others. James did the same on the back wall near the fire door.

"What if he comes back?" James asked after a few minutes.

"Then he comes back," Jack said matter-of-factly with a shrug as he turned to look at James. "If we're still here we'll find out what he plans for us next. Most likely it'll involve another run at the Blinovitch Limitation Effect. My guess is that right now he's off testing how much power our first attempt managed to feed to the TARDIS. If it was enough it's possible, unlikely, but possible, that he's already gone and happily on his way off creating his own special brand of chaos back in the timeline somewhere."

"Doubt we'll be that lucky." James snorted.

"You never know," Jack retorted. He moved to searching the far wall, fingers flicking quickly, but carefully over the surface. "Could be this whole thing is over and all we have to do is figure a way out of here and then get back to the Hub and get you home. Piece of cake."

"Right." James made a soft noise in the back of his throat. Not quite a laugh, but not a sound of disagreement or dismissal either.

"Okay," Jack conceded, "Piece of something then."

James started examining the wall with the observation booth. "Can't believe we cracked this," he said, his fingers skimming over one of the cracks.

"I've always been told of the powerful properties of touch. I guess ours just has a little more *power* than others."

"If worse come to worse we could always try to break this further. Either hitting or punching it might make it shatter."

Jack rubbed his chin, giving the window a long look. "It's possible, but I'd have to say unlikely. The cracks don't seem quite deep enough and the only way I can think of to make them deeper is for use to touch again, so let's leave that as a last resort, okay?"

"Fine with me. That was not a pleasant experience."

"No, I certainly wouldn't be classifying it as that either. Had worse though," he said with a matter-of-fact tone. James shuddered just a little as he snorted an assent. "Hello? What have we here?" Jack was tugging lightly on the piece of florescent tape that they'd mistakenly thought to be an exit when they'd first entered the room. After a bit of work the strip came off, revealing a switch that was inset slightly so it sat perfectly flush to the wall. "Aha!"

James' head popped up and he walked over to get a better look at the switch. "Should we try it?"

"I don't see why not. I suppose there's a chance it might be a trap and rigged to kill us, but," Jack shrugged, "so?" He reached out-

"No!" James yelled, causing Jack to jerk his hand away. "I'll do it." Seeing the confused look on Jack's face, James clarified, "Just in case. If he somehow figured out a way to kill us for good. To destroy us." He shrugged. "It should be me. You know what they say: always kill the future version instead of the past one. If there's an option, at least."

"I have to admit I'm rooting for the nobody dying option myself," Jack said dryly, but he did move out of the way to let James approach the switch.

James shooed Jack further back and then flicked the switch. A section of the wall, from the corner to the observation booth, slid back and away, revealing a passage and a dimly lit staircase. "Well, that was anticlimactic," James said as he walked through the opening.

"Nothing wrong with anticlimactic. Anticlimactic is good. No explosions with anticlimactic." Jack followed James up the hidden staircase. It was steep, with two doors, one, off to their left off a small landing about halfway up the stairs that probably leading to the observation room, and another at the top of the stairs. "Any preference?"

James tried the handle to first door and it swung open. They'd found the observation room. He cautiously walked up the four steps, poking his head into the room carefully in case there were any hidden traps, but it was barren and explosion-free.

"Anything?" Jack asked.

"Nope. No sign he was hurt when the glass cracked either."

"Any chance he's hiding in there somewhere?"

James ran a hand along the wall, finding a light switch and flicking it on. The room lit up instantly, showing three stark cement walls, the large windowed wall and a flat floor like the one in the lab. "Nope."

Jack sighed. "I don't suppose he happened to leave that remote there then, did he?"

"We ever that lucky?" James asked, stepping back into the hall.

"Nope. Well, we both knew that was too much to hope for," Jack said, dryly. "Then I suppose it's time to see what's behind door number two." He walked up the last steps and opened the door, being as careful and slow as possible, and peered through crack. "Damn it," he said in response to what he saw and flung the door open.

It was the warehouse. It was the damn warehouse. The same damn warehouse that the Master had used to bait the trap. Jack shook his head in disgust. "We were right here, all that time. When Owen and Tosh were searching it. And they never, we never," Jack paused and took a deep breath, rubbing the back of his neck and let out a tired sigh.

"So where's the TARDIS?" James asked softly. "Do you think he left?"

Jack closed his eyes for a moment, holding up a hand, as he tilted his head to listen carefully to something. "You were there," he said, gesturing slowly to where James had lain after being shot dead. "And I was standing... there." He shifted slightly. "And the Master was taunting me from," Jack opened his eyes and pointed to a large packing crate, "Over there."

James quirked an eyebrow at Jack and motioned for him to lead the way. "After you."

"I thought we were supposed to defer to our elders?" Jack joked quietly as he approached the crate he'd pinpointed as the TARDIS.

"Young whippersnapper," James muttered in reply.

"Better than being an old fogey." Jack looked back to see the glare James sent him. "I mean a debonair gentleman, who, while he happens to be older than me, is still in prime of his life?" Jack corrected quickly.

James harrumped half-heartedly.

"Hmmm." Jack reached out and brushed his fingers over the small brass padlock on the lip of the crate. "This is about the size for a TARDIS key, wouldn't you say? You want to have the honor, or should I?"

"Go ahead," James said, with a soft, almost wistful, tone of voice that had Jack stopping in his tracks.

"You? The Doctor?" There was a question that couldn't be asked there. Knowing too much about the future, your future, was a bad thing. Spoilers and all.

"Just. Just. Use your key," James said, motioning to the padlock.

"All right," Jack said carefully, pulling the chain from around his neck and testing the key in the lock. "Fits perfectly."

"Any TARDIS key will open any TARDIS; it's just the way they work," James said with a shrug. "I guess your average Time Lord wouldn't consider stealing someone else's TARDIS."

Jack grinned. "Lucky for us we're not Time Lords then." He turned the key and with a click the padlock unlocked and Jack opened the crate to reveal the console room of a TARDIS. The Master's TARDIS.

It was unlike the TARDIS that Jack was used to, one he didn't quite call home, but still dreamt about just the same. There was no comfortable coral or gentle curves. She was stark. White. Cold. Jack couldn't help but shudder as he walked in. Who could be comfortable surrounded by such sterility?

"I guess just like the outside, the inside can change as well," James said softly.

Jack stepped closer to the console as he spoke, eyes running over the readouts, taking stock of the condition of the TARDIS. "Looks like she's up and running again." With a jerk of his head he asked James to look at the results the TARDIS viewscreen was pulling up.

"Guess we were all the power she needed," James said, running a few of his own tests.

"All that vortex energy running through us? Nor surprising, really." Jack let his fingers trail over the console. "We can't just let him leave though. I know he has a whole history with UNIT and confrontations with the Doctor to do-"

"Not to mention that little incident with us."

"There is that," Jack said softly. "History says there are so many things he has yet to do, but. But I can't. We can't just let him go, despite the dangers of mucking about with the time stream." He looked up at James.

"No," James agreed, equally quiet. He bit his lip and looked up quickly, but failed to meet Jack's eyes. "We can't."

"Excellent." Jack rubbed his hands together. "How do you feel about a little sabotage?"

James nodded. "I'm oddly okay with that."

"I'll start here, rerouting the Multi-Loop Stabilizer. Do you think you can create fluctuations in the Synchronic Feedback Checking Circuit? If we're careful, and we do it right, we can trick the console indicator light to tell the Master that the TARDIS has finished materialization when it hasn't."

"And no more Master," James said, getting to work.

"No more Master." And all those things the Master had done would be undone. Like magic.

They worked in silence, trying to be as quick and accurate as possible. James finished first and walked around to help Jack replace the panel he'd pried up. "Now what?"

Jack looked around and shrugged. "Think we have the time to create a big boom?"

"Help send him off in style?"

"Can't think of a more proper send off, can-"

"Captains," the Master interrupted as he swept into the room from somewhere deeper in the TARDIS. "You were supposed to stay incapacitated, or at least carefully locked away, for at least another seven minutes."

"I'd offer my apologies for creating havoc with your time table, but I think you'd realize I was just mocking you." Jack took a step towards the door behind him, motioning to James with a slight flick of his chin that they should try to make good their escape while they could.

"Oh, I don't think so." The Master pulled his hands out of his pockets. In his right he held Jack's Glock and in his left the remote that would activate the gas canisters he claimed to have hidden in the Hub.

James held his hands out, a sign of surrender. "No. Leave the team out of this." He took a slow step forward, going around the side of the console, bringing himself closer to the Master. "Just tell us what you want from us." He looked back at Jack, then at the exit, his eyes calm, serene. "The records have never painted you as a man who killed indiscriminately, who killed without reason. There's no need to threaten them. The two of us are here. We're cooperating. Now, it looks like our little power boost got the TARDIS back on track. So there is nothing holding you here."

"My TARDIS is back to its full strength," the Master admitted, pursing his lips as he seemed to consider what James had said.

"Then you can just take off," James said, taking another step forward, his fingers tracing along the console. "We won't try and stop you. In fact, we'll even go with you if you insist." He turned to Jack, "Isn't that right, Jack?"

"Oh, absolutely."

The Master did not appear entirely convinced, but he did put the remote back in his pocket, keeping the gun steady on James. He stepped forward and began to start up the TARDIS. "If you would be so kind as to shut the door?"

"My pleasure," Jack said, grabbing the doorhandle.

"Now, Jack!"

Jack threw himself through the door, turning onto his side as he landed. He could see James and the Master grappling for control over the gun as the TARDIS began to shake. "James!" he shouted, but he was too late, the TARDIS door slammed shut behind him and began to dematerialize.

"James." Jack was sprawled on the floor, staring at the spot where the TARDIS had been. "No."

He still hadn't moved by the time the team arrived a few minutes later.

"Jack?" Ianto called carefully, "Are you all right? Where's James?"

Owen knelt down next to Jack and began to examine him. "Looks like he's in shock," he said over his shoulder to Ianto, "maybe died a few times too."

"I'm," Jack blinked a few times and cleared his throat, "fine. I'm fine. What are you doing here?"

"One of Tosh's programs picked up an unusual power surge in this area. Real big one. She didn't think it looked rift related, well, not exactly, but since it was where you disappeared we came to check it out." Owen was trying, unsuccessfully so far, to take Jack's pulse; Jack kept shaking him off.

"It's done. It's all over." He scrubbed a hand over his face and looked over at Ianto and Owen. "The bad guy is gone, probably dead. James too."

"But," Ianto reached over and pulled Jack to his feet, "he's you. He'll come back, won't he? Like he did when we found him after he was pulled through the rift."

"I don't think so." Jack held onto the contract for a moment longer than necessary before breaking it and heading to the door. "If all went according to plan, I don't think so. Not even. Well, suffice it to say there's no way to come back from something like that." He stopped, just outside, and turned his face to the sun. "Seal the building up, Owen. No one goes in or out by order of Torchwood."

Owen pulled out his phone. "Right."

Jack sighed. "Damn it, I just realized. Both Webleys. Gone."

"We'll find you a new one, sir," Ianto assured Jack, guiding him to the SUV with a gentle hand on his back.

"It's a good gun."

"Yes, sir."

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It was a while before things in the Hub went back to normal. A careful sweep revealed the Master's cameras and eight gas vials. Owen was still running tests on what they contained two weeks later, but so far they'd proven to be stubbornly unidentifiable.

Luckily, the rift had been fairly quiet. There were a few Weevil sightings and the incident with the Blandagor Ambassador that no one will ever mention again on pain of poorly prepared coffee, but overall they spent their time cleaning up, categorizing and archiving the piles of rift debris left over from the Master's mess.

Jack hid in his office whenever possible. He'd explained to the others about what had happened when he and James had been captured and they had offered vague hopes that James had survived, especially since the records about the Master's interactions with UNIT remained unchanged. But...

Jack brooded behind his desk. James had been so different. What did the future hold that could change him so much? The fact that he would become so careworn, so quiet and self-conscious; it was hard to fathom. And if, somehow, the Master managed to survive their sabotage, that didn't mean James did. Jack had told the Doctor he didn't want to die, and that was true. For now. But in another hundred years? A thousand? Ten thousand? James never did say when he was from. Maybe going out in fiery dramatic moment, sacrificing your life for another, maybe it was something not to be scoffed at, but welcomed?

It was hard to say.

"Jack," Ianto called from the doorway, after unsuccessfully trying to get Jack's attention by clearing his throat. "This came for you." He held out a parcel.

Jack motioned Ianto to come in. "What is it?" Eyes narrowing, he took the simple, brown paper wrapped box from Ianto's hand and started examining it. In a fine, familiar hand was written '*Property of Captain Jack Harkness*'

"Don't know. It was left in the tourist center. I was behind the curtain for maybe a minute, and the box was there when I got back."

"CCTV show anything?"

"Nope, I checked."

Jack gave Ianto a long look. "And you scanned it?"

"Of course." Ianto seemed almost horrified that Jack might question him about that.

"Then how do you-"

"Look, Jack, just open it. Trust me."

"Ianto."

"Please." Ianto handed Jack the brass letter opener off the desk.

Carefully, Jack began opening the box. The brown wrapping paper came off easily enough, revealing a note taped to the box. *'Ianto, make him open it or I'll tell him where you hide the extra-special coffee beans.'*

"What's this about coffee beans?" The handwriting was the same as that on the outside.

"Nothing for you to worry about, sir," Ianto said quickly. "But the handwriting."

"Yeah. It's mine." His voice didn't quite shake, but he was having difficulty reining in his emotions. With a deep breath, Jack opened the box, revealing a finely carved, velvet lined storage unit for the two Webleys it contained. "He could have kept them," Jack said softly. "Mementoes."

"Looks like James not only survived, but figured out a way to return them to you. I guess, more than anyone, he knew what they mean to you. And besides, this way he'll still have them when you catch up with him. I mean, when you turn into him. When your time line meets up to where his time line. No, when. I mean..."

Jack laughed, standing up and walking over to Ianto. "I believe it was the famed author Douglas Adams who said 'Time is an illusion. Lunchtime doubly so.' If this experience has taught me anything it's taught me that. What do you say, in the mood to split a pizza?"

