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Old Horizons, New Skies

by lorannah

Torchwood | PG-13 | Jack/Ianto, Jack/OMC | 31,000 words | language and a hint of sex

During a fight with a figure from his past Jack is transported to a parallel Earth - faced with alternate versions of his Torchwood teams, both old and new, he begins to wonder whether Torchwood only ever ruins people's lives. Can he avoid drawing them all back in to the danger and madness again? And will he get home?

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PROLOGUE

“Jack?”

Ianto fumbled with the headset, dragging it out from under a pile of paperwork and swinging one of Tosh’s keyboards into reach. The desk was a mess... the whole Hub was a mess.

“Jack?” He asked again.

“Got anything for me?” Gwen’s voice crackled through the comm accompanied by the sounds of the SUV’s engine sputtering into life.

“Working on it,” he told her, scrolling through the programmes. At least two dozen of them were running and the whole system looked as if it were slowly imploding under the strain.

“I’m going to kill Jack when I find him.”

There wasn’t even a pause. “Come on, Ianto, you know you wouldn’t have me any other way,” Jack said, slightly breathless.

“That’s a position I’m definitely reconsidering.” Ianto couldn’t quite suppress a smile.

“Grrr... don’t distract me, we can reconsider positions later. Extensively.”

“When you two have quite finished,” Gwen interrupted, “What the hell’s going on, Jack?”

“Ah, you know, chasing a sexy alien – just how I like it.” Jack sounded tense.

They’d got back to the Hub about ten minutes before to find all the security systems down and an alien rooting through their stuff. Messily, Ianto thought with annoyance as he finally found the right programme amidst the wreckage of the computer.

“Who is he, Jack?”

Jack didn’t answer, which probably shouldn’t have surprised them; Jack was still terrible at talking about his past. And whoever it was was definitely from the past... or the future, depending on how you looked at it. He had been wearing a Time Agency wrist band – which, from Ianto’s perspective, was more or less a sign of impending doom.

Seconds after they’d appeared the alien had vanished with a grin and a wink and Jack had followed, after a sudden frenzy of button pushing and a muttered ‘*Sorry, Doctor.*’

What was it about the other Time Agents that always made Jack run off, leaving the rest of them behind? Ianto tried to ignore the thought that it wasn’t just Time Agents.

“Jack?” Gwen asked again. “We know you know him.”

“He’s called Jai,” Jack said after a moment.

“They’re by the castle, Gwen,” Ianto told her, having managed to narrow the search boundaries to focus just on the wrist bands energy. The two dots blinked out of existence for a second and reappeared. “No, wait, they’re back by the docks. Roath Dock, by Old Clipper Road.”

“On my way.”

“You kids following me?” Jack asked, over the sound of pounding footsteps.

“Glad to hear you’re still with us,” Ianto told him, blandly. “Feel free to tell us what’s happening at any point.”

“Wait!” Jack called, but it definitely wasn’t aimed at them.

There was the noise of a struggle. And the sound of a gun shot.

“Jack!” Gwen shouted.

But they were just greeted by silence, and then suddenly an unfamiliar voice:

“Got me again, Jack?”

The ear-piece was suddenly alive with a high-pitched feedback squeal that ripped through Ianto’s head. He squeezed his eyes shut against the pain, white lights dancing across the back of his eyelids.

“Fuck,” Gwen swore.

The noise stopped as abruptly as it had started and he forced his eyes open again. At first he didn’t know what he was seeing on the computer screens and then he could do nothing but stare at it in horrified comprehension.

“Jack?” Gwen was asking. “For fuck’s sake, Jack, where are you? Ianto, what’s going on?”

“He’s gone... they’re both gone.”

“What?”

“There’s no signal. They’re not in Cardiff any more.”

MONDAY

There was something about the light that crept through Jack's eyelids that screamed hospital room. He lay with his eyes closed for a while longer, not quite wanting to face it. He really fucking hated hospital rooms.

When he finally forced himself to open them, it took approximately two seconds to confirm his hypothesis. All it really took was one look at the ceiling. There was a particular white paint that they used in the hospitals that didn't seem to exist anywhere else. He was almost willing to believe that the rift had dumped a load of alien paint somewhere in the NHS and they'd just decided to make the most of it.

If the ceiling hadn't given it away, the fact that he was in one of those horrible itchy hospital gowns would have.

At least he had a private room.

Although that did beg the question about where Jai had ended up.

He sighed; no time for that now. Better make the most of it, he thought, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He tested his legs for a second, but they seemed to be fine and in seconds he was searching the room.

His clothes were missing. Which was annoying. And a little bit worrying; it had taken months, and Tosh's particular brand of genius, to make his clothing practically indestructible.

Finally, giving up on his last hope that his coat might have been lurking under the bed, he pressed the call button and tried to strike an impressive pose – not an easy feat in a hospital gown, but if anyone could manage it, it was definitely Captain Jack Harkness.

As it was, the nurse looked slightly less impressed than normal, but that was still something he could work with.

"I know it's hard to resist getting me out of my clothes but you could have waited until I was awake. Much more fun. For both of us," Jack said just resisting adding a wink.

"You shouldn't be out of bed," the nurse replied with such a sense of utter disdain that Jack was, for a moment, completely floored.

"Well, I'm fine, no need to take up vital space. If you could just point me in the direction of my clothing..."

The nurse raised an eyebrow and, with an overly dramatic sigh, picked up the clipboard on the end of his bed.

“Mr Harkness,” she said in the tone of the long suffering, “Our notes say that you’re to stay here overnight. Despite either of our feelings on the matter, it’s neither of our places to disagree with the doctors, so if you could just get back into your bed, go to sleep and leave those of us with work to do, to get on with it.”

“Look, Nurse...” Jack paused for a second to read her badge, he was doing his best to remain charming, “Wilson, I’m with Torchwood so if you could just tell me where...”

“Torchwood?” She asked.

“There’ll be someone here who knows who we are, if you want to check with...”

“Mr Harkness...”

“It’s Captain Harkness.”

“Mr Harkness, I don’t have time for this, go to sleep, dinner will be along shortly. There will be jelly.”

~*~*~*~*~

He’d had to flirt his way through five staff members to find someone with enough free time to track down his stuff. It was true what they were saying; the NHS was definitely overworked and understaffed. He was going to have to put that down as the reason he’d only, disappointingly, had two phone numbers pressed into his hand.

Also, the overworking, might explain why his clothing had mysteriously been stored in an office.

“Thanks, sweet cheeks,” Jack winked at the blushing medical student and started to root through his clothing.

He dressed quickly, but paused for a moment as he strapped his Vortex Manipulator on, flicking it open. It was dark, only a dim light holding any promise of life. He pressed one of the less dangerous buttons experimentally, receiving a not very promising, ‘Fzzzt...’ in response.

Oh well. It looked like he was going to have to spend a few more restless nights fiddling with it.

When he finally found his comm., it wasn’t looking much better, but hopefully...

It whined lowly as he switched it on, the familiar sign of poor reception.

“lanto?” He tried. “Gwen?”

It was no good.

“Don’t suppose I could borrow your mobile?”

"Of course," the student, Beth, smiled and pulled it from her back pocket. "Err... just don't tell anyone I was carrying it with me."

It took a moment for the mobile to switch on, and the annoying tune that heralded it was still alive surprisingly loud in the quiet, still darkened room. Beth was biting her lip nervously, gazing through the doors glass window.

"Nurse Wilson might come," Beth murmured, "This is her office. I'll keep watch."

Jack dialled Gwen's number quickly, as Beth slipped from the office.

It rang four times and then Gwen answered.

"Hello," she answered, slightly breathless.

"Fat lot of good you two are," he told her, "Can't even track me down in a hospital."

"Errr..."

"Did you manage to catch Jai?"

"What?" Gwen asked, sounding confused.

"Who is it?" Jack heard Rhys ask.

"Don't know, some American."

"Gwen, what..." Jack started but he could hear Rhys talking again.

"You got another man, Gwen Cooper? Whoever it is, tell him to bugger off, I've not finished with you yet."

Gwen giggled.

"Get off," he heard her squeal, "This is why we can't live together."

And then she was back on the phone again. "Sorry, sorry," she gasped, "Can I ask who this is?"

Jack cut the call and stood, silent for a moment. Gwen had lived with Rhys for years. Something was very wrong. Outside he suddenly heard Beth start talking, trouble had obviously arrived.

"Nurse Wilson," Beth said quickly, "I've been waiting for you, I wanted to clarify something about the treatment of PCOS and I'd ask the doctors but they're useless, so I..."

"Have you seen the patient who was in Room 4D?" Nurse Wilson interrupted her sharply.

Jack lowered the phone slowly. And stared at the screen. The date was clear.

MONDAY

09/05/2005

“The American,” Nurse Wilson clarified and Jack looked up sharply.

Fuck.

“Erm... don’t think so,” Beth lied.

The nurse swore, inventively.

“Damn lot of use you lot are. He wasn’t supposed to leave the hospital, the police asked us to keep an eye on him. See if you can go find him.”

The phone began to ring again. It was probably Gwen calling back, trying to find out who he was. Tracking him down.

It barely took a second to drop the phone, force the window open and fling himself outside. The door had only just begun to open.

~*~*~*~*~*~

“Who is this?” A thoroughly angry, surprisingly female, very Welsh, voice asked.

“Err...” Gwen said, “Sorry... An American just called me from this phone. But I think they must have got cut off...”

Or cut me off on purpose, she thought.

There was a pause at the other end of the phone. Somehow pointed. It spoke volumes. Someone was in trouble, or going to be.

“The American is gone,” the woman told her a moment later.

“Right. Sorry to have bothered you.”

Gwen thumbed her phone off and dropped it back in her bag.

“No luck?” Rhys asked, leaning in close and still looking smug from the tickle attack. She shook her head and kissed him quickly on the lips.

“You said it was an American bloke? That should narrow it down, if you know them,” Andy asked.

“I don’t think I know...” Gwen started, but Rhys interrupted.

“Well, you know, Gwen. There’s always some pathetic, lovesick man throwing himself at her.”

It was an oddly sharp comment, greeted only with silence for a moment. Andy took a deep gulp from his lager. He looked uncomfortable, huddled on a stool on the other side of the Pub table.

“So,” he said a second later, “You’re thinking about moving in together?”

“Errr...” Gwen paused uncomfortably. Andy had, only last week, suggested that maybe they could move in together and save some money. Personally she’d thought it was a terrible idea, Rhys would have been round all the time and him and Andy would probably end up killing each other. Plus Andy was a terrible cook. She’d fobbed him off with a rubbish excuse and had been feeling guilty about it ever since.

“Yeah, we’ve been talking about it,” Rhys said.

“Rhys has mostly been talking about it,” she corrected and decided to change the subject quickly.

“So what do you think was going on at work earlier?” she asked Andy.

“God knows, looked important though.”

“What’s this? Something actually happening in Cardiff?” Rhys asked, with a chuckle. Sounding much more himself.

“They brought some kid in this morning, covered in a blanket,” Gwen told him.

“Could be a celebrity,” Andy suggested.

“God knows,” Gwen agreed. “I’d like to know what whoever it is has done though”

“Didn’t you see his face when they released him?” Rhys asked. “Or shouldn’t there be something written in, I don’t know, the arrests book or something?”

“Nope. He hasn’t been released and they’ve not charged him with anything yet, not publically anyway. They’ve got him locked in one of the cells at the end of the corridor and it’s all locked off. Only the top brass are even let in there.”

“Yeah,” Andy grinned, “They wouldn’t want us normal drones getting near our special guest. I heard they were calling someone in from one of the special branches.”

“Well,” Rhys moaned, “Now you can’t just leave it there. I’m expecting you both to go super sleuthing for me tomorrow.”

~*~*~*~*~

It was a normal busy evening in Cardiff. The streets filled with enthusiastic drunks. A normal busy evening in Cardiff nearly five years ago.

Which probably meant that Jai's wrist strap still had time travel capabilities and Jack had got caught up in the over wash.

Jack had been wandering without much purpose since he'd escaped from the hospital, though his feet, as always, had led him back to the Plass.

Another thing to worry about.

Not only did he have to avoid himself (which, as there were now three copies of himself in Cardiff, was going to be difficult enough), but he had to track Jai down, who could be more or less anywhere in time or space, which might be near enough impossible.

Before Jai had appeared again, he'd managed to re-jig his own wrist strap enough to reactivate the teleporter, but there was nothing he could do about the time travel, not for another 167 years at least... make that 171 years now.

There was no denying it, he needed to go to Torchwood. Torchwood One. They'd have the knowledge and technology he needed. And, annoyingly, the easiest way to do that was to talk to himself. The danger of Torchwood One discovering there were two of them, otherwise, wasn't worth thinking about. Yvonne Hartman would have a field day.

Of course talking to himself came with a whole other basket of problems. And not the ones psychiatrists usually worried about.

May, 2005.

It had just been him and Suzie then. Yvonne had still been holding onto the purse strings like a rabid Rottweiler and refusing them enough funding to pay another person. It had been another two months before Suzie had found Toshiko.

God. Toshiko was still in prison. She was still alive. So was Owen.

And that was the problem.

He could save them -- warn his past self about Grey or tell himself not to tempt them into Torchwood in the first place. Save them all that pain. But it was complicated. It always was.

And then there was Suzie. He knew how that ended. If he didn't tell himself then all those people would still die and it would be his fault. But if they stopped her now, then Gwen would never find them.

What was he supposed to say? Yeah, Suzie, bit twisted, but you'll want to keep her around because after her you get Gwen and she's bloody marvellous.

And I need her.

But he'd felt that way about Suzie once. And maybe he could save her now. But how was he supposed to choose between them? And how could he face Suzie, knowing what she'd become... What he'd make her.

It was like when Alice and Charlie had dug him up. He'd known that six years later there'd be the earthquake and they'd all die and he could have stopped it. Made sure they'd all be safe. But he hadn't. He'd said nothing.

And they'd still died, just as they had before, but now it was his fault. The responsibility fell on him heavily. It always did.

Of course all that was just, he told himself angrily, trying to find excuses to not do what he had to.

There was nothing else for it. He needed to go to the Hub.

TUESDAY

The Hub was gone.

No, that wasn't right, gone suggested that it had been ripped away leaving only hints that it had once been there. But there were no hints. No empty spaces suggesting its loss. It was as if it had never existed.

Ianto's Tourist Information Centre wasn't there. Or rather it was elsewhere. Probably, from a strictly tourist point of view, in a much better location, near the centre of the Plass.

The invisible lift was neither a lift nor invisible anymore.

Jack had fought and flirted his way into the basements of the nearby buildings and then found he could get no lower down. There was no where left to go. The Hub had brooded beneath Cardiff for over a hundred years and now there was nothing left.

Jai couldn't have managed that.

Hadn't.

The Hub had been there. If Jai had changed something massive enough to alter that, there'd have been ripples in time stretching back centuries. Plus, Jack would have been having that weird sea sickness feeling that he always got around major chronological anomalies.

Jack dropped down onto a bench. Lost. He wasn't sure what to do now. Other than head to London and throw himself on the mercies of Yvonne. Never a pleasant prospect.

And that was if Torchwood London was still there.

He'd spent so long searching that dawn had broken around him and the city was bursting into a different, mostly sober, form of life.

He watched as the street sweepers tidied away the debris of the night before and shops and cafes began to open and found his eye drawn to a booksellers on the other side of the street. That's what lanto would do. Research. He got to his feet and headed quickly across the road.

They worked hard to keep Torchwood out of the public eye, but enough small, uncertain mentions crept through that he should be able to check that the London branch was still around. If nothing else a history of Cardiff might throw some light on things.

He smiled at the boy behind the counter with a small nod and started to explore the shop.

It took him ten minutes to find the conspiracy theory books. There weren't as many as them as he'd expected. Then again, some shops were dismissive about that sort of thing. Which normally, for him, was a good thing.

He flicked through a few, looking for anything that might have Torchwood hidden within it.

Nothing.

It was only after the third book that he realised that there wasn't simply no mention of Torchwood, there was nothing about aliens. No Roswell. No UFOs. No abductions. Not even a book about fucking crop circles, and they were a nightmare to cover up. If the normal police thought they had trouble with graffiti, they should try dealing with it when it was the size of a field.

He scanned the shelf again.

There wasn't a single book on aliens.

And now that he was thinking about it, when he'd been searching the shelves earlier, he hadn't spotted a science-fiction section either.

He headed straight to the desk. The boy wasn't paying attention, he was flicking idly through a gossip magazine.

"Hey," Jack said with a warm grin, "I was hoping you could point me in the direction of the science fiction books."

"The what?" The boy asked. He didn't look too bright, or too awake for that matter.

"You know – stories about aliens... space ships." The boy gave him a blank look. "Time travel," Jack tried again.

"Oh, you want fantasy – back of the shop, left hand side."

It only took a minute for Jack to scan the measly two shelves reserved for the fantasy section and realise that the aliens were missing here as well. There were a few sci-fi books squeezed in between the books of dragons and wizards – he spotted The Time Machine – but most of them, even the classics, were gone.

He had an unsettled feeling in the bottom of his stomach.

Either Torchwood here were frankly outstanding or something was very wrong.

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Suzie had the odd sensation that it could see her, even through the one-way mirror. It's eyes, it's horrifyingly human eyes, were fixed upon where she stood. It was unnerving.

Everything was unnerving. And fascinating.

It was huddled in a corner of the interrogation room, one arm wrapped around its legs. Human arm, human legs, human eyes. Almost. From a distance you might have mistaken it for someone like you. Even up close you might have doubted your eyes or your sanity.

She moved across the small observation room to gain a different angle. Its eyes followed her.

It was all angles; every limb, thin and long, everything accentuated. Its shoulder blades, its cheekbones, its wrists – everything bony and sharp. And where those bones reached the surface, they jutted through the skin. Short, flat plates of different sizes, almost leaf shaped, like an open pine cone. Along its shoulders, the outlines visible against his t-shirt, the bones of its hand, its cheeks, its nose. Bones vivid in reds and blues.

They'd said, the medics and scientists, that the colours weren't real, that it was paint or dye. Something they didn't quite recognise. A makeup they didn't know. And it was almost believable, almost, that it was all just makeup, an elaborate disguise.

But Suzie had seen the scans and nothing on Earth was built like that.

DSI Hopkins stuck his head around the door, his eyes drawn to the mirror and the figure, his curiosity plain. He had wanted to talk to it like it was a human, which was probably why the commander had decided she should head the case, whilst he continued with the spate of recent murders they'd been investigating.

She'd give him that he'd managed to hide his annoyance well.

"Yes?" Suzie prompted him, breaking through his distraction.

"Just had a call from the hospital," he told her. "The man he was found with has disappeared."

She saw it smile from behind the glass.



~*~*~*~*~

After the fifth book shop with no mention of aliens Jack was starting to lose hope.

He needed coffee -- specifically he needed Ianto's coffee, but Starbucks would have to do. It was amazing, he thought, how things, even minor things like coffee, could come to underpin your life. You came to rely on them. To need them.

Like the existence of aliens... aliens and Torchwood. It was such a fundamental part of his life that he couldn't begin to comprehend what his life could be without them.

Wherever here was, he clearly hadn't *just* gone back in time.

There was a queue and some sort of argument as he entered the coffee shop. But it wasn't as if he had anywhere to go now.

He glanced at the Starbucks menu, nothing too different and the currency was listed in pounds and pennies. Prices which he sometimes still found ridiculous, it was one of those things that made him feel old and out of place.

The Time Agency only had one thing to say about parallel dimensions – avoid them. Make that two things. The other was, 'nice to have known you'. It had been one of the accepted dangers of taking the Wrist Strap, and people had got lost that way, or presumably that way. They'd never returned to talk about it. They'd all learnt to be careful.

It must have been the wrist straps. They'd both activated them together. Jack had been holding Jai, his hand half-wrapped around the boy, buried in the collar of his jacket and he'd been going to take

them both to the cells. Jai must have been trying to escape. Two straps, two destinations – it had been enough. Enough to tear a crack in the walls. And who knew where Jai had ended up, he could still be there, wreaking havoc through Cardiff, his own Cardiff. He hoped that Gwen and Ianto could handle Jai. Even Jack, the old young Jack, had struggled with him sometimes.

Perhaps it was the thought of Ianto that finally allowed the voice to filter into his consciousness. He looked up quickly. It was him. Young and whole, untouched by aliens and dressed in a green apron. It was Ianto. Arguing with a flushed customer. A nervous supervisor was hovering nearby, clearly wondering whether she should step in.

“I don’t care what you say you did,” the other man was saying, “You definitely didn’t go through all the proper steps – I know, I can taste it.”

Ianto gave the man a look. It was a familiar look, sort of, though not quite right. Like the times that Jack had tracked down his favourite authors, the books he remembered from the future, and charmed his way inside their first drafts and mostly realised that they still had a lot of work to do. It was a look in progress.

“Yes, you’re quite right, Sir,” Ianto said stiffly. “Let me sort it out for you.”

The man hesitated for a moment, obviously taken by surprise and then handed the cup over. Taking it, Ianto pulled the plastic lid from its top and then slowly and deliberately, never breaking the man’s gaze, picked up a dirty wet rag from behind the counter and squeezed it, one handed, over the cup.

“That should suit you better,” he said as the supervisor pushed past him, speaking at the same time.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” she turned to Ianto.

“You don’t even have to say it,” he told her, ripping the apron over his head and thrusting it into her hands. Then he was pushing past the queue, his face tight and angry and hurt. For a moment he was beside Jack, pushing past him, his hand resting for a moment on his shoulder but he didn’t even look at him. Then he was gone.

Barely thinking, Jack turned to follow him.

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He followed him through Cardiff. Ianto didn’t notice, withdrawn inside himself. It was strange seeing this version of him. It was a stark reminder -- no, a stark question – what would Ianto have been like if Torchwood hadn’t caught him?

It wasn’t so much that Jack thought he would find the answer by following him. It was more a longing to cling to this one familiar thing.

He paused for a moment as they reached the hospital. This probably wasn't a good idea, but Ianto wasn't heading for A&E. Instead Jack followed him into one of the long term care units, stopping outside as he closed the door of a private room behind him.

The room had a large glass window, with a blind giving those inside the illusion of privacy. Jack could see through it easily. As the door closed, a dark haired girl twisted in surprise, her eyes startled. She was sat beside a bed where a man lay wreathed and imprisoned in wires and machines.

"I thought you weren't finishing until three?" Jack heard her say.

"Work let me go early," Ianto told her. Moving forward he touched the man's hand, a brief, soft touch as if to reassure himself that it was still warm. "Where's Mum?"

Rhiannon, Jack thought, Ianto's sister. That was who this was. And that meant the man must be their father. She stared at him for a second, hesitation in the gaze and then she looked down.

"I told her to go home, she's exhausted... she needs time away."

Ianto just nodded.

"What have the doctors said?"

"There's no difference, nothing's changed."

Ianto wasn't watching her. He was staring at his father, his back to Jack, and if he had been looking at her perhaps he would have seen the lie. Jack was and saw it. He had never met Ianto's family -- he was fascinated, and he saw the hurtful lie so clearly on her face that it felt for a second like he had been punched in the stomach.

"Ianto," she said softly and he looked up, his shoulders tensing. She wouldn't look at him or couldn't. "Mum thinks... I mean, we decided, we think we should let him go. They're going to turn the machines off on Thursday."

The silence was horrible. They were both frozen. The only noise the hiss and whine of the machines, the only movement the soft rise and fall of the man's chest.

"You can't," Ianto said at last.

"Please don't make this difficult."

"Is that what this is about? He's gotten too difficult?"

"Ianto..."

"You don't just give up on someone. How can she do this? She's his wife, she's supposed to love him."

“She does,” Rhiannon said, “It’s... it’s... she’s not been his wife for years, not really, you don’t understand, you never listen to her – she’s just his carer now.”

“So it’s easier just to get rid of him? What, so she can move on? Find someone else?”

“You think this is easy? We can’t carry on like this, lanto, we can’t keep waiting.”

“He will get better.”

“He’s not going to get better, we always knew this would kill him one day, it was only ever going to be downhill, you have to accept...”

“Excuse me, sir,” a voice said behind him, and Jack turned to find a detective and two police officers standing behind him. For a moment he’d forgotten everything else that was happening. “We’d appreciate it if you would come with us to the station, to help with our enquiries.”

Jack thought for a second about running or fighting but he glanced back at the room. Rhiannon had stood, she was in front of lanto one hand reaching out to him. He pushed it away. If he did anything, they’d hear and Jack couldn’t do that.

He nodded his acceptance.

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Jack was hustled quickly through the police station. He thought that he caught sight of Gwen, dark haired and curious, behind a desk, but a moment later he had been hurried into an interview room and pushed into a chair.

One of the police officers was left with him, stood in front of the door.

“So what would I have to do,” Jack asked, “to get a cup of coffee?”

The man ignored him and, sighing, Jack settled down to wait.

When his interrogator finally arrived, with the detective from the hospital, it was the last person he had expected. It was Suzie.

“My name’s DI Smith,” the man said as they both took the seats opposite his, “and this is DCI...”

“Costello,” Jack said before he could finish.

Suzie’s eyes narrowed slightly, a tiny gesture, but otherwise she didn’t react. She was too good for that.

“You were found yesterday morning,” she said, her voice calm, “unconscious besides Roath Dock. There were signs of massive water inhalation, from which thankfully and surprisingly you seem to have made a thorough recovery. Can you tell me what happened to lead up to that event?”

Suzie should have been in London. That had been the hardest thing when he'd been sneaking her out from under Torchwood One's noses, convincing her to move to Cardiff.

He shrugged.

"I don't remember."

"You remember nothing about the night before?" Smith asked.

"No, it must have been a good night. I was probably drunk. Maybe I fell into the dock."

"We tested your blood, there was no alcohol in your system," Suzie told him.

"Isn't that against my civil liberties?" Jack queried.

"We're perfectly within our rights to follow what procedures we deem necessary if we believe the safety of the nation may be under threat."

"Under threat from what? A drunk man who can't keep his footing?"

"Except you weren't drunk, which begs the question why you aren't telling us where you were the night before last."

"I don't remember. Maybe I hit my head, got amnesia."

"You were also found with another individual," Smith said and Jack could not hide the slight tensing of his shoulders. Jai had come with him. "What can you tell us about him?"

"Nothing, I don't know who you're talking about."

It was not a very convincing lie.

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"Are you sure about this?" Hopkins asked and Suzie made a mental note to find out who had told him what she had been planning and make their life uncomfortable for the next few weeks.

"He's been lying to me," Suzie told him but refused to say anymore, she wasn't going to justify herself. This wasn't his case.

"What if he isn't? You questioned him for over an hour..." He was gazing at Harkness now, hands in his pockets, his face odd. It took Suzie a moment to place his expression – protective, possessive; the look he reserved for the special members of his team. It was the sort of look that Suzie only knew second-hand.

"It might not be safe for him in there," he added.

“Do you know him?” Suzie asked, suddenly suspicious.

“What? No. I just don’t think we should let somebody in our custody get hurt.”

Her hand clenched slightly, she wasn’t going to show weakness on this.

“We’d learn something from that too. Whatever his reaction, we’ll learn something.”

“Just as long as we don’t have a breach of protocol, that’s the last thing we need now.”

Well, Suzie thought angrily, you’d know all about that, Detective Superintendant Hopkins. He had no idea how much she knew about his out of office activities.

~*~*~*~*~

They shoved him into the room unceremoniously. He glanced around quickly -- it was just another interview room. He wasn’t sure how many times he could take being asked the same questions again.

“For fuck’s sake,” he swore in the direction of the one-way mirror.

“Hello, Jack,” Jai said.

Jack turned quickly. He hadn’t noticed Jai before, huddled in a corner, his arms wrapped around himself. He was shivering slightly, his jacket gone, his hand shaking. He tilted his head slightly and smiled. A familiar, secret smile. A gesture that he’d used on Jack many times before. It still made Jack’s breath catch in his throat.

The Time Agency had been always been liberal with its hiring policies -- as long as you were mostly humanoid, attractive, clever, dangerous and had a healthy disregard for morals, you were in. And Jai had all of those things. He was beautiful.

For a moment Jack wasn’t sure what to do and then he pulled off his long coat and threw it to him without a word.

“I’m not that cold,” Jai told him pulling the coat on anyway without getting to his feet, it was too long on him, pooling around him and loose on his slender frame. “Hungry, mostly.”

“They haven’t fed you?” Jack asked, turning away and sitting at the desk, his head in his hands.

“No, maybe they don’t know the proper etiquette or they’re worried I’m allergic or they’re not sure what to serve a... Have you noticed, Jack, there aren’t any aliens here. None. They don’t even know the word, they didn’t have a name for what I was. It’s all different in these weird, little strange ways...”

“They don’t seem to have much science fiction, I’ll give you that,” Jack admitted.

“Big ways too. Do you know what I found out? Pompeii didn’t happen here. I didn’t even know that aliens were involved-- you’d have thought we would have noticed, but then, we were busy. Do you remember? That’s where you first fucked me. You’d left John behind, not told him, he was furious... How long had it been, a month? No, just three weeks, I think...”

Jack ignored him. The memory sort of hurt. Anyway, Jai was just talking for the sake of it. He always talked too much. It made him seem warm and bright and vibrant, drew people to him. It hid that he was cruel and vicious and driven by zealous self-belief.

“They tied me up Jack,” Jai continued after a short pause. “On one of those big tables, just like Roswell, examined me... cut me. Wasn’t much fun.”

Jack looked at him then, swamped in the coat and childlike. There was something unfamiliar in him, his eyes reflective and broken and Jack felt a surge of... protectiveness. Fuck, it had been thousands of years and he still wanted to protect him.

And there was the yearning. He ached for him.

He pushed the feeling aside.

“Does your wrist strap work?” he asked instead. Jai shook his head.

“Fuck,” Jack said again. “Why the hell are you here?”

“Call me Jai,” he said.

“Don’t play games with me.”

“Don’t you remember Jack? They gave me to you and told you to find me a name, but you kept putting it off. You ignored me for days. Then you swore and said there weren’t enough J names so I might as well be Jai.”

Jack turned away, took three short steps to the other wall and just resisted hitting it.

“John said you should have called me Jeremiah -- ‘God will uplift,’” Jai continued, “but you said with what we were doing, the most we could hope was that God would ignore.”

They’d given Jai to him and John when things had started getting difficult between them, a challenge to keep their best team together – a present, a child. Though, even at sixteen there had been little childlike about him. Of course, that plan had backfired.

“Please, call me Jai.”

“Jai, why did you come here? Why couldn’t you just leave me alone?”

"I want it back. The Agency, I need it. And I thought, when John told me where you were, I thought maybe if I could talk you into coming back, then we could save..."

Jack turned back to him.

"You think I would ever go back there after what they did?"

"We could change..." Jai started, but Jack wasn't finished.

"They stole two years of my life!"

"Stole? Jack you begged us to take it, to take away the memories – you said we'd ruined your life and that you couldn't stay if you remembered what had... turns out, you couldn't stay even when you didn't."

It might be a lie. Jai had always lied. They all had. It felt a little like truth. Painful. What did it really change, it was all a long time ago now, his decision had been made then, this future had been forged. The good and the bad.

But that was the question, wasn't it? If he could go back and take a different path – never run away, never meet the Doctor, just one life, one adventure – would he do it?

The idea of not meeting the Doctor, of not meeting Martha or Rose, Ianto and Gwen, Tosh, Owen... That alone would normally have decided his answer – he'd managed to build families on this strange little planet again and again, and no matter how fleeting they were, or how painful, they were something he'd always lacked before. For them he would endure anything.

But then he'd just seen what he did to those families, just seen what Suzie's life could have been like if Torchwood had never found her, never seduced her away. Powerful, successful, surrounded by friends, helping people – not broken and alone and a murderer.

He thought of Owen as he'd first seen him, and of Rose trapped on a parallel earth and of Martha walking the world in darkness – what would they have been like if aliens had never come into their lives? If he hadn't? If the Doctor hadn't?

"Why are you still here?" he asked, pushing the dizzying thoughts aside. "You should have already escaped by now."

Jai laughed softly, though the laugh was oddly halting. "Angry that I'm not following the training? That's not like you, Jack. Maybe I was waiting for you."

Jack waited for the real answer.

Slowly unfolding his arms from around his legs, Jai climbed slowly and unsteadily to his feet, using the wall to his feet. The long coat fell open and Jack saw the t-shirt properly for the first time. It was covered in blood, still wet, he was still bleeding.

“I told you they cut me.”

Jack saw his hand, resting against the wall, clench against a painful spasm and moved forward just in time to catch him as he fell. Jai leant heavily against his chest for a moment, his head resting on Jack’s shoulder. Jai was still the shorter and Jack let his arms settle around him.

“I wouldn’t have been strong enough to get away,” Jai told him pulling back just enough so they could look into each others eyes.

“I’m strong enough,” Jack told him and Jai nodded.

Behind them, Jack heard the key in the lock, the door beginning to open. With his teeth clenched, Jai pulled his arms upwards and let his hands settle over Jack’s ear.

“What are you doing?” Jack heard Suzie say, though it was muffled through the bones of Jai’s fingers, and then Jai clasped him tighter and closed his eyes.

He could feel the sound as it began to steadily thrum through the building, Jai’s hands protecting him.

The building around them shook. From the corner of his eyes Jack saw Suzie fall, her hands tearing at her ears. In a moment she was still, in another moment she would be dead, but in his own arms Jai was suddenly slack, unconscious, his hands falling away from Jack’s ears and the noise gone.

Jack gathered him quickly up into his arms, he was lighter than Jack remembered. He did his best to cover up the blood with his long coat and tucked the boys head deeper into his shoulder, hoping that people would only notice a friend carrying another. It was probably the least conspicuous they could look now.

He carried him through the silent broken police station, stepping over the bodies, carefully not looking at them too closely, in case one of them was Gwen.

~*~*~*~*~

Gwen’s head was pounding. She had vague memories of drinking with Rhys and Andy. That was never going to happen again.

No, that was last night. Hours ago. She’d already had the hangover.

She reached up her hand to rub her head. There was dust in her hair. She forced her eyes open and saw long cracks running along the ceiling. Small streams of dust falling from it.

Gwen levered herself onto her knees, nothing broken at least. Around her the office was in tatters, chairs upturned, files and paper scattered across the floor and the groans of everyone as they righted themselves.

“You alright, sir?” She asked DSI Hopkins, one hand on his shoulder, helping him sit up.

“What happened?” He asked, dazed.

There was the sudden sound of someone coming, from the closed off corridor and Hopkins tensed beneath her hand. He was scared.

“When it comes,” he said, “just run.”

“What?” Gwen asked, but he was already struggling to his feet, his hand reaching for a gun, hung at his side.

He’d almost drawn it when DCI Costello stumbled through, pushing the door open. Her hair was a mess and she was covered in dust, blood seeped from one ear and a bruise was already forming on the side of her face.

“Where are they?” She said.

“They’ve gone?” Hopkins asked, horror in his voice and, yes, excitement. “I warned you... This is your fault.”

~*~*~*~*~

Jack slipped back into the hotel room, making sure that the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign was still on the door and slipping the chain back into place. The lights were still out, only the soft glow from the street lights seeping through the half open curtains.

It was enough light to see that Jai was awake, though he was still led out on the bed, looking tired and hurt, his eyes half shut. Jack moved across to him quickly, dropping the clean towels he’d had to ask for onto the bed.

The old towels had been as grubby as the room looked. All faded pink wallpaper, bare carpet and cheap, bland pictures. It was the only place he could afford with the money in his pocket. He doubted his Torchwood credit card would do any good here.

“How are you feeling?”

“Alright. Tired. Like you’re probably about to do something to me that will hurt,” he said his eyes falling on the sewing kit in Jack’s hand, one of the cheap ones that hotels gave away to forgetful guests.

Jack pulled two small bottles of vodka from his pocket. He’d had to steal them. He pushed one into Jai’s hand.

“Hopefully that will help.”

“I think it might take both,” Jai said with a smile as Jack knelt on the floor beside the bed.

“Afraid I’m going to need this one. You can have whatever’s left.”

He waited until Jai had taken a deep swig of his vodka and as quickly as possible prised the t-shirt away from his bloody skin. Jai hissed slightly, his teeth clenched together.

Jai’s stomach was a mess of blood, Jack couldn’t even see where he should start. Carefully his fingers traced the cuts, settling at last on the place at the top of his hip where they had obviously dug away the flesh to reach the base of the protruding bone and sawed it through, leaving only sharp pale edges behind. There wasn’t much he could do to help it.

Jai was watching him.

“I think they wanted a souvenir,” he said. Jack felt a brief, sudden surge of rage, but bit down on it. He couldn’t afford to lose his head over this or over Jai.

“You always take me to the nicest places, Jack.”

Jack wasn’t sure if he meant Earth or the hotel room. Opening the second vodka bottle, he poured some onto one of the towels and began to clean the blood away from the wounds. Jai winced, his body shifting beneath the cloth. He took another deep drink of his own vodka.

“Come on, Jack,” he said through the pain. “I’m worth better than this. Take me out, get me drunk. Wine me, dine me. Show me a good time. I could do with a good time.”

The wounds were as clean as they were going to get. Carefully he opened the sewing kit. Finding the needle.

“Do you want pink thread or blue?” he asked. Jai just laughed, brokenly.

“Blue,” Jack decided, “It will go better with your paint.”

“Do you like it?” Jai asked.

For a second he didn’t move and then he let his eyes meet Jai’s, they were wet and bright. Jack reached out and stroked the small bones along his cheekbone and Jai smiled, it was tight and pained, but still a smile.

“I like it,” Jack told him and then bent himself back to the task at hand. It took an agonisingly long time to get the needle threaded.

At last it was done. Jack took a deep breath to settle himself. Jai took another drink. Carefully he pressed the needle through the skin, pulling the sides of the cut back together. Compulsively Jai reached out, his hand gripping Jack’s collar at the back of his neck. Steadying them both.

For a while they stayed in silence. The only sounds the sharp intake of Jai's breath every time the needle entered his flesh. Jack worked quickly, eager for this to be over.

Suddenly Jai laughed breathlessly, though there was little humour in it, the sound coming out ragged and pained.

"Now *this* is familiar," he said.

"What?" Jack asked, not really listening, his mind still focused on the wound.

"No I guess you won't remember that. There were some bad things at the end, we got involved with things we shouldn't have. Fighting..." Jai's voice trailed away again.

Jack didn't want to think about it. The Time Agency had always got involved in things they shouldn't have.

Finally he finished. It had felt like it had taken years, though the flashing light on the cheap TV told him it had only really been minutes. They stayed, not moving, silent as Jai's shudders subsided. His hand still buried in Jack's collar, holding him there.

"So, where do you want me to take you out?" Jack asked him at last.

A longer pause.

"Keep me in, Jack. Keep me in."

Jai pulled him forward by the collar until their mouths met. A deep, soft kiss. Familiar and reassuring.

They pulled apart, their faces still close for a second and then Jack stood, pulling away. He saw a brief burst of pain in Jai's eyes, but it only lasted a moment as he moved to the other side of the bed and carefully climbed in beside him.

Jack kissed him then, gently sliding one arm beneath him. Jai's hands found his face and then one slipped down, undoing his shirt and slipping beneath to settle against the skin of his chest. Jack's own fingers stroked the bones on the back of Jai's neck.

It was a long tender kiss, made up of many smaller ones, and when they finally broke apart, Jai's head rested on the crook of Jack's shoulder and he fell asleep.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Suzie stood as tall and straight as she could manage. The side of her face was still throbbing. Beside her Hopkins had regained his composure, his anger hidden again, his careful mask back in place.

"I understand," the chief constable said, "that it was your decision, Detective Costello, to put the prisoners in an unsecure room together."

"It was," she replied.

"Despite the concerns of your superior officer?"

She didn't respond. Hopkins had obviously already told him everything.

"And without any analysis of the possible dangers of such an action."

"I was hoping we might gain vital evidence about the dangers. We had run out of other leads to follow and I thought..."

"Your thinking has allowed a serious potential threat to escape onto the streets of Cardiff."

He waited but she wasn't going to respond again. She shouldn't have said anything before, she'd long since learnt the danger of rising to his bait.

"I've always had my doubts about you, Costello. You're unreliable, unpredictable. You've been here nearly a year and don't seem to have settled in. I'm starting to think that the glowing report you received from London was because they were eager to get rid of you."

She fought down the angry flush that was threatening to emerge.

"All things considered, and following the recent disaster, I think control of the case should be handed to DSI Hopkins. I'll leave it up to him whether he'll keep you as part of his team."

WEDNESDAY

The sun was warm but it was the soft breath against his neck that woke Jack up. The heavy weight in his arm was reassuring. He didn't often get to wake up like this. Ianto was always up early, coffee ready and waiting for Jack. Except when they were woken by the sound of the alarms.

"Sleeping late," he murmured softly and Jai hummed, a soft pleased sound, lips pressed against Jack's neck.

His eyes opened. There were cobwebs on the hotels ceiling. He pulled in a deep breath, crushing down the disappointment. Jai kissed him on the nape of his neck.

"Not sleeping late, just waiting impatiently," Jai kissed him again, on the lips this time.

"How are you feeling?" Jack asked him, rolling over onto his side. The bed beneath them was still covered with splatters of blood.

"Better," Jai told him. "You know me, I heal quickly. You and me both. I thought you'd drowned. I thought, maybe, John was lying. About you."

"You talked to John," Jack replied.

"I wanted his help," Jai admitted. "He just laughed. Told me the Agency was over. Dead."

"Maybe its better that it is," Jack told him.

Jai paused.

"You're different," he said at last, "softer."

Jack didn't reply, waiting for him to continue.

"I know a lot of what we did wasn't good, Jack. But the Agency was all I ever had. You know how humans look at people like me, like we're nothing, but then they didn't anymore. Not when they saw this."

His finger ran along the edge of Jack's wrist strap.

"They wouldn't have if they'd really known what we were doing."

They lapsed back into silence and even though they were still led close it felt like there was a sudden gap between them. Without warning Jai sat up, wincing slightly.

"The idea was good, they just made mistakes. I worked it out, all the things that had gone wrong and it was right from the beginning, from the charter, but I tried to get them to change it and they wouldn't. So I thought if I talked to the inventor, if I talked to Adam Mitchell, told him not to sell the patent... and he was where you were."

“You can’t do that,” Jack said. “You can’t change history.”

“Like we never did?”

“We shouldn’t have.”

“I know, that’s why I went to your base.”

“Why?”

“To see what I was up against, to see what was keeping you here. I saw you, just on the street, and I thought... I thought maybe there was another way. I thought if you came back the others would to and we could rebuild it, make it better.”

Jai turned to look at him.

“We could still do it, Jack.”

“What are you talking about?”

He turned round completely then, kneeling in front of him and gripped Jack’s arm, holding it up so that both their wrist straps were held between them.

“We could fix them.”

“If we fix them, we could recreate the accident, we could get back.” It was a more thought but Jack said it out loud.

Jai sighed, looking down for a second and then back up, his head slightly tilted. He leant forward, and let go of Jack’s wrist so he could seize his hand. Holding it in both of his own.

“Why bother? We could rebuild it here. Start again – no problems, no private investors. It could be what it should have been.”

“Jai, you heard them- there’s nothing out there. Nothing to save or police or mess up. Just humanity, alone in the darkness.”

Jai rocked back on his knees and shook his head. Letting Jack’s hand free, his own falling to his side.

“We don’t know that, all we know is that aliens didn’t come here. Maybe they worked out there wasn’t much worth taking.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“I have to be, Jack. I know that right now my people aren’t anything – practically crawling in the dirt. But they’ll become something, they’ll become mine and if they don’t exist then everything I knew and loved is just gone.”

Jack couldn't reply. Couldn't reassure him. He knew about losing things, and, whatever people thought, there weren't any real words of comfort. They sat like that on the bloodied bed, together and apart.

"It won't work," Jack said at last. "Too much alien tech, we won't be able to fix them. This is pointless. We don't have the parts, the materials. I mean they come from..."

Jack gestured meaninglessly. The original time travel had come from this time, but the wrist straps, whatever the Doctor said, were complicated technology. Mitchell had needed to jump blindly forwards centuries to find the material to make them work properly.

"John always said you never listened properly in classes. We have the strap, with that we have everything here on earth that we need to replicate the parts. We just need to synthesise the raw materials."

"We'd need a genius."

"We'll find one. Your friend Toshiko, she's alive, Jack, have you thought about that? I read her file, she could do it."

"Leave Toshiko alone," Jack snapped, his voice suddenly harsh. The idea of Jai near Toshiko was horrifying, and his disgust was obviously clear. He saw a sudden flash of anger on Jai's face, of strength and fury. A sudden reminder of what Jai was really like.

"Am I too grotesque, Jack, to go near your precious little friend?" Jai got to his feet, dragging the bloody t-shirt back over his head.

"Just leave her alone, I don't want her to be dragged into any of this."

"Why not? You dragged her in before. Why is this any different? I need her."

"It's just different."

"You don't get to tell me what to do anymore. I'm not going to let you stop me."

Jack got quickly to his feet, reaching out for the boy again but Jai shrugged him off.

"This isn't over," Jai said as Jack reached for him again, and then suddenly Jai was humming and the pain was echoing through him, shattering him, and the world went black.

~*~*~*~*~

Jack woke hours later, housekeeping banging on the almost open door, the chain at its limit. The first thing he noticed was that his wrist strap was gone, the second was that Jai had gone with it.

He took one glimpse around the blood spattered room and decided it was probably better to leave through the window, only pausing to pull on his coat. It still smelled a little like Jai.

Once he was out of the hotel it was more difficult. He had no idea where Jai would go, and nowhere to go himself. He wandered aimlessly back towards the Plass, again.

He thought for a moment of going back to the hospital... back to Ianto. The memories of the few seconds before his eyes had opened, when he'd thought it was Ianto folded into his shoulder, blended with the image of him angry and hurt beside his dying father's bed.

He had known from Ianto's records that his father had died but that had been all it was, a brief sentence, without emotion or weight and he'd never asked. That felt like an unforgivable slight now. He pushed that memory aside again with an effort.

Even without that he'd already been arrested once at the hospital, seeing Ianto was out of the question.

But he needed something. Someone. Reassurance. His eyes were drawn to a phone box.

He wanted Gwen.

The phone was already in his hand, when he hesitated again.

It was a selfish desire, a selfish need. He'd heard Gwen on the phone, happy and carefree, and he wanted, even if it were just for a second, to draw her into all this? Jack had seen her so many times, hurt and broken and lost – all because of Torchwood. He'd ruined her life by letting her follow him. Hers, and Toshiko's, and Owen's, and Suzie's, and Ianto's and everyone who he'd touched.

Jai had said that his life had only been worthwhile because of the Time Agency, but he had been wrong – the Agency had sucked them all in and turned them into monsters and unleashed them on all those worlds. It had ruined their lives, and then he'd let himself do exactly the same with Torchwood.

The Time Agency had unleashed Jai again, even if it hadn't planned to, and this world stood, unprepared and unexpected, in need of protection. He wasn't sure if he could fight him alone. Wasn't sure if he could bear to. He owed Jai but then he owed the others too. He had to fight him. And he had to do it alone.

He slammed the phone back onto the receiver, hesitating again.

He just needed to hear her first, he just needed a reminder of what he was fighting for.

He picked the phone up and dialled her number quickly not wanting to doubt the decision now it had been made.

She answered on the fourth ring -- she always did. She'd told him, once, that two rings seemed desperate, three rings was expected and the other person might give up before the fifth ring.

"Hello," she said, "Who's that?"

He couldn't answer, didn't want to. He knew her, and if he gave her anything she'd track him down, get herself involved. The pause stretched between them.

"Is that you again?" She asked suddenly. "Look, I don't know what's going on, but why don't you just talk to me? I won't bite. Maybe I can help you."

She paused again and he almost hung up the phone, but then she was speaking and he couldn't cut her off.

"You sounded like you knew me before, when you rang -- like you thought I'd know you. If you'd just..."

The line suddenly went dead, then clicked back to life. But Gwen's voice was gone instead he could hear what sounded like a struggle and something else, something different, underlying the whole thing. It sounded like an oddly discordant hum.

"Gwen!" Jack shouted. "Gwen!"

"What I'm doing is important, Jack," Jai said from the other end of the line. "I can't let you screw it up."

"Jai, don't do this."

"Don't interrupt me. I'm just going to take your friends, so that you don't do anything, do you understand? Once it's sorted, I'll find a way to get home. I think you were right, I think we can replicate the accident and... Just let me have this. I need it, I need the Agency. We can't all leave it behind like you did. I can't but I'll make it better, something to be proud of... I want to be proud again. And maybe I can rescue Toshiko like you did."

"Jai, please," Jack begged him.

"I won't hurt them, I promise, as long as you don't do anything."

There was a slight pause.

"Don't get in my way, Jack. Do you remember those things you taught me? The secrets of torture. I don't want to use them on her, but you know me, I will."

The other end of the line went dead, leaving Jack staring at the phone. Lifeless and cold and despairing in his hand. For a moment his mind was blank. He didn't know what to do.

And then something Jai had said sunk into his shattered brain. He had said 'them'.

He had to get to the hospital. He had to find Ianto before Jai did.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Gwen woke up slowly, her head pounding again, though now the feeling had the taint of familiarity. There was an image now as well, an image of something monstrous, an avenging angel. No, not an angel.

It was almost not a surprise when she forced her eyes open to find that she was in a small windowless room, nor as she rubbed a hand across her face to find it was caked with dirt and dried blood. Neither felt real, but they matched too neatly with the last things she remembered to be a surprise.

At least she wasn't tied up.

The only real surprise was that she was not alone. DCI Costello was unconscious beside her, roughly flung on the floor, face down, bruised and bloodied.

Gwen crawled to her and as gently as possible, which granted wasn't very, turned her over. Her fingers stroked roughly down Costello's neck, struggling for a moment to find a pulse, though as she was breathing lightly that was probably, Gwen thought, more her own ineptitude than something to worry about.

As she finally found the pulse Costello's eyes flickered for a moment and then opened accompanied by a hacking cough. She sat up suddenly, her eyes wide.

"Where is he? It," she corrected her voice jerky. "Where did it go?"

"I don't know," Gwen told her, hoping mostly to calm her down.

Costello looked at her in blank confusion for a moment. Unsurprisingly perhaps. It was definitely a weird situation.

Quite apart from the obvious, Gwen wasn't sure they'd said more than a dozen things to each other in the past year. And she knew she wasn't alone. Since Costello had arrived from London a year ago, she'd barely mixed with the rest of them, preferring to keep a cold, calculating distance between herself and everyone else.

Gwen didn't think she knew a single thing about her outside of work. Even in work her knowledge pretty much amounted to the fact that she was always there all hours, tended to get the job done and most the people from her department thought she was a bitch.

"You're one of the... We work together, don't we?" Costello asked.

"I'm Gwen," she said, nodding and held out her hand.

"I'm... errr... I'm Suzie," she replied after a pause and shook her hand. There was blood on it, and grit.

"And my name's Jai," a voice said from the corner of the room.

He stood there, unnoticed, the monster who had attacked them. Almost a monster, Gwen suddenly found herself thinking, because he was also beautiful and wearing a simple hoodie and jacket and there was a shadow of frailty and pain on his face, all of which stopped him seeming entirely monstrous.

"Why have you taken us?" Suzie spat from beside her. "What are you going to do with us?"

"I don't know," he replied, "Perhaps I'm just feeling curious, like you were."

It obviously meant something, because Suzie blanched beside her.

"Don't worry," he said with a soft laugh. "Few species have managed to convince themselves of their right to cold, detached cruelty like humanity has. And having seen your apartment, Suzie Costello, cold detachment seems to be something you've made rather an art."

"Who are you?" Gwen asked him. He smiled, walked towards them and knelt down close to her before answering

"Someone very far from home, who's just looking for a way back."

"Why do you need us?"

"Don't worry, sweetheart. You're just here to make sure that an old friend of mine doesn't do anything stupid. It's in his nature, but luckily for me he cares deeply for both of you and--"

"Who?" Suzie interrupted. Jai rose to his feet as he turned to look at her, suddenly towering over them again.

"The man you locked me in with. You made a mistake, there; we weren't working together, not for a long time, not until you forced us back together. I suppose I should thank you for that, but I must admit that right now I'm still feeling a little bitter. A little sad. I'm sure it will turn to anger soon enough."

"Is he American?" Gwen asked him when he seemed to have finished, she saw no point in upsetting him unless it was necessary.

"How do you know that?" Suzie asked her not waiting for his answer.

"An American called me."

"Why didn't you tell us, for god's sake?"

“She didn’t know she was supposed to be watching for an American,” Jai interrupted. “You didn’t want to tell anyone.”

“It’s procedure...”

“I think you’re scared, Suzie Costello. Not of me, you proved that. No, I think you’re scared that you’re not good enough, so you push yourself and you keep secrets and you don’t let anyone in – because then it’s your victory and every little victory is another hurdle to stop them seeing the truth about you.”

Suzie’s face had frozen beneath its mask of blood, stilled, withdrawn.

“Stop it,” Gwen said softly. “Leave her alone.”

There was a pause and Jai’s face twisted for a moment, then settled back together.

“All right. For you. And for him. But she has long since lost any right to my pity. Or my mercy. What would you like to know?”

“I don’t understand,” Gwen said, “Why would you keeping us here, stop him? I’ve never even met him, not that I remember.”

“He loves you, he won’t risk me hurting you. You see, he comes from a very long way away, too and where he is there’s another you, and another her, and he’s the centre of your worlds and you’re the foundation of his.”

“That’s not possible,” Suzie said bitterly, “Don’t listen to it.”

“It?” Jai said quietly, “Yes, I suppose I must be an it, because if I were a him, then all those things you did to me would feel much more real. Wouldn’t they? Here’s a secret for you, Suzie Costello – you’re right. You’re not good enough and he sees it – he gets rid of you and finds her, because she’s better than you can ever be.”

With that, Jai turned to leave, making for a large iron door in one wall. Pulling it open with what looked like some effort. All the bolts were on the outside.

“What’s his name?” Gwen suddenly, instinctively, called after him.

He paused silhouetted against the light but didn’t turn round.

“You call him Jack.”

~*~*~*~*~*~ *

Jack stumbled at last into the hospital room, breathless and aching. Ianto wasn’t there. His father was, alone and wreathed in wires – a cage of tubes and monitors.

He hadn't known where to look. He'd tried Ianto's phone number but it wasn't recognised, he'd thought about Starbucks but it didn't seem likely he'd turn up there again and there were too many Jones in the phone book to offer any help. He'd never felt so lost without technical support. In the end, the only place he'd known he must turn up eventually was here. Unless Jai got to him first.

Jack pulled in a few deep breaths and then turning, closed the blinds so nobody could stare in as he had. He paced to the small window, staring out across industrial Cardiff, carefully ignoring the man in the bed. It was surprisingly sunny.

But the view could only hold him so long, and he'd always gone up to high places to think – his mind was trained to it. The view could not hold off the thoughts.

He didn't want to think about Ianto's father. He didn't want to think that he was in the room of a dying man, that he was paused on the edge of the moment when Ianto's life would be shattered, broken and then remade in the image of Torchwood.

If he'd just been sent back a few months later then he wouldn't have had to face this – Ianto would have fled to London and, eventually, to...

He didn't know. Not on this world. In their world he'd been found by Yvonne, but here anything could happen. A few more months and the matter would have been out of his hands.

It was a selfish wish.

He watched as some gulls, the scavengers of Cardiff, sailed past the window.

He had been in a coma once, he didn't remember it clearly now – just fractured memories. He'd been able to hear things, though, he remembered that. It was one of those times he'd been hiding from Torchwood, mimicking normality and there'd been an accident. He'd lingered on for months, listening to the people who cared for him desperately trying to save him and he'd just been longing for them to let him die, so he could finally heal and escape from that limbo.

Perhaps that had been how Owen felt by the end.

"It doesn't hurt," he said suddenly. "Death, it doesn't hurt."

Dying hurt and coming back hurt, but for those blissful moments between it had always been peaceful for him. He tried not to think about the things Suzie and Owen had talked about – the movement in the dark. Did Abaddon exist here? Did Death? No aliens, but what about the other things?

He turned at last to look at the old man. He didn't really look like Ianto but that was probably whatever disease was eating away at him, leaving his pale dry skin clinging to his bones. Jack knew he could have picked up the chart and known exactly what this thing was. This thing that must have

haunted Ianto for years but he didn't want to, wanted to hide behind this one last barrier of ignorance.

"I know your son," he told him. "I love him, a different him. It's complicated. I shouldn't be here. But I am and I've... I... I want you to know that I won't let anything happen to him... either him."

He felt the hollow awkwardness of the lie in the base of his throat. Around them the soft hiss and tick of the machines carried on and the lie settled and became a promise. A sickening promise that Jack knew one day he wouldn't be able to keep.

He was so absorbed in the feeling, in the silent disapproving presence of the man, that he did not hear the door open.

"Who the hell are you?" Ianto asked.

He was pale, his eyes dark rimmed and heavy with sleepiness. And suspicious. Jack's heart clenched at the sight of him. He was still safe.

"My name is Jack Harkness, Captain Jack Harkness." He held out his hand anticipating Ianto's touch, almost yearning for it. Ianto just stared at it.

He was dressed casually, all soft colours and soft materials – jeans and faded t-shirt – a different man. The suits gone. Jack had to remember, he was a different man. He should treat him like one. Like a stranger. Behave like a professional.

"Are you Ianto Jones?"

"Captain of what exactly?" Ianto asked.

"Mr. Jones, I have reason to believe that you may be in some danger."

"What? Is this some sort of joke?"

"I'm afraid not. It's deadly serious."

"Who the hell are you?" Ianto asked again, his voice laced with anger this time.

"I work for a private... agency." The familiar lie slipped out. "Currently we're investigating the activities of a dangerous individual who we believe might make an attempt on your life. I've been sent to keep an eye on you. To protect you."

Jack was carefully trying to keep his voice neutral, desperately trying to hide his need for Ianto to trust him. To have faith in him.

Ianto groaned. "I don't fucking believe this," he snapped and turning stormed from the room.

~*~*~*~*~*~

“Look, I know everyone at work doesn’t like me,” Suzie said with an annoyed sigh, “But we could talk maybe.”

Gwen paused for a moment, she had been examining the small high window in the wall where dusty sunlight was filtering through. Even if they could get up there she was pretty sure it was too small for either of them to get through. Still she could see what looked like a street and there was a faint hum of traffic and even if no shoes had wandered past yet, if they could break the window then when they did they could shout...

Suzie was crouched by the base of the heavy metal door. They’d been alone now for over an hour, according to the scratched face of her watch, and they’d hardly said a word. The things that Jai had told them had felt to her like it was hanging between them, an invisible barrier.

“Nobody...” she started, about to deny what Suzie had said and then stopped herself, deciding to start again. “You’ve never seemed interested in people liking you.”

There was a pause, accompanied by the faint sound of metal grating against more metal as Suzie worked at one of the bolts.

“I don’t have to justify myself to you,” Suzie replied after a moment.

“No,” Gwen agreed, “You don’t, but you wanted to talk. It’s difficult, you know. I don’t think I know anything about you.”

“There’s not much to know.”

“That can’t be true. I mean, you came all the way from London – big and impressive and good at your job...”

“Is that a bad thing?” Suzie snapped at her.

“No, of course not. But... well, surely there’s other things you care about. What about family?”

There was a heavy pause.

“Just my father,” Suzie admitted a moment later.

“I’m an only child too,” Gwen told her. “Rubbish isn’t it?”

Suzie turned to look at her, sharp surprise in her eyes.

“I know, I know,” Gwen said with a laugh. “We’re supposed to be all smug and pleased – no competition, always spoilt. But I always thought all that was stupid,” Gwen continued conscious that she was rambling to fill the silence, “Because it means there’s no one else to share the blame either. Or the responsibility. And there’s all that pressure on you to do this or achieve that and...”

Gwen was suddenly aware that Suzie's expression had grown dark. That she was staring at her. Her words trailed feebly away.

"Nothing I did was ever good enough for my father," Suzie said slowly.

"Me neither," Gwen said, trying to be companionable but too deeply aware that what they were talking about wasn't the same. She'd never heard Suzie sound vulnerable before.

"My mother's worse," she added half without thinking. It crossed her mind for a fleeting second that it was probably a good thing that her mother and Brenda, Rhys' mother, had hated each other at first sight, if not before. If they ever banded together she'd be doomed.

Suzie turned back to the door.

"Is that why you're always trying to impress everyone?" Gwen tried, wanting to draw her back into the conversation.

"I'd rather you didn't try to psychoanalyse me," Suzie replied.

"All right, I was only going to say that you really don't need to. Everyone knows you're the best, that's why they always put you on the most important..."

"They don't act like they do," Suzie interrupted.

"Of course they don't. We're Welsh, we hate seeing English people being better than us at anything. Doesn't mean it isn't true... sometimes."

Suzie straightened up, climbing to her feet as the door slowly and painfully swung towards them, its hinges freed.

"All right," Gwen told her, "I'm impressed. Sodding English."

Unexpectedly Suzie laughed.

~*~*~*~*~

"And you can't tell me why he'd be after me?"

"The Agency thinks it's better if you don't know," Jack told him.

He'd finally caught him the third time and convinced Ianto to stop to talk in Splott of all places, and now they were sat beside the canal. Jack thought that maybe this time he might believe him. He hoped that he would. He wasn't sure how to handle this strange, fragile Ianto. Before, he would have just reached for him, drawn him in and drawn him out. Even with a stranger he might have.

But this lanto was something different, something in between. He was a stranger and a lover and everything else. Jack couldn't just reach out to him like that, he was too scared it would chase him away again.

"Why would anyone be after me? I've not done anything... I'm not important..."

"That's not true," Jack told him. lanto shot him an angry look.

"You know nothing about me, don't pretend you do. Anyway, why should I believe you? You could be insane..."

"I'm not. Whether you believe me or not, Mr. Jones, I will do my job. I will follow you and I will protect you."

"I think, technically, that's called stalking. What if I call the police?"

"You'd be putting yourself and the people you love in danger. The agency I work for has always had a difficult relationship with the police; they tend not to listen to our warnings until it's too late."

Jack had a fleeting image of the Judoon – uninspired and implacable. He'd not thought about them for years. Not since the incident in London, anyway, and not for a long time before that.

lanto didn't seem to be listening, his eyes were fixed on the slow movement of the water. "What could anyone do to us that is worse than what's already happening?" he asked softly.

The wind rose for a second, lifting their hair.

"I'm sorry about your father," Jack told him and reaching out touched his hand.

"Don't," lanto said suddenly sitting up straighter and leaning away from him, pulling his hand away, "You don't know me. You don't get to have opinions. You don't get to feel sorry for me, or him. You don't get to even think about him." He rose quickly to his feet, clearly meaning to leave again.

Jack pushed himself to his feet, grabbing his arm. "lanto, please don't do this."

The name slipped out, he'd been trying not to use it, trying not to let his own familiarity slip dangerously between them. Gwen had teased him once – told him that as soon as anyone heard him say lanto's name they'd know how he felt about him.

They stood for a second like that, frozen in place, the closest they had been in this world, their eyes locked together. Jack felt the paused and felt himself lean, naturally, forward slightly. Then lanto shook his hand off.

"Don't call me that," he said, he sounded uncertain of exactly what he was forbidding.

"I..." Jack started, but he had no time to finish as the silence was ripped apart by the sound of an explosion in the distance.

Without meaning to, Jack grabbed Ianto again, holding his arms tightly. He felt shaken, and it must have shown -- Ianto's hands were suddenly there supporting him. Leaning against each other, both their eyes scanning the sky and both finding the plume of smoke steadily beginning to snake through the air.

"It looks like it's coming from the prison," Ianto said as there was another explosion, more smoke and a long moment of silence as thoughts of the terrifying possibilities raced through Jack's mind.

"But that's a men's prison," he said.

"What?" Ianto asked and then, suddenly realising how they were stood, pulled himself away. "They have both men and women there. Have done since the old women's prison closed."

Another difference.

"He's gone after Toshiko," Jack said, "He must have. Damn."

"Who?" Ianto asked.

"Someone else I care about," Jack told him as he began to run in the direction of the smoke.

~*~*~*~*~*~ *

They were half way back to the police station, Gwen's eager footsteps contrasting with Suzie's reluctant ones, when the first explosion flung them to the ground.

Gwen just managed to get her hands beneath her in time to cushion the fall, the stinging of the grit mixing with the numbness of the impact. For a second she just saw pure whiteness and then the ground faded back into clarity beneath her. Her head was pounding again -- she needed another painkiller. What was it her grandmother had said? That was it, 'if you keep taking them like that, you'll bloody rattle'.

As the initial shock faded away she felt a gentle rumble beneath her palms. It was like the feel of traffic but deeper, more menacing. She might have thought that it had been an earthquake and this the aftershocks, if another explosion hadn't cracked through the air and the smell of smoke hadn't reached her nose. She pushed herself carefully onto her knees and then into a more comfortable position. Her trouser was ripped, the knee beneath it bloody and grazed but definitely movable.

Suzie was still stood, staring into the sky, where twisted smoke was beginning to rise, it looked like it was a few streets away. With a slight frown, she turned back and offered Gwen a hand. Thankfully, Gwen took it and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" Suzie asked her.

They were in Adamsdown before Jack paused, his breathing heavy, his face pricked with sweat. Ianto stopped with him, took two deep breaths and grabbing him forced him against the wall. "Tell me what's happening," he demanded.

For a moment Jack was silent, his eyes fixed onto Ianto with an intensity he hadn't expected, his mouth slightly open, and his breath suddenly soft. Another explosion. The echo of it trembled through the wall and through them both.

Jack looked away, back in the direction of the prison, and Ianto felt the breaking of his gaze like a sudden, sharp loss.

"There isn't time," Jack said. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try. You said 'someone else you cared about.' What did you mean?"

Ianto shook him slightly, pressing him hard back into the wall. Wanting answers. Wanting his attention again. Jack looked back at him, angry now and roughly, easily, pushed him away.

"Did you mean me? Did you mean that you cared for me? Why?" There had been something in the way he'd said Ianto's name, something that Ianto hadn't quite been able to grasp or understand.

Jack sighed. "Yes, I meant you. It's complicated."

"You don't even know me."

"Like I said, complicated." He paused for a moment, looked torn about what to do and then, with a grimace, he began to speak again. "I'm not from around here. I'm from another world, almost identical to this one – in that world you work for me... I care for you and for the girl inside that prison. The man going after her is from my world too. And if we don't go soon, he'll hurt her."

It was... well, 'unbelievable' didn't really begin to cover it.

"I said it was complicated. Look, you don't have to believe me but I do have to go."

Ianto wasn't sure that he did believe him but he couldn't deny that something was happening. From the edge of the alleyway he could see people running past, cars crashed and abandoned and the air filled with dust and smoke. He had a sudden glimpse of his father, in his death bed, untouchable.

"You care for her? And me, the other me, he cares for her too?" He asked Jack.

"Deeply."

"Then we have to save her."

~*~*~*~*~*~ *

She pressed herself further into the corner, wishing the wall would swallow her, longing it to. She could feel the building vibrating through the stone.

A small part of her, the part still called Toshiko, was busy trying to work out what was happening, trying to find the cause, but she'd stopped listening to her long ago. There was another explosion, loud and painful and the sound of screaming. She pressed her hands painfully against her ears, not wanting to hear it.

That was the thing she still hated about this place, still hadn't got used to, hadn't gained that magical immunity that didn't make things better but made them numb – she still couldn't quite come to terms with how it was always crushingly noisy here or destructively quiet and she had no choice over which she was caught in.

Another explosion, more screams. Another voice was screaming at her now, a broken desperate voice in her own head -- Toshiko's voice.

"Something's coming," it said, "Something dangerous. You should get ready, please be ready."

But she had learned long past that listening to that voice only caused trouble and pain, so she pressed herself further into the wall wishing that it would swallow her and never let her go.

~*~*~*~*~*~ *

Alex Hopkins drummed his fingers against the police cars dashboard in frustration. Their siren was blazing, but the streets were gridlocked, half the cars abandoned and they weren't getting any closer. In the distance there was another explosion and his fingers paused for a moment and then took up the beat again, more incessantly now. If he had been off duty when the attack had happened he would have already been there and half the team would have been on the way, weapons at the ready. He should never have taken the promotion, it took up too much time – too much time playing it by the book.

"Fuck this," he said, flipping his seat belt loose and pushing the cars door open.

"Sir?" Smith said, his surprise clear.

Alex was already out of the car, he leaned back down for a moment, looking back into the car. "I'm going on by foot. Call through to the station and get there when you can."

"But Sir, the protocols..."

There was definite panic in his voice now but Alex wasn't listening. He slammed the door and, with a feeling of excitement and joy, began to run, winding through the abandoned cars.

~*~*~*~*~*~

The sky was beginning to darken as they reached the prison, the smoke standing out palely against it. The building, the remnants of it, was in tatters, walls broken and smoking and bodies everywhere – guards and women mostly. Jai must have headed straight to the women’s wing. The scene had a sickeningly familiar feel to Jack, one he had tried to escape again and again but had never managed to. A battlefield. The perpetual soldier, someone had called him that once long ago and far in the future. They hadn’t known the half of it.

He glanced wearily and as surreptitiously as possible towards Ianto. Neither had said anything since they left the alley. Ianto hadn’t really reacted at all and Jack had no idea whether he’d believed anything he’d said or not. He’d thought he’d long since passed the time when he couldn’t read Ianto but now it felt like he was back before he’d learnt about Lisa – guessing and second guessing and hoping and hopeless. And mostly lost.

Jack wasn’t sure what was worse, the things that made this Ianto feel so different or the things that made him seem the same.

He felt the deep rumble of danger that underscored those rare moments whenever Jai appeared in his dreams, one of the endless lost souls that haunted his nights and kept him from sleep.

“This way,” he said softly.

The easiest route inside seemed to be to scramble up the rubble, ignoring as much of its hidden horrors as they could and steadying themselves against the sudden rushes as the stone slipped away beneath them. They emerged, mercifully quickly, into the one of the fourth floor corridors, its end now gaping hungrily at the smoky sky. Jai was there, crouched in front of a door, his lock picking equipment in his hands. Clearly, he wasn’t planning to blast this one open. Toshiko must be inside.

As Jack pulled himself inside, Ianto besides him, another cracked brick shifted beneath his feet, rattling down the heap.

Jai stood, turning quickly and gracefully as he moved, alert. Dangerous. Jack couldn’t see any weapons but then he didn’t need them. As he saw Jack his face twisted angrily and then his eyes settled upon Ianto. The boy was tense beside him, nervous and angry, never a good combination.

“What are you trying to do, Jack? Put your precious Torchwood back together?”

“I told you I wasn’t going to let you touch her.”

“I don’t think you get a choice,” Jai’s eyes were still fixed upon Ianto. For a moment they were all silent, something twisted inside Jack.

“Leave him alone,” he said, his throat suddenly dry and his voice hoarse.

“‘Leave him alone, don’t touch her...’ Who do I get to play with, Jack? You always used to be so good at sharing. In fact, didn’t you used to insist on it? What has he told you?” He suddenly asked Ianto.

lanto didn't reply, but straightened slightly, stiffening.

"That you're something special? That you're part of his team?"

"Yes," lanto admitted.

"Do you want to know why you're in his team? Why he saved you now?"

"Don't do this," Jack warned him, his own eyes now fixed on lanto.

"Because he's fucking you," Jai said, "You know, the other you. If it's any consolation you're probably enjoying it. I should know. I used to be you."

lanto didn't react, his face a careful mask. That, at least, felt uncomfortably familiar.

"It's not like..." Jack started but Jai interrupted him

"Enough."

Jack wrenched his eyes away from lanto, beginning to move just a moment too late. In a single, fluid move Jai turned, gripped the door by its handle and the small window set in it and ripped it loose. Jack expected there to be a scream, something, a reaction but instead there was simply silence. Jai was staring inside.

"Is this it?" He murmured as Jack shouldered him aside and pushed into the cell.

Toshiko was curled in the corner of the room, her hands around her head, her face buried into her knees.

Jack's breath was trapped for a moment in his throat.

There she was.

Alive. Terrifyingly, gloriously alive.

He turned to face Jai. "I'm not going to let you do this."

"How are you going to stop me Jack?"

~*~*~*~*~

Gwen edged up the stairs carefully behind Suzie. The gun felt wrong and heavy in her hand. They had taken them from the bodies of the guard. Whatever had killed the ones outside had spread farther and faster than she could have believed possible. They hadn't found anyone alive until they reached the women's wing.

They could hear the sound of voices, male voices above them. There were three of them, one of them instantly recognisable as Jai, none of them noticed as they rounded the corner. She stared at the other two – one of them had to be Jack. Her eyes fixed upon one, he was dressed in a long military style coat, dusty but impressive. Him, she thought, it's him.

Suddenly everybody was moving, Jai dragging a door, terrifyingly, from its hinges – the man pushing past him, suddenly out of sight.

“How are you going to stop me, Jack?” She heard Jai say and then suddenly, menacingly the sound of humming drifted towards them. It felt like the soft, subtle sound was vibrating through her skull.

Without warning, Suzie stepped forward, her gun raised and fired.

The noise stopped, Jai fell backwards, one hand clenched to his neck, his eyes piercing them for a moment. And then he screamed, a horrid, wet sound.

It was almost as if she saw the sound, rippling through the building towards her, she flung herself backwards into a doorway, pressed against a door. The wood shaking beneath her and around her the building began to fall. Collapsing as easily as a house of cards.

~*~*~*~*~

Jack heard the gunshot and Jai suddenly fell backwards, clutching his throat. He had no idea what was happening but as he saw the muscles in Jai's cheek tighten he knew what would happen next.

There was no time to do anything.

He turned, the world both speeding past and moving sluggishly slow.

Toshiko was still huddled in the corner, unmoving. There was no time.

He flung himself over her. All he could do.

She gasped but for a moment didn't move – then her hands buried themselves in his collar, clinging to him.

And something hit him.

~*~*~*~*~

Alex staggered through the gap in the wall as the final collapse happened. Dust and debris surged towards him, almost knocking him from his feet. As the dust passed and his stinging vision cleared, he saw the prison... or what was left of it. It was much worse than Alex had expected, more like a war zone than a building – filled with the personal tragedies that each battle left. He'd been a soldier once, it felt like a long time ago now. He'd got out as soon as he could. It had been one of those things that haunted him, that if it ever emerged what he did in the deep of the night that they'd seize

on that fact. He could see it, sometimes in his dreams, in that same newspaper type you saw in superhero movies:

'Former soldier can't cope with normal life, position in police doesn't satisfy his violent desires, turns vigilante.'

The whole dream probably said rather too much about his psyche.

He was still picking his way through the rubble when the last person he expected stumbled dustily out of the darkness. It was Gwen Cooper, there was blood on her forehead, but it looked like it wasn't too bad. He moved to her as quickly as possible.

"Are you alright?"

She nodded and then winced, one hand reaching for her forehead.

"I think I need more pills, no matter what my gran says," she said softly with a slightly broken laugh. "The door fell away."

She swayed slightly and he caught her, stopping her from falling, she gripped one of his arms.

"I always liked you," she said her voice soft and slightly slurred. "If it wasn't for Rhys..."

She sighed, leaning into him and he choked back a startled laugh. He'd always liked her, had been keeping an eye on her – just in case he needed someone else...

"It's alright Gwen, stay with me. Do you know where DCI Costello is?"

There had been people out searching for them both for hours. Panicked people. Nobody wanted to find out there was a cop killer around.

She seemed to sharpen, shook her head slightly and peered across the rubble.

"She's... they... they're over there, they were in the building when it fell, I couldn't dig them out, came to get help."

He didn't wait to ask who 'they' were. In moments he had lowered Gwen onto what looked like a relatively stable pile of masonry and began to dig. It was easy to find the first man, already half out of the rubble, but too weak to pull himself free.

"Hey," he said to him, "I'm a policeman. How are you feeling?"

The man gave him a scathing look which in a lighter situation might have made him laugh.

"I've been better," the man said, a slight hiss betraying his pain. "Don't think anything's broken, just... stuck."

Alex shifted the heaviest bits of stone with a grunt of effort. The man was young, early twenties at least and what he could see of his clothing didn't look like it belonged in the women's wing of a prison.

"OK, I'm going to pull... What's your name?"

"Ianto."

"Good Welsh name. I'm Alex. Okay, Ianto, I'm going to try and pull you out. What I need to do is to let me know if anything's really hurting. Alright? Now just let me know when you're ready."

Bracing himself carefully, he slipped his hands under Ianto's arms and waited. Ianto pulled in one deep breath and then another and nodded and Alex heaved.

At first he didn't think it was going to work and then, with the sound of ripping material and a groan of pain, he slipped free.

They rested for a second, both breathing deeply, Ianto cradled against his chest. Across from him he saw Gwen getting back to her feet, shaky and loose. He was about to tell her not to, when Ianto was suddenly rising to his own, stumbling away from him.

"Steady, you might..." he started to say but Ianto interrupted him.

"He was over here, I think he was over here..." He started moving the crumbled bricks, pushing and throwing them out of the way. "We have to get him out."

Alex glanced for a second at Gwen, she was stood a little way away, on one of the few bits of precarious floor remaining, looking around her. He looked back at Ianto and the pile of rubble – he couldn't see how anything could have survived underneath all that. It didn't matter, in three steps he was besides Ianto, digging as well.

It took them nearly three minutes to reach the man – Jack Harkness, he thought, their escaped prisoner – and when they did he thought his initial reaction had been right. He was dead.

He looked back at Ianto. The boy's expression was bleak. He'd seen that expression too many times.

Without warning, the body suddenly gasped in a lungful of air, seizing his leg. Jack's eyes were wide, his face streaked with blood and dust and very much alive. Alex steadied him, his fingers brushing his wrist and he felt a shudder like electricity running through his hand.

"Alex?" he said, shocked recognition clear on his face.

"How do you..." Alex started but Jack was scrambling to his knees, looking suddenly scared. It struck Alex, without quite knowing why, that this wasn't an expression you saw on his face often.

“Please, let her be alright,” he muttered and as he shifted Alex saw why. There had been a girl sheltered beneath him.

She didn’t move, not until Jack reached out and touched her -- then she flinched. Jack laughed, a sound of utter relief.

“It’s alright, Toshiko,” he said. “It’s alright.”

Slowly, unsteadily, her hands moved away from her face and through lank hair, dark stunned eyes stared at them.

“I’m going to look after you,” Jack promised her and climbing to his feet, carefully he pulled her to hers. She had a few bruises, but he looked remarkably unhurt. Alex couldn’t even see where the blood had come from.

“I’ve found her,” Gwen suddenly called from nearly the bottom of the wreckage.

Alex reached her first and with horror saw Suzie, like a rag doll, led amidst the rubble. Gwen knelt beside her.

“She’s breathing,” she told him, “but she’s hurt. She must have fallen and there’s a lot of blood. We need to get her to the hospital.”

He was barely aware of the other three reaching them.

“No,” he said, not quite sure why, “I know a doctor, he’s closer.”

He gathered Suzie’s limp body into his arms and began to move.

~*~*~*~*~*~

They moved through the streets dark, deserted streets quickly, one of his hands gripping Toshiko firmly, pulling her with them.

Jack spared one glance back for the prison, but he knew Jai wouldn’t be there anymore. Then his eyes fixed upon where Alex was carrying Suzie.

It had been so long since he had seen him. January 31st, 1999 – it was a date difficult to forget for so many reasons. He’d spent a long time after that day wondering how long it had been since he’d really seen him before that. How he had failed to notice what was coming.

And here he was, years after he should have died – alive and whole and still a hero.

Saving Suzie.

If Alex had lived, would Suzie have gone mad? Would he have succeeded where Jack had so spectacularly failed?

He could see both of them, images flashing through his head – both clever and brave and strong and heroic and broken and mad and murderous. For a second, he had to stop – pulling in a deep breath, trying to calm the madness – watching the two of them drawing father away from him – again.

Then he was running again. Following them. Again.

He felt torn and tired and broken, the only thing settling him, the warmth of Toshiko's hand as she stumbled after him.

"This is it," Alex called, turning back his eyes meeting Jack's, as they reached a big imposing building. The look lingered for a moment and then he turned back and pressed the bell.

It was long minutes waiting for the door to open and when it did, with how he felt now, Jack would hardly have been surprised to find Owen behind it.

It wasn't... it was James, Dr. James Lawson. Only a scattering of grey hairs at his temple, different from how Jack remembered him. James Lawson. Who had died as millions of people had counted down to the end of a millennium. He surveyed them with a stern critical expression, only slightly marred by the fact that he was wearing a dressing gown, and sighed.

"I know you haven't had much time for us recently," he said snappishly, glaring at Alex. "But I wasn't expecting you to put a new team together and if you truly had to, you could have at least taken better care of them."

Alex didn't reply, just gazing up at him silently, openly, pleading.

Jack wondered if this James was in love with Alex too – deeply, annoyingly, unrequitedly in love. They'd slept together, him and James, more than once over that shared feeling – finding solace, relief and maybe a little joy in each other's bodies. Each thinking of Alex.

James had told him once, in the not quite bitter light of morning, that he thought maybe it was better like that – that he enjoyed their friendship hidden behind ill-disguised sniping and moaning. And that at least that way it never really changed.

And then Alex had shot them both.

"Oh for fuck's sake," James groaned moving aside, "come in. The last thing I need is you lot drawing attention. I'll end up with the police on my doorstep again."

He glanced over Gwen's dirty, torn uniform.

"More police," he added.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Alex watched as James swept the cooking utensils off his kitchen table. It was large and wooden and, if you looked too closely, had ingrained blood stains from the other bodies that had led on top of it. He lowered Suzie onto it and without speaking for a moment they set to work, James pulled her bloody shirt open, to reveal the gaping gash across her stomach, as Alex searched through the cupboard for the emergency surgery kit.

“Nasty,” James muttered, “But lucky it’s not lower. What’s her name?”

“Suzie,” Alex said as he opened the case and began pulling out equipment, “She works with me.”

James looked up at him, his eyebrow quirking upwards slightly.

“Bringing your work home with you? That’s not like you, Alex.”

“You were closer than the hospital and I think they might…” he trailed off, he’d been going to say that they’d be busy soon, but he had his doubts that anybody else could have survived that attack.

“Very flattering,” James said as he leant closer to the wound, prodding it slightly. “God knows why I let you bother me in the dead of the night like this.”

“It’s my charm and natural good looks,” Alex told him.

He caught a glimpse of movement at the corner of his eye and looked up to see Jack leaving the kitchen. He looked back to see James watching him.

“You two,” he said suddenly, turning to look at Gwen and Ianto – “I need you to go and get me towels – as many as you can carry. This is going to be messy. Upstairs, second door on the left.”

As soon as they’d left he turned back to him.

“Go and talk to him,” he said sharply.

Alex didn’t bother to pretend he didn’t know who he was talking about. “You need my help,” he told him.

“Surprisingly, Alex, I’m a rather marvellous doctor even when you’re not here holding my hand. I’ll get those two to help me – I suppose you’ll end up keeping them so might as well start the training now.”

Alex hesitated again and James glared at him.

“There’s a sort of gravity about you,” James snapped at him, “God help us, but you draw people to you. When I look at you, I want to be near you – no matter what – and when I look at him I feel exactly the same. That’s the first time I’ve ever felt like that about anyone else, and don’t pretend you don’t feel it too. You want adventure? Well, he’s it. Go and talk to him. You’re no good to me distracted like this. Now bugger off and leave those of us who are up to it to be heroes.”

~*~*~*~*~

It was one of those old, falsely grand houses that held odd echoes for Jack. He could remember when these houses were new and fresh, and now they were dusty, slightly faded, ghostly. It was all dark woods and rich patterns and beautiful complicated windows decorated with edges of coloured glass. The living room was dark, the only light coming from the moon, spilling across the dusty carpet. Jack's fingers lingered on the light switch for a second and then his hand fell away. Right now he was ready for a bit of darkness. He sat heavily on the couch and let his hands run across his face, trying to smooth out the aches and pains, rub away all the hurtful, lingering memories.

He could hear the others in the kitchen. All those people he'd loved and right now he'd never felt so alone. So unsure of how he fitted into this jigsaw. And a bit of him felt that if he could find where he fitted, find where his edges matched theirs, and then the picture would change – suddenly become a tragedy.

His hands were still rubbing, uselessly at his face, when he felt someone sit down on the sofa beside him. Jack looked up. It was Alex, all soft rough edges.

"So you're Jack Harkness," he said.

Jack almost laughed, the feeling brewing in his stomach unable to burst through with Suzie laid open on a table next door. That had been the first thing Alex had said to him when he'd arrived from Torchwood One.

"Captain Jack Harkness," he corrected him, momentarily enjoying the taste of the familiar words and the feel of the soft memory.

Those first few weeks with Alex had been tight and uncomfortable – all last names and aggressive bravado – afterwards, much afterwards, Alex had told him that he'd been trying to impress him. It had worked of course.

"So," Alex said, his tone nonchalant, "I couldn't help but notice that back there you already knew my name when I haven't been able to think of a way for you to have known it. Unless you can read minds."

There was a pause and Jack suppressed a frustrated sigh.

"Can you read minds?" Alex asked, half a challenge and half a joke.

"Nope," Jack told him. "I've known a few people who could, but never a skill I managed."

Nor wanted, he thought. Mind reading was not so much a double-edged sword as a very sharp single-edged one -- it was just that it was always the wrong edge that was sharp. Right now though, with Alex sat quiet and unshakable beside him, he might have been willing to reconsider that position.

“Alright, no mind reading,” Alex replied. “So how do you know my name.”

A few possible answers flitted through Jack’s mind, each as unlikely as the next. He dismissed them all. Alex wasn’t stupid. He took a deep breath – he’d trusted Ianto, this Ianto, enough and the world had failed to end. And if anyone was likely to actually understand, then it would be Alex.

“There isn’t just one world,” he started. “One here, there’s hundreds of them – some completely different and some, some with just one little thing changed. Those worlds can almost feel like this one, the same places, the same people...”

He paused for a second, debating what he should say next, Alex didn’t interrupt him.

“I come from one of those worlds,” he settled for at last, “I got trapped here by accident. Me and Jai, the alien who attacked the prison. “On that world I... know you.” His mouth had hovered for a second, about to say ‘knew’. Alex didn’t seem to have noticed or if he had, had chosen to ignore it. Jack waited in silence for a moment that felt like hours but probably was not even minutes. “What are you thinking?” He asked at last, unable to bear the silence any longer.

“That you’re probably mad,” Alex said after a second’s hesitation. “But that I don’t want you to be.”

“When James answered the door...” Jack started and Alex looked at him too quickly, his mouth quirking slightly.

“So on that world you know James as well? He’ll be pleased.”

“He was a member of your team... and I was, too. I was going to ask -- he mentioned a team here. What sort of team?”

“Nothing that organised – just a small group of us. Investigating mysteries, going after criminals the police won’t.”

“Is that something you should be telling me?”

“Probably not, but there’s something I trust about you.”

“And how did the team come together?”

“By accident mostly. It just seemed to fall into place.”

Jack put the answer aside, though it troubled him, settling at the back of his mind, an uncertain threat. An unasked question. “You believe me, don’t you?” There was no need in the question, just disbelief.

“Yes,” Alex replied.

“Why?”

He laughed, a soft sound in the moonlight. "I could tell you it was because you knew my name," he told him. "But it isn't, it's that feeling -- the feeling that something bigger is supposed to be happening to you. And that you have to be ready for it."

Jack heard echoes in those words. In his head he heard a different Alex's voice – 'It's the twenty-first century, Jack. Everything's going to change. We're not ready.'

"I've spent my whole life waiting for an adventure. What sort of man would I be if I turned away from it now?"

Probably a wise one, Jack thought. Not like me, not like Jai, or Martha or Owen or Gwen or Rose or you. "Are you going to call the police?" He asked instead of replying – there was no reply he could give.

Alex was watching him closely. "Two escaped prisoners. I should. But there's something about you, Jack Harkness. Maybe you're what I've been waiting for."

"I'm not," Jack told him.

Alex's eyes were enough to tell Jack that he didn't believe him, but he didn't try to argue he just smiled with a slight nod.

"Which just leaves one question," Alex said. "What the hell is an alien?"

~*~*~*~*~

Gwen met the boy's eyes as they stood, lost for a second, in the bathroom. The same tired, drawn, baffled expressions and, for a second, breathless desperate laughs broke from both their lips.

"It's all a bit mad isn't it?" she said softly, as they both regained themselves and he began rooting through a cupboard.

"That's an understatement," he said but he smiled, a slightly broken smile, as he turned and pushed a pile of towels into her arms. "We should go back down."

She was half way down the stairs, when she noticed the girl from the prison. She had completely forgotten her. She was stood by the front door, her back pressed against it, looking scared and abandoned but not about to escape. Gwen smiled at her but didn't know what to say. What did you say to a convicted terrorist?

Before she could make up her mind, Gwen had swept past her and into the kitchen. She glanced back but couldn't see her. The boy had paused in the doorway of the room next door. He stood there, immobile for a second and then swallowing turned and followed her into the kitchen. Gwen hadn't recognised the girl until just then, hadn't really even looked at her, but as soon as she had – she'd known who she was – Toshiko Sato, she'd been in all the papers last year. Mostly Gwen had felt sorry

for her – they'd said that the people she'd been passing state secrets to had held her mother captive. That wasn't an excuse for putting thousands of lives at risk, that's what the press had said.

They'd never found the mother.

Alex wasn't in the kitchen, and for a moment, she paused, awkward. The doctor met her eyes and smiled.

"I'm James," he said.

"Ianto," the boy offered.

"Gwen," she said and then thought to add, "And she's Suzie. Suzie Costello."

"Right," James looked surprised for a moment. "*This* is Suzie Costello. Well, she's going to be alright, I just need to patch her up a little. I might need some help, but don't worry -- I'm not planning to trust you to do anything more than pass me things."

Gwen glanced back at where Toshiko was stood again, she had turned away, her face pressed against the glass of the door. When she looked back, James was watching her.

"I think perhaps," he said softly. "That I only really need one person to pass me things."

She nodded gratefully and turning headed back down the corridor.

Toshiko turned large, frightened eyes towards her as she approached and Gwen, realised with a silent inner curse, how she must look filthy in her battered police uniform. But then, she was used to being the last person anyone wanted to see, in her uniform.

"My name's Gwen," she told her, trying to push as much warmth into her voice as possible. "What's your name?"

Toshiko looked away for a second as if it were a difficult question.

"Tosh," she said eventually, her voice rough as if she hadn't used it for a long time.

"It's nice to meet you, Tosh. I bet you're feeling a little scared. I am. But I think we're going to be safe here."

Tosh didn't respond.

"You must be getting cold here, by the door. Why don't we go upstairs and get cleaned up a little. I know I need it."

Another pause, but then Tosh nodded and Gwen followed her thankfully up the stairs.

Gwen waited outside, giving Toshiko the privacy of the bathroom. She'd probably had little enough of that recently.

She'd been around a few prisons, mostly when she was training, and had mixed feelings about them. And there had been times, when she was at an arrest, when the criminal was just teetering on the edge and hadn't plunged yet into true evil, that she wondered sending them to one was the right thing to do. Now, thinking of the trembling broken girl hidden behind the door, she was less certain than ever.

Toshiko emerged from the bathroom, back in her clothes, pink-faced and hair wet.

"Will you just wait for me a moment?" Gwen asked her. "While I clean up?"

Toshiko nodded, a slight movement and, biting her lip, stepped out of the way.

Gwen didn't close the door behind her, leaving it ajar.

She surveyed herself critically in the mirror for a second – she was bruised and dirty and dusty. With quick economic movements she pushed the plug into place, turned on the tap and shrugged off the bits of her uniform that looked most police-like, until she was left in her trousers and the black vest she wore underneath. Then, stopping the tap again, she began to wash the worst of the dirt and dust from her skin and hair.

It took about two minutes, all told, one eye always fixed on the door and Toshiko.

Afterwards she paused only to look at herself in the mirror again (better, if not great) and, gathering up her uniform, headed back to Toshiko.

"All better," she told her brightly and then, pausing only for a split second's doubt, pushed the door opposite open.

Thankfully it was a bedroom.

"James -- he's the man who owns the house -- he said you could sleep in here," Gwen lied, the sudden urge to put the girl back together - to rebuild her - winning against any sense of the professional distance she should have been keeping with a convicted criminal.

Toshiko walked inside slowly, her eyes brushing across the room. Gwen hovered in the doorway, uncertain.

"Are you going to be alright?" she asked after a second.

For a moment, as the girl turned quickly to look at her, it seemed as if Toshiko would just nod again. But then she spoke. "Please, don't leave me."

"Alright," Gwen said, "I won't go if you don't want me to."

She prattled more nonsense, aware she was doing it, as Toshiko climbed uncertainly into the double bed and then settled onto the mattress next to her.

“Suppose I’d better shut us up and let you go to sleep,” she said after another moment.

“No,” Toshiko said, the quickest she’d spoken yet. “Please, just keep talking. It doesn’t matter what you talk about.”

Every possible thought fled Gwen’s head -- it was a terrible thing, sometimes, to be told you could say anything. Something.

“OK,” she said, forcing the words out and keeping her voice soft. “My boyfriend thinks we should move in together but I’m not sure. You see those couples sometimes, who live together and they barely seem to like one another. And his mother’s bound to be a nightmare about the whole thing...”

THURSDAY

James lost track of how long he had been working -- he always did. But the grey light of dawn appearing outside the window was enough to tell him it had been hours.

The wounds were complicated but not impossible. Mostly he'd just needed to stem the blood and now it was just tidying up. She'd most likely be up and about in a few days, if she was a fighter... and every complaint Alex had ever uttered against her said that she was.

"Needle and thread," he said softly and Ianto handed it to him without hesitation.

They had worked mostly in silence. The only sound that of the soft murmur of Alex and the man talking next door. Every now and then the boy's eyes had drifted in their direction. Thankfully it hadn't affected his work. He had blanched only briefly as James had opened her up and had then set to work efficiently and thoroughly -- even his spare medical kit was now organised.

After another half an hour or so, James was satisfied. Setting down the needle, he turned and quickly washed the blood from his hands and arms. His shirt was ruined. Again.

When he turned back, Ianto was sat in one of the kitchen chairs, his hands clasped together, staring at a thoroughly uninteresting spot on the kitchen floor. He looked exhausted. No, not just exhausted -- 'spread too thin', he'd heard someone say that once. There was obviously something troubling him. James sighed -- he was a doctor, this was where he was supposed to step in and ask and be sympathetic and magically solve everything.

He was steeling himself for the first inevitable question when Ianto spoke. "If someone is in a coma, they could still wake up, couldn't they?"

"That depends on a lot of different things," James told him truthfully.

"But it happens... You shouldn't just give up."

James paused for a moment before answering. "Sometimes it's not giving up, it's just accepting the truth."

Ianto stayed perfectly still for a moment and then as a soft laugh drifted from the other room, he twisted rapidly in his seat towards the sound -- startled back into the world of the living. For a second James saw sorrow and anger and jealousy and grief mixed on his face.

"I should get her upstairs," James said and, not waiting for a response, he went to get Alex.

He was sat next to the other man -- an interesting portrait in familiarity and ease and tension. They both looked up, surprised and slightly guilty as he entered. They'd probably forgotten he was even next door.

"She's going to be alright," he told them. "Alex, I need you to carry her up to my bed."

It was with a certain sense of reluctance that Alex followed him, leaving Jack alone. Neither they nor Lanto said anything as they re-entered the kitchen and Alex gathered Suzie into his arms, and it was with equal silence that they climbed the stairs. James pushed the door to his bedroom open, to find Gwen and the other girl curled in his bed. Peaceful and comfortable. Alex shot him an amused look, as he pulled the door back shut and headed to the room next door. For once he was grudgingly thankful that his parents had left him with this big, sprawling heap. This one was thankfully empty and Alex settled Suzie gently onto the bed. He looked at her for a second and then straightened, his eyes already past James focused on the door.

"I'm going to..." he started but James interrupted him.

"You've had him all night," he told Alex, "Give someone else a chance."

"Someone else?"

James tutted in annoyance.

"For a police officer, you're worryingly unperceptive. Come on, there's a double bed next door we can both sleep there."

Neither spoke as they climbed into the bed -- it was hardly the first time they'd ended up sharing. He was almost used to it. Almost. Nothing could quite take away the dull ache it provoked. Though even that was mostly worth it.

James lay on his back, staring at the ceiling as Alex fidgeted beside him. Eventually he felt Alex roll onto his side, so that he was facing him. He could almost feel his eyes watching him.

"You're not asleep," Alex said.

"Apparently not. Perhaps it's because people keep bothering me. At night. With bodies."

"I just wanted to say thank you for helping her," Alex said, at least attempting to sound genuine.

"That's not what you wanted to say," James told him bluntly.

Alex grunted in annoyance and reaching out shoved him softly.

"Stop pretending to be a miserable bastard."

Giving up James rolled onto his own side so they were face to face. Noses too close together.

"So who is he?" He asked.

"I think he's what we've been waiting for," Alex told him, his eyes bright.

What you've been waiting for, James couldn't help thinking, and what I've been dreading. But I'll still follow you.

~*~*~*~*~

Jack watched as Alex and James left the room, feeling the old sting of pain. He was already scared of losing them again. All of them.

The clock on the wall said it was half past seven. They must have talked for hours, though he hadn't truly told Alex much, hadn't known what he could say. Instead they'd just talked of anything and nothing. Explored each other in words.

Jack sat down heavily on the sofa – lost again. He wasn't sure when lanto arrived, didn't hear him or see him but was suddenly aware of him, stood in the doorway, staring at him. Their eyes met and Jack waited for him to speak first. He had no idea where they stood now.

lanto looked away first. "Is it true, what he said? About us?"

"Yes and no," Jack told him, still refusing to look away. "We are sleeping together, me and him, but that's not why he's part of my team."

lanto moved into the room, his eyes scanning the bookshelves, glancing out at the grey window. "What's he like? This other me?" he asked.

For a moment Jack saw lanto clearly in his mind – his lanto. Brave and broken, heroic and monstrous, passionate, clever, beautiful. His. The image of him hurt, like it was splintering inside him.



"I can't tell you."

"Why? Would it break some rule?"

"Probably," Jack said and smiled, "But that's not what I meant. I can't just explain him."

Suddenly a phone began to ring, shrill in the stillness of the morning, lanto pulled the mobile from his pocket and stared at it blankly for long seconds. Then with a small shake of his head, he switched it off and dropped it on the table beside the doors to the garden.

"Shouldn't you take that?" Jack asked him. "It might be someone worried about you."

He thought he saw a swift flash of anger, and suddenly the boy was moving towards him. lanto seized his face and suddenly their lips were together, his tongue pushing inside Jack's mouth. It was awkward for a second, teeth clashing and knees tangled against the sofa. Jack shifted, twisting so that lanto was beneath him, breaking apart only long enough to catch a quick breath, and then kissing him again. lanto's hands slipped down to his chest, struggling with his shirt, pulling the buttons loose.

It felt right. It felt like lanto.

With the last thought, everything came rushing back to Jack. Where he was, who this was. He pulled sharply away from him.

“This isn’t right.”

lanto was breathing heavily, his eyes hurt and pleading. “Why? Why is this any different?”

Jack didn’t have an answer -- it just was. lanto lunged upwards towards him for another kiss but Jack turned his head away and lanto’s lips found his throat instead. There was a second’s pause and then lanto bit him softly, just on his jaw line. Jack couldn’t disguise the gasp as his breath caught in his throat.

“Don’t,” he told him through clenched teeth, trying to disentangle himself. “You’re not him.”

“I am,” lanto said, his voice etched with desperation. “Please. I need this.”

Jack paused then, looking down at lanto. He looked fragile, like he was about to break.

“Please,” he said again.

Jack hesitated for a second longer and then leaned in, kissed him again, slower this time, more gently, deeper.

~*~*~*~*~

The dream faded, an insistent beeping pulling it apart. Gwen thought it was her alarm and reached out, half blind to knock it back into silence. Her hand found nothing and she was suddenly aware that the bed felt wrong and the room was too cold and that everything smelt different. Her eyes opened, for one panicked moment she was lost and then she remembered, sitting up sharply.

Toshiko was already awake, scared, curled up in a protective ball inside the bedding.

The phone was still ringing. It didn’t sound like hers.

Struggling from the bed, she tracked it down. Hidden amidst her pile of abandoned clothes – she didn’t recognise it. She clicked the answer button quickly.

“Hello?”

“Hello sweetheart,” a familiar voice said. “I need to talk to Jack.”

~*~*~*~*~

lanto pulled his trousers back on, the silence awkward between them. Jack leant back against the sofa and squeezed his eyes shut. He was too old for this. Too old and too tired.

The sofa shifted beneath him as lanto got up. He rolled over onto his side, letting his eyes fall back open. He watched lanto push open the patio doors and walk into the garden, outlined by the morning sunshine. Pulling himself reluctantly into a sitting position, Jack fastened his trousers, climbed to his feet and moved over to the door, buttoning his shirt.

lanto looked young in the early light, young and pale. Jack watched him light a cigarette with trembling fingers, lifting it numbly to his lips. He had never seen lanto smoke, had never been able to imagine it. Now he blew out a thin trail of smoke, some of it lingering for a second on his lips. Jack felt something lustful twinge deep in his stomach and, with a will, pulled his eyes away. They settled instead on lanto's phone, abandoned on the table, it was still turned on. He must have just switched it onto silent.

He picked it up. Six missed calls, four voice-mails.

His eyes found lanto again, still trembling against the cold, cigarette clenched in loose fingers. His eyes fixed upon him, he dialled the number to get the voice mail.

"You have four new messages," the falsely warm, efficient female voice said on the other end. "First message received today at 7.43 am, from Rhiannon."

lanto's sister, she was probably just worried about where he was. He'd been working at a Starbucks, he was probably still living at home. God, he was so young.

It sounded like he had been right as the voice shifted to Rhiannon sounding anxious and tearful. "For god's sake, lanto, where are you? Please don't do this. Not to me, not to Mum." Her voice hitched for a moment in a sob. "Don't you want to say goodbye? I'm not going to let you do this to us." Another pause. Jack felt like the bottom of his stomach had fallen away. "We'll go ahead without you." Quiet and then the click of the call being ended.

lanto's father was going to die, this morning. Might have already. Jack had completely forgotten. How could lanto have?

lanto turned in the garden and met his eyes, saw the phone and Jack knew instantly that he hadn't forgotten. A sudden flare of anger burst inside him and he forced his way into the garden.

"You don't have any right to touch my phone..." lanto started, but Jack was too angry to listen.

"Is this what that was about?" He asked, gesturing at the living room.

"Does that matter?" lanto asked.

"It mattered to me."

lanto paused for a second and then smiled. His eyes filling with tears. "Well it wasn't how I was expecting my first sexual experience with a man to be," he spat. "But beggars can't be choosers."

Jack shoved him. He staggered backwards a step.

“Why?” Jack demanded.

lanto laughed, though it hardly resembled one, bleak and despairing.

“Haven’t you ever just wanted to prove to yourself you’re alive, Jack?”

Jack didn’t have an answer. No ready lie on his lips. “You’re father…” he started.

“Is dying,” lanto interrupted. “And nobody will save him. No heroes rushing in. Not for him. Not for me.”

The tears finally broke then and, reaching for him, Jack pulled him into his arms, one hand gripped the front of his shirt and he felt the sobs shaking against him. Into him.

“You could still go, there might still be time,” Jack told him, softly.

lanto seemed to freeze against him and then suddenly pushed him away, violently. “For what? To sweep in and save the day? Enough people have told me that that isn’t going to work, not this time.” He viciously rubbed the tears away from his eyes.

“You should say goodbye.”

“Goodbye to what? Something so wrapped up in tubes and wires and metal and plastic that it’s hardly human anymore – something I don’t even recognise as my father anymore?”

Jack paused, unsure what to say. “You’ll regret it,” he said after a moment.

“Why? Does the other me regret it? The better me? Is that what this is about, feeling like you’re healing him by making me go through this?”

“That isn’t what this is about.”

Jack had no idea how lanto felt about his father’s death. He had no idea if he had been beside his bed as it happened. He knew nothing about any of this. He was lost.

“My best friend,” lanto started and then paused. “When we were thirteen his mother was in a car crash – it left her in a coma, she managed to hold on for a week but they said she was already dead inside and they turned her off.” The last three words were haltingly emphatic as if he could barely stand to say them. “He told me about it afterwards. They said he should stay with her, say goodbye, and he needed to tell someone. Anyone, and I didn’t want him to, didn’t want to listen to it, but I was all there was. So I had to.

“He said that it was so slow and that her skin, it changed colour – from one to another and another. Painting her away. I don’t think he ever really got over it and he kept wanting to talk about it and I couldn’t listen to all that again – we stopped seeing each other. Do you think that is what I want my last image of my father to be? Haunting me? It’s bad enough that I can only see him now, half a machine...”

Jack reached for him again, but Ianto knocked his hand away. He had no idea what to say and it was almost a relief as Gwen appeared suddenly, pale, a phone clutched in her hand.

“It’s him,” she told him.

Ianto turned away and Jack took the phone, climbing unsteadily and wearily back into the living room. Gwen glanced between the two of them and then followed Jack inside.

“So how much mess have you made so far, Jack?” There was a vicious tone to Jai’s words, his voice rasping painfully.

“What do you want?”

“You know what I want, I want you,” he spat, there was a horrible moment of silence. “I warned you, Jack. Give me the girl. This is your last chance.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Jack told him, trying to keep his voice steady and calming, knowing it wouldn’t work.

Jai was like a child – every emotion sudden and encompassing and bright. That’s why Jack had liked him. In the Agency you’d learnt to wear scathing indifference like armour because pretending that nothing could hurt you was almost as good as it being true. Jai had never managed that, never saw it for the pretence it was, never copied it. Jack had liked having someone he could excite or anger or hurt - provoking laughter and smiles and tears – it had been a game for him. But it had been a point of love as well. Those emotions had made Jai the most human of them all, the most lovable but it made him dangerous as well.

“Why can’t you see that this isn’t a bad thing?” Jai asked, his voice sounding increasingly desperate. “Why are you choosing them instead of me. What did I do that was so terrible? How many of them have you got now? How many of them are you massing against me?”

Jack was distracted, he had been watching Ianto through the window, uncertain of what he would do next, the boy had suddenly frozen. He almost didn’t hear what Jai said next.

“I’m sorry, Jack. You missed one.”

The line went suddenly dead, and in the garden Ianto stumbled backwards in horror. As he moved, Jack saw the body strung up between the trees. Carelessly left like an abandoned toy.

~*~*~*~*~

It was Craig.

James watched as Alex and Jack cut the body down. Craig – unreliable, funny, always late, always needing money, inventive, quick on his feet, protective like a pit bull, dead in his garden. It felt like someone had taken hold of his stomach in a clenched fist and was twisting it.

Alex turned to him with desperate eyes. They had heard Ianto's yell.

"James," Alex said.

He moved forwards and pressed his fingers needlessly against the cold skin. Craig. Always smiling, except when he was moaning. Too young, stupid and clever, sometimes at the same time.

"He's dead," he told them, standing quickly and, turning, went back into the house.

He sank onto the sofa, his head in his hands. He should be used to death, but not here, not like this. They'd all known it was dangerous but he'd never...

The others filtered in slowly, settling themselves on seats or the floor or leaning against the walls, none of them speaking. Even Suzie appeared from upstairs, looking nervous and uncertain and unsteady on her feet. Alex came in last, James met his eye and knew that he had sorted Craig out. Again. As always. He selfishly didn't want to know how.

Alex waited a moment, stood in the doorway, breathed in softly and then turned to look at Jack, who was leant against the farthest wall. "You need to tell us everything," he told him.

There was a long pause, breath stilled and James thought that Jack might be about to argue. He sighed and then took two steps forward so he was stood in the centre of the room.

He began to talk.

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They listened in silence as Jack did his best to explain, stumbling over the words, his heart tight. Craig haunting him again.

Outside, Alex had told him just to leave him to it – his voice rough with anger. It had almost been a relief – dealing with the bodies once had been enough. And here he was surrounded by all these living ghosts. Listening.

So he talked.

He told them about his earth. About parallels and duplicates. About Torchwood and aliens. About Jai. About what he would do. What he could do. Eventually he ran out of things to say.

“He’s going to hunt us?” Gwen said.

“Why did you keep this from us?” Alex asked before Jack could answer.

Jack considered the question for a moment. “I thought,” He said slowly, “That you would be better not knowing. That this time I could protect you.”

“That worked,” James said quietly, bitterness tainting his words.

“Protect us from what?” Alex again, taking control.

“Aliens... No. Torchwood ruins everybody who comes near it,” Jack told them. “I didn’t want that to happen to any of you. Once was enough.”

There was a moment of silence. In the end it was Gwen who spoke. “How do you know that? How can you know that our life is better without it?”

“Do our lives look that good?” Alex asked, frustration and exhaustion clear in his voice.

Jack looked around the staring faces, each showing echoes of disbelief. His eyes were drawn to Ianto, but he was staring at the floor, his hands held too tightly before him. Jack watched him for perhaps a second too long. As he looked away he met James’ angry eyes and thought perhaps he, at least, believed him.

“You don’t understand,” he told him. “You don’t know what happened.”

“I died, didn’t I?” Alex suddenly said and Jack, instinctively, took a step backwards. “You tried not to, but you kept talking like I was in the past last night – where you come from, I’m already dead. Is that what this is about?”

Jack felt the old pain again, saw the look on the other Alex’s face, the despair. He couldn’t tell him all that, he’d not told anyone – he’d lied to Torchwood 1, said there’d been an attack on the Hub – he couldn’t lay this on them. But he had to say something.

“Yes,” he admitted. “You’re dead, most of you are – there’s only three of us left where I’m from – out of hundreds – just three. That’s what Torchwood does.”

“But we died for something, something that mattered – that’s what counts.”

They were silent for a second.

“You asked me,” Alex said, looking determined and ready for an argument. “Last night, you asked why James and why... Craig – why we were together. We were drawn together Jack, we were all missing something. Doesn’t that mean anything?”

Jack ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Does it matter?”

“All that matters,” James interrupted, quelling Alex’s angry look with a glance, “Is what... Jai, is going to do next. Is he going to come after us?”

Another hesitation. Jack had no idea what Jai would do next. “Possibly or other people involved in Torchwood. I didn’t think that Jai would have known about... about Craig. He must accessed the entire database before we found him.”

“Then we don’t really have any choice do we?” James said. “We’re involved, whether we want to be or not.”

Jack wished he could deny it. Around him he could see the realisation settling on the others like weight. The horror and anger would arrives soon – he didn’t know if they would stay or fight or flee – he didn’t know these pale images of the lost well enough. It made him feel sick.

All he could do now was take control and hope they’d follow – it was his last chance to save them.

“What we’re going to do,” he said firmly, “Is to start contacting everyone who worked for Torchwood on my world.”

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They all stayed. Watching as Jack painstakingly made a list of names, his mind and his stomach churning over what Alex had said. It didn’t matter -- whatever their lives were like here, Torchwood wouldn’t have made them better. He’d seen what Torchwood had done to them all. He tried to push the thoughts away, focusing on each name, ignoring as best he could each remembered story gathering at the corners of his mind. Thankfully, with Suzie and Alex working for the police, they had easy access, both officially and unofficially to the police database – so it took far longer for Jack to make the list of people than to locate their numbers.

As he found people, he handed the name to one of the others – trying to match them up with people they knew, in case it helped. The awkward conversations were a distracting constant background noise. Sometimes they weren’t able to get through.

Jack knew he didn’t even have a hope of remembering everyone at Torchwood One, all he could do was hope that Jai would ignore them – they didn’t mean anything to Jack. He did make a point of writing down Lisa’s name, it seemed the least he could do for Ianto, both Iantos. He handed it to him, holding on slightly too long, fingers touching, hoping that Ianto would meet his eyes. He didn’t.

Eventually the list was done and Jack could turn to the small pile of names he’d kept for himself. He selected a number at random. And looked at it blankly for a moment.

Martha.

He had to use James’ phone to call her – he was the only one without a mobile. It rang for a horrifyingly long time, the weight of it heavy on his chest.

Then she answered.

“Hello.”

Jack let out the breath he hadn't even noticed he'd been holding. The familiarity of her voice, sinking through him, warmed him.

“Martha Jones, my name is Jack Harkness, I have something to tell you.” He felt the hesitation on the end of the phone, knowing Martha she probably thought that he was selling something and was debating if it would be rude to hang up. “It's very important that you listen to me. Your life may be in danger, I need you to...”

“Is this a joke?” She asked. “Did Tish put you up to this?”

Jack thought for a moment of Tish, sweet and comforting. Was there anything about her in the files?

“It isn't a joke,” he told her. “Somebody might try to hurt you and your family.”

“This isn't funny.”

“I need you to take your mother and father and Tish and Leo and find somewhere to hide – don't go home, don't go to work – go somewhere that no one would expect to find you. Turn off your phones.”

Martha made a soft, disbelieving noise.

“Please, Martha, I know how much you care for your family, do this to protect them.”

There was a pause and Martha hung up the phone. Jack could only hope she'd believed him.

He pressed the phone down and across from him, Gwen smiled, reached out and took his hand, squeezing it.

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He couldn't get through to Rose and it took over ten minutes to convince Jackie even to listen. While he was still trying to get a word in edge ways, James threw his mobile on the table, stole a cigarette from the pack that Ianto had left on the table and headed into the garden.

Once he had finally finished, Jack followed him with a quick glance at the numbers left on the table. He needed a break.

He found him crouched on the steps, the cigarette smoking in his fingers. Pale and still young, for all he wore the cynicism of age like a mask.

“You don't smoke,” Jack sat on the step next to him.

James took another deep drag.

“True,” he said after releasing the smoke. “But out of the current options, death by smoking seems the most pleasant – so I thought I should try and catch up.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack told him. “For all of this.”

“Yep,” James said noncommittally.

They’d argued, Jack remembered, the last time he’d seen him alive – over Alex, like normal. James had tried to tell him he didn’t seem right. They’d argued and fucked and both stormed off. Jack had come back, all ready to make it better, and he’d been dead. They all had.

“If anything happens to him...” James suddenly started but didn’t seem to know how to finish the sentence.

“I won’t let anything happen to him.”

Another pause.

“On this other world, are we... were we... me and him...”

“No,” Jack said. “He loved you, but not like that.”

James laughed, bitterly. “Some things never change.”

“We were,” Jack told him, catching his eye for the first time, not sure quite why he wanted him to know. He reached out and touched his hand softly.

James watched him, his eyes tracing along Jack’s jaw and lips and neck. He twisted the cigarette viciously into the ground. Leaning in, James pressed a kiss against Jack’s cheek, his lips lingering coolly, smokily there for a second and then he stood up. Wrenching himself away.

“I have more people to call,” he said.

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Jack hesitated before calling Owen – perhaps he should have left that phone call to Gwen or Ianto – but he’d just wanted to hear his voice again. Even though he knew it would hurt.

He dialled the number as quickly as he could – not wanting to give himself any more chance to wait, to delay.

It was a voice mail message. Owen’s voice frozen on tape.

“Hey we can’t take your call right now,” he sounded happy, “As we’re off somewhere much more exciting than you can possibly imagine.”

“Damn right,” Jack heard a girl say with a laugh in the background.

“Leave a message,” Owen continued and we might possibly call you when we get back from the honeymoon. Unless you’re my mother or we’re still enjoying the sex.”

Another laugh. “You can’t say...”

The message cut off, interrupted by a high pitched beep.

Jack hesitated for a moment.

“Be happy,” he said softly and hung up the phone.

Owen was better – his life was better. That was what mattered. And he was far away where Jai couldn’t get him. Life was better without Torchwood. How would his life have been without Torchwood? Without the Time Agency? Without the war, that first war that had eventually merged into all the others? Without the Doctor? It would have been better, he thought angrily. But lingering at the back of his mind was a doubt and his eyes were drawn to Toshiko. He hadn’t asked her to call anyone, hadn’t spoken to her, scared to find her again knowing he must lose her. One way or another.

She was stood in the hallway, separate from the rest of them, staring out of the window, had been for hours, still in her prison uniform. Her life wasn’t better. It should have been, but it wasn’t. He didn’t understand. On his world, aliens had trapped Toshiko, taken her mother, manipulated and damaged her – and then UNIT had caught her and done more or less the same – but that couldn’t have happened here. Something else had happened, something, drawing her back onto that path. And Jack hadn’t been here to rescue her, to give her something, even if it was only a shorter life.

As he watched her, her eyes fixed on some distant spot, her hand reached up and stroked the window pane, the different coloured glasses, fingers spreading – as if it felt strange to her, wondrous, new. Curiosity, even if only in this small thing, breaking through the fear and pain. So familiar

Jack stood, suddenly yearning to be near her.

She flinched as she heard him approach, backing slightly away. He wanted to reach for her but didn’t, he remembered how nervous she’d been when she’d first come out of prison. He’d learnt to be careful of her. Instead he just stood by her, not talking, hoping she’d become comfortable in his presence. Waiting.

The silence lasted for over five minutes, each second ticking impatiently by, marked and measured by the grandfather clock by the door.

Eventually Toshiko spoke, quiet halting words. “Was that why he was coming after me? To kill me?”

Jack hesitated, he owed her the truth – he owed all of them the truth. She turned dark, beautiful eyes on him.

“No,” he told her. “He was trying to take you, not to kill you. It’s different with you.”

“Why?” she asked. “Why does he want me?”

“Because you’re special, Toshiko Sato.”

She shook her head in mute denial and Jack pressed down the new urge to reach out and take her hand.

“You’re the cleverest person I know. He has these machines,” he tried to explain. “The machines that brought us here in the first place, but they’re broken – he thinks you are the only person who can fix them. He might be right.”

She turned away from him, caught in the minute details of the window, silence reclaiming them.

“Why don’t you let him take me?” she asked at last.

He reached out then, instinctively, unable to stop himself, lightly touching her trembling fingers, almost instantly regretting it. “Because you mean more to me than anything in this world or in mine and I won’t let something like him touch you, even for a second, not now.”

Her hand fell away from the window, away from his fingers, clutching at the material of her shirt. Her shoulders hunching, closing her off from him.

“He’s killing them because of me,” she said with soft desperation. “They said, the judges, the... that people died because of what I did. That I killed them.”

“It’s not your fault,” Jack told her, wishing he could convince her.

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Suzie watched as Jack wandered into the hallway and stood by Toshiko. She’d watched as he took Gwen’s hand. Watched as he’d followed James and from where she’d sat had seen that brief, sorrowful kiss pressed to his cheek.

She’d seen the obvious respect he’d shown Alex and the long lingering, tense, yearning glances he’d directed at Ianto.

And she’d felt the way he avoided her eyes.

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Eventually there was nothing left he could say, and with a final, sad smile Jack left Toshiko. Though he was pleased that moments later she followed him into the room, even if she hesitated by the doorway.

They had reached all the people they could and someone had switched on the TV, a news report.

“... it is believed that this is the worst terrorist attack ever perpetrated in the UK,” a serious faced reporter was saying, the smoky remains of the prison behind her. “Due to the current crisis in prison overcrowding, the prison was home to 857 prisoners and a currently undisclosed number of prison wardens on the night of the attack.”

Jack sank onto the sofa beside Alex, numbness sinking through him.

“Initial reports suggest that no one has yet been found alive within the prison, though the cause of death is still undetermined. An unconfirmed source says that the majority of victims within the male wings were found with blood at their ears and nose, but no other visible injuries, which may suggest internal haemorrhaging.

“Concerns have been raised about the possibility of prisoners having escaped. Police representatives have stated that they are working around the clock to identify the bodies and account for all the prisoners. Doubts have been raised, however, whether this will be possible in the women’s wing, which was utterly destroyed in the attack...”

They watched in horrified silence as flickering images of the devastation and fruitless rescue attempts crossed the screen.

“A helpline has been set up for anyone affected by the attack and officials urge the friends and families of the victims to get in touch,” the newsreader said, drawing to a close. “We will bring you further updates as reports emerge. In other news,” she said, none of the tight sorrow leaving her voice, “Respected human rights advocate, Lucia Moretti, was found dead in her Cardiff home this morning – it is not clear whether she died of natural causes or...”

Jack felt Alex turn next to him but he couldn’t move. He was frozen. Trapped.

He hadn’t even thought of Lucia, she hadn’t been on the list. In his world she’d died over ten years ago, peacefully in her home – long retired. Was that what Torchwood did to you? If it couldn’t rob you of life through violence, it would steal your years through pressure and weariness and heartache...

He rose abruptly from the sofa, not wanting to give anyone the chance to question him, desperate to escape the news report – the miscellany of tragedies – both small and large. He moved, quickly past Toshiko, escaping to the solitude of the kitchen. He stood against the sink for a moment, bracing himself against it, feeling the hot sting of tears. Flicking the tap on he splashed the cold water across his face – cooling them, hiding them.

Behind him he heard steady footsteps and taking a few seconds to collect himself he turned, expecting to see Gwen and instead finding Suzie.

They stood for a moment, facing each other, like figures from a Western.

“Why are you avoiding me?” she asked. “Why are you treating me differently to the others?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” He started to push past her, but she grabbed him, forcefully stopping him.

“What did I do that was so bad that you can’t look at me?”

Grief and anger solidified in him, pressing down all around him. “You killed people,” he spat at her.

She paused for a second, horrified. “That wasn’t me, not this...”

“And you’re so different? Jai told me, what you did – you tied him to a table and cut him into shreds,” Jack found his own hands were gripping her shirt now, shaking her.

“He’s a monster.”

“That doesn’t make it alright.”

Angry tears pricked her eyes. “He told me,” she said bitterly. “He told me – that I wasn’t good enough for you, for Torchwood, so you replaced me with her... with Gwen.”

The lines were blurring for Jack, he could see it but was powerless to stop it – as one Suzie and another merged together. “You betrayed me,” he spat, “I needed you and you destroyed everything. Why did you do it?”

“I don’t know,” she said, angry still, and then. “Because I was never good enough.”

“I needed you,” he said again.

“I’m sorry.”

Without knowing quite how or why, he pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her. They stood tied together for desperate minutes.

“You were good enough,” he murmured into her hair. “You were always good enough.” A long pause. “That’s what Torchwood does, it ruins people.”

They pulled apart and with one short squeeze of her hand, Jack left her, emerging back into the living room. His eyes scanned the sorrowful gathering twice before he realised.

Toshiko was gone.

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She only had to walk three streets, uncertain, unsteady footsteps leading her away from the sanctuary of the house, when he found her.

Everything felt disconnected, fleeting images that didn't match, didn't make sense. Normal people and normal streets – both tight with pain and fear. Things that still felt like fantasies and nightmares to her – unreal in their normalness. And then she'd looked up and he was stood, watching her approach, waiting. The hood shrouding his face not quite disguising that he was none of those things – he wasn't scared, he wasn't normal.

He was something else. She kept walking towards him.

And he was beautiful, she thought, heightened and more vivid amidst the world. Both of her – the her she was now and the her she had been – found him beautiful and wondrous and more real for both things. Drawing the halves of her back together.

As she reached him, he pressed a hand to her cheek and she didn't flinch away, allowed him to hold it there – the soft bone of his fingers cool against her skin.

“Toshiko,” he said, his voice hoarse.

She nodded, accepting the name, taking it back.

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They searched the streets for Toshiko – it was the only thing they could do. Searched for hours and slowly pair by pair returned to James house. Jack and Gwen were last. As they wandered, hopelessly through the door, Jack met Suzie's eyes – things still weren't right between them, he didn't think they ever could be, but at least they both knew now where they stood. He glanced around the others – the quick look was enough to know that each search had been as useless as their own.

They sat in silence for a time.

“Will he hurt her?” Gwen asked at last.

“Not if she does what he says,” Jack said.

“And if she does, what then? What will he do?”

Jack looked at Suzie for a second before answering her question. “I don't know, he said he wanted to get back home but I don't know if that's true anymore.”

As he was speaking, Alex stood up. “It doesn't matter at the moment,” he said firmly with a hint of bleakness. “We don't know where they are and there's nothing we can do.” He paused for a second

and then looked at Jack. "I need to go back to the station. We do." His glance encompassed Suzie and Gwen. "We've been gone too long and they'll need us."

Suzie nodded and Gwen rose quickly to her feet as if she had been startled back into reality.

"I'll get people out looking for them – for Jai and Toshiko. I'm sorry there's not more we can do – if you need us, if he contacts you – call us."

Gwen pressed the phone Jai had left into his hand and with only a seconds hesitation, kissed him on the cheek.

James got to his feet as well, slightly slower than the others and not quite meeting Jack's eye. "I'm going as well," he said. "They might need a doctor."

And they were gone. Everyone except Ianto, curled in a chair, staring out of the window. They sat like that, in painfully awkward silence, for a long time. Jack not knowing what to say, trying to sort through his anger and hurt and longing. In the end it was Ianto who spoke first.

"What do I get to live for, Jack?" He asked, still not looking at him. "How do I rebuild my life? He got aliens and saving the world – what do I get?"

"You saw what happened last night," Jack said in surprise. "What happened to Craig. It's not all wonderful, sometimes it's even hard to remember when it was."

"But it's something to live for – something to believe in. Something to die for, that's what Alex said."

"It's not that simple," Jack said through gritted teeth.

Ianto stood and turned to look at him at last, his expression angry. Jack rose with him.

"Why? Because it's difficult? Because it's dangerous? Isn't it worth it to fight the monsters, to stop things like that happening?" He gestured at the silent television. It only took three steps for Jack to reach him. He gripped his arm and leaned in, faces close but not quite touching.

"What if you become one of the monsters?"

Ianto paused, but his eyes were still defiant. "Maybe that's worth something too? Is that what happened? To the other me? Is he a monster?"

"No." The single syllable hissed vehemently out, masking the instant seed of doubt that plunged into Jack's stomach.

That wasn't his Ianto, he told himself – Jai may be a monster and Alex may have broken and Suzie become hideous – but not Ianto. But another part of himself watched with cruel eyes and asked – *'How would you know? You never saw the others as they were until it was too late. What are you making him into?'* Jack could not bare the thought of unleashing another monster into the world.

Ianto's hand gripped his collar pulling Jack even closer so their noses were touching, his breath warm on Jack's lips. "He said that didn't he?" Ianto said. "That he used to be like me. Did you make him into a monster, Jack?"

"Yes," Jack said – they were both tense and shaking.

Suddenly Ianto kissed him, a brief plunging kiss. He pulled away slightly. "Make me monstrous," he said. "Break me, rise me up, throw me down, create me, destroy me, hurt me – just do something."

Jack kissed him, their bodies pressed together, Ianto's hands moving to his neck.

Then the mobile began to ring.

They broke apart as if they'd been electrified.

With shaking hands Jack answered it.

"It's ready," Jai said. "We're at Roath Dock."

Jai hung up, dead silence all that was left.

"I'll drive," Ianto said.

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Jack stopped for a moment his fingers hesitant on the phone, Ianto silent beside him his eyes fixed on the road. Did he really want to drag them back into this?

The answer was no, but if it might mean the difference between saving Toshiko and not, then it didn't matter.

He pressed the dial button.

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The dock looked like Jack remembered it, like the one on his world and if there were small differences, he didn't know the place well enough to notice them. Even if he had, he wouldn't have seen them – the only thing he could see was Jai, hood thrown defiantly back, stood in the light of one of the street lamps. And behind him, in the shadows, Toshiko.

As he saw her, rage blossomed inside him and Jack pulled Alex's gun from his pocket, pointing it at Jai as he strode towards him. "Let her go."

Jai laughed, a painful halting laugh. His throat was swathed in bandages. He was hurt. The realisation was accompanied by a twinge of possessiveness, followed a moment later by the realisation that if his throat was damaged he might be close to powerless. As close as he ever got anyway.

“And then there were six, Jack, is that what you want?” Jai asked mockingly. “Are you going to destroy the whole Time Agency?”

“Maybe it should be destroyed,” Jack told him.

A flash of pain crossed Jai’s face. “You don’t mean that.”

“Why wouldn’t I? All we ever did was ruin people’s lives.”

“Not mine, Jack. Not hers,” he added gesturing at Toshiko, “You gave her something to believe in, something to make herself into – a hero.”

“I killed her,” Jack’s anger spilt out. “It was my fault she died.” He couldn’t look at Toshiko. Wouldn’t.

“No, Jack, she just died – it happens. People die.”

“She died because of Torchwood.”

“And a man who leaves his house at the wrong time dies because he’s hit by a car. Don’t blame yourself for this. No matter how much you think you’re tempting us or blackmailing us or forcing us - we all chose this. We all wanted it.”

Jack felt the gun shake in his hand and steadied it.

“And him,” Jai said his eyes moving past Jack to Ianto behind him. “You did the same for him, rebuilt him, shaped him, gave him something to stand on – and I don’t think you even knew you were doing it. Without the Agency, without you, I would have had nothing – you know the choices my species have – I would have ended up in the mines or if I was lucky on a pleasure cruiser. Would that have been better?”

Jack didn’t answer. He didn’t want to listen.

Jai’s eyes were bright under the lamplight. “You give us power, freedom, that’s all you give us – you give us the power and yes we can fuck up or save the world or die tragically. Because that’s what people do. That’s all anyone wants, the chance to make something with their life, even if what they make is terrible.”

Jack’s heart hurt, he was tired and lost and sore. He dropped the gun and Jai smiled.

“She’s fixed it Jack and worked it out. We can open a portal back. God, she’s incredible.”

Jai turned suddenly, reaching out a hand to Toshiko pulling her towards him, gently letting his jagged fingers wrap around her hand. She smiled at him, gazing at him in wonder and he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. Jack’s heart ached seeing them together. Seeing Toshiko so lost in him, so trapped. That was the thing about Jai, the horror of his acts of violence and violence were joined by moments of love and compassion and mercy.

Looking back at Jack, the smile lingering on his lips a moment longer. “Her life wasn’t better Jack, it was different but not better and she deserves so much more. It doesn’t have to be perfect but some of it should be wonderful, some of it should shine. That’s what she deserved. That’s what you gave her.”

Jack had a sudden fleeting memory of a man, a priest, he had met years before during the Second World War as the horrors of mankind and the monsters crashed around them. Afterwards - after people had died and sights had been seen and one battle, at least, had been won, the priest had turned to him with tears in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Jack had told him, then a moment later. *“For everything.”*

The priest had stared at him for a second and then seized his arm, speaking quickly with conviction, the words had seemed almost like a song:

*“When I behold the heavens in their vastness,
Where golden ships in azure issue forth,
Where sun and moon keep watch upon the fastness
Of changing seasons and of time on earth.*

*I feel thy balm and, all my bruises healing,
My soul is filled, my heart is set at ease.”*

Jack had barely understood what he was saying, recognising the words at last for a hymn – he had never had much time for God and it must have shown upon his face, for the priest had smiled at him sadly.

“These sorrows,” he had said seriously, *“deep as they are will heal – but the wonders I have seen in turn will live with me forever. For that it was worth it. Perhaps when you understand that, you will find some peace.”*

Jack had not thought of him since, couldn’t even remember his name now, he had not known that those words had remained hidden inside him. The same words that Jai was saying, that Alex had said and Ianto – perhaps they were right and perhaps they weren’t. Jack didn’t know anymore.

Jai sensed his indecision and smiled at him, still holding Toshiko’s hand. “I’d take her with me but I guess you’d kill me. You could take her with you. She needs a home and you need her. You could make her life magical. There’s nothing to stop you.”

Jack felt like he had been kicked in the stomach. “I couldn’t,” he said. Trying to cast the picture from his mind, forget it, deny it.

“You could take all of them – they’ve all been waiting for you. Give this to all of them. And I’d leave,” he said his voice suddenly quiet, the serious voice of a child who doesn’t really understand but is saying the words he think you want to hear. “I know there’s no place for me, not now. I’ll go.”

As he spoke, Jai moved closer, until he was stood before Jack and fighting back his own tears Jack pulled him to him, wrapping his arms around him. Jai's lips soft against his neck, warm and young and momentarily innocent.

Jack wished he could believe all those pretty words the way that Jai believed them. The way that they all believed them. But maybe he didn't have enough belief left in him now and somebody had to see the other half of the truth.

The other edge of the sword.

Jai sighed against his neck and Jack wished he could abandon himself in the moment but the knife was heavy at his side. Heavy with responsibility and loss as a city grieved in shock and terror at the monsters that had been unleashed. He pulled it loose, weighing it in his fingers for a second, torn between hope and duty. Jai's body gentle in his arms, defenceless – asking to be kept and redeemed and protected - but the hesitation could not last. A soldier couldn't hesitate. That was the first rule.

The knife slipped smoothly into Jai's back, finding the space between his intertwined back bones – slipping through the spinal cord - his one spot of real weakness. Jack felt the spasm run through his body and the short, desperate, shocked breath against his neck.

"I'm sorry," he murmured powerlessly into Jai's hair.

Jai pulled back slightly, his hands grappling at Jack's collar, tense within his arms, so that he could meet Jack's eyes. His face was contorted with the pain of his final moments. His eyes were horrified and despairing. "We could have... the Agency... why Jack?"

He swallowed deeply, he owed him an answer. "Because you killed so many people, people who didn't need to die and you didn't even think about it. I couldn't let you do that again and you would. I know, I made you into this."

"Just slaying your monster?" Jai said with a broken laugh and pressed a shattered kiss onto Jack's lips. It lasted mere seconds but as they broke apart, Jai pulled in a deep constricted breath.

He smiled at him. "What does that make you?"

Jack pressed a kiss to his forehead and lowered him gently to the ground. "A bigger monster."

They stayed like that for a moment, not moving, not talking. The only sound Jai's pained breathing and lanto and Toshiko's horrified silence. Jack watched as Jai's eyes wandered away, leaving him and then suddenly came back, wrecked with effort, focusing upon Jack again.

"I love you," Jai whispered through dry lips and then his body was loose and heavy in Jack's arms. Gone.

Jack held him there, this boy that had once been his – his challenge, his passion, his heartbreak, his fury, his loss. It was the sound of police sirens that broke him in the end. The others were coming. He couldn't face them, couldn't face the temptation. Maybe that was the truth of it, it was not them that Jack was trying to spare. Jai hadn't understood that. Jack couldn't take them back. Recruit them again, break them again.

Lose them again.

With careful hands he removed Jai's wrist strap and then searching his pockets, rescued his own. Preparing to leave. As he stood he met Toshiko's eyes. She looked scared, terrified of him, she backed away a step – deeper into the shadows – broken with sorrow.

It hurt. He had to escape.

He looked at the wrist straps, the programme was there, clear, ready and waiting. All it took was a press of a button. He steeled himself, his eyes still fixed on those meaningless pieces of leather and metal and glass – he couldn't look at them, at Toshiko and Ianto, couldn't say goodbye.

"You're just going to leave us," Ianto asked. Horrified and angry.

"I can't stay."

"What about us? What about me? What do we do now?"

"You'll be fine, live a life, be normal." *Forget the horror and the wonder.* The words shook as Jack said them and those left unsaid felt like a wound. He couldn't talk anymore. He pressed the buttons.

At first there was nothing and then the wind rose, twisting towards them, a steady whine and the first sparkle of light. He was going home. He took a deep breath and then felt hands on his shoulders, turning him. It was Ianto.

"I'm sorry," Ianto said, his eyes still angry. He kissed Jack fiercely, a bright burning kiss, and then pushed him.

Jack fell through the portal, for a second lost in the twisting, destructive whiteness. He landed heavily on the pavement the portal wrenching closed behind him, stunned for a second.

It was a moment later that he realised that Jai's wrist strap was gone.

In the distance he heard running footsteps. A figure passing through the shadows. She emerged into the light of a street lamp and paused. Gwen. Her face warm and thankful and joyous.

Then she was on him, arms wrapped around him, holding him. "Ianto," she said, "It's Jack, he's back."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Jack?”

“I’m here.”

~*~*~*~*~

Ianto watched Jack fall, swallowed by the light and then looked down at the wrist strap in his hand. The possibility.

He turned to look at Toshiko, she was sat on the floor beside Jai, lightly touching his hand, staring at the body. Tears on her cheek, unnoticed. He crouched down beside her and held out the wrist strap, letting her take it.

“Could you make more?” Ianto asked.

She nodded. “I think so,” her voice was soft.

He heard the police car pull up on the road. The others finally arriving. He took the wrist strap back, feeling the weight of it in his fingers, the potential. The sound of running footsteps.

“How would you like to never be trapped again?” He asked her. She stayed silent but something in her eyes told him her true answer, something indescribable, an expression another him in another place would have recognised. “We could go anywhere, find everything and if there’s nothing to find here then there are all those other worlds.”

There was only one question left now.

“What do you think we should be called? Torchwood or the Time Agency?”

EPILOGUE

Jack had been missing for seventeen days, three hours and forty seven minutes when Gwen called into the Hub, and Ianto felt like he could finally breathe again.

He wouldn't tell them much about what had happened as they'd checked him over, only that Jai was gone. He seemed quiet, which was unusual, his mood affecting the others and for a moment it felt to Ianto like they were back in those frozen, painful weeks after Grey's attack. Then suddenly it was like a switch had been turned and he'd been laughing and teasing and brusquely annoying again. All that pain, wherever it had come from, packed away, as Jack always packed it away. Hiding it from himself and from them.

Once Gwen went home to Rhys, who was badly in need of her affection considering she'd spent most of the past fortnight by the docks, it took Ianto roughly thirteen minutes to pull Jack into bed. Doing the only thing he could right then to mend him. An hour later they were led together, comfortable and warm in the familiar cramped surroundings. Jack's fingers tracing the line of his collarbone.

"I never asked you about your father," Jack said suddenly and Ianto frowned for a moment.

"What did you want to know?"

"He died." It was a statement, not a question.

"He was ill, it was years ago."

"What did you do?"

Ianto pondered the question for a moment. He was not sure exactly what it meant, though he had a feeling in the depths of his stomach. "I ran away to London," he said hesitantly. "Drifted, found Torchwood."

"Didn't that hurt your mother?"

Ianto couldn't avoid the instinctive swallow, trying to dislodge the sudden lump in his throat. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk about this but Jack didn't normally act this way and with everything that happened they needed only the truth to lie between them. "I don't know," he admitted, "I didn't talk to her, not for a long time – not until after Lisa. I understood better then."

Jack nodded as if he understood and pressed a long, lingering kiss on his lips. Ianto opened to it, enjoying it, it stretched for long peaceful minutes.

"What do you think you would have done if you hadn't found Torchwood?" His tone lighter, more relaxed, though Ianto sensed the question had a secret sharp edge underneath it.

He sighed melodramatically. "Well, I'd probably be the prime minister by now, I sacrificed a lot to work here, you know."

Jack laughed.

“Or I might still be working in a shop,” lanto added. “I’d guess I would be bored.”

Jack kissed him again.

“Sleep in tomorrow morning,” he said, “Lay in with me.”

“Is that an order?” lanto asked.

“Forever.”

Jack’s forehead rested against his own for a second, close and comfortable. Then he whispered against his cheek, so softly that lanto almost could not hear the words:

“Don’t let me ruin you or Gwen. Stop me.”

lanto didn’t know what to say for a moment, had no response ready. He felt as if his soul was suddenly beating slower. He was only half conscious of his hand tightening on Jack’s shoulder.

“I’ll stop you,” he said at last. Jack’s fingers traced along his cheek, turning his face so he could press a kiss against his lips. They lingered there together after the kiss ended.

“Promise?” Jack asked.

“Always.”