



The Rose of Jericho
Kaydee falls

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The Rose of Jericho

by kaydee falls (kaydeefalls@gmail.com)

Torchwood, New Who | R | Jack/Ianto, Gwen, Martha, Mickey, Lois, Rhys, Andy, John Hart; canon pairings | 63,000 words

Post-CoE. When Martha Jones encounters a dark UNIT cover-up in the wake of the 456, it's up to Gwen's new Torchwood team to bring the truth to light -- and save Ianto.

Betaed by: such_heights, tricksterquinn

Warnings: None

Spoilers: Children of Earth (TW), through "End of Time" (Who)

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The Rose of Jericho is the common name for several species of "resurrection plants" - so called for their habit of reviving after seeming to be dead.

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I.

*Relax, said the night man
We are programmed to receive
You can check out any time you like
But you can never leave
(The Eagles)*

"Name?"

"Lieutenant Yuan Zhang, UNIT medical officer." He taps the ID clipped to the pocket of his lab coat pointedly, repressing a sigh. As though the day hasn't been long enough already; this is the fourth guard to stop him.

The guard peers at the ID suspiciously. "This is a quarantine zone. What's your purpose here?"

Yuan doesn't quite roll his eyes, but it's a near thing. "UNIT is handling the investigation into the biological attack; I've orders to begin the autopsies. Your superiors ought to have been notified several hours ago-" Yuan glances down at the guard's lapel "-*Sergeant* Grimes." Not that Yuan makes a habit of pulling rank - he doesn't have much to pull, after all - but on occasion, it can be *great* fun. Anything to make this miserable evening a little brighter.

Grimes has the wrong sort of complexion for enduring embarrassment; his pale skin flushes nearly as red as his hair. "We were, *sir*," he grinds out. He glances down at the clipboard in his hands, checking it over. "But I was told to expect a Dr. Martha Jones."

"You and me both," Yuan mutters. "She was meant to return to London this morning, but her flight was cancelled due to...well." What's the proper term for it, after all? *Riots* would be accurate, but hardly encompassing enough; *mass panic* somehow implies it wasn't a perfectly justifiable reaction to the events of the day; *alien invasion* just doesn't sit right. *Attempted murder of millions of children* sounds downright treasonous, and Yuan knows better than to advertise his particular sentiments on the matter. He plows on ahead. "So she's stuck on the Continent and my arse was hauled off my very comfortable couch so that I could cut up a bunch of corpses rather than enjoy a very nice bottle of gin in front of my telly tonight. Go ahead and turn me away; you'd be doing me a favor."

Frustration and ill-temper make him honest; almost to his chagrin, it works. Grimes even cracks a smile. "Amen to that, *sir*," he says, setting the paperwork aside and swiping his card at the door, which opens. "Go on in. Mind you wear a mask."

Yuan does roll his eyes this time. "If the pathogen remains *that* virulent, a surgical mask won't do anyone much good, and I know they've already allowed people in to identify the bodies. Your 'quarantine zone' is a joke, Sergeant."

Grimes shrugs uncomfortably and follows him in.

They'd set up an impromptu morgue, here in the basement of Thames House. It isn't pleasant. Though the air conditioning is set on high, and the weather outside can hardly be considered springtime, this place doesn't have the proper refrigeration facilities for the purpose, and time is beginning to take its usual toll. It's been more than twenty-four hours since the 456 released their virus; there are over a hundred bodies that have been sitting out for over a day. The smell isn't terribly noticeable yet, probably thanks to the bags, but it will be soon. Fucking government bureaucracies, Yuan thinks bitterly, and dons his scrubs. And, yes, the surgical mask. He knows his business, thank you *very* much. At least they've provided him with all the necessary equipment.

"Are you really going to watch?" he asks Grimes skeptically; the young man is no doctor, clearly, given the squeamish look on his face as he glances around at the body bags.

Grimes swallows hard. "I have orders to remain and observe, sir."

"Oh, for the love of God," Yuan sighs. "Fine. Don't just stand there, then; help me get this body onto the table." He selects his first corpse at random, by virtue of being the nearest body bag to hand; he and Grimes carefully manhandle it onto the gurney.

There's a tag around the victim's wrist, identifying her as *Harriman, Elizabeth*. Date of birth 7 October, 1969. She's still fully dressed in business attire - civil servant, possibly a PA; the gold band around her finger means that she was someone's wife, maybe even a mother...

"Do you have kids?" Grimes asks unexpectedly, as though the same thought has just passed through his head.

"No," Yuan says, pulling his voice recorder out of his bag to prepare for the autopsy notes. "But my brother in Hong Kong has a daughter. She just turned five."

Grimes shifts his weight uncomfortably, staring at anything but the body. "I've a nephew in Sheffield." He pauses, then adds, "I've been stationed here in Thames House since 0600."

Neither of them participated in the riots earlier that day, then. Yuan might have military rank, but he's no soldier - oh, he had basic training, of course, but he'd only made it through by the skin of his teeth. Some men just aren't meant to carry a weapon, and that wasn't what UNIT recruited him for.

Just as well. If he'd been on the streets this morning, he's not entirely sure which side he'd have ended up fighting on - and by the sound of it, neither is Grimes.

Filthy fucking business, the lot of it. God, Yuan could use a drink right now. He shakes his head and turns his attention back to the task at hand. Autopsy, right. His instructions are straightforward: identify the virus used by the 456 - an airborne pathogen of extraordinary virulence, though it clearly didn't survive long in the open, given that no infection has been reported beyond the initial wave of attack - determine its full pathology, examine possibility of developing an antivirus. In case the 456 ever return, he supposes, though he doesn't know how likely *that* is. At any rate, at first blush, the pathogen seems to have functioned more like a poison than a proper virus...

He reaches down to begin undressing the corpse, and that's when he finally notices.

"What the hell?"

Grimes starts, looking up at him. "Sir?"

"Look at her," Yuan demands. "I realize you're not a doctor, but just *look* for a second, and think. What's wrong with this picture?"

His face pale, Grimes makes a cursory examination of Elizabeth Harriman's body, not daring to edge any closer. "She's, um, dead?"

"She's been dead for more than a day, in a body bag, without refrigeration," Yuan says, not even bothering with the first three scathing retorts that came to mind. "But she looks as though she only died an hour ago, at most." He presses a latex-gloved finger to her neck, where the pulse would have been. "Her body temperature is cool, below normal, but not nearly as low as it ought to be, in this room; rigor mortis has not even begun to set in-" He carefully lifts her torso, pulling up the hem of her shirt as he does so. "No noticeable lividity in her blood vessels, despite having been lain on her back since shortly after time of death. And no signs of decomposition in her skin tissues, no odor of decay whatsoever. For a dead woman, she's been *remarkably* well preserved."

"But...the stink in here..." Grimes shakes his head, bewildered. "I mean, it's not bad, but you can still - it's *death*, right, you can smell it."

"Check the other bodies," Yuan orders at once. "All of them. See if there are any more like this one. She may have no pulse, but I'm not so sure she isn't still alive."

There are a hundred and twenty-two corpses in body bags in the improvised morgue.

Thirty-nine of them aren't dead.

"Name?"

"Ianto Jones. I have an interview at two o'clock."

The young man behind the reception desk glanced down at his calendar. "Yes, that's right. Please have a seat. I'll let them know you've arrived."

"Thanks." Ianto took a seat off to the side, trying not to crease his new suit in the process. He felt absurdly overdressed, like an imposter; how the hell did anyone ever get comfortable wearing this sort of thing every day?

He glanced around, taking in the dull corporate look of the place. Just like him in his conservative three-piece suit, blandly attractive and anonymous. Good to know he'd chosen correctly. The chairs in

reception were comfortable, at least, and the feel of the leather upholstery spoke of generous funding. Not the usual government front, then, Woodley Consulting.

But Ianto knew *that* already.

When the receptionist finally led him into the conference room - too large for an interview, too posh, chosen to intimidate - Ianto found three people seated on one side of the broad table. He thought he might have seen one before - the man, thirty-something, clearly born into money, sharp green eyes. Ianto flipped through the photo album of his memory, matched the face. Yes. At the investigation site, in what looked to be military duds, but no insignia. Ianto remembered. He always remembered.

The other two - both women, one middle-aged with dyed blonde hair, the other youngish and black, both attractive in very different ways - were both strangers. He hadn't seen either of them before. Well, they went into the mental album along with Faux-Military Man (now introduced as Harry Upshaw).

At first, the interview was excruciatingly routine. The usual introductions, CV check (his university experience and a string of odd jobs, half fabricated), what-can-you-bring-to-the-table sort of questions. Ianto answered on autopilot, politely engaging, gauging their reactions, boring them as pleasantly as possible. He could've doctored up a truly impressive resume, but that might have set off alarms. They'd been curious enough to bring him in. That was all he needed.

"So why do you want to work with Woodley Consulting?" the blonde woman - Jaime Miller - finally asked.

Ianto took a deep breath. It was now or never. "I don't, actually."

They looked up at him, startled. The younger woman - Lisa Hallett - raised a curious eyebrow. "I'm sorry?"

"I don't want to work with Woodley Consulting," Ianto repeated. "Because Woodley Consulting doesn't exist."

Miller and Upshaw exchanged an inscrutable glance, but Hallett kept her eyes on Ianto, a smile quirking the corners of her generous mouth. "And yet," she said, "here we are."

"Here we are," Ianto agreed. He reached into his briefcase and pulled out the file he'd so carefully assembled. "Three weeks ago, an unidentified craft crashed into a field outside of Wallingford. Local police investigating were evicted from the site by a military special ops force." He pulled out the appropriate documentations as he spoke, laying them on the table in front of him. "That same team was previously seen investigating reports of mysterious gas in Milton Keynes, a missing persons case on a London council estate, and a minor explosion by the Thames which coincided with shop window dummies coming alive and rampaging through the centre of town - which, according to all television and government reports, never actually happened. Eyewitness accounts also changed dramatically within twenty-four hours of the incident - after this particular special ops team arrived on the scene."

He tapped one particular glossy photograph, looking up at the three impassive faces across the table. "A team with no apparent military insignia or designation, which was evidently led by Mr. Upshaw here."

There was a long, heavy silence. Ianto sat it out as patiently as he could and tried not to sweat.

"I'm sorry," Miller finally said, in a tone of utter disinterest, "but was there supposed to be a point to this little presentation?"

Ianto smiled blandly. "The crash is on record as a military accident, but the RAF reported no activity in that airspace for months. The missing girl - Rose Tyler - police think her boyfriend had a hand in her disappearance, but there's no evidence, and *he* claims she's been abducted by an alien. And the shop dummies-

"Proceed to the point, if you have one," Hallett said. She was clearly suppressing a smile, which Ianto took as a positive sign, despite her stony-faced colleagues.

"I think there's more out there than this," Ianto said. "More than I can begin to imagine or document. And I think the organization you represent knows that for a fact. I want to join up."

"And what qualifications could you possibly bring to the table?" Upshaw asked coldly.

"I managed to find you," Ianto pointed out. He kept his hands folded in his lap, below the table, where no one could see them shaking. His voice remained perfectly steady. "Despite the considerable efforts and resources you have at your disposal to keep people like me ignorant. Wouldn't you prefer to have me working *for* you?"

Upshaw bristled visibly. "Is that some sort of threat?"

Ianto raised an eyebrow. "What possible threat could I pose to *you*? I couldn't begin to expose you - with, what, a handful of circumstantial evidence and flimsy conjecture? Who would listen? Besides, I know what happens to people who see your work firsthand. I assume the only way I'm walking out of here with my memories intact is if you hire me."

That was another piece of very flimsy conjecture, actually, but the looks they exchanged confirmed it. Well. It occurred to Ianto to wonder what sort of organization he was volunteering himself for, exactly - but he didn't much care.

There was something more out there, and anything was better than where he'd started.

And after a long moment, Lisa Hallett laughed. "All that, and looks good in a suit. Oh, Yvonne will *like* this one!" She glanced over at Miller and Upshaw. "Trial period?"

"Three weeks," Miller confirmed, giving Ianto a hard look. She scribbled a note down on a piece of paper and passed it across the table to him. "I hope you're a quick learner, Ianto Jones. Tomorrow morning, eight o'clock sharp."

Ianto looked down at the note. It was an address. "Canary Wharf?"

"Fancy enough for you?" Lisa teased with a grin. "Welcome to Torchwood."

Though she has no way of knowing it then, the last time Martha will ever see Jack Harkness is at Canary Wharf.

Two days after she finally returns to London, four days after the 456 are dispatched, and three years to the day after the Battle of Canary Wharf, Martha goes to leave a flower at the monument marking the only grave her cousin Adeola has. It's become a tradition. The first time was just a couple of months after the attack, when the new memorial in the tiny park by the Thames was unveiled. Martha attended with her family, thinking she'd lost her cousin in a terrorist attack. The second time, on the first proper anniversary, she'd known better. The Doctor had allowed her the stop without question, but refused to set foot outside of the TARDIS himself.

By the second anniversary, Martha was on her own again, and she'd added a second flower by the name of Rose Tyler. Not so much for Rose herself, safely if irretrievably ensconced in some parallel universe, but for the Doctor, who would never leave flowers here. For the uncounted millions lost and then found again during a year that never happened. For everyone the Doctor was just too late to save, and everyone left behind. Maybe Rose didn't deserve to be made into a symbol like that, but she was just a name to Martha, and she'd have to do.

Martha knows Rose a bit better now, but the symbol remains; there are so many more to mourn today, and she doesn't know where else to leave the flowers.

There is no list of the dead and missing in the wake of the 456. Because there was no actual attack, the governments of the world insist; just some mildly frightening parlor tricks. After all, disaster was averted. No children were taken. The aliens were vanquished. Planet saved.

They don't count the victims of the riots that spread across the globe, children wrenched screaming away as soldiers beat back parents in the poorer districts of London and New York, New Delhi and Beijing. The "accidental" and unremarked upon deaths. The soldiers executed by their own officers when they tried to stand down or look after their own sons and daughters, nieces and nephews.

The memorial to Canary Wharf is nothing fancy, just the names carved into stark white marble plinths, waist height, set in gently curving rows around a central monument. Martha leaves a small cluster of daisies by Adeola's name. There are a few other tributes scattered about the blocks of marble today - flowers here and there, or stones piled atop names. But not many. People forget, and they move on. Besides, it's been a hell of a week.

When she moves on down the row to her second stop, she sees a single pink rose already adorning the name of Rose Tyler.

The Doctor doesn't leave flowers at Canary Wharf. There's really only one other person who might visit Rose's marker today - and there, partially obscured by the tall central monument, she sees a man in a familiar blue-grey coat leaning over another marble plaque.

She calls out to him.

"Voice of a nightingale," Jack says, turning to face her, hands tucked deep in the pockets of his coat. She meant to throw her arms around him, but something in the set of his shoulders and the shadows in his eyes makes her keep her distance.

"Jack," she says, uncertain. "I've been trying to reach you for days."

He shrugs. His face is like granite, completely devoid of expression. Part of her wonders if this isn't Jack at all - or maybe not *her* Jack. This man - well, she's seen Jack die before, more than once. But this is the first time he's ever *looked* dead.

"I heard you're the one sent the 456 packing," she tries again, stepping closer. It feels incredibly wrong to be invading his personal space like this - it's meant to be the other way around, *Jack* coming too close, pushing too hard. Not her. "Not that anyone's explained *how*, and Torchwood's like a dirty word these days, mention it and all the top brass flinch. Your mobile's out of service, and Gwen and Ianto haven't been answering theirs--"

Jack's the one who flinches now. She may as well have slammed a door in his face.

Martha reaches out to him, feeling the rough wool of his greatcoat under her fingertips, the warmth of his arm. It's strange that he's still so warm when his eyes are so cold. "Jack, what happened here?"

He looks down, but she doesn't think he's actually *seeing* her at all. "Enjoy your honeymoon, Martha?"

The casual cruelty of it feels like a slap, and she yanks her hand away from his arm. "Don't you dare. We tried to get back, to get through to someone, anything. I was blacked out of this one entirely. And now UNIT's in an uproar, half my superiors have been sacked, and everyone's too scared to say anything until the chain of command shakes itself back out."

Jack just watches her impassively. "I told them to place you on the Thames House investigation."

Her hands clench into fists at her side. Oh, the Thames House fiasco - yet another unremarked list of the dead that she doesn't have the *security clearance* to even see. "They did, then yanked me right back off. Used to be the Doctor was my ticket in; now it's all *us vs. them* mentality, and I'm a bloody alien sympathizer. It's been four days and I can't even get a straight answer as to how we got rid of the 456--"

"We did," Jack says. His eyes are empty. "That's all that matters, right?"

"Jack, *please*, talk to me-"

"Did you ever try calling him?" Jack demands instead. "Last week, when everything was going to hell?"

No, she just bloody well sat around and shagged her new husband. What does he *think* she did? "I tried."

There's a flicker of life in his face at last, a flare in his eyes that might be anger. "And?"

"He said he was sorry," she tells him, not bothering to hide the bitterness in her tone. "But that the twenty-first century is when everything changes, and he couldn't interfere."

If anything, Jack stiffens further, lips pressing flat together. "So," he says, more exhalation than word.

They stand in silence for a few long minutes, together yet utterly separate, staring out at this monument to Torchwood's folly, to the Doctor's success and failure. Martha has never felt so perfectly alone.

Finally, Jack shifts beside her. "Do you know who's heading up UNIT's investigation of Thames House in your place?"

Martha wonders why he's so fixated on that in particular. Had he been there? "A colleague of mine is heading up the medical end of it - Yuan Zhang, decent bloke, great scientist. Better choice than I would've been, actually - much stronger research background. He's been sequestered, last I heard."

"I need a favor."

Martha looks up into his face, tears pricking her eyes. He's never been so distant, not with *her*. What's wrong with him? "Anything, Jack," she tells him softly. "You know I'd do anything for you. God, Jack, I've been so worried about you and-"

"I need you to get in touch with your friend Yuan, and ask him-" Jack swallows, looking away and back. There's an edge to his voice now, like broken glass. "Ask him why they haven't released the bodies of the Thames House victims to their families." Which is rather rich coming from him, given what she knows of Torchwood's own post-mortem policies, but before she can point it out, he goes on. "Ask him when they'll let his sister give Ianto a proper burial."

It's almost a physical blow, visceral, as though she's been punched in the stomach. She exhales sharply, putting her hand on the nearest marble marker to steady herself. "Oh, *no*," she whispers. "I didn't know, no one told me. Jack-"

"Don't," he says harshly. "Just let Gwen know what you find out. Her mobile should be working again now."

"And what about you?"

He smiles then, a ghastly approximation of his usual grin. "Oh, you know me. I'll live."

She knows then that he's leaving.

Jack reaches out to cup her cheek in his warm, broad hand. "Be well, Martha Jones," he tells her, voice low and sincere, and then he turns and walks away.

In the many years of her long, well-lived life, Martha will never forget the sight of Jack Harkness walking away from her, shoulders perfectly straight, greatcoat billowing behind him blue-grey among the stark white marble monuments.

She flips open her mobile, knowing precisely the correct pattern of PAs and uncollected favors to call on to reach him. "Dr. Zhang," she says, finally, tracing names on the nearest block of marble. "I need to ask you a few questions about Thames House. It's about a friend."

A single yellow rose adorns the memorial Jack had stood over, by the engraved name of Lisa Hallett. Martha absently wonders who she was.

Nine days after Lisa (and was that how he'd always measure out his life now? Ianto wondered - Before and After Lisa), Ianto found a bench on the Plass and sat down to wait, staring out at the windswept bay.

It didn't take long.

"I'm pretty sure I said you were suspended for four weeks," Jack said from behind him. Ianto didn't even flinch. "*Four weeks*. Granted, it's been well over a month if we're going on Betelgeusean time, but in *this* particular solar orbit-"

"I want to come back to work."

That caught Jack by surprise. Ianto could feel the difference in the air between them, the sudden stillness, taut with tension.

"That's not your call to make," Jack finally said.

Ianto risked a glance up at him, turning to see. Jack had folded his arms across his chest. He still had a mark on his lip where Ianto had punched him, brown and not yet healed. His eyes were devoid of expression.

"I know," Ianto said, looking away again. "But I have to - please. I'm ready."

"The team isn't, though," Jack said.

"Hiding me away for three more weeks won't make them trust me again."

"Trying to con your way into a job - *again* - won't make *me* trust you again."

It wasn't anything Ianto hadn't expected. It might've hurt if he weren't already completely numb. "I know," he said, throat raw. "So stick me in the archives in front of five CCTV cameras and change all the authorization codes so I can only get into the files you assign me. Or keep me in the middle of the Hub where everyone can see what I'm doing at all times. Or make me work in a cell and throw away the bloody key, I don't care. Just give me something to do, *please*."

He'd spent the past nine days alone inside his own head. Nineteen more and he'd put a bullet in his brain just to drown out the screaming.

"Funny thing about punishments," Jack said. His tone was deliberately light, but Ianto could hear the edge of steel underneath. "You don't generally get to negotiate."

"I know," Ianto said, doing his best not to punch Jack (again). And Jack was in the right this time. That was what he hated most of all. "But I can't-" He cut himself off, frustrated with Jack, with himself. "Please," he said again, because it was the only word he seemed to have left.

Something in his tone got through to Jack, at least a little. He sat down on the bench beside Ianto. "You've just lost someone you loved, Ianto," he said quietly. Their legs nearly brushed, an echo of intimacy that made Ianto flinch. "You need time to mourn."

Ianto clenched his fists in his lap, willing his voice to remain low and steady. "With all due respect, sir, you haven't the faintest idea what I *need*." He swallowed hard. "I've had nothing *but* time. Lisa died at Canary Wharf. I've been mourning her ever since. I just didn't realize it."

It had the benefit of being true; but more importantly, it was what Jack wanted to hear.

They sat together in silence for a few more minutes, not quite touching. Ianto could feel the warmth radiating in the air between them, and hated himself just a little more.

Finally, Jack got to his feet, looking out at the Bay. Ianto stared down at his hands and pressed his lips together, swallowing the words back.

"I'll see you Monday," Jack said.

Ianto took a deep breath, and then another. It got a little easier every time.

Gwen sits on the steps in front of the Millennium Centre, staring down at what's left of Roald Dahl Plass. The worst of the debris has already been cleared away from the surface over the past week, but it'll be some time before she can begin investigating the extent of the damages. Hopefully the blast hasn't penetrated all the sublevels - Torchwood Cardiff had dug in *deep*, and a good amount of the archives, at least, might be salvageable. Not to mention the heart of the Hub itself, the alien mainframe, which is buried deepest of all. She's never really thought about it - not her area of expertise, to put it mildly - but if they'd been able to access the remote servers from pilfered laptops, then surely *something* must remain. A place from which to start rebuilding, at least.

God, the sheer scope of the task ahead of her is...well beyond daunting, really. And to do it all alone...

Well. One step at a time. There isn't anything in particular Gwen can do here today, anyway. Just wait. And witness. Anyway, Rhys will be picking her up in a few minutes-

"Excuse me, miss? I'm looking for Torchwood."

Gwen's heart stutters, misses a beat. She looks up to see an unfamiliar man standing in front of her - about her own age, black, stocky build, wearing a leather jacket and an expression of determination. "And who the hell are you, then?" she demands.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, squaring his shoulders. "My name's Mickey Smith. I know you - you're one of the people who called up the Doctor a few months back. I traveled with him for a bit, and Jack - well, sort of. Anyway, after we got back, Jack said if I ever wanted a job, I should meet him here. So here I am. Where's Jack got himself to?"

"I don't know," she says, without really thinking about it. The name sounds vaguely familiar - has Jack mentioned him before? After they called up the Doctor - the Daleks and the Medusa Cascade - with Martha - oh! "Mickey Smith - that's right. I think Jack said you're good with computers or something?"

For the first time, Mickey smiles. "Yeah, or something."

We could've used a tech expert, Gwen thinks, a little bitterly. God, wouldn't that have made their lives easier, the past few months? Not that Ianto isn't good with computers, but he doesn't have anything like Tosh's flair for creative programming, and lord only knows he's got enough on his plate these days-

Had. Past tense. It doesn't matter now. She swallows back the nausea that accompanies the memory, telling herself it's just morning sickness anyway. "What took you so long?" she says instead, a little uncharitably. "It's been months since the Daleks."

Mickey shrugs, looking down at his trainers. "I'd been...away. For kind of a long time. I needed to reorient myself. And I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life, anyway. Like I said, getting messed up with the Doctor and all that - well, it's a bit much, you know? I thought I'd let other people save the world for a change."

She wonders why he's being so open with her, a complete stranger. He doesn't seem like the type - too bloke-ish, she'd have said. "Then why come looking for us now?"

He meets her eyes again, mouth pressed into a grim line. "Last week. The kids, and aliens, and all, and there's me stranded with no power to do a damn thing about it. It woke me back up. The world still needs saving. I can help. I'm not sitting this one out again."

Gwen looks him over, feeling very tired. About her age, she thought, but right now, she feels much older. "Jack's missing," she says. "I don't know where he is. And I don't know when - if - he's coming back."

Mickey's mouth twists into a wry smirk. "Ran off and left you to clean up the mess, did he? He's spent too much time with the Doctor, then."

The bitterness rises up again, half-forgotten over the past year or so but made newly potent, like an old scar reopened, with the 456's attack. The *Doctor*. Some savior *he's* turned out to be. Gwen gets to her feet, brushing the gravel off her trousers. "Yeah. It was nice to meet you, Mickey Smith, but I'm afraid I don't have a job to offer you. Try UNIT, they're always looking for fresh meat."

"What, so the bloody Rift shuts down just 'cause Jack swans off?" Mickey argues, folding his arms across his chest. "I remember the shitstorm it opened up here last time I was in Cardiff."

"And what do you expect to be able to do about it?" Gwen demands. She points down at the gaping wound in the earth that used to be the Hub. "Everything we had - everything we knew - all our tech, the archives, the weapons, the Rift monitor - it's all a bloody *crater*. I'm flying blind here, I barely even know where to begin. And this job, Mickey, it eats you alive."

"I know dangerous," Mickey says with a shrug. "I spent three years hunting Cybermen, you think I can't handle myself?"

Gwen presses her fingers to her temples. He just doesn't *get* it. "I joined up almost three years ago," she explains, lowering her voice. "First time I met Torchwood, there were five of them on the team, each more brilliant than the last. Clever, and tough, and with more experience than I could even begin to imagine. And it didn't save any of them. Only Jack couldn't die, but even he finally broke, in the end."

"They all chose it though, didn't they?" Mickey says. His voice is gruff, but there's empathy in his eyes. "So. Let me take my own chances, yeah? I choose Torchwood."

"I'm sorry, Mickey, but there *is* no Torchwood anymore. There's just me." She hears the honk of a car horn, and looks across the shattered remains of the Plass to see Rhys there at the curb, waiting for her. "And I've got a memorial service to get to."

"Right, I understand." Mickey steps aside, letting her pass. "I'll be starting Monday, then, yeah?"

"Yeah," Gwen sighs. "I kind of figured."

The Rift was quiet just after Jack disappeared, like a snake slowly digesting its latest meal. Ianto didn't much appreciate the downtime. It was too much like mourning, a moment of silence, reminiscent of hours and days trapped in his lonely flat with Lisa in a drawer in the morgue and too much time to think.

He didn't know which was worse at night now: his empty flat or the silent Hub. One evening about a week in, he found himself in Tosh's kitchen, getting drunk on cheap wine. She'd cleaned up the CCTV

footage and spotted the police box on the Plass. Ianto recognized it at once, and suddenly Jack's occasional cryptic, offhand remarks made a lot more sense.

"Do you think he's coming back?" Tosh asked, after her fourth glass of wine.

Ianto swallowed his own (fifth? Sixth?) in one gulp, grimaced, and refilled it to the brim. "Would you?"

They'd both encountered the Doctor. They'd read the reports. They knew.

"Jack came for me, once," Tosh said quietly. "When no one else would. He didn't even know me, but he came for me."

Ianto had already read her file, back when he was still studying his new coworkers, learning how best to disappear from them. "He wanted your skills," he said, alcohol making him too blunt. "Your genius. Not you."

Tosh lifts her shoulders in a vague shrug. "Does that really matter? I was trapped, and he set me free."

He didn't free you, just transferred ownership, Ianto thought. *Jack owns you.* "Yeah," was all he said aloud. "Me, too."

They refilled their drinks.

"What should we tell Gwen and Owen?" Tosh wondered.

"Tell them to stop looking."

He fell asleep on her couch at some ungodly hour in the morning, and woke up with a sour taste in his mouth and a pounding headache. All in all, it had been one of the better nights.

That was the morning fifty sentient pincushions started wreaking havoc in Llandaff Cathedral, which pretty much meant business as usual. Owen deduced that the pincushions were controlled by a sort of hive mind, but they got stuck after Tosh traced the signal back to a crashed pod of some sort.

"There's got to be a way of rounding them up without killing them outright," Gwen insisted while something squealed in the background; she and Tosh were on site, while Owen sulked in his med bay and Ianto manned the comms. "Ow!"

"Yeah, and if we knew where E.T. phones home, I might be able to help you out with that," Owen said. "But until we figure out what the hell these bastards are, nothin' doin'."

"Jack would've known," Tosh said, sounding rather out of breath.

"Yeah, well, Jack isn't here," Owen snapped.

"But we are." Gwen's tone brooked no argument. "So what do we know?"

For a minute, no one responded. Then Ianto shook his head to clear it. This was how it would have to be, from here on out, and there was no point moaning about Jack's absence. He was gone. Maybe he'd come back, maybe he wouldn't, but in the meantime, they'd get by.

Ianto was good at getting by.

"Well," he said, as he strode over to the nearest computer terminal, "I think if I cross-reference the data with a search through the archive mainframe..."

And they got to work.

The service is nice enough, Rhys supposes. He's always harbored a secret fondness for tradition - families and friends and communities gathering together, big white wedding dresses or solemn funeral corteges, everyone done up in their Sunday finest to outdo their neighbors and whinge about the quality of the potluck. There's just something inherently comforting about meandering sermons and matrons in enormous hats.

But Ianto's memorial service just leaves him feeling hollow inside. There's nothing *wrong* with it, exactly - but there's nothing right about it either. There's no burial because the government still hasn't released the bodies; the people who get up to speak give heartfelt platitudes about some distant young stranger Rhys never met. The whole business just doesn't seem to have anything to do with the sarcastic, smartly-dressed Ianto Jones of Torchwood.

Ianto may have been close-mouthed about his past (and God knows he was reserved enough about everything else; Rhys isn't entirely sure *why that* surprised Gwen), but Rhys suspects that these people, in this worn-down church, are the ones who never really knew him.

They make up a sad little contingent in the back of the church, the Torchwood section. Just Gwen and Rhys, and a somewhat battered Andy (currently suspended without pay from the police force) tagging along in a show of support. Jack is nowhere in evidence. Rhys is inclined to be furious with the man for leaving Gwen alone to face a day like this - and he's got a particularly potent rant brewing about who should or should not have been the one to give Rhiannon the news in the first place - but at the same time, sitting through this empty blather, he's hard pressed to blame the man. If it'd been his Gwen instead - this service of strangers, a memorial with no resemblance to his own memories of *his* lover - well.

Still, Jack should be here. But he's not.

Rhys has a feeling this is a recurring theme in the life and times of Captain Jack Harkness.

His mind wanders, and he can see Gwen's gaze roving around the edges of the church, lingering at the doorways, the shadows. Looking for Jack, like always. He wonders if this will set the pattern for the

remainder of their days, a part of Gwen always absent, always searching, always waiting for that last-minute save. But Rhys doesn't think Jack has any more heroic entrances left in him.

But because she's looking for Jack, she spots the newcomer almost at once. Rhys sees the change in her face, the spark of curiosity mingled with confusion, just as she jabs a sharp elbow into his side.

"Oi," he hisses, keeping his voice down. "What's-" He follows her gaze, to the back door of the church. "That can't be - *Lois*?"

It is, though. Lois Habiba, their woman on the inside, for all the bloody good it'd done. She gestures to them frantically. Gwen and Rhys exchange a look - it'll seem fair rude to walk out of the service now, but for once, Rhys isn't going to argue the point. He sighs and shifts himself, moving out of the pew, letting Gwen tug a bewildered Andy along with her. The little church is only half full (more of Rhiannon's friends than ever had anything to do with Ianto, although Rhys supposes a few might've been his childhood playmates or acquaintances), and by staying at the back, Gwen had ensured there was no one sitting near them. Rhys almost wonders if she expected this.

Well, that was bloody Torchwood though, right? Gwen always prepared for the job to come first. Nothing could be sacred, not even grief.

Ianto had been the same. He'd have understood.

"Sorry, I'm so sorry," Lois says, once they're outside. It's a chilly, gray day, though at least it's not raining for once. "I meant to come for the service, only I found out about it a little too late, and I couldn't catch as early a train as I'd have liked, and then the bus was late out of Cardiff Central, but I suppose that's all for the best because that's how I noticed the *thing* in the *road* and I couldn't think of anyone else to tell about it."

"Okay, okay," Gwen says soothingly, her hand on Lois's arm. "Slow down." Rhys might've asked how Lois found out about Ianto's memorial service at all, or why she'd come, but of course PC Gwen Cooper picked right up on: "What sort of 'thing in the road' are we talking about, here?"

"It's just down the street, by the bus shelter." Lois's dark eyes are wide. "At least it was a few minutes ago. It's - I don't really know how to describe it. It's like light, and color, except not. It was whirling about in circles in the air over the road - not high up, about eye level. But there was this...*violence* about it. I don't know." She shudders. "Like a bird beating itself against the side of its cage."

Andy, beside them, shakes his head wryly. "Yeah, sounds like one of your X-Files, all right."

"Right," Gwen says. "Andy Davidson, meet Lois Habiba. She spied on the government for us last week. Without her-"

Gwen cuts herself off abruptly, with a little choked sound. Rhys takes her hand wordlessly. Without Lois's help, Jack and Ianto might never have got into Thames House. And Ianto might not have died there. But on the other hand, Jack never would've been in place to stop the 456, and they *all* would've

paid the price for that, in the end. Who could say? Sometimes all you could do was play the hand you were dealt.

"Without her, we'd none of us be standing here," Rhys says, because someone has to. "Let's go find your angry little rainbow, then."

"Right," Gwen says, shaking her head as if to clear it. She straightens her shoulders, standing just that much taller. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. Rhys, there's a kit in the boot of the car - could you and Andy grab that, please? I'll head down the road with Lois and see what the situation is..."

Eventually, all it takes is a butterfly net and a large glass jar. Gwen herds the rainbow-light-thing into the jar with the net, and clamps it shut. The creature isn't very large, nearly insubstantial, and seems to fold in upon itself once captured, still pulsing with color. Rhys feels the strangest sense of anticlimax - catching aliens oughtn't be *that* simple.

Then again, it usually isn't.

"What is it?" Andy asks, staring transfixed at the lights dancing within the jar.

Gwen shakes her head. "I don't know. But it's beautiful."

"Beautiful, and lost, and sad," Lois says, then blinks. "But how do I know that?"

"Low-grade empathic field, I think." Gwen tilts her head, frowning slightly as she considers it. "Maybe that's how it communicates."

"Before, when I found it, it felt...terrified." Lois reaches out to the jar, as if to press her hand against the glass, then drops her hand to her side. "And angry. But that faded."

Gwen's eyes are shuttered and dark. Rhys slips an arm across her shoulders. "What is it, love?"

For a moment, he doesn't think she even heard him; then a shudder ripples through her, and she leans against him, pressing her cheek against his shoulder. "Jack would've known what it was," she says, voice low and rough at the edges with grief. "And Ianto could've cited three examples of related encounters from the archives. But now it's just me, and I don't bloody know anything. God, Rhys, how could I have lost them *both*?"

He has nothing to say to that, so he just holds her as tightly as he can.

Two days later, the jar is empty. When Gwen opens it, they glimpse a brief shimmering, like the memory of a handful of glitter tossed in the air, and then it's gone.

The lights were still on in the medical bay, long after Owen had conceded defeat and gone home. To do what, Ianto didn't know. Not sleep, apparently; not anymore. He shoved the thought and its accompanying chill aside.

"It's very late," he told Martha, leaning down over the railing. "And it's been a particularly stressful day. Why are you still here?"

Martha ticked something off on her clipboard, studying what looked like test results. "Just finishing up some tests - Owen's blood work, before and after."

"Can't it wait?"

She sighed, rolling her shoulders with an audible pop. "Probably, but if there's anything useful in there-"

"Then it'll still be useful tomorrow," Ianto said gently. "It *is* tomorrow, actually. Nearly one in the morning. You should get some sleep."

"Probably," Martha agreed, but she kept staring down at her charts. "Why are you still here?"

"Cleaning up."

Martha frowned, glancing around. "We didn't make much of a mess *here*."

"That's not what I meant." Ianto lowered himself to sit on the steps leading down to the medical bay, rubbing the back of his neck. At Martha's bemused look, he elaborated: "The incident at the hospital. Altering records, handling the eyewitnesses - the usual."

"Twelve people died today because Owen - because of what Jack did," Martha said flatly. "And you're covering it all up."

Ianto shrugged. "It's my job."

"That doesn't bother you at all?"

"I didn't say that," Ianto said. "But it has to be done."

Martha sighed. Her face had regained its youth and vigor, but her eyes looked very old. "I know. Don't listen to me, Ianto, I'm just...very tired."

Ianto got to his feet. "No offense taken. Go back to your hotel, get some rest."

"Yeah," Martha said, finally putting the clipboard down. "You too. Go home, I mean. Or - wherever you go." She let out an embarrassed giggle at his smirk, tired though it was, then sobered again. "Ianto..."

He turned back, hand on the railing. "Yes?"

"If Jack ever wonders why I turned down his offer to join his team - well, this is why. You know?"

Ianto just nodded and left her there. He understood. Martha wasn't Torchwood, never would be. She had something else to believe in, and maybe it was even something better. Ianto didn't. He never had - not after a childhood spent yearning for a world beyond himself, grasping after anything at all.

Torchwood had him then. And once it had you, it never let go. Canary Wharf fell, Lisa was killed, Jack ran off for his Doctor - the only constant in Ianto's life was Torchwood. Good or bad, this was all he had left.

Later, staring out into the darkness under Jack's office, Jack warm at his back, Ianto took a breath and said what they'd all been thinking all day. "You shouldn't have brought him back."

For a long minute, Jack remained silent. "You're the one who said that gloves came in pairs, remember?" he said, in a light tone belied by the tension in his arms, the hard grip of his hand on Ianto's hip.

Ianto rolled his eyes. "That was meant to be a *warning*, not a suggestion."

"You'd rather I let him die?"

At that, Ianto rolled over to face him, pulling back slightly. "You know that's not what I meant."

"Ianto..."

"What you did," Ianto started hesitantly, unsure of the right words. "You'd have done that for any of us, wouldn't you? If someone else...if it had been me-"

"Don't," Jack said. His voice was harsh. "Don't ask me what I'd have done if it had been you. Just don't."

Ianto tried on a smile in an attempt to diffuse the tension. "You know, for someone who outlives everyone he meets, you're utter rubbish at letting go."

"You're one to talk," Jack retorted, but he pulled Ianto in to nip at his earlobe, effectively ending the not-quite-argument the way he always did when he knew he was losing.

And Ianto let him, as *he* always did.

"Just, please, Jack," he murmured into Jack's neck, not sure if Jack would even hear him, "if - *when* it's my turn, please don't go looking for another glove."

Jack's arms tightened around him. He didn't say a word.

When Rhys sees the new hub - helping Mickey move the monolithic new servers in - he laughs so hard he nearly makes himself sick.

"It's only temporary," Gwen reminds him, but she can't keep the corners of her mouth from twitching.

Lois glances back and forth between them, frown creasing her forehead. She's only spent an entire bloody *week* scouting various locations before settling on this one, after all. "What's wrong with it? It's a lovely office - walking distance to Mermaid Quay, plenty of space for a small staff, flexible short-term lease, very reasonable rate for the area, Mickey can install our own security system..."

"It's perfect, Lois, thank you," Gwen says, touching her arm. "It's just rather more...ordinary than we're used to."

"Torchwood goes corporate," Rhys chuckles. "I never thought I'd see the day."

There's a pounding on the door. "Oi!" Mickey shouts. "You lot gonna help me with the load-in or what? You won't believe the alien arsenal I scavenged from the crater this morning!"

"Well," Gwen says thoughtfully. "Maybe not too ordinary."

Once the morning's plunder has been hauled in - and Lois wonders how on earth she's ever going to devise an effective filing system for the arcane rubble - Mickey and Gwen work to get the computers up and running.

"Three years ago, Gwen could barely navigate the difference between a word document and a spreadsheet," Rhys remarks, leaning companionably against Lois's new desk, "and now she's installing alien software."

"We all picked up a few tricks," Gwen calls over, flashing them a smile that Lois can't help but return. "Small team, everyone has to learn a bit of everyone else's job in a pinch. And it's not like there's anyone else familiar with the Torchwood mainframe now-"

Lois can see the renewed crush of memory flash across her face, and bites her cheek to keep from saying anything stupid or trite about it. Anyway, it's not her place to offer comfort to this woman - this impossibly willful woman with the gap-toothed grin and red-rimmed eyes.

She wonders how Captain Harkness ever could have left her.

Fortunately, Mickey - who seems to have all the tact and insight of a brick to the head - fills the sudden silence with a blithe, "No worries, give me a week and I'll be *rewriting* your alien software." He taps cheerfully at his keyboard, already engrossed in the code dancing across the monitor. "The blast wasn't as effective as it looked. The mainframe itself was more or less undamaged - well, the outer shell got dinged up a bit, but the hardware inside is safe enough. Whoever first dug that place out knew what they were about - the foundations are solid to start rebuilding."

Gwen visibly stiffens. "Rebuilding?"

"Well, yeah," Mickey says. "You said yourself, this place is only temporary. When I join up with a secret alien-hunting organization, I bloody well expect a kickass underground lair to come with it. You've still got a level or two of archives mostly intact down there, too. Seems silly to find a whole new place."

"Who's supposed to be in charge here, again?"

"And besides," Mickey adds, "when Jack gets back, you'll want him to be able to find us."

Gwen presses her hand to the hollow of her throat, eyes wide and dark. "You think he's coming back?" Lois unconsciously mirrors the gesture, feeling something twist in her chest.

Mickey grins crookedly. "Are you kidding? He's like a bad penny, that one. He always turns up eventually."

At that, Gwen turns away from her desk, making a soft sound that seems caught partway between an exhalation and a sob; Rhys is at her side at once, hand low on her back, pressing his lips to her temple. Lois just blinks at them for a moment, not sure what to do with herself.

"Here," Mickey says gruffly, leaning over her to type a few commands into her own computer. She hadn't even noticed him getting up from his workstation. "You're gonna be working with the archives, yeah? A lot of that info's been scanned into the servers - here, I'll show you how to navigate the database."

It's not until much later that afternoon that she realizes how effectively Mickey distracted her - and gave Gwen a chance to sort herself in the meantime. Lois tucks that information away into her mental personnel file. Mickey Smith: cannier than he may first appear. He and Gwen head back out to the Millennium Centre with Rhys to begin plans for reconstruction; Lois stays behind, engrossed in Torchwood's electronic archives.

It's getting dark outside when she comes to a folder simply entitled *Tourist Office*. She blinks at it for a moment before remembering - that's right, the old Hub supposedly used a little tourist office as one of its entrances. And as its front to the public, from what Gwen told her. Which means, presumably, that someone had been there to run the office itself, at least part of the time.

It doesn't matter anymore, but her head's spinning a little from all the alien stuff in the thousand *other* folders, and some mundane bits and bobs about a perfectly ordinary shop might make for a nice, quick diversion, a good way to wind down toward her dinner break.

The documents within the folder are just as dull and everyday as she could hope. A few expense calendars, maintenance files, inventory spreadsheets - the only thing remarkable about it is how resoundingly *unremarkable* it is. Doesn't feel like Torchwood at all, to be honest. She absently opens up a file that caught her attention by virtue of not quite making sense - *usersmanual.doc*. User's manual? To the little shop?

It isn't.

The Care and Feeding of Torchwood Three

Courtesy of Ianto Jones

If you're reading this, it means you're Torchwood Three's newest butler/guard dog/teaboy (or girl, we don't discriminate here at Torchwood). Congratulations! You're in for a real challenge.

It also means one of two things - either I've been promoted, in which case bully for me, and I'll be deleting this paragraph anyway so it makes no difference; or I'm not here anymore. Let's assume the latter, shall we?

First off, don't worry about it. Seriously. You'll understand once you've been here a while. If it's too much for you, we'll let you out, and you won't have any bad memories. And if you decide to stick it out, it means you've already made the same decision I did. It's worth it. I promise you, it's worth it. I'm just sorry I didn't have the chance to train you in person, because if you were chosen for this team, you must be wonderful, brilliant, and probably very attractive.

Lois pushes her chair back away from the desk, blinking rapidly. Oh, God. Ianto Jones - the one who died, the quiet man who so expertly faded into the background. If Captain Harkness is Torchwood's elephant in the room - larger than life, immortal, and as noticeable by his absence as his presence - then Ianto is the elephant's shadow, dark and silent and hardly more than empty space. The ghost lurking in Gwen's eyes.

Lois's predecessor.

She reads on, hand pressed to her throat. Ianto had been thorough - from archive maintenance to pterodactyl feedings, Gwen's favorite takeaway place to how to dismantle and clean the Big Gun. He'd loved this job, this place, these people; it shines through in every instruction, every sarcastic aside. And Captain Harkness, most of all. Lois hadn't known that they were lovers; now she wonders how on earth she'd missed it. It's there in every line.

Jack likes his coffee dark and strong. Yes, like he likes his women. And men. And otherwise gendered biological entities. He only makes this joke every other week. It helps to have a witty comeback prepared, but really, there's only so much you can do.

And then, almost as an afterthought-

Be there for him, if I'm not.

II.

*Somewhere there's music
How faint the tune
Somewhere there's heaven
How high the moon
(Ella Fitzgerald)*

Martha never leaves her flat unarmed these days, even when she's not in uniform. And especially not when she's responding to a mysterious meeting request from an anonymous contact. But that e-mail account isn't one a person could just stumble across, and the message had the right keywords.

She cases the alleyway carefully as she approaches. It's not ideal. The aspects that make it a good covert rendezvous point - off the beaten track, poorly lit, but in a respectable enough neighborhood that she won't look blatantly out of place - also mean that if this goes badly, she's going to be trapped. If this is a sting, they'll have both ends covered, although she might still make a break for it - but that's ridiculous. If they've burned her, she doesn't stand a chance anyway, so it's not worth worrying about.

"Martha Jones."

She whirls, hand automatically going to her sidearm. For a moment, she almost doesn't recognize him. Then she relaxes. "Yuan? The message came from *you*?"

Yuan Zhang nods, looking around them warily. The change in his appearance is startling. Yuan has always been a rather stout man, but he's lost a lot of weight over the past few months. It doesn't suit him at all. He looks exhausted, almost ill, his skin too pale, clothing hanging off him loosely.

Martha clears her throat. "I heard you'd been stationed in Bonn."

"That's the cover story, yes," he says, clearly ill at ease. "You weren't followed?"

"Followed? By whom?"

"UNIT."

She blinks slowly. Yuan's sharper than she credited him for. "We both *are* UNIT."

"That's the trouble, yes," Yuan says shortly. "But you're on the fast track up their ladder - they trust you, they probably won't have put a tail on you..."

"Yuan, calm down." Martha places a hand on his shoulder. "No, no one followed me. What's happened to you?"

He takes a deep breath, lets it out, visibly forcing himself to relax. When he looks at her, his gaze is steady. "I know a place we can talk. It's not far. Please, just trust me, you need to hear what I have to say."

"Of course." She looks him over again, concerned. "You...you're not in any sort of trouble, are you?"

"Not yet," is the terse reply. "Not until they find out I'm talking to you, anyway. Here, it's this way."

He leads her down to the end of the alley, emerging onto a bustling street. Half a block down, there's an Irish pub. It's very crowded, even for a Friday night, but he leads her to an empty booth at the back, giving the bartender a friendly nod. She glances around approvingly. For someone who doesn't handle field ops - Yuan is purely a research doctor - it's not a bad choice. With this many people around, they won't stand out. And it was clearly chosen to make her feel safer, more comfortable, as she might not if he'd cornered her alone in a secluded location.

"Come here often?" she asks casually.

"Often enough, when I'm in town," Yuan replies, settling back. "The bloke at the bar's an old friend of mine from school. Anyone asks, he'll say I was here on the pull, as usual. And it's a popular place, good for chance encounters, if anyone actually spots us here together."

"Right. So what's with all the secrecy, then?"

Yuan sighs. He presses his hands together on the table, staring down at them. "I haven't been in Bonn. They stationed me at Bournemouth."

Bournemouth. UNIT keeps a secret base there - well, not terribly secret from its own employees in England, but certainly not public knowledge. Even so, very few people even within the organization actually know what that particular installation is used for. Martha doesn't, not for sure, but she's heard rumors. "So they do have medical facilities there."

"Yes." The bartender stops by their table, then, with a couple of pints of Guinness and a basket of chips. He must know Yuan pretty well. Once he's gone again, Yuan goes on. "It's a research station, mostly. Just...the things UNIT would rather not leak out we're researching."

Martha feels something cold settle in the pit of her stomach. "Such as?"

"Bioweaponry." Yuan takes a large swallow of his beer, as if attempting to wash a bad taste out of his mouth.

And Martha remembers the last project Yuan was working on. "Oh, God," she says softly. "The missing bodies. From the 456's biological attack on Thames House seven months ago."

Yuan meets her eyes, expression bleak. "Yes."

"But - after so long?" Martha presses. "Why are they still keeping the corpses? Surely they've gotten everything they need from them already - the virus can't possibly still be viable in the bodies themselves, not after so long. And I know they let people in to see them, immediately after the attack - if it had still been viable, there would've been an outbreak. Like with the bodies of plague victims."

"No - no, of course not," Yuan says. "No, the virus didn't linger in those it killed, it wasn't transmissible from the corpses. We originally planned to release those bodies back to the families after the autopsies were completed. But...well, we couldn't release them without explaining what happened to the rest, could we? So they were incinerated instead." He runs his hand through his hair, looking suddenly much older than his thirty-odd years.

Martha follows this with mounting confusion, and something akin to horror. "But...I don't know what you mean. 'What happened to the rest?'"

"That's why I contacted you. I need your help." He leans forward, beer and chips forgotten. His voice takes on an edge of desperation. "They're going to kill them, Martha. It's been six months and I can't figure out the cure, and if I can't prove they're still alive, *soon*, UNIT is going to incinerate them all."

"Slow down, Yuan," Martha tells him, trying to keep her voice as low and soothing as possible, even as her mind races and heart thuds painfully in her chest. She's beginning to get an inkling of what he might mean, but - that isn't possible, is it? "I don't understand. Who's still alive?"

Yuan's hands clench into fists on the table, but his voice remains steady. "Thirty-nine of the victims at Thames House survived the attack. Sort of. I don't know why or how, and my superior officers don't believe me. But they're *not dead*, Martha, you have to trust me on this. I've tested their blood - it's full of antibodies for the virus. Natural resistance, maybe, I don't know, but somehow their bodies fought it off."

"But - if they're obviously alive-"

"That's just the thing! They're *not*. They aren't breathing, their hearts aren't beating, they're completely cured but they have all the appearance of death. But they're not decomposing, either. It's as though they're just...stuck. In stasis. I don't know. Whatever's causing it, I'm sure there must be an antidote. But UNIT's so obsessed with all this bloody fucking secrecy that they won't assign me any further assistance, and they just think I've gone mad, or something like. They want me to shut up and work on synthesizing the virus for our own use, not waste their precious time and resources on curing a handful of civilians whom everyone thinks *died* half a year ago."

"All right," Martha says, after a long moment. "Why do you think I can help? I'm a medical doctor, not research - and anyway, I'm mostly a field operative these days."

Yuan looks down and away, reaching absently for the basket of chips. He picks one up and toys with it, not eating. "We all deal with weird shit at UNIT, but we've only had the dregs of the galaxy to deal with, the stuff that washes up here. None of us have much firsthand experience with alien life. Rumor has it *you* do." He pauses. "You traveled with the Doctor, didn't you?"

No one except her direct superiors is supposed to know that, but...word gets around. Martha knows it's probably the reason UNIT hired her in the first place. "Yeah."

"And you've got a way of contacting him."

"Technically, yes," she says, not without some degree of bitterness. He hadn't come when the 456 had arrived to wreak havoc for five increasingly miserable days. Some day, she'll be able to forgive him for that. Maybe. But she hasn't seen him since Davros, well over a year ago now. "But I can't promise he'll come."

Yuan shrugs helplessly. "I have to try. The stories I've heard about him - if anyone could help me find a way to save these people, it's the Doctor. The 456 didn't come out of *nowhere*, this virus didn't magically appear. It was engineered, or developed naturally on some other planet, and if the Doctor's seen and done as much as everyone says he has-

"He has," Martha says. "More than you can possibly imagine."

"Contact him," Yuan says quietly. He looks back up at her, face drawn and pale. "Please. I know it could get you in trouble - hell, if they even find out I've spoken with you about this, I'll be jailed for treason. Or worse. Have you seen UNIT's holding cells? Because I have, and they're not pretty. But I can't condemn these people to death, I just *can't*." He rubs his temples. "We *used* them. We're developing our own virus from the antibodies in *their* blood. And now they're just going to - dispose of them, like so much biological waste. It's not right."

Martha considers him thoughtfully. She never noticed a particularly strong strain of conscience in Yuan Zhang before, but this case is affecting him deeply for some reason. Then again, the 456 and resultant debacle brought out both the worst and best of humanity, in any number of ways.

This will step up the timeframe by more than she'd like, but opportunities like this don't present themselves every day.

"And what makes you so sure I'll agree to help, if I even can?" she asks, gauging his reaction.

"Two reasons," Yuan says. He drags up something akin to a smile. "Firstly, because these are innocent civilians, and it's the right thing to do. You never could resist a noble cause, Martha. And secondly-" He leans forward again, eyes dark and intent on hers. "That friend of yours, the one you asked me about right after the attack. Ianto Jones. He's one of the thirty-nine."

Early on Christmas morning, Ianto suddenly and inexplicably found himself standing on the roof atop the Torchwood Tower at Canary Wharf.

"What the *fuck*?" he demanded, taking a few hasty steps back away from the edge.

The last thing he remembered was being down in the communications department, coordinating a systematic search of the remote archives for anything relating to the Sycorax. The old nutter from the Archives had been in rare form over the phone, commiserating with Ianto about alien invasions ruining one's well-earned holiday. Not that Archie ever got much in the way of down time anyway, and when was bloody London going to requisition the support staff he needed-

And then, roof.

It was somewhat disconcerting.

Looking around, he recognized many of his coworkers. They all looked about as befuddled as he felt. Lisa was nowhere in sight; he hoped that was a good thing.

There were guards posted across the roof - not Torchwood operatives, but the UNIT militia Hartman liked to employ when situations got too out of hand. They looked surprised, but rather more alert than Ianto and the others; after a few moments of frantic discussion over their radios, they started herding everyone back down the stairwells into the building. Ianto tapped one - a short, competent-looking woman. "Excuse me - do you know why we're all up here? How did we *get* here?"

The guard glanced up at him curiously. "You don't remember anything?" She sounded vaguely intrigued. "Only it's just that something like a third of the world's population took to the roofs a few hours ago, and everyone else is in a panic about it."

"Aliens," another passing guard remarked, long-suffering. "With this lot, it's always aliens. Except these were on the telly, too."

That'd be a PR nightmare for the Torchwood and UNIT branches, Ianto thought distantly. "Why roofs?" he asked, without much expectation of an answer.

"To scare us," the helpful guard said. "The aliens were controlling you all. Said if we didn't give them what they wanted, they'd make you jump. You really don't remember anything? What did it feel like?"

"Nothing," Ianto said. His stomach twisted, like he was going to vomit. "It didn't feel like anything at all."

A good Torchwood employee would've returned to their desk then, probably with renewed fervor for the work, determined to bring the Sycorax down. From the looks of it, most of the other roofers certainly did, splitting off with their departments and chattering angrily amongst themselves.

Ianto didn't. He took the stairwell all the way down to street level and out of the building.

It was Christmas morning. The streets of London were strewn with tinsel and pine boughs, giant glittering snowflakes strung up above boulevards. But it didn't feel very festive just now. Not with the clumps of confused civilians hurrying homeward, clinging to one another. They should be eating breakfast or opening presents, not sneaking frightened glances at the sky. Many were only half-dressed. At least Ianto had that dignity left to him.

And if the Sycorax had wanted him to jump, he supposed he would have just - stepped off the edge, none the wiser.

He lost track of how long he wandered through the city, feeling like a stranger in his own skin. At some point, he heard cheering. He peered into a shop to see what all the fuss was about.

"That'll show the bastards," an old man exulted, pointing at the TV mounted on a wall. It broadcast the image of an asteroid-like ship in retreat.

"But what *happened*?" Ianto asked.

The old man just shook his head. "That'll show 'em," he said again. "That'll show 'em."

Ianto nodded and turned back in the direction of his flat. He knew what would probably come next. When he checked his mobile, he saw five new messages - two from work, and three from Lisa. He erased them all without listening to them.

Green light streaked across the sky overhead as he reached his apartment building. *Good*, he thought, and let himself in.

Lisa found him there a few hours later, sitting in the dark of his living room, an empty bottle of posh brandy at the foot of his sofa.

"Hey," she said softly. "Ianto. Hey."

"What's the story this time?" Ianto asked, slurring the words somewhat. Lisa drafted press releases and developed cover stories for Torchwood. She was very good at her job.

She slipped down beside him on the couch, trailing her hand along his arm. "Oh, you know. The usual."

Ianto closed his eyes tightly, leaning into her. She smelled like peaches, her favorite body lotion. It was oddly calming. "Too many witnesses to retcon. The whole world."

"Doesn't matter," Lisa murmured. She pressed a kiss into the curve of his jaw. "Tomorrow morning, it'll all seem like a bad dream. They'll forget about it. They always do."

"I won't."

"No," she said. "I know."

It's going on midnight when the phone rings. Not that it matters - Gwen's up, of course. Rhys is out with a few of his mates, trying to enjoy his Friday nights while they still mean anything, but Gwen brought a stack of paperwork home to work on. It gives her something to do besides worry. Not that Rhys can't take care of himself, and his mates are good, steady blokes, but - well. There haven't been any lootings in the city centre since last month. Maybe things are finally getting better.

Mickey and Andy headed out early to investigate a Weevil sighting up in Splott - Andy had been vocally unenthusiastic about their prospects, but Mickey talked him around with good cheer. He seems to like the uncomplicated action of hunting down a problem and shooting it, not unlike Jack used to be.

Anyway, Mickey had been off all last weekend, which always puts him in a pleasant mood for the rest of the week. Lois thinks he's got a lady friend stashed away - hence the monthly getaways. She was all

for following him the first couple of times, but Gwen just laughed and told her everyone was entitled to their secrets.

Besides, it's more fun to wonder and gossip about it.

Gwen doesn't like staying too late in her office, because Lois always feels obligated to stay as long as Gwen's there, and that's just cruel and unusual for a twenty-four-year-old on a Friday night. Gwen had given her strict orders to go and have *fun* for a change, maybe join up with one of the cinema clubs in town. Not that Lois will listen, but it's worth a try.

She glances down at her mobile, frowning. Martha Jones? If Martha's calling this late, after months of just the occasional friendly e-mail, it probably means - well. No need to speculate when she can just ask. She flips open the phone with a sigh. "Martha, how are you? How's-" shit, she can never remember Martha's husband's name, and it's way too late to ask now - "your man?"

"Fine, we're fine," Martha says, speaking very quickly. "Gwen, I need to get in touch with Jack, *now*. I know you've said you don't know where he is, but if you've *any* way of contacting him, any at all-"

"I did," Gwen says tiredly. She sinks down into the couch cushions, rubbing her distended belly. "But not anymore. He's...he's gone, Martha. A few weeks ago. I meant to tell you."

"Gone?" The confusion in Martha's voice is apparent, even over the phone. "Yes, I know he's been missing since the 456, but-"

"I gave him back his wristband," Gwen tells her dully. "He used it to call up a spaceship. He's *left* us, Martha. Gone. Outer space. He's never coming back."

"Oh, that *bastard*." There's silence over the line, for a long minute. The baby shifts inside her, pressing up against her bladder, and Gwen winces. Little bugger has a real sense of inconvenient timing. Definitely Rhys's kid.

Finally, Gwen asks, "What did you need Jack for so badly?"

"It wasn't - it's not that I needed him, exactly," Martha hedges. "But - oh, *God*, if only I'd known earlier, if I could've told him before he - *shit*."

Martha almost never curses. This is not a good sign. "Martha, what is it?"

"It's about Ianto," Martha says. Gwen's heart skips a beat. "I can't discuss it over the phone, but Gwen, Ianto's still alive."

For a moment, time stops. Then she's up, moving, grabbing blindly for her purse. "I can be in London in three hours," she says into the phone, breath coming hard and fast. Shoes? Shoes! Car keys?

"No need," Martha says. "I'm already on my way. Fifty kilometers out of Cardiff. And, Gwen? We're going to need help. I'll explain when I get there, but this is going to be tricky."

"Tricky?" Gwen laughs, feeling just a touch hysterical. Bloody hormones. Oh, *Ianto*. "That's all right, then. Tricky just happens to be Torchwood's specialty."

It was one of the bad days. Ianto increased Lisa's morphine dosage and stroked her arm until she slept, then straightened his tie and went back upstairs to work.

The others were in the boardroom; team meeting, apparently, though no one had bothered notifying him. Well, they'd still want their coffee afterward. No, Ianto decided, better to bring the drinks in now, before it occurred to anyone to ask. The best way to be invisible was to anticipate every need. If he was absent when someone needed him, *then* they'd notice - would look for him, wonder where he'd been. But if he always seemed to be *there*, hovering, they'd never realize he'd ever been missing.

He filled his tray and headed down, then stopped abruptly before reaching the doorway, pulling back against the wall and out of sight.

So that was why no one had called him for this particular meeting. They were discussing *him*.

"You can't seriously be considering putting him out in the field," Suzie said, not bothering to conceal her exasperation. "He'd muss up all those pretty suits, for one."

Jack snorted. "Like you don't want to see that as much as I do. But no, I said firearms training, not actual fieldwork. Not yet, at least."

"I don't like the idea of the teaboy packing heat," Owen said. "If you're not bringing him out on missions, why put a gun in his hand?"

"Sometimes the field comes to us," Jack said. "And everyone should be able to defend themselves."

There was a long pause. Ianto imagined Owen and Suzie exchanging looks, while Jack waited them out.

"Look, Jack," Suzie finally said, "we know the twink is very pretty, but..."

"That kid is just a couple of minor traumas away from a nervous breakdown," Owen said bluntly. "And it's *not* going to be pretty when he shatters."

"Is that your professional opinion, Dr. Harper?" Jack asked coolly.

"I've seen his psych evals, and sure, he's got the whole stiff upper lip routine down pat," Owen replied. "But more importantly, I saw Canary Wharf. No one came out of that unscathed, Jack."

"He shouldn't be punished for it, either," Jack said. "And the next time the shit hits the fan, I want him to be able to fight back along with the rest of us. What do you think, Ianto?" he added, raising his voice. "Wanna play with the big kids' toys?"

lanto straightened his shoulders and stepped into the boardroom, holding his tray of drinks in front of him like a shield. "I beg your pardon?"

"Don't be coy, Jones," Suzie snapped. Her eyes were far too shrewd.

Some claimed the best defense was a strong offense, but lanto had always found it far more effective to simply roll with the punches. So he shrugged and handed out the coffees (and one herbal tea, black, for Toshiko). "Weapons training, I take it?"

"If you'd like." Jack was still looking at Owen and Suzie, as if daring them to challenge him. Toshiko studied her tea intently. She was always pleasant to lanto, though she rarely looked away from her computer monitors long enough to actually see him, and she generally kept out of the constant power plays between the other three. "It's best to be prepared."

"What are we, the bloody Boy Scouts?" Owen grouched, but his shoulders were hunched and he wasn't making eye contact with anyone. Even if Suzie decided to make a fuss, she was outnumbered now. Jack had won this round.

Jack smiled, shark-like. "They come in handy. I know how to start a fire just by rubbing-"

"I'll train him," Suzie said unexpectedly. At Jack's raised eyebrows, she rolled her eyes. "I've experienced your 'training,' Jack, and lanto doesn't need you handling his weapon. Do you want him to learn how to shoot straight or not?"

Having won the battle, Jack ceded the point graciously. "Fair enough. Any further objections?" Unsurprisingly, there were none. "All right, I'm sure you all have work you should be doing. Scat."

When lanto moved to leave, Suzie caught his arm. "Come on then, Jones. No time like the present."

He allowed her to maneuver him down to the gun range, and geared up under her instructions. The closed-circuit comms in the ear defenders were a nice touch. Suzie selected a Beretta 9mm for him and showed him how to load it, how to check the safety, all that fun stuff. lanto let her without comment.

She corrected his stance only slightly, and he took aim.

"*You think you're so clever, don't you?*" Suzie murmured through the comm.

lanto flinched, missing the target by a good foot and a half.

"*Focus,*" Suzie told him sharply. "*You think there won't be any distractions when you're facing down a bad guy? Because I promise you, there will be plenty, and you'll still need to make the shot.*" She took the semiautomatic out of his hands and fired once, twice. Both bullets were clustered right in the center of the target's head. "*What kind of training did they give you in London, anyway?*" she asked, passing the weapon back to him.

lanto fired off another couple of rounds. At least they hit the paper this time. Damn, he was rusty at this. "Basic firearms training, with a fairly wide range of weapons. Refresher course every other month

for us research weenies. I never had to fire my weapon in the field." And he hadn't even had it on him the day Canary Wharf fell - not that it would've done any good.

"So why didn't you just tell us you already knew how to fire a gun?"

Ianto shrugged, ejecting the empty clip and reloading. "It wasn't relevant." This time he made the kill shot - not nearly so perfectly placed as Suzie's, but good enough.

Suzie smiled. "*Sneaky, clever Ianto Jones, full of secrets. What else do you think you're hiding?*"

She didn't know about Lisa. She *couldn't* know about Lisa. If she seriously suspected that he was concealing Cybernetics in the Hub, he'd have a bullet perfectly centered in the middle of his forehead. But still, he could feel cold sweat trickle down his back. "I have nothing to hide from anyone."

Suzie laughed, the sound ringing in his ears. "*Everyone has something to hide. All right, then, keep your secrets, Ianto. You like keeping secrets, don't you? Yours and everyone else's.*" She folded her long fingers over his on the gun, adjusting his grip. "*Here's one of my secrets: I absolutely despise carrying a gun.*"

They fired together. It was a perfect shot.

Ianto carefully disentangled himself from her and set down the handgun. His hands weren't shaking, much.

"*And here's a secret for you,*" Suzie said. She reached up and pulled off his ear defenders, going up on tiptoe to whisper to him. "You should be more careful about erasing CCTV footage."

His blood ran cold.

She pulled back, lips curled into a gentle smirk. "Not that you and Jack don't make a very pretty picture together, but that was rather clumsy of you, don't you think?"

He definitely didn't have to fake the flush in his cheeks. Suzie giggled.

"Don't worry, Ianto. Your dirty little secret is safe with me." She nodded to the semiautomatic. "I assume you can clean your weapon without my instruction."

He nodded, and she turned on her heel and walked out of the firing range, still laughing to herself.

She was right. He *had* been clumsy about wiping the CCTV footage, leaving enough of a trail that anyone with half a brain could reconstruct it, if they were looking. So Suzie had got an eyeful of him and Jack in the Archives. How careless of him. He hoped she'd enjoyed it, at least.

More importantly, now that she'd found *that*, she'd never bother looking for the rest of the CCTV footage of the basement sublevels, the parts Ianto had been much, much more careful about erasing.

It was almost too easy.

Still, he stood there alone for a good while after, just breathing until his heart rate returned to normal.

They arrive in Cardiff at about one in the morning. Martha leads Yuan to a squat, nondescript office building, where she introduces him to Torchwood's current leader. Gwen Cooper is a bit too young and friendly - and pregnant - to be heading up this sort of shadow organization, but Yuan's not inclined to make snap personal judgments after midnight. After a quick briefing to fill Gwen in - she's a good listener, and keeps her questions pointed and to a minimum, so the meeting takes less than an hour - they decide to call it a night and reconvene with the rest of the team the next morning. Gwen checks Yuan and Martha into hotel rooms under false names on the Torchwood account, and Yuan is out before his head even hits the pillow.

He's up again at around eight, still tired but too restless to fall back asleep. With some time to kill before he needs to be back at Torchwood, he strikes out on his own to find a coffee shop and something resembling breakfast.

The wind off the Bay is nippy, but Yuan doesn't mind. It's oddly peaceful here. The Plass in front of the Millennium Centre has been almost completely rebuilt. Various bits of construction machinery are scattered at rest across the plaza, their crews presumably off enjoying the weekend. Tourists mill about the place and shops and cafes on nearby streets are bustling. It takes a while for Yuan to figure out what feels so *off* about it all.

It's perfectly ordinary.

Yuan sits on a bench looking out at the Bay and sips his tea, soaking it in.

Eventually he makes his way over to the Torchwood base. He's a bit on the early side. A young receptionist type lets him in with a harried air, and immediately dashes off to take care of something or other. "Gwen's in her office," she tosses over her shoulder. "I'm sure she'd love to speak with you before the others get here."

Gwen's office is a glass-walled enclosure just off what appears to be the central work area. Like the rest of the base, it's liberally decorated with a wide assortment of exotic debris, probably alien, which Yuan eyes curiously as he enters.

"It's all stuff we scavenged from the Hub," Gwen says, watching his ogling with some amusement. "Lois has a makeshift archival system in place for the important items, but the bits and bobs kind of slip through the cracks. Wherever they land, there shall they be buried." She flashes him an infectious grin. "I think there's a chair under the rubble somewhere, just dump the junk on the floor and have a seat."

Yuan does, carefully placing what looks like a hunk of coral atop Gwen's cluttered desk. "Thanks."

"So how long do we have you for, Dr. Zhang?" Gwen asks, folding her hands over her belly. "By which I mean, how long before UNIT notices that you're missing?"

"I have weekend leave," Yuan says. "So long as I return to my post by tomorrow evening, there shouldn't be any trouble. As far as I know, they have no reason to track my movements. I am a model employee, Ms. Cooper - apart from my demonstrable insanity in trying to revive corpses, of course."

Gwen laughs. "No wonder Martha likes you. She's another model soldier - apart from her affinity for things like justice and fairness." She sobers abruptly. "You do know we won't be able to break all thirty-nine victims out, right? Torchwood simply doesn't have the resources for a full-scale jailbreak, especially when the prisoners are all in comas," she adds with a grimace, toying with the coral.

"I know." Yuan fidgets in his seat. "When I went to Martha, I thought - well. No offense intended, but I thought she would contact the Doctor, not Torchwood."

Gwen looks back up at him abruptly, eyes wide. "You know about - Christ. Worst kept secret on the planet, isn't he? But he's got a hell of a network. That's how we first encountered Martha - she met Jack through the Doctor."

"Jack?"

"Captain Jack Harkness," Gwen sighs. She runs a finger along the coral again, tracing its outline gently. "He used to run Torchwood Three. My boss. He's gone now."

Something in her tone keeps Yuan from questioning her further. Maybe he'll ask Martha what happened there. "So you met Martha through this Captain Harkness. And she also mentioned your technician, Smith...?"

"Mickey Smith, yeah. He traveled with the Doctor a few times, same as Jack." Gwen smiles. "The International Conspiracy of TARDIS Ex-Pats."

"I'm sorry?"

"That's what Ianto called them. We used to joke about it. Seems like traveling with the Doctor is rather a sort of bonding experience, not unlike Stockholm Syndrome." She seems to be looking past Yuan, at something very far away. "The Doctor's a lovely fairytale hero," Gwen murmurs. "But some dragons are best left to us to sort on our own." Her focus snaps back to Yuan. "They're really alive? You *are* sure about that?"

The guarded hope in her eyes is nearly heartbreaking. "I'm certain," Yuan tells her. "I wouldn't be risking my career on this if I weren't."

"If we can get Ianto out, I'll pull every string Torchwood has left to help you find the cure for him." Gwen sits up a bit straighter as she speaks, cold steel in her spine and voice. "And then we'll save the rest. You just need to convince your superiors to delay disposal of the others for a little while longer. We *will* find a way, Yuan, I promise."

She has no right making those sorts of promises, but Yuan understands. If she says it firmly enough, it'll become true.

The receptionist sticks her head in the door. "Gwen? Everyone will be here in a moment."

"Thanks, Lois." Gwen and Yuan both stand, Gwen somewhat awkwardly. His instinct is to run around her desk and assist her - she's *very* pregnant. Maybe eight months gone, he'd guess. She waves off his attempts to help. "When you've chased down a Nostrovite with your belly out like a bowling ball, getting out of a chair is a piece of cake," she says. "Trust me on this."

Out in the central work area, chairs have been assembled into a makeshift oval, with an overstuffed couch forming one end and a laptop set up on a workbench at the other. Martha sits behind the laptop. She spares Yuan a quick smile, waving him over. "I'm starting to sketch out a workable operation," she tells him in a low voice. "But it'll need to start with a hell of a diversion. Think you can engineer a medical emergency in the base?"

Yuan doesn't need to ponder it for long. "With the stuff we're working with there? Oh, yeah. I can give you a biohazard containment breach, with a mandated level three quarantine."

"I suspected as much." Martha grins.

The receptionist - Lois - herds two men into the room. They seem to be in the middle of a squabble, but they break it up congenially enough when they notice Torchwood's guests. One heads straight over to give Gwen a kiss - her husband, Yuan guesses, which turns out to be correct. He's introduced as Rhys Williams, manager of a lorry company and freelance Torchwood consultant. Which is reasonable enough - plenty of alien bric-a-brac deposited across the countryside that need hauling. The other bloke is Andy Davidson, field agent and police liaison. He looks friendly, though perhaps a bit out of his depth. Lois is properly introduced as Torchwood's general support.

Gwen lowers herself to the couch, gesturing for the others to take their seats. "So now we're just waiting on-"

"Sorry, sorry," the latecomer announces, bursting in. "Just had to swing by the Hub to pick up-" He cuts himself off, eyes widening when he sees their guests. "Dr. Jones."

"Mr. Smith," Martha says with a tight smile. Yuan thinks about the International Conspiracy of TARDIS Ex-Pats, complete with their own passwords and secret handshakes, and suppresses a smile. "Hiya. Yeah."

"Oh, bollocks," Mickey Smith - Torchwood's technician - says, with feeling. "Something's gone disastrously wrong, hasn't it?"

Martha smiles a little more genuinely at that. "Sort of. On the hand, it's also possible something's just gone unexpectedly *right*, for a change." She gives Yuan a nod. "Torchwood, meet Dr. Yuan Zhang. I think I'll let him explain."

Ianto spent the first night after Lisa in the Hub, heavily sedated. When he finally woke up, it took him a few minutes of blinking in the semi-darkness to reorient himself. His brain felt like overcooked porridge. Lethargy numbed his limbs, making him stiff and unfocused. It was not unlike the worst hangover he'd ever had, right down to a big blank spot when he tried to remember how he'd gotten here last night. Or, for that matter, where *here* even was.

A small room. No natural light. He was lying on a bed, or maybe a cot - narrow, uncomfortable. He was wearing his shorts and someone else's T-shirt - that was right, because his own clothing had been ruined, what with all the bloodstains...

Not his own blood, though. Tanizaki. The pizza girl.

Lisa.

Oh, God, he remembered everything.

So the sedatives Owen had given him *hadn't* been laced with Retcon after all. He'd wondered, but at the time, he hadn't particularly cared. He rolled over, feeling the lumpy mattress dig into his side, and pressed his face into a pillow that smelled like-

And then he laughed - a harsh, rasping sound that could never be mistaken for mirth - when he realized that he'd finally ended up in Jack's bed, just as he'd always suspected he would.

After that, it was simply a matter of going forward. He supposed he could just close his eyes again and stay there, but sooner or later, Jack would return, and then...he didn't know what Jack would do then. He didn't intend to find out.

So he got out of the bed.

There was clothing folded neatly on a chair - trousers, dress shirt, suit jacket. It took him a moment to recognize it as the spare suit he'd kept in his locker by the showers. So Jack had been going through his things. Ianto wasn't surprised at all.

He dressed himself mindlessly, pulling the shirt and jacket on over the T-shirt he was already wearing. His own shoes waited for him under the chair, so he put them on as well. No socks. He couldn't have cared less. Then he climbed up the ladder and into Jack's office, because there was nowhere else to go.

Jack was there. Of course. He looked up from the paperwork on his desk. Ianto allowed himself a moment of distant amusement - he'd often wondered aloud what it would take to get Jack to do some of his own paperwork. A Cyberman in the Hub, apparently.

It wasn't really funny.

"Hey," Jack said, face and tone unreadable. "How are you feeling?"

lanto just looked at him, faintly incredulous.

"Fair enough." Jack's lips quirked for the barest of moments, gone before lanto could react. "So this is the part where I take away your badge and your gun, except I'm pretty sure we took care of all that last night. You're on suspension. Four weeks. I will be checking in with you on an extremely regular basis. At the end of that time, we'll powwow and decide whether or not you are willing and able to return to work."

Suspension. Not Retcon. Not execution - well, lanto supposed Jack could've taken care of *that* last night, if he'd been so inclined. Just - suspension. Sitting alone in his empty, ugly flat for a month, staring at Lisa's photo on his nightstand and wondering if he'd just imagined her. And then back to being the teaboy, playing janitor to the people who'd killed the woman he loved, the woman he'd nearly ended the world in a futile attempt to save.

Maybe it was a fitting punishment after all.

Jack was still looking at him expectantly, and lanto realized he was supposed to say something. "Yes, sir."

"lanto..." Jack got to his feet, but kept the desk between them. "I know you probably hate me right now-"

"Honestly, sir, I don't feel much of anything right now," lanto said flatly. After so many months of lying, keeping Lisa hidden and safe, concealing everything he was thinking and feeling, it felt strangely refreshing to simply...tell the truth.

He had nothing left to hide.

"Okay," Jack said, oddly gentle. "But you will. And for what it's worth, I wish it hadn't had to end that way."

"She," lanto said. Jack raised an eyebrow, bemused. "She. Not *it*."

Jack looked almost - sad. Or maybe like he wanted to be angry, to be furious, but he'd used it all up last night and there was nothing left. Like lanto. "Oh, lanto," Jack sighed, "*she* ended a very long time ago."

He wasn't wrong, but he wasn't *right*, either. It didn't matter now. lanto had done everything in his power to keep Lisa alive, to make her better, and he had failed. What Jack and the others had done - no, he couldn't go on hating them forever. It was lanto's failure. Just his.

"Yes, sir," he said, because there was nothing else worth saying. "Will that be all?"

Jack frowned faintly, as though disappointed. But all he said was, "Yes. Go home, lanto."

So lanto went.

The rest of the Hub was deserted. Probably Jack's orders. Ianto gave the invisible lift a wide berth and left by way of the tourist office instead.

He didn't remember how he got back to his flat, but he found his way, somehow. Once there, he considered food, but there was nothing in his fridge and only a box of uncooked pasta in his cupboard. He didn't have the energy to go to the shops and the thought of ordering in made his stomach turn. (He vaguely wondered if they'd ever be able to order from Jubilee Pizza again, and then deliberately shoved the thought aside.) So instead he went back to bed - his own, this time.

He stripped out of the suit methodically, then realized he was still wearing the unfamiliar T-shirt. The fabric was soft, well-worn. It smelled like Jack.

At one point last night, after they'd dragged him away from Lisa's body, Jack had cornered Ianto alone, shoving him up against a wall. *So many lies*, he'd said harshly, pressing too close, breath hot on Ianto's cheek. *Was this all a lie, too?*

No, Ianto had admitted, furious and miserable and honest. *I wanted to distract you, but I also wanted you. That's what I hated the most.* He'd stopped crying by then, but his voice was still hoarse and broken. *I'm a monster, too.*

At that, Jack had pulled away, emotions flickering across his face too quickly for Ianto to read. *No. You're just human.*

Ianto yanked the T-shirt off and threw it into a corner. He sat down on the bed. For the first time in months - since Torchwood Tower fell, leaving his life a smoking ruin - there wasn't anything left to do. He didn't have any machinery to maintain, ever so carefully, check in every few hours to make sure it was still running smoothly, silently. He didn't have any CCTV footage to erase or loop, any power surges to account for or cover up. He didn't have any more lies to tell, to Jack or to anyone else. Not even to himself.

Lisa was gone. And she had been for a very long time.

He was free.

And with that thought, Ianto dropped his head to his hands and began to cry, his betrayal of Lisa now complete.

This *so* isn't going to win Andy any popularity points, but he's been holding his tongue for the entire operation-planning powwow, and someone's got to bring it up sooner or later. The fact that Ianto - former Torchwood agent and generally decent bloke - is essentially being held hostage by his own government with thirty-odd other hapless victims is pretty awful. That UNIT is trying to develop the alien virus that supposedly killed them and *actually* killed a bunch of other people into a viable biological weapon is kind of disgusting. And the image of Team Torchwood busting in to save the day is

very appealing, really. But there are some hard realities to be faced, starting with the fact that a team of four intrepid alien-chasers (five if they're counting Rhys, back down to four if they ever remember that Gwen's not exactly in prime chasing condition) plus two disgruntled UNIT employees does not exactly a successful revolution make.

Gwen and Martha are currently debating logistics, with occasional remarks from Rhys; Mickey has his head bent over the laptop with Yuan, going over site schematics. Lois is frantically trying to take notes on everything anyone says or does, bless. Andy raises his hand and tries not to feel like he's back in primary school.

That doesn't get anyone's attention, so he coughs pointedly instead. Very pointedly. "Right," he says, once they're all looking his way, "so I don't mean to sound callous, but I need some clarification. Is the primary goal of this mission to expose UNIT or to get Ianto out? Because if it turns out we can't do both, I need to know what to prioritize."

"The victims," Yuan says at once, at the same time that Martha says "getting proof" and Gwen says "Ianto."

It's an awkward moment for everyone.

"If we can't prove UNIT's wrongdoing, what's the point?" Martha demands. "They don't care about Ianto - they won't lose any sleep over us getting one useless corpse away from them."

"They might not care about Ianto, but *I do*," Gwen says sharply. "I'm not leaving him in there to be...*disposed of*!"

Yuan clears his throat. "But it's all right to abandon the other thirty-eight victims to their fates?"

"Yeah," Andy sighs. "That's what I was afraid of. This isn't helping, guys."

They all cut themselves off, exchanging looks for a long moment, as though waiting to see who'll step up first.

In the end, it's Martha. "We need to expose UNIT's activities," she says firmly. "There's no use getting a few people out if they're going to keep developing these weapons. Biowar is - it's just *dirty*. It kills indiscriminately, soldiers and civilians alike, and it's just plain dishonorable. Ugly."

Lois puts her hand up tentatively. "I don't disagree, but the 456 already used it on *our* civilians. And if it's us or them-"

"That's exactly the trap UNIT's fallen into," Martha snaps. "Us or them. There are hundreds of thousands of alien species out there - are we really just going to kill them all preemptively and call it self-defense? It's *genocide*, and I want no part in any organization that promotes it."

Rhys blinks at that. "Isn't that coming on a bit strong? Even UNIT's hardly all-powerful. The world governments-"

"-were already willing to give up ten percent of the world's children out of fear," Yuan interrupts quietly. "People on the streets are terrified. They saw invaders in the sky and the government tried to hush it all up, like they always have, only it's not working anymore. They're scared and confused and they don't know who to trust, because their government *lied* to them, tried to take their *children* away from them." He looks straight at Gwen. "You don't know how lucky you are, here in Cardiff."

"We heard about the riots, in the days after the 456," Rhys says, arms folded across his chest. "And we've had our share of troubles, but nothing too serious. Sure, there are always reports on the telly about civil unrest, but-"

"Crime rates have nearly tripled over the past seven months, in urban and rural areas alike." Martha sounds very tired. "In particular, violence against police and military forces has risen dramatically. There are nearly daily protests in front of Whitehall, but they're still disorganized, leaderless. Everyone is angry, and frightened, but they don't know who to blame or how to channel their energies. There's no coherent movement yet, which is probably the only reason Britain hasn't resorted to martial law yet - unlike half the EU, not to mention China and most of the African republics. America managed to rally under their new president, but that won't last forever. Why Cardiff alone has been spared is beyond me."

"The Rift." Gwen smiles wryly. "We're used to alien invasions here. It doesn't faze us much anymore."

Andy clears his throat. "So what sort of good do you think exposing UNIT will actually do?"

"It might give people a cause." This is Mickey, unexpectedly speaking up for the first time. He looks serious and speaks slowly, clearly, as though this is something he's given a lot of thought to. "Something worth fighting for. If UNIT actually stepped up and took a stand, they might make a difference. They've got the resources, they've got the moral authority of the UN behind them - whatever that's worth these days - and they've got the manpower. But instead they're running scared and stockpiling weapons, like some old nutter building an arsenal in his fallout shelter."

"Won't exposing them just weaken them, though?" Lois asks.

"Not if we play our cards right," Martha replies. "I'm not the only one within the organization who's unhappy with the direction it's taken. I'm not going to waste your time with the details, but we have...arrangements in place. We weren't planning on moving this soon, but when Yuan approached me with this information - it's too important to wait. We need to get the intel out as soon as possible, before UNIT has the chance to develop a viable weapon."

Gwen exhales sharply, hand going to her stomach protectively. "Oh, Christ. I'm an absolute idiot. It's not just for use against aliens - they could target *us*."

"The government is frightened, and they've got an increasingly unruly populace to deal with," Yuan says. "It's a possibility. I've been dragging my heels on the research as much as possible, but sooner or later they'll find someone with fewer scruples. I can only distract them with the thirty-nine for so long."

Martha glances over at him in surprise. "I thought you came to me because you cared more about the victims than the research."

"If I can figure out why they survived, and cure them..." Yuan shrugs. His eyes are dark and bleak. "Then when UNIT inevitably develops a live virus - and have no doubt, they *will* have it ready, and soon - at least I'll have the antidote. I'm no soldier, no field operative. I'm a doctor, and this is the only way I know how to fight back."

Andy watches them all watch each other, and suppresses a sigh. "So, saving the world, then, is it? My question still stands. Primary mission objective?"

"It's all the same, sounds like," Rhys remarks, with his usual blithe forthrightness. "Getting the evidence out to the world. Martha here's looking for indisputable proof of wrongdoing. What's lanto if not your proof? Get him out, find the cure, show the rest of the world what UNIT's been up to. Done and done."

They all turn to stare at him, agape.

"What?" he asks, hands up defensively. "What are you looking at me like that for? What did I say?"

Gwen just leans over and kisses him soundly.

Early on Christmas morning, lanto was entirely unsurprised to find Jack standing on the roof atop the Millennium Centre.

"John Ellis is dead," Jack said without turning, as lanto walked up beside him. "Carbon monoxide poisoning. Your car. I'll have it cleaned. Or replaced, if you like. Happy Christmas."

lanto just nodded. He'd rather not think about that just now, thanks. The December wind was brisk and cold up here, cutting through his suit jacket. He ignored it.

They watched the sun rise fitfully over the city in silence.

"Are you all right?" lanto finally asked, risking a glance over at Jack's face.

Jack's lips quirked into a mirthless smile. He almost looked as though *he'd* been the one who spent the night slowly dying. "Aren't I always?"

There wasn't much lanto could say to that. He stared out over the rooftops, watching the city slowly come to life. "This is becoming an unfortunate habit," he remarked lightly, trying to shift the mood. At Jack's curious glance over, he elaborated: "Christmas, roofs..."

It took a second, but Jack got it. He laughed. It sounded hollow, but it was something. "At least we haven't had any alien invasions yet today. Granted, it's still pretty early. Was that really only last Christmas?"

"It's been quite a year," Ianto agreed. He shifted his weight, ever so slightly, just enough that his jacket sleeve brushed Jack's. This close, he could smell the odd scent clinging to the woolen greatcoat, very faintly, like exhaust fumes. "What was Three up to that day? Office gossip had you in a strop with Hartman afterward, but I always wondered if you actually tried to take on the Sycorax yourself."

Jack shrugged, giving him a lopsided smile. "Never had much of a chance. I was up here. Suzie was having a field day, let me tell you."

It seemed so incongruous, somehow, that Captain Jack Harkness had been subject to the same alien voodoo as a third of the rest of the world. "Your blood type is A-positive?"

"I *am* human, you know." Jack eyed him narrowly. "And it's not exactly uncommon."

"Not at all. But given your...proclivities, I'd have expected you to be O-negative. The universal donor."

This time, Jack's laugh was full-throated. "Sorry to disappoint." He tilted his head to look Ianto over appraisingly. "So what were *you* doing last Christmas?"

Ianto shrugged, unconsciously mimicking Jack's stance. "Standing atop a roof with the rest of the possessed, like you. Hell of a way to wake back up."

"You must have *hated* that." Ianto turned to him, startled by the softness in Jack's tone. Jack's smile was far more genuine now, and he reached up to brush his thumb across the lapel of Ianto's suit jacket. "Jones Ianto Jones, always in control of every situation," he went on, not quite teasing. "To have been so completely under someone else's power like that - you must have been furious."

I wasn't furious, I was terrified, Ianto didn't say. Because Jack knew him too well already, and Ianto had to keep something left for himself. "I wasn't sorry for what One did to the Sycorax afterward," he admitted instead. "Not that I had anything to do with it, but - I wasn't sorry."

"Can't blame you for that." Jack's hand slipped up to cup Ianto's cheek, startlingly warm in the chilly morning air. He sounded very tired. "I'm sorry about your car."

"Yeah. I'm sorry about John."

Jack's thumb traced the line of Ianto's neck, settled lightly over his pulse point. Ianto resisted closing his eyes and leaning into the touch. "It was his time," Jack murmured. His eyes were red-rimmed with exhaustion - it had been a very long night - but when Ianto met his gaze, there seemed to be something lighter there, something like relief. Something like tenderness - which left him at a complete loss, throat dry and heart racing, mind a perfect blank.

He never told Lisa he loved her until after Canary Wharf. Not because he didn't, before, but maybe he hadn't quite realized it yet - hadn't realized what *love* was until she was screaming with pain, metal glazed into her skin and flames all around them. Maybe true love only came so deeply entwined with terror and loss that he couldn't pick the individual sentiments apart anymore, that they just became a roiling, agitating mass of gut-clenching emotion that he had to call *love*, because what else was there?

So when he looked at Jack now, and something unfurled in his chest, he didn't call it anything at all. He was too damn scared.

Ianto kissed him, then, because that was far easier than meeting his eyes.

It's been a slow week. Slow *decade*, actually, but those are the 4260s for you. Least imaginative era in humanity since the days of hunting and gathering, and at least the prehistoric peoples had some delightfully wicked uses for arrowheads. John Hart still recalls *that* visit with some fondness, and he's got the scars to prove it. Point being, year 4267 in the Kyrtonan Nebula is about as exciting as watching metal rust. Has its advantages, of course, primary among them being the *last* point in time and space that a certain bounty hunter from Orion 12 will think to look for him, but it's been a good galactic fortnight since John nicked her Albatoran Gidget, and surely she's gotten over it by now, right?

So that's why he responds to Jack's message so quickly. The only reason, really.

Typing the coordinates into his vortex manipulator drops him in a bar. In the ladies', to be specific. Jack always did have a juvenile sense of humor. John manages to resist the urge to scrawl something lewd on the mirror with eyeliner before heading out of the dingy loo.

The bar isn't a surprise; its location is. Spaceport, John judges, mostly populated by non-humanoid types. Not that John has anything against a bit of local color, but last he checked, Jack was pretty contentedly Earthbound. Then again, Jack is also immortal, so God only knows where he is in his own time stream at this point.

He hasn't changed his coat.

"So," John says, slipping onto the stool beside him, "are you still going by *Jack*, or do I finally get to call you-

"We said we'd never mention that again," Jack interrupts with a wide, false smile. He glances ostentatiously at his wriststrap. "You took your sweet time getting here."

Actually, John hadn't. He'd deliberately arrived thirty minutes later than the temporal coordinates Jack sent him. John is the goddamned Versace of 'fashionably late,' ta very much. "Things to see, people to do, not your bloody lapdog. So what's so urgent you had to drag my arse halfway across the known universe after ages without so much as a how-dee-do?" John narrows his eyes, trying to guesstimate timelines. Jack looks the same. He always looks the same these days, the bastard. Although there is something in the hunch of his shoulders, a certain weariness that makes him look...older. "How long *has* it been for you, anyway?"

Jack shrugs, aiming for casual. It would almost work if not for the stiffness in his jaw, the sharp movements of his hands toying with his drink. "Still in linear time since we last met."

A little over a year, give or take, same as for John. So what the hell is Jack doing all the way out here?

"And speaking of time, I don't have much of it," Jack continues, before John has a chance to ask the obvious. "I've got to be on a transport out to Galatea in twenty minutes. So let's skip the chit-chat, shall we? I've got a job for you."

John grins. "Work, work, work. Can't you buy a lady a drink first?"

"It's a quick snatch," Jack goes on, ignoring the interruption. "Earth military facility, present time. They've got live samples of a virus. I need you to steal one for me. I can pay you two thousand Andovarian credits - half now, half on delivery to the rendezvous coordinates I send you. Any questions?"

That's not much money in this time, but the exchange rate for Andovarian credits on Elyssia will make it pay off nicely, if John plays his cards right. "Sure," John says aloud, stalling for time while he considers. "What's it for? Trying to wipe out an alien populace? That's so thirty-eighth century of you."

Jack just frowns at the barb. Damn, what crawled up his arse and died? That should've at least merited an eye roll. "No, it's...evidence. For a criminal investigation I'm pursuing."

"So you're playing intergalactic detective now?" John asks. "Do you have a badge? I've always wanted a badge. Or was that a brand? I always get those confused. I see the uniform hasn't changed, though." No reaction. He might as well be a Jybaxian for all the response he's getting here. Worst stand-up comedians in twelve galaxies, the Jybaxians. "All right, Captain Sherlock Holmes, so remind me why you can't track down this virus yourself?"

"Two reasons. One, as you're well aware, the teleportation function in my vortex manipulator is...nonfunctional. And this job may well be time-sensitive; I don't know why or for how long they've got this virus, but for all I know they'll destroy it tomorrow." Jack drums his fingers on the bar, staring off at nothing in particular. "And I'm currently chasing down a different lead, which is frankly more important. So I need you." He looks over at John, cold blue steel in his eyes. "You owe me one."

John does. That doesn't mean he has to like it. "So that's one reason it can't be you. What's the second?"

"It took me six months to find a way *off* that planet. I'm not turning right around and going back now, just because I've got some fresh intel."

Six months. That sounds like it's significant, somehow. John considers the current date, subtracts half a year and change, refreshes his memory of old Earth history - "Oh, for fuck's sake. *First Contact*. Is that what all this is about? Couldn't you just watch a history vid?"

Jack clenches his fists, but his voice remains even, nearly expressionless. "We all know First Contact is a fucking joke. Aliens have been visiting Earth since the time of the dinosaurs. And various organizations within various governments have been aware of extraterrestrial interference since at least the mid-nineteenth century, if not earlier."

"That's not the point. First Contact was-"

"Horrible," Jack says flatly.

"Well, sure, but you knew *that* going in." John pauses, gives Jack a hard look. "You did, didn't you?"

Jack shrugs, looking away.

"Oh, you stupid bloody idiot," John nearly shouts. "You've only been stuck in linear time on Earth at the turn of the twenty-sodding-first century, and you forgot to set your alarm for *volcano day*?"

Jack's mouth twists into a grim line. "I knew the twenty-first century was when it happened, but-"

"Slept through that course in the Academy?" John asks caustically. "Jesus, you didn't *actually* fuck your way into the uniform, did you? How could you just forget-" It clicks. "Oh, for the love of - the Agency memory wipe. You lost peripherals, too, didn't you?"

There's no response, but Jack's grip on the edge of the bar is all the answer John needs.

John starts going through a mental inventory of hardware. If he's hitting up Earth in the months immediately following First Contact, he's going to need to be well armed. Probably there should be grenades. Possibly body armor. "You're going after the 456, aren't you? You know, that species was never properly identified - or if they were, it's been well hushed up. They're smugglers, scavengers - buying and selling through third parties, never staying still long enough to get caught. My sort of lowlife, really."

"You haven't met them," Jack says bleakly. "Anyway, the Shadow Proclamation already has a warrant out on them for black market dealings. They just don't know *how* black. If I can get a hold of the live virus, I might be able to narrow down who the 456 might be, or at least trace the people who sold it to them."

"You never could resist a hopeless cause," John sighs. He fondles the blaster in his coat pocket longingly. "But usually you drag your little band of misfits along for the ride. Tell me, what does Team Bushfire think of this little adventure?"

Jack stiffens. "I have nothing to do with Torchwood anymore."

"Finally got bored with Eye Candy, did you?"

Jack's eyes flash, and it's a bit of *deja-vu*; the last time John saw *that* look, he was very nearly shoved out an airlock. Would have been, actually, except the manual gauge had been fried along with the rest of the electrical circuits on that particular craft, which, come to think of it, had been the reason Jack had wanted to kill him in the first place... "*lanto*," Jack snaps, voice cracking in the air like a whip, like a gunshot. "His name was *lanto*."

Time Agents learn to be very, very precise with verb tenses. John catches it immediately. "Was?"

Jack just looks at him. It's enough.

"Ah," John says. "So this *is* personal."

Jack stands, pushing his stool aside negligently. "Like I said, a thousand credits now, a thousand after. Send me the account number you want them in."

"Four thousand."

"I'm sorry?"

"Four thousand credits total," John elaborates. "Half now, half after. Or no deal." It's a gamble, but the payoff will be well worth the fury in Jack's eyes. This job is personal for Jack. He'll pay whatever John damn well asks.

"Fine," Jack finally grits out. "I'll send over the money and the intel you'll need for the job. You'll get the rendezvous coordinates once I have them - the lead I'm following now might take a little time, call it three or four months. Not that it'll make a difference to *you*, of course. Any more questions? And they'd better be relevant."

John considers it for a moment. "What's the facility? I know you kept a file on me at Torchwood - will this lot have the same intel?"

"They're called UNIT, and no, they shouldn't. I never let them play with my toys when I could help it." Jack smirks mirthlessly. "Another reason it can't be me, actually. They've been trying to snatch me up since First Contact. You wouldn't believe the runaround I had to give them just to say goodbye to Gwen."

Ah, the lovely Gwen Cooper. So there's still one survivor, at least. John intends to give Cardiff a wide berth.

"Anything else? Good. I'm out of time. Talk to me when you've got something I can use." Jack turns and starts heading out of the bar, carelessly maneuvering around the resident aliens. Impatient bastard. He always did this. Running off half-cocked with insufficient intel, and if he'd managed to forget First sodding Contact lord only knows what other obvious clues he's been missing...

"Did it never occur to you to wonder what else you might have forgotten?" John calls after him. *Peripherals*. "Fuck. Jack - do you even remember your real name?"

Jack glances back over his shoulder. His grin is wide and empty. "Do you remember yours?"

Touché, John acknowledges, and lets him go.

III.

*And there's no light to see the voices by
There is no time to ask-he knows not what
(Wilfred Owen)*

The old axiom holds true even with Torchwood: *hurry up and wait*. Lois hugs her knees to her chest and counts the time down in heartbeats, in her carefully measured breaths. There's not much room to move around in the lorry trailer - most of the space that's not taken up by computer equipment has been converted into an impromptu medical bay, like an ambulance. So that when they get Ianto Jones out, Martha will be able to get straight to work curing him before regrouping with Yuan back in Cardiff.

At least, that's the plan.

Andy pats Lois's shoulder awkwardly, and she gives him a smile. He's sweet, always trying to put her at her ease on the rare occasions she joins them in the field. The gun is heavy in its holster at her hip. She hates carrying it, but what choice does she have? They need everyone they have on this mission, and she can hardly go into a potentially hostile situation unarmed.

Mickey paces across the limited space. At every circuit, he pauses to check his computer monitors, though Lois has no idea what he might be looking for. Martha will call them over the comms when Yuan gives her the go signal. And then Rhys will drive the lorry up into the UNIT facility, and off they'll go.

Martha and Gwen are currently crammed into the cab along with Rhys. Martha because she's the official face of UNIT, the one who can get them in, and Gwen because - well, because Rhys doesn't trust her not to go running off into the facility with the rest of them otherwise. She'd put up a hell of a fight last week when she was outvoted in that regard - *The hell I'm not going! This is Ianto we're saving, my best friend in the world, I am not sitting at home in Cardiff and just waiting-*

You're big as houses, Gwen, Andy pointed out. We're playing at being the response team to a medical emergency. Apart from the fact you can't run faster than a waddle, who's going to buy a pregnant woman in a biohazard containment zone?

That was Gwen told, at least temporarily.

The comm crackles to life. "*Time to roll,*" Martha says in Lois's earpiece. The engine revs up, and they're on the move.

Lois takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, feeling every bump in the road beneath the lorry's wheels.

"Okay, people, suit up," Mickey instructs. He pulls a couple of hazmat suits out of a storage container. Andy and Lois obligingly start struggling into the bulky suits.

"This is ridiculous," Andy mutters. "I don't even know how to put this on properly."

Mickey rolls his eyes and helps him with the zip, then fastens the helmet securely into place. "It doesn't need to be perfect, or even functional," he reminds them. Lois clicks her helmet into place, and the rest of the world is muted, like being underwater. Mickey's voice now comes through her earpiece only. "*It's just to get us in the door.*"

The lorry rolls to a gradual stop, though Lois still braces herself against the trailer wall to keep from stumbling. The trio in the cab must have their comms off - she can't hear a thing. Her imagination supplies the UNIT guards approaching the lorry, the questions asked, Martha's responses. If all goes as planned, they should look like one of UNIT's emergency response teams, here to investigate the possible biohazard exposure and contamination that Dr. Yuan Zhang called in. She wonders how he managed to stage that little drama. She probably wouldn't understand the details even if he explained it.

She starts to sweat in the heavy, unventilated suit.

After what feels like an age, the vehicle lurches back into motion. "*We're good to go,*" Martha says. "*Pulling right up to the front door.*"

And then the lorry stops, and the door opens, and they're off, grabbing their gear in large black bags as they go.

Lois doesn't do field missions. At worst, she might be called out to help the rest of the team with clean-up, or to assist in containing a site. But though she's heard plenty of stories about field ops from Gwen, Torchwood doesn't really do this sort of thing anymore. They've been too busy rebuilding, with occasional forays out for Weevils or when the Rift is acting up. Whenever something bigger or more complex comes across Gwen's desk, she just presses her lips into a thin line and tells Lois to bump it over to UNIT.

And now they're taking covert action *against* UNIT. It's a funny old world. Also, scary.

The facility is a sort of biomedical compound, an odd hybrid of military base and science laboratory. The perimeter is heavily guarded, but the facility itself is oddly undermanned. That's partly due to their timing - 0200 hours, the skeleton shift. The bare handful of scientific personnel on staff at this hour have already been evacuated due to Yuan's simulated emergency, and the perimeter guards - all lacking in any medical training - have a healthy fear of what's being cooked up in the labs and are keeping their distance. Lois can see them form a loose arc between the compound gates and their lorry, but well back.

"*They seemed pretty relieved to have us take over,*" Gwen remarks, amused, as she makes her way out of the cab toward the hold, where the impromptu computer control center has been set up amidst the medical equipment. Her passage is shielded from the soldiers by the lorry itself.

"It's a biosafety level 3 zone. That means you're playing with some scary stuff," Martha explains. She leads the way into the facility, already wearing her own hazmat gear. A swipe of her UNIT ID card opens the doors to them. "Not quite Ebola scary, but only one step down from that. Possible aerosolized contamination - yeah, if I didn't know it was simulated, I'd be staying out of our way right now. Yuan's got them running scared."

"He's clever," Gwen says. "I like him."

"Trying to steal my staff, Gwen?"

"He's not yours, Martha. Good luck, everyone. Keep me posted."

Lois twists around in the bulky suit for one last glance at the lorry, painted black with UNIT insignia. Rhys is shadowed by the night and the darkness in the cab; Gwen's face is pale as she climbs into the trailer. She gives them a tight smile and wave.

"We'll bring him back to you," Martha says. "I promise. All right, guys, here we go."

Once inside, the double doors close behind them with the faint hiss that indicates an air-controlled environment. The corridors are dark, lit only with red emergency lights. Martha turns to face them. "Mr. Smith?"

"On it, Dr. Jones." If any of the guards had *actually* been paying attention to the supposed hazmat response team, they might have noticed that Mickey wasn't fully suited up - he's wearing normal black workman's gloves, not the ones that go with the suit. Now he yanks them off and pulls what looks like a large-ish PDA out of his bag. It's actually linked up to the computer equipment Gwen's now monitoring in the back of the lorry. He types out a quick sequence, then grins. "Internal CCTV disabled. Should look like a technical glitch - like a wire shorted somewhere. A very important wire."

"Good. Let's get out of these things."

Martha's the quickest to strip out of the suit, with the ease of long practice. Lois wonders what sort of work she's done with UNIT. She's a doctor, like Yuan, but it didn't sound like she practices much medicine. For some reason, it had never occurred to Lois to ask.

"Communications?" Martha asks Mickey, the next free, while Andy and Lois are still getting out of the suits.

Mickey shrugs. "As secure as I can make them. Ours, anyway. Mobiles, less so. There's not much I can do about that. What's the chance UNIT will be listening in?"

"We should have a brief window of time before they realize something's amiss. After that, all bets are off. Sooner or later one of those soldiers will check in with another base and figure out that I'm really not supposed to be here." Martha tucks an errand strand of hair behind her ear. "UNIT's a bureaucracy at heart; information bounces between the various chains of command for a while before it lands anywhere useful. We should have thirty minutes or so, an hour if we're lucky."

"How will we know if we're not lucky?" Andy asks.

"Did you not notice all the gear I set up in the truck?" Mickey replies, somewhat incredulously. "Or did you think Gwen would just sit around twiddling her thumbs all night? I've got it rigged up for her to monitor all of UNIT's communications. She'll let us know when they're onto us."

"Can you *do* that?" Lois asks, a little timidly. "Or - if you can listen to them, why can't they listen to us?"

"Like I said, they *can* listen to us if we use our mobiles. But our comm system was built using the Torchwood mainframe - which isn't exactly Earth technology. Unless UNIT has a chunk of the mainframe to study - or their own alien supercomputer - we're secure."

Martha taps her wristwatch. "Time, people. The longer we gab, the more likely we'll be caught. Lois, you've got the floor plans." Lois pulls them out of her bag, along with a torch. "Good. Yuan marked the room where they're keeping the victims. You and Andy will go find Ianto. Once you've located him, check in over the comm. I trust you two to assess the situation and determine if you need additional resources or assistance evacuating him. If so, tell us what you need, and we'll get it to you."

"But - aren't we all going in together?" Lois asks.

Martha and Mickey exchange glances, and Lois's stomach sinks a little. This wasn't the plan. "There's more evidence in here than the Thames House victims," Martha says quietly. "I've been trying to get into this place for months, even when I only had rumors to go by. I'm not letting this pass."

"Gwen said-"

"You wanted a priority, Davidson," Martha reminds him. "Ianto's still the priority. Go get him. We'll provide backup if you call. But I'm the only one who has enough of a scientific background to understand what else here is valuable to our cause, and I need Mickey's tech savvy to get me around."

"Yuan left the cold storage unlocked," Mickey adds. "You shouldn't need me to get in there. Mind, if something goes wrong and you do, just holler."

Andy folds his arms across his chest mulishly. "I can also call Gwen."

"Yeah, you can," Mickey says affably. "And then she'll haul arse out to yell at us, and possibly blow our cover, and we're still wasting time arguing about this, so can we go do the thing now?"

She might not like it, but he's right, and every minute they spend bickering is another minute closer to getting nabbed. Lois tugs at Andy's elbow. "Come on," she urges, brandishing the floor plan. "It should be down this way."

"You can ream me out all you like once we're back in Cardiff," Martha calls after them. "I'm sorry, I really am, but I have to do this."

"Yeah," Lois says. "So do we."

She leads Andy to the left, and then the second right, and doesn't bother looking back.

For a minute or so, there's no sound but the faint squeak of their shoes along the red-lit corridor. It's eerie - Lois never liked hospitals at the best of times, but this is like the most sterile, dehumanizing bits of a hospital combined with the science-fictiony bits of every faceless laboratory where they torture animal and human test subjects alike...

And all right, maybe Lois's imagination is running away with her a bit but she *saw* the 456, the glass tank filled with death, and they're trying to remake their poison in here and it's just *not okay*. Her skin crawls just being in here. The sooner they find Ianto, the sooner they can get the hell out.

"They've been conspiring against us, they have," Andy grouses. "All this bloody time, with their little inside jokes-

"Gwen said Martha and Jack used to be like that too, sort of." Lois keeps her eyes on the floor plan. It's not a particularly large complex, fortunately. They're nearly at the cold storage area, or at least where it *should* be. "She said Jack called it 'the end of the world club.' I guess Mickey was there too. Here, it should be the third door to the left. And they weren't conspiring *against* us so much as against UNIT, so..."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend? Doesn't mean I have to *like* them. I'm going to give that woman a real earful when we get back outside - oh, the door's open. Just like that. Huh."

Lois doesn't quite roll her eyes. "They *said* Yuan would leave it unlocked." She pushes the door open and steps inside. She notices the change in air temperature at once - well, cold storage, it stands to reason. The room is vast, almost cavernous - at least, what she can see of it. "Lights?"

"Right by the door, usually." Andy flicks them on. "I wasn't a copper for nothing. Oh, hey, would you look at that?"

Lois is already looking, feeling faintly ill. Rows upon rows of gurneys, forms covered in dark cloth, stretching out before them. Thirty-nine doesn't sound like a big number until you see thirty-nine bodies in a cold room under harsh fluorescents. Then it becomes somehow monstrous.

Andy is already examining the nearest metal bed. "No identification," he says. He sounds remarkably steady, but then again, he *had* been a policeman, once. Lois supposes he dealt with plenty of bodies even before Torchwood snatched him up. He looks up at her now with something akin to sympathy in his eyes. "We'll have to look at their faces," he tells her gently. "To see which one's Ianto."

"All right," Lois says, swallowing. *They're not dead*, she reminds herself. *They're just not quite alive, either*. "You start with that row. I'll take this one. It shouldn't take terribly long to find him - there's only thirty-nine of them, after all."

Thirty-nine is a very big number when you have to look at every individual, wax-like face of the not-quite-dead.

"Shouldn't they at least be rigged up to life support, or something?" Lois asks, just to fill the air. The first body she checks is a woman, with stiff blonde hair and eyelashes so pale they're nearly white. "If they're actually alive?"

"Yeah, doesn't much look like the sets on *Casualty*, does it? You'll have to ask Yuan about it next time we see him."

Andy's going faster than she is, lifting the cloths covering the bodies economically and giving the faces only cursory glances before moving on. It seems somehow - disrespectful. "Are you even looking at them?" she demands.

He pauses, glancing across the gurneys at her. "I'd rather not, honestly. Besides, I'll know him when I see him." He frowns. "But you - hey, did you ever even meet Ianto?"

"No," Lois admits. "Not properly. But you knew him, right?"

"Yeah, of course, ran across him all the time on their spooky-dos. I was still on the force then, mind." Andy looks back down at the cloth-covered body in front of him, mouth twisting. "But I guess - no, I didn't really *know* him. Not properly. But I had to help deliver the news to his sister, and that was - well. So here I am."

"Here we are," Lois agrees. She steps down the row to pull the cloth off another one of the victims.

Her breath catches.

She'd never met him in person, although she'd seen photos, and privately, she hadn't been entirely sure that she would even recognize him. But there's no doubt in her mind. "Here," she calls to Andy. "I think-"

Andy dashes around, nearly tripping on the corner of another gurney, skidding to a halt beside her.

"That'll be the one," he says. There's something like wonder in his voice, like he hadn't actually believed they'd find him. "Hiya, Ianto. Let's get you out of here, yeah?"

Night had already fallen by the time Jack made it back to the Hub. He chose the entrance through the tourist office - the Earth's return from the Medusa Cascade had been pretty rough, and he wanted to assess the structural damage within the Hub before chancing the invisible lift.

The cog door was stuck halfway open - okay, he'd have to look into that. Probably some gear damaged somewhere. It also meant the proximity alarms failed to sound as he came in, which downplayed his dramatic entrance somewhat. Well, next time. His first impression was that the Hub didn't look nearly as bad as he'd expected. Then he noticed the careful piles of debris and cleaning equipment stacked

neatly in corners. Between the TARDIS's characteristic aim, the hour or so he'd spent catching up properly with Martha and Mickey, and travel time back to Cardiff from London, he'd estimate that about twenty-four hours had elapsed here since the Earth had returned to its proper orbit. Clearly, Gwen and Ianto hadn't wasted a minute.

"Jack!"

Gwen barreled across the atrium, throwing herself at him. He laughed and swung her around. She felt warm and solid in his arms, vibrantly alive.

When he released her, she swatted his shoulder, hard. "What took you so long?" she demanded.

"Oh, you know, saving the world, having the adventure of a lifetime, playing matchmaker - the usual. Besides, the TARDIS dropped me off in London." He pulled back to look her over more carefully. She was a bit of a mess, as might be expected when one spends a day cleaning and repairing one's secret base, and she looked pretty tired, but completely unharmed. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you all in one piece."

"Well, what were you expecting?" She pushed her hair back out of her face and gave him a brilliant smile. "It'll take more than a couple of Daleks to slow *us* down."

A shudder ran down Jack's spine. He really didn't want to think about how close it had been for them. If it hadn't been for Toshiko's time lock - well. "I want all the details," he said, more seriously now. "We'll have to swap stories later. But for now, you look like you could use a break - it's after nine. Go home. Where's Ianto?"

Gwen sighed. "I actually had to pull rank and *order* him to take a nap. After the - well, after it was all over, yesterday evening, I went home to check on Rhys and things. And get some sleep, honestly. Ianto stayed here. When I came back this morning, half of this-" She waved her hand, indicating the general state of the cleanup. "-was already taken care of. He'd been up all night fixing the place." Her voice was fondly exasperated. "Didn't slow down until a couple of hours ago. I couldn't convince him to go back to his flat, so."

She pointed toward the workstations. Ianto was curled up on the couch along the wall, dead to the world. Someone - Jack suspected Gwen - had dug up a blanket from somewhere; it had wound up twisted awkwardly across him in his sleep.

"He was awake for something like forty hours straight," Gwen said softly. "And I still practically had to handcuff him to the sofa. We need to have a talk about his work ethic."

Something twisted gently in Jack's chest, a soft ache. "It makes him feel like he's still in control," he told her, lowering his voice to match hers. "Keeping busy when there's nothing else he can do. If he stops moving, it means he has to think about it."

Gwen just looked at him, too compassionately. "He knew you were coming back this time, Jack. We both did."

"There's knowing and then there's *knowing*." Jack swallowed past the small knot in his throat and headed over to the couch and Ianto. He spared her one quick smile over his shoulder. "Go home to Rhys, Gwen. I'll still be here in the morning."

"Goodnight, Jack," she called quietly after him. He hardly even heard her collect her things and head out as he shrugged out of his coat, leaving it hanging over the nearest railing.

He crouched down at the head of the sofa. For a moment, he just studied Ianto. In sleep, he looked so much younger, the lines in his face smoothing out, a small frown playing across his lips. So serious, his Ianto, even sound asleep. He'd stripped down to his shirtsleeves and trousers, shoes lined up neatly at the foot of the couch, suit jacket hanging over the back of the chair at Tosh's former workstation. He was too tall for the couch, long legs bent awkwardly to fit. Jack knew he generally slept all stretched out, hogging the sheets, not all curled up on his side like this. He'd wake up with a hell of a crick in his back if Jack left him here all night, and then Jack would have to listen to him bitch about it tomorrow morning, and he couldn't have that, now, could he?

Jack reached out to cup Ianto's face, running his thumb lightly across his cheek. "Hey," he said softly. "Ianto. Hey."

Ianto startled awake, flinching, eyes wide. Jack dropped his hand back down to his side, and straightened as Ianto sat up groggily. "Jack," Ianto said. His voice was low and rough from sleep - always Jack's favorite. His hair was mussed and shirt half unbuttoned, and Jack wanted nothing more than to drag him close and rumple him even further.

"Told you I'd come back," Jack said instead, plastering on a grin.

"Never doubted you for a second."

Jack could feel his smile shift into something more muted, more genuine. He held out a hand. "Come on. You really don't want to sleep here all night. Let's get you somewhere more comfortable."

Ianto ran a hand through his hair, which only made it worse. "I only meant to close my eyes for a couple of minutes..."

"You're allowed a full night's sleep occasionally," Jack said gently. "It's not the end of the world. We already averted *that*, remember?" He wagged his fingers. "Come on."

With a sigh, Ianto took the extended hand, and Jack helped pull him to his feet. He stumbled over the blanket still twisted around his legs, slow and clumsy with exhaustion. Jack slipped an arm around his waist to steady him, then couldn't think of a pressing reason to let go.

It had been a very long couple of days.

"You came back," Ianto murmured, still sounding more than half asleep. The wonder in his voice made Jack's hand tighten convulsively on his, pulling him closer.

"I came back, and you were still here," Jack agreed. "So I'm going to call this one a win."

Ianto chuckled, a low rumble that vibrated against Jack's chest. He tilted his head closer, eyes still on Jack's. "Told you we'd be fine."

Jack smiled against Ianto's lips. "Never doubted you for a second."

Gwen stares at the array of computer monitors and tries very hard not to go mad. The programs basically run themselves - a very nifty bit of creative programming on Mickey's part, searching through all UK-based UNIT communications for assorted keywords and capturing any relevant matches. She's not sure what parameters he set before a line of chatter would be classified as dangerous and broadcast to the operator - her - but she trusts him. She has to. In the meantime, she watches meaningless data stream across the monitors.

There's a faint burst of static in her earpiece - someone's opened their comm. "*We've got him*," Lois says, voice faintly breathless. "*Working out the best way to move him*."

"*We can just wheel the gurney out, that's what it's for*."

"*Yeah, Andy, because that won't look suspicious to the soldiers out there or anything*."

Gwen allows herself a moment of amusement at Lois's uncharacteristic sarcasm - clearly, Torchwood has trained her well. But far more importantly - "Ianto's all right? He's alive?"

The silence stretches out a beat too long for her comfort. "*If we take that doctor's word for it, sure*," Andy finally says. "*These people, the victims, they just look-*"

"*He'll be fine*," Lois interrupts firmly. "*Yuan says they're alive, then they're alive. Let's just get him out of here*."

It doesn't sound particularly promising, but Gwen decides not to worry about that right now. They don't have time. "Martha, how should we proceed on moving him?"

There's no response.

"Martha?" Gwen repeats. "Lois, why isn't-"

"*She's not with us*," Lois says. "*She and Mickey had - another matter to attend to*."

How diplomatic. In Jack's Torchwood, that probably would've meant they were off shagging. Simpler days, Gwen thinks, conveniently ignoring the fact that they'd been nothing of the sort. "I'm sorry," she

says pleasantly. Her sidearm is in its holster. She checks to be sure. "Would you care to elaborate? Has something gone wrong?"

"They're looking for more rope to hang UNIT with," Andy says. "Martha sent us after Ianto and then they hared off in the opposite direction. Haven't heard from them since."

They'd never established a clear chain of command, Gwen realizes with a sinking sensation. Martha needed Torchwood to get in, and Torchwood needed Martha and Yuan's intel. For all they'd spoken of one objective, they're still essentially on two separate missions, and no one is officially running the operation. Gwen can order Martha back, but she has no authority to back it up, and Martha knows it.

Fuck.

But Mickey is supposed to be Torchwood - he's basically her second-in-command at this point - and she *can* order him about. "Mickey, report," she demands.

Nothing.

"Mickey Smith, *report.*"

"This isn't right," Lois says, almost too quietly to be heard. "They said they'd come when we called them. They should've checked in by now."

Gwen clammers to her feet, hand resting lightly on her holstered gun. "Something's gone wrong. Lois, Andy, I don't care what it looks like to the guards, just get Ianto out of there. If you see any sign of-

There's another soft burst of static in her earpiece, and then Martha's voice at last, barely more than a whisper. *"There's someone else here."*

Gwen's pulse pounds in her ears. She forces herself to breathe evenly. "Where are you?"

"One of the labs. Got separated from Mickey when we heard the noise." Martha takes a deep breath. *"There was someone rummaging through the lab. Had to keep quiet. Sorry about that."*

"Did you get a look at them?"

"Just a quick one. I didn't recognize him. Definitely not UNIT."

"He's on the move, heading toward the main entrance." Mickey cuts in tersely. *"We can bring him in, if we're careful. Gwen, orders?"*

Oh, so *now* she's in charge. Great.

That's when all the computer monitors start flashing orange.

"UNIT's nearly on to us. We're almost out of time." She doesn't even think, just strides across the hold to get outside. Her gun is cool and oddly comforting in her hands. Rhys is going to give her hell for this later, but her team is scattered and there's a potential hostile between them and the exit. The body of the lorry and the dark of the night combine to shield her from the distant UNIT guards. They haven't been alerted by the higher-ups yet, but that won't hold for much longer.

"*What about Ianto?*" Andy asks.

"Get him to the exit. Martha, Mickey, regroup with Lois and Andy. If you encounter the intruder, use your own judgment. I don't want anyone getting hurt, but better him than us. I'll meet you at the front door."

Rhys has been silent throughout - he's smart enough to know how much he *doesn't* know about Torchwood ops. But he's on the same comm channel, and he was bound to open his yap eventually.

"*What? Gwen, you're supposed to stay in the vehicle!*"

"The hell I am," she mutters, and shoves open the front door of the facility.

It's nearly as dark inside as out, the red emergency lights giving the corridor an ominous, unearthly feel. The discarded hazmat suits are piled along the wall - they seem far less necessary now than in planning the operation, but better safe than sorry, and they hadn't known the guards would keep their distance quite so conveniently. Gwen makes her way the short distance down the empty corridor, and turns-

It happens so quickly she doesn't have time to process. Her arm is wrenched behind her back, gun knocked out of her hand before she even has a chance to cry out. She tries to twist out of her assailant's grip, but she hasn't tried hand-to-hand combat pregnant before, and her body feels too slow and unwieldy to fight back effectively. Any attempt she might yet consider is abruptly cut off at the press of cold metal against the side of her stomach.

"Hello, darling," John Hart murmurs against her ear. "Make any noise and I'll put a bullet right through that lovely belly."

"Oh, look what the cat dragged in," Ianto said, frowning at his screen. He had that very particular note of disgust in his tone that made all the hair on the back of Jack's neck stand up.

Here came trouble, apparently.

Jack did his level best not to dash around the atrium to join him. He walked briskly instead. "What is it?"

Ianto tapped the computer monitor. He'd brought up the CCTV footage from the camera posted right above the entrance to the tourist office. John Hart was leaning nonchalantly against the chain barrier

to the seafront. Every now and then he glanced straight up into the camera, raising his eyebrows as if to say, *well, let's get on with it, then.*

"I hung the 'closed' sign on the shop for a *reason*," Ianto muttered.

The actual reason being that Ianto hadn't had anything like the time to mind the little tourist shack in the month since they'd lost Tosh and Owen. None of them had. They'd probably never bother opening it again. Jack ignored the pang of renewed grief for now - he had a much more visceral reminder of that day to handle at the moment.

It had only been a matter of time. He'd expected John's return more than a week ago, to be honest. A full month stuck in one time, on one planet? Maybe John really had learned some degree of patience.

"I'll deal with him," Jack said. "Stay here."

Ianto pressed his lips together in disapproval. "I'm not letting you-"

"Yes, you are. And you're going to shut down that CCTV footage for the next ten minutes, and no one's going to breathe a word of this to Gwen." Jack leveled him with a hard glare. "Are we?"

Ianto remained silent, but the mutiny in his eyes spoke volumes.

"Please," Jack said. "This one time, *please*, just let me handle this. He's not setting foot back in the Hub again, I promise. Ten minutes. I just need ten minutes, and then we'll never see him again."

They both knew that Jack was the boss, and he didn't need to ask permission. *This is all I can offer you right now*, Jack thought at him, as loudly as he could. *Please take it.*

Ianto gave him a curt nod and looked away. "I'll take care of the CCTV."

"Thank you." Jack stepped in and pressed his fingertips to Ianto's chin, making him turn back to meet Jack's eyes. There was an undercurrent of anger there, but more for John than Jack, and tempered with concern. Jack nodded and kissed him, swift and hard, then pulled away.

"Ten minutes," Ianto reminded him. "Then I'm coming up there after you. Or sending Gwen."

Jack nodded again. He made a quick detour to his office, to grab the item out of his safe, then strode upstairs.

The little tourist shop was dark and sad. Jack pushed through it blindly.

Outside, the air was fresh and cool, despite being the middle of June. Cardiff weather seemed to be firmly resisting any notion of summer this year. That suited Jack's mood just fine.

"I know what you're here for," Jack said.

John stretched, unimpressed. "Took you long enough. I thought I'd be sitting out here all bloody day."

"Believe me, I'd have let you - if I didn't worry you'd set something on fire to relieve your boredom. The city's barely managing to rebuild itself from your *last* visit."

"Which wasn't my idea, let me remind you," John pointed out. A faint smile played at the corners of his lips. "Not that the exploding bits weren't *great* fun."

Jack folded his arms across his chest. "A whole month, huh? I didn't think you'd last a week."

"Neither did I, but then I found Vegas, and, well, it gets kind of hazy from there." John rubbed his wrist, wincing. The scar tissue there probably itched like hell as it healed. Jack somehow found it difficult to muster any sympathy.

A pair of gulls swooped and cackled overhead. Jack kept his eyes on John in stony silence.

"A whole month, and you never used it yourself," John said. He kept his voice low, but his quiet had an edge. "I don't think I'll ever understand you."

"Well, I figured you'd come looking, once you failed to fix yours." Jack sighed. "And the thought of leaving *you* stranded on this planet frankly makes my blood run cold."

John scowled. "I *can* fix mine. It's just this stupid primitive fucking century. Can't scrounge up a halfway decent geosynchronizing coil for love or money."

"So go somewhere you can." Jack fished the vortex manipulator out of his pocket and tossed it over. Surprised, John caught it on reflex. "And if you ever set foot in Cardiff again, I will shoot you on sight."

"You didn't disable it, or something?" John asked suspiciously. He fingered the wriststrap, flipping the panel open to examine it more closely. "None of your little pranks?"

"Haven't touched a thing. If there's anything wrong with it, it happened before he came here."

John frowned thoughtfully at it, then back up at Jack. "You're just *giving* me Gray's vortex manipulator. Just like that."

Jack exhaled, shoulders slumping. "I don't want anything of his anymore. I forgave him. I forgive you. We're all done here. Now go away before Ianto gets jealous and shoots you anyway."

John just shook his head. But he wrapped the vortex manipulator around his uninjured wrist without any further questions. After a few long moments, he stepped closer to Jack, looking up into Jack's face. "We could-"

"Go," Jack told him coldly. "Just go."

He turned away, leaning out over the posts to look out over the water. The sun was making a noble effort to peek out from behind the clouds, but it wouldn't last. The air felt like rain.

Energy crackled behind him, blue-white light flaring in the corners of his eyes. He didn't flinch.

Eventually, Jack heard the tourist office door creak open behind him. He glanced down at his watch. Ten minutes, to the second. Of course.

Gwen peered out from the doorway, brow furrowed. "Jack? Ianto said I might find you up here. What's going on?"

"Nothing," Jack said. He closed his eyes, breathing in the salt air off the bay, making his mind a perfect blank. "Just taking out the trash."

"No, but really, mate, that's my wife and child you're threatening, so I'd step back, yeah?"

The part of Rhys's brain capable of rational thought is distantly impressed by the cold steel in his voice. Also by the cold steel in his hand - or whatever the gun's made out of, anyway, it's not like he's ever had cause to learn *that* bit of trivia for pub quiz. It wasn't included in the very reluctant firearms training Gwen had finally conceded to give him. His marksmanship may be shite, but it's not like you need good aim at this range. At any rate, the gun pressed to the back of this fucker's head apparently trumps the one at Gwen's stomach. The Fuckler in question slowly drops his hand to his side.

"Seriously, though, drop the fucking weapon," Mickey says. Rhys spares a glance over The Fuckler's head to see that the rest of the team is just down the corridor, guns out and trained at The Fuckler with far greater expertise than Rhys possesses. They look surprisingly formidable. Even little Lois looks like she'd just as gladly put a bullet through The Fuckler's forehead as breathe.

The Fuckler sighs, put upon. "Now, really, kids, is this entirely necessary?"

"From where we're standing, yeah, it is," Martha snaps. "Seeing as you're the asshole threatening a pregnant lady."

"Gwen and I are old friends - aren't we, darling? What's a few bullets between friends?"

"Drop the weapon and let me go, Hart," Gwen grits out. "We *way* outnumber you right now."

The Fuckler - Hart? Where has Rhys heard that name before? - doesn't. His tone darkens. "I could kill her before any of you have a chance at me."

Andy snorts. "Yeah, and then you'll be just as dead, so why are we still talking about this? Actually, fair point - why *are* we talking about this when we could be shooting?"

"Don't shoot him," Gwen says quickly. "Well, unless he makes a move to shoot *me*, in which case fire away. But he never turns up without trouble following close on his heels, and I'd rather know what's coming. John, if you don't get your hands off me in ten seconds I'll cut them off myself, and then you'll never get laid again."

Hart actually has the nerve to *laugh*, which makes Rhys's fingers twitch on the trigger. "Feisty. Looks like getting knocked up hasn't slowed you down much, dollface. All right, *team*, you win this round."

He drops the gun and releases Gwen in one fluid movement, stepping aside. It takes all of two seconds for Rhys to have him shoved bodily up against a wall, muzzle of his gun right in The Fucker's face.

"Hey, hey, big boy, that's not kosher!"

"Leave him be, Rhys," Gwen sighs. "The safety's still on, by the way. Andy, please check this man for additional weapons. Thoroughly."

"Oh, goody, a frisking," Hart purrs, entirely unconcerned, as Rhys steps back and lets Andy take over. "Do be gentle with me, officer."

Rhys turns away in disgust, and realizes that he's shaking. He turns to Gwen. She takes one look at his face and then folds him into her arms.

"I'm fine, love," she murmurs. "We're all fine." She pulls back to look at him again. "Now why the hell did you abandon the lorry, you daft sod?"

Rhys puts his hands to his hips, stepping back. "I might ask you the same! And in your condition!"

"I'm not going to - oh, fuck it all, we haven't the time for this. Mickey! Secure the vehicle, see if you can delay UNIT at all." Mickey nods and runs out. "Lois, where's-"

"Here," Lois says. She's wheeling a gurney down the corridor toward them. Covered in a dark sheet is the unmistakable shape of a human body.

Gwen shoots one hopeful, agonized glance back at Rhys, then meets Lois and her cargo halfway.

"This is getting kinky," Hart remarks with interest, now efficiently disarmed and handcuffed. And why on earth had Andy bothered bringing *those* along? Well, once a copper, always a copper, Rhys supposes. "Who's the stiff?"

Gwen pulls back the sheet with a slow, gentle hand.

Hart's eyes widen comically. "Oh, you *didn't*."

His remark goes universally ignored. Gwen reaches down, as though she wants to brush back Ianto's hair, but stops herself. "He looks-"

"He's not," Martha interrupts firmly. She's got her med kit open, but she steps over to stand beside Gwen, putting a hand on her shoulder. "He hasn't even been put into cryogenic stasis. He's just...stuck."

"Guys?" Mickey's voice comes through their earpieces, and everyone immediately stills. It would almost be funny, except for how it really isn't. "*We're gonna have company, real soon. Get back to the vehicle ASAP.*"

Gwen rolls her shoulders back and covers Ianto's face with the sheet again. "Right," she says briskly. "Out of time. Our cover's blown, it doesn't matter what this looks like anymore. We'll have to roll him out like this."

"Hey, if the former Ianto Jones here gets the VIP treatment--"

"Martha, shut him up," Gwen says calmly.

Apparently Martha anticipated this, because she's got the hypodermic already out of her kit and prepped. She jabs Hart efficiently in the side of his neck before he even has the chance to protest. He's out like a light, slumping into Andy's arms.

"Andy, if you and Rhys could get him in the boot? There's a love. We girls can manage Ianto."

"Why are we bothering with this fuckhead, again?" Andy demands, as he and Rhys support Hart's unconscious form between them. "Remember the time he threatened to shoot you? Because that was like two minutes ago."

Gwen's lips twitch into something like a smirk. "Threats are just his primary means of communication - well, one of the two, anyway. It's nothing personal." Her eyes harden. "Besides, I don't believe in coincidences. He's here for a reason. I want to know what it is. Let's get moving, people."

They get moving. The hazmat suits lie abandoned on the corridor floor, like so much rubbish. Ianto hadn't had one to save him the first time. Didn't look like they were much use now, either.

Mickey's waiting for them outside. He doesn't comment on their additional load, just helps Rhys and Andy swing Hart up into the trailer, dumping him unceremoniously into a corner. They take a bit more care with the gurney.

At the perimeter of the compound, Rhys can see the soldiers regrouping at the gates.

"I scrambled their comms," Mickey says. "The reports they're getting should be pretty damn incomprehensible at the moment, but they know something's up, and that it probably has something to do with us."

"Let's see if we can beat them out, then," Gwen replies. "Martha, you're up front with Rhys. I hope your UNIT cred is still good enough to get us through. Everyone else in back. Andy, stay by Hart, and don't take your eyes off him for a second. He moves, he gets another jab."

They pile in the back; Rhys and Martha run around to the cab. She doesn't even give Rhys the chance to pull open the door for her before she's in.

He fumbles the key to the ignition. Martha notices his shaking hands and sighs. "It's hard for you, isn't it? When she goes haring off like that."

"That's Torchwood," Rhys says grimly. "I knew it when I married her. You're married too, aren't you, Gwen said? What does your bloke think of all this?"

Martha looks out the windshield, smiling wryly to herself. "Oh, he manages. He's right in the thick of things himself."

Sounds like quite the man. Rhys doesn't think Gwen ever mentioned his name. He revs up the engine - successfully, this time - and they start rolling toward the gate. "Did you find what you were looking for in there, when *you* hared off?"

There's silence for a moment. "No," Martha finally admits, voice low. "There wasn't time."

The gate is still open, but one soldier runs out from the guardhouse, practically right into their path. Rhys hits the brakes. It's not like he was driving fast enough to scare the guy off, anyway. The guard runs up around to the driver's side and starts pounding on the door to the cab, brandishing his very large gun in what he probably thinks is a threatening matter.

"*What's going on?*" Gwen asks over the comm.

"Soldier stopped us," Rhys replies. This isn't a good sign at all. He thinks about Ianto, there in the back, pale as death and covered with a dark sheet. He thinks about Lois's wide, nervous eyes. And his wife and unborn child - well, that goes without saying. He'd fight for them if he could. He'd go out there right now and give this stupid knuckle-dragger what for, him and this whole stinking compound and their bloody bioweapons and fucking UNIT.

But what exactly is he supposed to do that'll do them any good?

"I'll handle it," Martha says quietly. "Rhys, when I give you the nod - drive. Just get the hell out of here."

Before Rhys can stop her, she's gone, swinging out of the cab and slamming the door shut behind her.

She walks up to the guard, hands open in front of her. "*Here, what's the problem?*" she asks, and it takes Rhys a moment to realize that he can hear her clearly - she's got her comm open.

"*What the hell is she doing?*" Mickey demands from the trailer. "*She's never gone out there-*"

"*Stay where you are,*" Gwen orders, voice tight. "*Don't you dare leave this truck, Mickey Smith. I will shoot you if I have to.*"

"*She will, too,*" Andy mutters. "*And I'll enjoy it.*"

Martha manages to walk the guard a few meters further away from the lorry, still speaking with him blithely. She sounds a bit like Jack used to do, fast-talking and charming.

"*I'm sure we can clear all this up if I could just speak with your commanding officer,*" Martha says, coming around the guard so that he has his back to the lorry. She glances over his shoulder, looking straight at Rhys, and nods.

He hits the gas.

"No! What the hell!" Mickey practically shouts, loudly enough to hurt through the earpiece.

The guard whirls around, but he's completely powerless to stop the lorry. The last Rhys sees of them, the guard has Martha's arms up behind her back, and she gives a little cry of pain they can all hear far too clearly.

"Mr. Smith," she gasps, and Rhys thinks of Mickey, currently pounding on the wall of the lorry and demanding that they turn back around. "I need you!"

That's the last they hear before her comm goes dead. Rhys grips the steering wheel too tightly and drives, just drives.

Jack checked them all into an extravagantly ritzy hotel to relive twelve hours away from themselves. It was a very thinly veiled, grandiose gesture of apology. They all knew that. No one called him on it, though, a kindness he accepted with wordless gratitude.

When he turned up at Ianto's room an hour later, Ianto just opened the door and let him back in. No questions, no demands, no hesitation. All that would come later, probably, but for now, Jack accepted the grace gladly given and mouthed his thanks against Ianto's warm skin.

The next morning, once they were reasonably sure they'd caught up with their own timeline, Jack gave them all the day off. "I can look after the Hub by myself for a day," he said. "Go home, relax, pretend to be normal people for a bit. I'll call you if anything dire comes up, but otherwise, see you tomorrow morning."

Owen was off like a shot; Gwen and Tosh exchanged a look, like they didn't trust him not to disappear all over again. He couldn't blame them.

"I just need a little time to reacquaint myself with the place," he told them gently. "I promise, I will see you tomorrow. Bright and early!"

He found Ianto waiting by the SUV, wearing a fresh suit. Jack had no idea when he'd managed to go home and change, then realized he must've kept a spare in the boot. Typical. Jack had *missed* that. "Back to the Hub, then?" Ianto asked patiently, breaking Jack out of his mild reverie.

"Right," Jack said. His brain kicked back in. "Uh, you do realize that I was giving *everyone* the day off, right? That includes you."

"And I'm choosing to spend my day off in the Hub. Do you know how many projects I'll be able to actually *finish* without the others around interrupting me every five minutes?" Ianto shrugged, a smile teasing the corners of his mouth. "I could hardly let the opportunity pass."

Jack hesitated.

"I'll stay out of your way if you want to be alone, Jack," Ianto added, more seriously.

Thing was, Jack didn't *want* Ianto to stay out of his way, not really. "All right," he said, hopping into the driver's seat and gesturing for Ianto to follow. "You can fill me in on the past - how long has it been for you guys, anyway?"

"A little over three months," Ianto said quietly. He fastened his seatbelt carefully, like one with too long experience of Jack's driving habits. Jack didn't know whether to laugh at that or apologize, again, so he just drove.

Back in the Hub, Jack stood in his office, taking the time to really look the place over. He'd been in here already, when they were dealing with John, but hadn't had the chance to properly reacquaint himself. "It's like no one's touched it at all," he said, half to himself.

Ianto, still hovering at the doorway, gave him an embarrassed shrug. "Apart from giving the place a good dusting every week or so, no one has. We left it be."

"Who wound up taking over?" Jack asked, genuinely curious. Owen was technically his second, but Gwen had seemed like the one in charge when he'd found them again.

"Gwen, mostly," Ianto confirmed. "She and Owen duked it out for a few days, but it was pretty clear no one was ever going to follow Owen. Once I saw she'd won Tosh over, that settled it."

"Torchwood by democracy," Jack said dryly. "A novel concept. How'd she do?"

Ianto took a moment to consider his reply. "Not bad," he finally judged. "She's got the guts for it, and no question but her heart's in the right place. Mostly she just lacks experience. And she's still a bit..." He trailed off.

"Soft?" Jack suggested. "Naïve?"

"Not the words I'd use," Ianto said, shaking his head thoughtfully. "I'm not sure I can quite put my finger on it. But she's not hard enough yet. Not for this job, not for the decisions you need to make."

Jack leaned back against his desk, crossing his arms across his chest. "Did you tell her about Flat Holm?"

"No," Ianto said at once. He met Jack's gaze evenly. "But yes, that's exactly what I meant."

Jack nodded. Food for thought. Ianto was very good at reading people. And that made him think of *why* Ianto had developed that skill, which reminded him of Torchwood One and unfinished business. Time to get back to work.

"Thanks," he told Ianto, meaning it. "We'll talk more later, okay? For now, I'd like to..." He waved his hand to vaguely indicate the office.

"Of course, sir," Ianto said, back to business as usual. "I'll be down in the Archives if you need me."

He slipped away. Jack waited until he was sure Ianto was gone, then pulled up his computer. It took him three tries to remember his login password, but he got in eventually, and started hacking his way into the Torchwood One archives.

Jack wasn't actually Torchwood's senior ranking official. He'd certainly served the longest, but Archie had taken over as head of Two long before Alex had bequeathed Three to Jack. So technically, Archie was the sitting Director of the Torchwood Institute. But that had never stopped Jack before. He pulled up the files from the Battle of Canary Wharf, and fiddled his way into the list of the dead and missing.

There were so many names. Yvonne Hartman, who'd been a self-righteous prig but had gone down with honor in the end. Danny Malloy, her executive assistant - he'd always been a pleasant voice over the phone, and an even pleasanter body when Jack made the trip down to London. Rajesh Singh, a clever scientist who'd done a brief stint with Cardiff in the early '90s. Martha's cousin Adeola Oshodi - Tish said they'd looked just alike as kids, and bickered constantly as a result.

Lisa Hallett, who'd been forced to die over and over again and had never deserved it.

Rose Tyler and her mother, whom he now knew to be living but lost.

And after a moment's consideration, Jack added one more name to the list: *Mickey Smith*. He hadn't died, and it was too late to add him onto the memorial, but that didn't matter. According to the Doctor, he'd fought at Canary Wharf and been lost there; his name ought to be recorded *somewhere*.

Next up: UNIT. Jack hacked his way into their database with the ease of long practice. There was an open file in UNIT's records on known associates of the Doctor - Martha had already made it in, Jack noticed, with a note on her potential for recruitment, to be followed up ASAP. Jack had long since scrubbed his own name out. Rose was listed as *missing, presumed deceased [ref: Battle of Canary Wharf]*. Mickey was hardly a footnote, cross-indexed with Rose and a woman called Sarah Jane Smith.

Jack almost gave Mickey's file the same notation as Rose's, then thought better of it. Better to give the poor guy a break. He erased it entirely, carefully following up and scrubbing any cross-references. As far as UNIT was concerned, he'd never existed at all.

Case closed.

And in the meantime, Jack was pretty sure there must be *someplace* left in the Archives he hadn't had sex yet. He grinned and headed down to interrupt Ianto's long-awaited filing.

"You blew my mission, pointed a loaded gun at my pregnant commanding officer, and got our friend thrown into prison." Mickey crosses his arms across his chest, the holster at his hip more than usually apparent. "And then to top it all off, we found a live sample of UNIT's reconstructed virus in your jacket pocket, so I'm gonna need a pretty damn compelling reason why I shouldn't kill you right now. Talk fast."

Hart just rolls his eyes. He looks far more comfortable than he ought, after a night spent handcuffed to the wall of Torchwood's holding cell. Clearly they've invested too much in the accommodations. "And here I thought your type was all about shooting first and asking questions later," Hart remarks. "My, how you've all evolved. Jack leaving was the best thing that ever happened to Torchwood, wasn't it?"

Gwen leans forward in her metal folding chair. "How do you know about Jack?"

"You're clearly the one in charge. Ergo, no Jack. It doesn't take much in the way of deductive reasoning, sweetheart."

"He left you, too," Gwen points out coolly. "Many, many times. You can't possibly have any reason to keep his secrets now."

Hart shrugs. "It pisses *you* off. That's reason enough."

"We have to go through this again? Really?" Mickey sighs and removes his sidearm from its holster. He doesn't bother waving it around threateningly - that's kid's stuff, and he outgrew that phase back after the first round of Cybermen.

But damn if he doesn't *want* to.

"Why did you break into the UNIT compound?" Gwen asks.

"I didn't exactly break in," Hart says. He taps his bare wrist. "Just showed up. You know."

"Vortex manipulator, yes, we know. And we've got it upstairs, so if you ever want it back, you'll have to give us more than that."

"That was the job," Hart says, sounding bored. It takes Mickey a second to realize that he's actually answering Gwen's question. "Get in, get the virus, get out. Quick snatch, he said. No Torchwood, he said, the lying bloody bastard. That was part of the deal, was *no fucking Torchwood*. So believe me, ladies, I'm just as thrilled to be here as you are to have me."

"What job? Who hired you?" Gwen demands, even though she must know the answer by now. Mickey sure as hell does, and he's supposed to be the thick one.

Hart raises one eyebrow in faint disbelief. "Who d'you think, you daft cow? Jack did. Jack's job, Jack's money, Jack's stupid bloody *team*. I am so sick of you people, you really have no idea. I could be in the harems of Pylavia right now, enjoying pleasures outlawed in five galaxies."

Mickey ignores the irrelevancies. "What do you know about the virus?"

"First Contact," Hart replies, mouth twisting into a faint grimace. "And I actually can't tell you any more about *that* even if I wanted to. Time might explode, which is a whole vast universe of not fun." He glances over to Gwen. "But I know it took out Jack's boy toy. I'd say sorry about that, but I don't like wasting time on apologies for the ones that aren't my fault."

There were two others on the team before that *were* Hart's fault, albeit indirectly. Mickey heard the story. A doctor named Owen and a tech called Tosh. That was long before he joined up, though, and he's not going to hold grudges over anyone's history but his own. There are plenty of reasons for him to hate Hart as it is.

"Except he's not dead," Gwen says forcefully. "The virus didn't kill him."

At that, Hart sits up a bit straighter, looking vaguely interested for the first time since he awoke in this cell. "No, it must have done. I ran a quick scan on the sample in the lab - that was one nasty critter. Useless as a contagion, it kills the host *much* too fast to spread, but absolutely lethal upon initial exposure. Estimated 99.99% mortality rate for homo sapiens. No way your boy walked away from that. Not to mention, saw the corpse before you knocked me out."

"How could you get such detailed data from the sample so quickly?" Mickey asks.

Gwen presses her hand to her stomach. "He said he scanned it. The wriststrap. But Jack never used his like that."

"Jack never knew how to use that feature," Hart scoffs. "Anyway, his got badly fried at some point before he landed here, never heard the full story. Frankly, I'm amazed he managed to restore as much function as he - hey, what are you doing?"

"Up," Gwen says succinctly, crossing over to undo the handcuffs. "You're coming upstairs with us and running your magical fifty-first century scans on Ianto. Our UNIT doctor's already up there with him. Between the two of you, we're going to figure out what's wrong and bring him *back*. Mickey, please keep your weapon trained on him at all times."

She shoots Mickey a hard look, and he just nods. They haven't had words yet about Mickey's little defection at the UNIT compound, but that doesn't mean Gwen's forgotten about it. For the moment, Mickey's keeping his mouth shut and toeing the line. It'll all come to a head soon enough anyway.

"And why should I help you?" Hart demands. As though he hasn't already been singing like a bloody canary.

"Because I said so," Gwen retorts, yanking him upright. "And because if Jack ever finds out that you *could* have saved his 'boy toy' but you *didn't*-"

Hart stumbles hastily to his feet. "Right. Lead the way."

Up in Torchwood's improvised med bay, Ianto is lying in state on their hospital bed, watched over warily by Lois and Andy while Yuan fusses with an array of sensors and monitors and other things that go beep. Mickey has never even *seen* most of this equipment before. He has no idea where Yuan managed to drag it all up over the past few hours.

Actually, a couple of those look like *his* monitors.

"Honestly," Yuan is saying, "how you people have managed to not all be *dead* by now without a resident medical technician on hand just to keep the equipment maintained-"

"If you want the job, it's yours," Gwen says as they enter the room. "Seeing as UNIT probably has a warrant out for your arrest at the moment."

Yuan whirls to face them, brandishing a scalpel rather worryingly. "Do you even have a properly stocked first aid kit in here?"

"Cupboard above the sink in the kitchen, with a spare in my top desk drawer," Lois replies promptly. She flushes at Gwen's approving smile.

But Yuan has already moved on to other, more pressing matters. He's eying Hart with a significant (and wholly appropriate) degree of mistrust. "And who is this?"

"Captain John Hart," Hart introduces himself with a swagger. "Eye Candy's new knight in shining armor."

Mickey rolls his eyes so hard they *hurt*.

"Come again?" Yuan says, too politely.

Gwen shoves Hart forward. "He has technology that might help you. Lois, where is *Captain* Hart's wriststrap?"

Lois runs off and produces it in less than two minutes, returning it to Gwen, who then reluctantly hands it over to Hart. "Lest you try teleporting, let me remind you that we still have that sample you stole," Gwen says in dire tones. "Not to mention your little arsenal."

"I do love the tiny gun," Hart agrees wistfully. "The places you can hide that thing-"

"*John*. Wriststrap. Ianto. Now."

Hart saunters over to the bed, looking down at Ianto's still form with surprisingly clinical detachment. "You're right," he says, after a long moment. "Stasis. Not death. I think I've seen this before, actually." He frowns. "There's something almost - here, let me see." He taps out a quick sequence on his wriststrap, and for a moment, the body is bathed in blue light.

Yuan leans over in rapt fascination, even as the light dissipates. "Is that a medical scan? How do you access the data? Is there-"

"Don't give yourself a heart attack, Tubby," Hart remarks, absently amused as he continues fiddling with the computer on his wrist. "This toy is not for you. Anyway, it's not particularly sophisticated by any civilized standards, just a cheap trick for Time Agents who manage to contract those particularly exotic STIs-" He cuts himself off abruptly. "Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me," he breathes.

He looks vastly more intrigued than alarmed, but that doesn't exactly allay Mickey's fears. "What is it?" Gwen demands.

"A Jericho Rose?" Hart says incredulously, glancing back and forth between his wriststrap and Ianto's body. "That really does not belong here. Someone is *so* breaking the rules."

"Right, and what the hell is that, then?" Mickey asks.

"Rose of Jericho - but that's a kind of plant, isn't it?" Lois says. "Flowers in the desert, something like that."

Hart grins. "Give the lady a gold star. They're called resurrection plants - because they look like they're dead when they're actually still alive. Blossom just once a year. Ugly bastards the rest of the time. But that's not what I'm talking about here." He taps his wriststrap, expression almost pensive. It's an odd look on him. "A Jericho Rose is - well, look, I don't know the biological mumbo-jumbo, but it's a sort of medical stopgap measure. It induces coma - actually, way beyond a coma, more like near-complete biological stasis. Just...stops you."

"And this was the virus released by the 456?" Andy asks, torn somewhere between fascination and horror.

"No, not at all," Hart says scornfully. "That was just run-of-the-mill bioterrorism. Brew up a virus, adapt it to hit your species of choice, release into the air and watch them keel over. Ianto Jones contracted it along with every other unlucky bastard in that building."

"But he survived it," Yuan protests. "I ran every test imaginable. His body fought off the contagion. He's completely free of it."

Hart rolls his eyes. "That'll be the Jericho Rose. Sticks everything in stasis so the body can heal itself up without any of those nasty side effects when the body fights off infection - death, for example. Once the stopgap kicks in, the human immune system can do its work. He's completely cured, kids, congrats. Except for one pesky little thing - his body can't rid itself of the Jericho Rose. That would be the thorn. See, this particular Rose is way ahead of its time. Like giving penicillin to a dinosaur. It's not going to be created for another, oh, let's call it three or four million years."

"Then what the hell-"

"That would be the question, yeah." Hart looks Ianto over, eyebrow raised. "Was he the only one like this?"

"Thirty-nine survived," Yuan says. "But a hundred and twenty-two were infected. Did the Jericho Rose kill the rest outright?"

Hart snorts. "Don't be an ass. It can't kill anything. No recorded species in any galaxy has a lethal reaction to it."

Gwen rests her hands on her hips, brow furrowed. "How do you know so much about it?"

"Part of the standard Agency kit." He flips open the case of his wriststrap to reveal a tiny hypodermic needle. "Holds one dosage, and you'd better be prepared to hop back to your base for a refill if you ever need to use it, because this is a one-trick pony. We also get the antidote jab at the Agency beforehand, so we don't get stuck like your boy Ianto here."

"But if it was developed millions of years in the future..."

"Yeah, by this weird sisterhood of cat nurses. Now those girls have some claws on them, let me tell you." His eyes unfocus for a moment, and he smiles fondly to himself. "Anyway. When the Agency was first established, it had a real bitch of a time developing effective booster shots. Sure, you get the full round of immunizations when you're assigned to a specific time and location, but let's get real, we hop about all over the fucking place, and there are all sorts of weird local bugs you can pick up. Apart from the obvious," he adds, with a generous leer. "And then you carry the wrong disease over to your next assignment, suddenly you've wiped out half the local civilian population and royally fucked the timelines. Hence, emergency Jericho Rose kit. You get infected, you jab yourself with your secret booster, wake up a day or so later with full factory reset."

"Reset," Gwen echoes flatly.

It takes Mickey a few moments to remember why that sounds familiar - oh, right, Martha's first case with Torchwood, back when it was still Jack's team. She told him that story once.

But Hart has already moved on: "Thirty-nine with the Jericho Rose, that's way beyond unlikely. That's like the Rose was engineered straight into the virus itself, which doesn't make *any* sense. Unless the 456 never intended to kill them at all - but then *everyone* should've survived." He turns on Yuan. "You. You're the one who studied them all this time, yes? What did the thirty-nine have in common that the other poor bastards didn't? Or did you never think to look?"

Yuan stands his ground, glaring at Hart. He draws himself up to his full height - unimpressive by any standards, but it grants him an odd sort of dignity. "Of course I made every effort to determine the common denominator. But it didn't make *sense*. They all shared the same blood type."

Hart appropriates the only chair in the room, sprawling into it and leaning back. "I suppose if the Jericho Rose was connected to a particular antigen-

"Then it should have affected a larger subset - AB as well as A, or disregard positive versus negative. Or if the survivors were all type O, then we might infer the virus itself was somehow connected to the blood antigens." Yuan sighs. "Believe me, I've exhausted all possible avenues. But the survivors are all A-positive. What on earth is so special about A-positive blood?"

Something clicks in Mickey's memory. He grabs the nearest computer workstation and starts typing in commands. It takes less than two minutes to find the answer. "Oh, for the love of-

"There's a connection?" Gwen asks. Her hand rests on his shoulder.

"And this is why sharing is caring, kids," Mickey says, exasperated. "Blood type A-positive. It's right here in our bloody database." He points at the file he's brought up on the monitor. "The Sycorax invasion, a few years back. When everyone took to the roofs on Christmas morning. The Sycorax used some kind of alien space magic to control a third of the Earth's population - using a sample of A-positive blood. That's why I remembered it, 'cause I was *there*, on the Sycorax ship, when it all happened."

The rest of the team all exchange glances. God, none of the rest of them even *knew* about aliens back then, did they? Mickey suddenly feels very old hat.

After a few long moments, Hart bursts out laughing. "Blood control! A Trojan Horse from millions of years in the future activated by bloody *voodoo*, my God. *Someone* certainly has a sense of humor."

Gwen puts her hands on her hips. "Care to explain the joke, John?"

"It's *brilliant*, is what it is," Hart laughs. "The perfect scam. Look, the 456 didn't brew this baby up themselves. They bought it from someone. That's what they are, black market traders. And whoever sold it to them snuck the Jericho Rose in there, and they never noticed because what civilized race in any galaxy would ever think to test a bioweapon's vulnerability against black magic? No, someone put a lot of thought and effort into this. I just wish I knew what they were getting out of it."

"Who would've even had access to this Jericho Rose thing, though?" Andy wonders aloud. "If it's from the future."

"A Time Agent, clearly," Hart replies casually. "But we never had the technological capacity to create the Jericho Rose ourselves, and that stash was *very* carefully guarded. Maybe one of the Sisterhood that's going to develop it in the first place, I suppose, but none of *them* ever had anything to do with time travel, and wouldn't have any reason to want to interfere with First Contact. So, really, your guess is as good as mine, Blondie."

A sisterhood of cat nuns. Mickey has a good memory for weird stories, and that sounds like one of Rose Tyler's old yarns. And also one of Martha's, actually-

Oh, he thinks, but doesn't say a word about it. He could be wrong, after all. It's not his tale to tell.

There are so many stories, like the Sycorax and blood types, and damn if it wouldn't be nice to have those fucking resources when the shit hits the fan. Mickey looks over at Ianto, a man he never actually met, ashen and wax-like on a pilfered hospital bed, and tries not to think about Martha shut away in a UNIT cell for the crime of trying to save him.

"I don't care who did what or why," Yuan says harshly. "The Jericho Rose did its job. Now I want to know how to get rid of it."

Hart only shrugs. "You're Torchwood, you figure something out. God knows you've got access to all sorts of fun tech - which absolutely terrifies me, by the way, in case you were wondering. It's like giving a gun to an infant, except with a far greater likelihood of blowing up entire planets."

Lois clears her throat awkwardly. "Actually. There's a medical device in the archives - we retrieved it from the Hub a few weeks ago. It's, um, a sort of antitoxin kit. If we scan the Jericho Rose into it, it should be able to develop the antidote."

"Owen swore by that thing," Gwen remarks. "Used it to save me the first time we met, John - remember?"

Hart smiles in fond reminiscence. "All too well. We have to try that again sometime, paralysis optional."

"I will punch you in the face. Again."

"But there's no trace of the Jericho Rose in Ianto's system," Yuan says in exasperation. "Or if there is, it's nothing any of my tests or scans recognize."

"Millions of years in the future," Mickey reminds him. He looks pointedly at Hart. "Fortunately, we have another sample on hand. *Don't we, Captain?*"

This was what death was: nothing.

Sure, sometimes, just after coming back, Jack was left with an impression of darkness, vast and unforgiving. Of movement just out of the corner of his eye, a silence he strained to hear but couldn't, quite. What Suzie said about something moving in the dark, coming for him - it sounded all too plausible, but nothing he could quite put his finger on.

Not that Jack had anything against someone *coming* for him in the darkness - or in the sunlight, or under any lighting conditions, really - but he got the impression that wasn't what Suzie had meant.

But Jack had some experience with death, and he knew: *dying was nothing*. And then, suddenly, unwanted, *something* - life - and it hurt like hell. Sometimes he stood alone in the morgue, holding vigil over row upon row of uncaring reminders of Torchwood teammates past, and wondered if they weren't the lucky ones, after all.

Jack was never supposed to live past forty.

Another day, another drawer, and Gwen was alive now but might not be tomorrow. Suzie was dead now but might not be tomorrow. It was a funny old world. Jack used to have a sense of humor about these things, but he didn't laugh at the irony anymore. He'd become a bitter old bastard, he thought.

"Thanks for doing this," he told Ianto, who really shouldn't be here right now.

lanto had a knack for insinuating himself in where he shouldn't, though. It was oddly endearing.

He hardly even glanced up at Jack. "Part of my job, sir."

"No," Jack said. He couldn't quite muster a reprimand in his tone. "I should be doing it, but..."

But there was something moving in the dark, and it might just be waiting for him here. God knew it was waiting for all the rest of them. Owen had already picked out his drawer, even - he'd tagged it with a hospital bracelet. Jack suspected there was a whoopie

cushion or something equally tasteful waiting inside for whoever eventually laid him to rest. Then Gwen and Tosh could go into the rows flanking him, maybe, although lanto would want to be as far away from Owen as possible-

Shit.

"One of these days," Jack said wearily, slumping against the wall of drawers, "we're gonna run out of space."

And then lanto ambushed him with a smirk and a stopwatch, and Jack's breath hitched in his throat.

There weren't many people who could still surprise him.

Sprawled across his desk, legs spread wide and lanto moving in syncopated rhythms against him, Jack felt as impossibly alive as anyone ever could. lanto pressed sloppy kisses along Jack's collarbone, up his neck, and Jack had forgotten everything - the drawers in the morgue and Suzie driving through the endless night and *because I could not stop for Death* - his entire universe reduced to the feel of lanto inside him and the hard desk against his bare back and the stopwatch ticking heedlessly from wherever it had been dropped a long, long time ago.

"Ten minutes and counting," lanto whispered, hot breath against Jack's ear making him shudder, and then lanto twisted his hips and sucked on the sensitive skin just behind Jack's earlobe and Jack was coming, crying out wordlessly, light flaring behind his eyelids.

lanto didn't hold out much longer, rhythm increasing in frantic tempo and then stuttering to a stop. He pulled back, and Jack followed, sitting up with him and reaching out to cup the back of lanto's neck, loving the way lanto's eyes fluttered shut at the contact. Jack didn't say anything, only tugged him closer and kissed him, slow and sated, keeping the darkness at bay just a little while longer.

He doesn't dream. There's just nothing; and then all at once, there's not, like a spark struck into sudden flame. His mind is empty, devoid of memory or analysis or emotion. Then there comes perhaps the faintest sense of surprise - *oh*.

Here I am, then.

And he opens his eyes, because it seems like the thing to do, and discovers that he's alone.

Daylight reluctantly filters in through the wide window of an unfamiliar room. All he can see through the rain pelting against the glass is grey sky. He's lying in a bed with pale blue sheets. He manages to sit up, although it's a bit tricky - his muscles feel weak, like he's been very still for a very long time. Apart from the bed, the room is mostly cluttered with medical equipment. There's also some more elaborate laboratory-like detritus. It doesn't quite feel like a hospital, or have that pervasively sterile hospital smell. He's very sure of this, though he doesn't know why. Perhaps he's been in too many hospitals already. He doesn't remember.

There's something very important he *should* remember. After a moment's contemplation, it comes to him: he's dead.

He doesn't panic. He doesn't scream, or cry, or shake. In fact, he doesn't feel much of anything at all. Just the calm certainty that yes, he died. And that's all right. He vaguely recalls that he hadn't *wanted* to die. Memory flashes - *breath choking in his throat, legs no longer able to support his weight, fear mixed with rage against the dying of the light*. But it's all distant, like a sad story about someone else.

He thinks maybe there's something else important that he ought to remember, but it eludes him.

The door opens and a stranger enters. He's a stout Asian man of middling height, with a round face and dark, intelligent eyes. He might be any age between thirty and fifty. There's no name plate on his white lab coat, and he isn't wearing any visible ID. Definitely not a hospital, then.

When the man glances up from his clipboard, his eyes light up. "Well, hello," the man says. He speaks with a London accent. "It's good to see you awake at last."

"Where am I?" The words emerge as an appalling, gravelly croak, voice creaky with disuse. He swallows and tries again. This time he sounds at least vaguely human.

The man hastily fetches him a cup of water, which he accepts gratefully. "You're in Cardiff, and I'm Dr. Zhang. Do you remember your name?"

Once prompted, he does. "Ianto Jones," Ianto says, somewhat distractedly. Cardiff. That's right, he lives in Cardiff. But he doesn't think he died here. So how did he get back to Cardiff? "What is this place?"

Dr. Zhang hesitates. "It's called Torchwood," he says, oddly gentle. "This is their medical facility. You worked for them before - well. What do you remember, Ianto?"

Torchwood. "Oh, God," Ianto whispers. It's as though a plaster had been laid over his memories, and now it's being ripped away, and it *hurts*. Memory begins to come back in flashes-

an explosion, being thrown off his feet, something sharp and hot glancing across his cheek-

running, always running, for hours, days-

children pointing toward the sky-

gun warm in his hand, firing round after useless round of bullets at a tank of blue-tinged gas, and he can't breathe-

He realizes that he's nearly hyperventilating, breath coming in harsh gasps, hugging his knees to his chest like a child. Dr. Zhang leans over him, speaking in soothing tones. "It's all right," he murmurs, "you're safe here, Gwen is on her way. You remember Gwen? She'll be so happy to see you. Just breathe slowly, now. Everything will be okay."

"I died," lanto says, that knowledge finally *meaning* something. "I *died*, what the hell am I doing here?"

"You were infected with a virus," Dr. Zhang explains calmly. "It put you into a sort of coma - stasis, really. You were very ill, and it's a very long story, but we developed the antidote, and you should be just fine. But you've been asleep for rather a long while."

lanto forces his body to relax, leaning back against the pillows. He looks up at Dr. Zhang. "How long?"

"About seven months," someone new says from the doorway. It takes a moment for the memory of her voice, her face, to slot into place, and by then Gwen has thrown herself at him, hugging him tightly.

Those words - *seven months* - don't really mean anything yet. It's the unexpected swell of her belly, the awkward fit of their bodies as he tried to return her hug - that's what makes the reality of the missing time register.

The world is not where lanto left it.

His memory is still patchy, like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle. Missing pieces continue clicking into place-

Gwen's hand on the medical scanner, eyes wide with wonder-

Rhys pulling his punches in a staged fight with him while Gwen lifts a bemused bystander's laptop-

an old man shouting, eyes wild and deranged, as Gwen attempts to calm him-

When Gwen pulls back to meet lanto's eyes, her cheeks are wet. "Oh, lanto," she says, "you great sodding idiot, you have no idea how much we've missed you."

"Seven months," lanto repeats, trying the words out. They taste dry and bitter on his tongue, like a Retcon tablet. He feels as though he ought to ask what's happened in the half a year he's been (*dead*) asleep, but he's having enough trouble sorting through his own recollections of what came just before. He doesn't want to deal with anyone else's memories just yet. "You're looking well," he says instead.

Gwen smiles, with the healthy glow of all pregnant women, but there are worries etched into unfamiliar lines around her mouth, fanning out from the corners of her eyes. She glances over her

shoulder to Dr. Zhang, and the same shadows are lurking in his eyes. *Everything will be okay*, the doctor had said, but Ianto is beginning to suspect that everything is *not* okay just yet. There's still something important he can't yet recall.

Torchwood never rests. He remembers that.

The puzzle in his head has been almost completely reassembled. He remembers being hunted by their own government, the 456, children chanting in eerie unison, horrifying cabinet meetings and alien ambassadors. He remembers going off guns blazing with only half a plan in place because they had no *time*.

They had no time, they had no plan, and he died.

And he remembers the very important missing puzzle piece, the full picture coming into focus at last.

He hadn't died alone.

"Where's Jack?" he asks, and watches Gwen's face fall.

Oh, he thinks.

Ianto closes his eyes.

IV.

One always dies too soon-or too late.

And yet, life is there, finished: the line is drawn, and it must all be added up.

You are nothing other than your life.

(Jean-Paul Sartre)

Offices make John Hart nervous.

It's not his fault - they're just so bloody *anonymous*. Bland. Weirdly sterile. Cubicles in neat rows, drab off-white walls, glass-paned private offices. It all makes him want to start lobbing grenades left and right.

And here he'd thought the Torchwood sewer was bad.

Still, the last time he was in a twenty-first century office scenario, he got to stick his gun in Eye Candy's face, so that hadn't been so bad. He might even get to repeat the experience, now that they'd un-zombied the kid. John's good at looking on the bright side.

He's also very good at getting out of handcuffs when it suits him, but he's keeping that to himself for the moment. It's kind of cute how they think cuffing him to a desk makes them safe. Jack's team, on the whole, had been much cleverer than Gwen's. Although he has to say, Officer Blondie is definitely an improvement over the rodentlike doctor who'd died at the nuclear plant, and while no one quite holds a candle to the lovely Toshiko, this soft-eyed receptionist has her own particular charms. The thug-cum-techie has no charms whatsoever, but his biceps make up for the lack. All in all, it's almost a shock that Jack didn't cull this gang himself. So much pretty, so little time before John ditches or shoots them all. He hasn't quite made up his mind on that point yet. It's better to keep his options open.

John idly wonders whether Ianto Jones will threaten to kill him again. It's kind of hot when he does that, if ineffectual. But Ianto owes him his *life* now. It'll be fun to hold that over his head.

Okay, bored now.

Bored for rather a while, actually. Once they'd developed the antitoxin from his personal Jericho Rose hypo - which they'd better have returned to its compartment in his wriststrap - they'd been too busy fussing over Ianto and whatnot to bother with John. So he'd renewed his acquaintance with this new Torchwood's cells, which are far cleaner and far more boring than the old Hub's. Periodically someone would remember he needed food, and provide, though his repeated requests for conjugal rights went ignored. Near as he could tell, he was there for the rest of the afternoon and all night. This morning, Officer Blondie and Techie Thug had fetched him back up here, asked him a few desultory questions about his "plans" (now *there's* a joke), then left him with the promise that Gwen would be by shortly to speak with him further.

That was about an hour ago. It's past noon now, according to the clock on the wall, which means he's been in Torchwood custody for going on thirty-six hours and they still haven't figured out what to do with him. Fucking *bureaucrats*.

There is precisely one reason why John is still hanging around, and that's because they're still holding his vortex manipulator hostage. Also the virus sample, without which he doesn't get paid, and that was kind of the whole point of this little adventure.

"Hey," he calls. His current babysitter, the delectable receptionist Lois, shoots him an irritated glare from her workstation. "Did *you* ever meet Jack?"

She snaps a file folder shut. "Yes, I met Captain Harkness during the incident with the 456."

Captain Harkness. Of course. He'd had a nice little scam running here on Earth, hadn't he? "Well, the good Captain is the person who hired me to pick up the virus sample, and he's going to be ever so tetchy if I don't get back to him. You wouldn't want to keep Jack waiting, would you?"

"Time is relative, especially with your wriststrap," Lois says crisply. "It doesn't matter how long we hold you here. You'll still reach your rendezvous with the Captain on time."

John really hates the smart ones.

"But you lot have got what you wanted from me. The Jericho Rose antitoxin, your man's back among the living, all sorted. And yet here I still am."

"Here you are," Lois agrees. "Until Gwen says we're done with you. Won't be a moment too soon for me, mind."

"Well, since we've already got the cuffs out, we may as well take advantage. Why don't you come over here and-"

Lois gets all flustered, which is cute. "None of that, now," she says hastily.

John gives her his widest, filthiest grin. "Yes, mistress."

"Lois!" Gwen strides in, which is always fun to watch these days. Pregnant women just move so *interestingly*. Her gait hasn't quite lost the battle to the waddle yet, but it's a very near thing.

Lois perks up at the sound of Gwen's voice. It seems to be her thing. John spends the next few minutes zoning out to pleasant fantasies of the two ladies in various mistress-slave scenarios, while their reality-based counterparts discuss something or other to do with UNIT.

Gwen abruptly snaps her fingers in John's face. "Torchwood to Captain Hart, please come in."

"Gladly. *Come* in where?" John never could pass up a cheap shot.

"Now there's an image that's going to haunt me. I was *asking*, did you do anything to affect UNIT's communications when you broke into the compound?"

John shrugs. "Didn't bother. I timed it carefully. Two in the morning on a weekend, who was going to be around? I wasn't planning on hanging around long enough to be noticed, and I had the equipment to neutralize anyone I did encounter." He scowls. "Obviously, I overlooked the possibility that *you* people would be breaking in at exactly the same time."

"We're Torchwood. We specialize in inconvenient coincidences." Gwen drums her fingers along the desk absently. "But *something* is currently disrupting the hell out of UNIT's comms, and it's not us. Lois, do you know where Mickey wandered off to?"

"He and Andy brought Himself up," Lois says, indicating John. "Then he said he had to go out and make a call, but he'd be back shortly." She hesitates. "Actually, Gwen, about Mickey-

"If this is about the way he acted at the UNIT compound, then no, I haven't had the chance to speak with him about it yet," Gwen sighs. She scrubs her hand across her face, looking tired. "The issue with UNIT is a bit more pressing right now."

Lois looks uncomfortable. "But I think there's a connection between them and Mickey. I was looking-

"Sorry, why do we give a flying fuck about UNIT, again?" John asks. Chitchat is *boring*. "Aren't you lot going to war with them or something?"

Gwen grimaces. "God, I hope not. They'd win. We don't have anything like UNIT's resources. No, I've been trying to negotiate terms of Martha's release - not to mention a preemptive deal of some sort for Yuan. But the line cut out while I was still in transfer purgatory, and we've spent ten minutes trying to reconnect with no luck."

"Maybe they just don't want to talk to you," John suggests, fidgeting. "I sympathize."

"Well, it's about time we sat down and figured out our next move, anyway." Gwen glances over at Lois. "Please call the others in for a team meeting."

Lois reaches for her headset, then hesitates. "Um. Define 'team.' I mean, is Yuan-

"Until he or I decide otherwise, yes. Call Yuan, Mickey, and Andy in here." Suddenly Gwen grins. "And lanto."

Lois does as ordered - *yes, mistress*, John thinks, and smiles to himself - then turns back to Gwen. "Is lanto - I mean, he was ill for so long. Do you think he's ready to be up and about so quickly?"

"He says he feels fine - and anyway, lanto likes keeping busy." Gwen's smile turns inward, a little sad. "It keeps him from...dwelling."

"Besides, he wasn't *ill*, he was in stasis," John scoffs. "Won't even need the sort of primitive physical therapy your doctors have to give coma patients. Assuming your Yuan didn't bollocks anything up too

drastically, he should be in the exact state he was seven months ago. Apart from not dying of the 456's virus, of course."

"Speaking of," Lois says, and nods at John. "Should we put him back in the cells?"

Gwen actually considers it for a second. John finds himself almost hoping she agrees - if Lois tries to escort him back downstairs, he can take her out easily, and then it's just a matter of hunting down his wriststrap and the virus and hightailing it out of here before anyone else notices.

"No," Gwen decides. "He's given us useful information already. He might have more."

"Spoilsport," John mutters under his breath. Gwen flashes him a ruthless grin, as if she knows *exactly* what John was thinking.

Whatever. His chance will come.

Everyone shows up at almost exactly the same time, minus the Techie Thug. When Ianto hesitates at the doorway, John gives him a laconic round of applause. "If it isn't good old Eye Candy," he drawls. "Back from the dead. Jack's been rubbing off on you, huh?"

"Right, because I've never heard *that* joke before," Ianto sighs. Oddly, he looks more comfortable now that John's insulted him, joining the group with something like his former confidence. Probably everyone else has been treating the guy with kid gloves so far, like he might break or something.

Damn. It's a sad day when John's accidentally putting Ianto at ease instead of riling him up. How the mighty have fallen.

"Love the new look," John says to make him fidget. He's dressed vastly more casually than John's seen him before, in ill-fitting jeans and a too-large rugby T-shirt.

Ianto glances down at his clothing with a slight grimace. "Rhys's. Turns out that when you're dead for seven months, all your personal belongings disperse through rummage sales."

"We'll get you sorted quick as we can," Gwen says hastily. "I'll take you out shopping myself as soon as we're done here."

Ianto shrugs. "Torchwood never rests," he murmurs, as if to himself. He clears his throat. "Anyway. Sorry if I'm a bit slow, but I'm playing catch-up here. We're trying to break Martha out of jail?"

Gwen nods, and Andy and Yuan pull up their own chairs to the central table. John, still handcuffed to his desk, is left somewhat out of the loop. Not that he's complaining.

"It's a bit more complicated than that," Gwen explains. "But Martha was working on a plan to expose some of UNIT's research, so getting her back is the top priority at the moment. Yuan, did you-"

But Yuan is already shaking his head. "I didn't know anything until I approached her myself, a little more than a week ago. Right before we came to you. I know she's cultivated some kind of network

within UNIT, people who think they've gone drastically far along the wrong direction since the 456 - possibly even before."

"The Osterhagen Project," Ianto says. "Back when the Daleks attacked. Jack told me about that. As a last resort, UNIT planned to blow up the Earth - literally, there are something like twenty or thirty nuclear warheads placed under the Earth's crust." Lois and Andy look horrified; Yuan just frowns. "To use the planet itself as a weapon, if there was no other option. Martha was one of the handful of UNIT personnel who know about the project. They nearly did it," Ianto finishes quietly. "*She* nearly did it. We didn't see her much after that, but Jack said it really shook her up, badly, how close she came to turning the Osterhagen Key. If you're wondering when Martha lost faith in UNIT, well, that would be my guess."

"Good guess." John twists his head to see Techie Thug - Mickey, was it? - standing in the doorway. His eyes are hard. "Ianto Jones, right? Nice to actually meet you. Sorry I wasn't actually around when you, you know, woke up."

Ianto nods, unsmiling. "Mickey Smith. You've been busy, I understand."

"Very." Mickey leans against the wall, not approaching the board table yet. "Reporting in, Gwen. Trouble with UNIT?"

"Trouble even communicating with UNIT," Gwen says. Her eyes narrow. "Lois said you were out making a call. Anything interesting?"

"Same news as you got, apparently. UNIT's gone dark. No one can get through to them. It's almost like they're planning something."

"Because that doesn't sound at all ominous." Gwen looks over at Lois, mouth pressed into a thin line. "Lois, I think you were trying to tell me something, earlier - about UNIT and Mickey?"

Lois straightens, looking uncomfortable but determined, and John has to give Gwen credit, she timed this out *beautifully*. Put the possible traitor in the hot seat in front of the entire team, using the admirably efficient and unbiased little secretary to take him down.

"After the - incident, in the UNIT compound," Lois says. Her voice doesn't shake, but she's twisting her hands in her lap. "I started examining some of your computer activities, Mickey. I'm sorry, I really am, but - you caught us off guard, is all. I wanted to make sure you didn't have any other surprises to spring on us."

Mickey folds his arms across his chest, meeting her eyes stonily.

"He's been sharing files from our archives," Lois says quietly, not looking at anyone in particular. "Mostly witness statements, testimonials, that sort of thing. Nothing that exposes Torchwood directly. I couldn't figure out the pattern."

"Sharing with whom?" Gwen sounds as if she's only just holding her temper in check. John hopes she explodes soon. That should be entertaining.

"Several UNIT employees, for starters. And a journalist," Lois says. "Her name is Sarah Jane Smith. According to Torchwood files, she used to work with UNIT, too, back in the '70s. And she's got a pretty hot private stash of alien tech, according to Captain Harkness's notes - including an alien supercomputer way more powerful than the Torchwood mainframe."

Mickey squares his shoulders, as if bracing himself. "Mr. Smith, yeah. He's a Xylok. So yeah, I've been consorting with aliens, I guess - gonna lock me up for it?"

"If we're following the original Torchwood charter, we certainly could," Ianto murmurs, but no one's listening to him. John sure as hell isn't.

Xylok.

John does some hasty temporal recalculations. Seven-odd months since First Contact means - *shit*. So it's *this* week. And of course, of *course* it's bloody fucking Torchwood. He should've known. All of the really important bits always get left out of the history vids.

This is one of those fixed points that Time Agents are very strongly warned away from. The sort that earn you a memory wipe and several years' hard labor if you even *think* about interfering with. First Contact was one. The Xylok Tapes are another. John's getting the fuck out of here, pronto.

He should've realized Jack had forgotten this, too. He never should have accepted this damn job.

"Have you been plotting to take over the world long?" Andy inquires, faintly shell-shocked.

Mickey shakes his head. "I wasn't-"

"What the hell were you *thinking*?" Gwen yells. She looks as though she'd jump up and smack him across the face if the belly weren't making it so awkward to get out from behind the table. John rather hopes she tries anyway. "Sharing classified Torchwood documents - are you completely mad? And with *UNIT*? For all we know, the radio silence means they're preparing for an attack! Was this part of Martha's plan? Did she even *have* a bloody plan?"

"It wasn't supposed to go forward this *soon*!" Mickey shouts back. "This whole bloody clusterfuck of a rescue operation pushed the timeline forward before we were ready for it. She got herself nabbed getting your boy out, and now everything's gone to shit!"

"So you've not only betrayed Torchwood for ulterior motives, you're a *failed* traitor," Gwen remarks scathingly. "How long have you been conspiring with Martha?"

"Since well before you hired him."

It's spoken quietly, but the words carry. Everyone slowly turns to look at Ianto. John leans back and enjoys the unfolding drama, grinning widely. This is better than a Navkari soap.

Mickey and Ianto are watching each other intently. Ianto raises an eyebrow, and Mickey breaks first, looking away.

"Ianto," Gwen says warningly.

Ianto sighs. "Don't you run some kind of background check on your employees? He's not *conspiring* with Martha. He's married to her."

"Ianto!"

Ianto glanced up from the bit of Rift flotsam he and Gwen were studying in the lab. She pulled a face. They'd finally got the place back in order after the Earth's misadventures in the Medusa Cascade, and this was the first real chance they'd had to deal with the backlog of Rift debris. Gwen *hated* cataloguing, but while Torchwood remained short-staffed, Ianto couldn't slog through it all on his own.

"Oh, go on, then," she sighed, brushed her hair out of her face. "I'll manage."

Ianto gave her an apologetic shrug and emerged onto the catwalk. Jack grinned up at him from the atrium. "My office. I've got a quick project for you."

"*Project*," Gwen drawled. "Is that what we're calling it now?"

Ianto rolled his eyes and headed down.

"I feel like we used to be much better at *discreet*, sir," he remarked dryly from the doorway to Jack's office.

Jack laughed, taking his seat. "You say that as if she hasn't already seen us in the altogether. But I really do have a project for you this time." He slid a file across his desk toward Ianto.

Ianto skimmed over the documents. "A missing persons case? We don't usually - oh, do you want me to follow up with Flat Holm?"

"No, he wasn't taken by the Rift-

"Doesn't look like it," Ianto agreed. "Mickey Smith, last seen in London a couple years back - huh. That was right about when Torchwood One started the ghost shifts."

Jack leaned back in his chair, studying Ianto, an odd smile playing across his lips. "More or less coincidental."

Ianto examined the photo pensively. "I'd swear I've seen him before, though. Not Torchwood, you're sure?"

"Positive." Jack chuckled to himself. "Very, very positive."

"Okay, I give up. What do you want me to do with Mickey Smith?" Wrong choice of words - Jack's eyes unfocused for a moment, considering. "Not what I meant!"

"Right." Jack shook his head. "So the thing was, Mickey didn't go *missing*, exactly. More like traveling."

"I take it he wasn't off on a bender in Barcelona for two years," Ianto remarked. "Traveling - with the Doctor?"

And he could say the name without either of them flinching these days, and might even get a straight answer out of Jack about it. That felt something like progress.

"Got it in one," Jack agreed easily. "Though not for long - it's kind of a long story, but basically he's been living in a parallel universe for the past few years. But he was involved with the kerfuffle with the Daleks last week, and in the end he decided to stay here, not there."

Ianto tapped the file. "This case was closed about a year ago. He's officially marked as deceased. I'm guessing he's running into some difficulties returning from the dead?"

"No ID, no bank account, no way to prove he was ever here," Jack ticked off. "Which is a shoddy way to treat a man who helped save the planet a time or two. So work your magic. Build a new start for Mickey Smith. Call it a favor for an old friend."

Ianto started drafting a mental checklist. In some ways, it was far easier to create a new identity from scratch - no old paper trails to sort through beforehand. But it sounded like Mickey wanted to regain some part of his former life, at least. Which seemed fair enough. "First thing's getting him some funds to live on," he thought aloud. "Until he finds work..." Ianto hesitated. "Are you recruiting, Jack?"

Jack leaned back with a smile. "I did offer, actually. He's good with computers. But he said no thanks for now - I think he's still trying to get his feet back under him. Can't blame him, really. But speaking of - UNIT." Jack's face darkened. He'd already told Ianto the story of Martha Jones and the Osterhagen Key.

"UNIT likes drafting friends of the Doctor," Ianto said quietly. "They had quite the rivalry with Torchwood One for a while, if I recall correctly."

Jack snorted. "Something like. Former companions are a hot commodity amongst alien-hunting organizations. Everyone wants to squeeze them dry." His eyes were very old for a moment; someday, Ianto would have to get the story of exactly how Jack had been drafted by Torchwood in the first place. Jack shook his head. "Keep UNIT away from Mickey best you can, Ianto. He deserves that much from us."

Ianto would gladly kill for a coffee right now.

To sum up: he was just brought back from the dead by his lover's psychotic ex, only to find the tiny alien-hunting troupe he worked for now verging on open war with a vastly larger international paramilitary organization, his best friend having assumed command and leading field missions despite being very pregnant, another friend incarcerated for trying to save him, and now they may or may not have just been betrayed by one of their new (to him) coworkers, who was secretly married to the jailed friend. Oh, and his lover has fucked off into outer space, probably forever. And Ianto is expected to face this brave new world without coffee?

Granted, Gwen's probably off caffeine because of the baby, but that can't possibly mean Torchwood's knocked the habit entirely. Then again, this Torchwood bears very little resemblance to the one Ianto died for. He has no idea what to expect in any sense. Except that he's *still* the only person who knows anything about anyone's personnel files, apparently.

Lois looks stricken at this new information, like she wants to dash off to her computer and update the database *right now*. Ianto feels her pain. He likes Lois, even if she did kind of take his job. Or, at least, he remembers liking her before he died. He supposes she could be a whole different person seven months later. Torchwood has that effect.

"We weren't keeping it secret from *you*," Mickey tells Gwen, voice low and sincere. "Just from UNIT. Problem is, UNIT's been keeping very close tabs on you since the 456."

"Me? Why?" Gwen's mouth twists bitterly. "I thought they'd more or less written Torchwood off."

"They had," Mickey says bluntly. "But they were looking for Jack - don't ask me why, Martha never knew the details, though we've got a few theories - and you were their best shot. Have to hand it to him, he gave them a good runaround for a while there."

Ianto does his best not to react at all. He has ample practice. Gwen glances his way briefly, then goes back to Mickey. "That explains the remote hilltop, I guess," she murmurs. Her tone hardens. "Why infiltrate Torchwood? To get access to our files?"

Mickey exhales sharply, like he's trying to rein in his temper. "To help you rebuild! Torchwood had always served as a sort of balance of power to UNIT, even when it was just Jack's team here in Cardiff. UNIT's military intelligence, the aliens are mostly incidental. *You're* the people who actually know how to deal with aliens. UNIT only knows how to blow them up." He slams his hand on the table. "I rebuilt your communications *from scratch* to make them completely secure, to keep UNIT from reading your bloody mail. And you're pissed at me because I lied about my *marital status*?"

"It would hardly be the first time a Torchwood employee conned his way in to help his girlfriend," Ianto points out quietly. The others just look confused, but Gwen meets his eyes with reluctant compassion.

She sighs. "And it wouldn't be the first time he nearly ended the world for her, either," she counters, but she's not going to battle the point further. That's Gwen all over - quick to anger, quicker to forgive. She hasn't changed at all, not in any way that matters. "So. Martha's conspiracy. What was its objective?"

"It started with the Osterhagen Key. Martha found other people within UNIT who were angry about the way UNIT handled that, and then the 456 debacle. There was this whole chain set up, each of us with our own tasks to accomplish. I was part of it." Mickey sighs, shoulders slumping. "Martha set it off when she got nabbed. She called Mr. Smith - Sarah Jane's computer - over our comms. She knew he'd be listening. So he followed the program we'd set up."

"From what Martha was on about before the mission, it sounded like the goal was to expose UNIT, somehow. But what is that supposed to accomplish?" Andy asks, reasonably enough. "And you and Martha never got the proof you were looking for in the compound. I suppose we could use Ianto as our new anti-UNIT poster boy-"

Ianto grimaces. "Please tell me I get a say in this."

"The point isn't to just point to UNIT and say, *ooh, look how evil they've become,*" Mickey says. "Because clearly, they're not - well, not most of them anyway."

He gives a nod to Yuan, who returns it thoughtfully. He's been keeping well out of this whole exchange. Smart man, Ianto thinks.

Mickey goes on: "We're trying to pull out the rug on the whole governmental cover-up. To say, look, there's this whole vast universe out there, there always has been, and we can either destroy ourselves 'cause we're scared of the dark or go out and meet it." He looks somber, tired. "Join the intergalactic community. It's that or we may as well give up now, because it's coming to us whether we like it or not, and if we shoot first, they'll wipe us out."

Ianto remembers the Sycorax, and thinks maybe humanity crossed *that* bridge a long time ago. But that's neither here nor there. "The twenty-first century is when everything changes," he murmurs.

"And we've got to be ready," Mickey agrees. "Look, Martha and Sarah Jane and - well, a few other people, they were putting together this sort of broadcast. Think the original 'War of the Worlds', except with a more positive spin, and *real*. All true stories, from real people. There's more of us out there than you'd think."

Gwen looks to Ianto, letting out a startled laugh. "The International Conspiracy of TARDIS Ex-Pats," she breathes. "Oh, my God."

Ianto raises an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, did you think that was a joke?"

"Anyway, the broadcast was Martha's idea, of course," Mickey says, with a wry smile. "She's got an idealistic streak a mile wide." The smile fades. "But we weren't ready yet. We'd hoped to compile so much more-"

Ianto's head snaps up. "The Torchwood Archives."

Gwen frowns. "What, the bits and bobs of alien tech? I mean, sure, they're fun to play with, but I don't think-"

"No, not *our* archives," Ianto says. "*The Archives*. Torchwood has been recording witness statements for decades. There are thousands of them-

"Not stored on your mainframe," Mickey interrupts. "Believe me, I've been looking for months - sent out what little I could find to Sarah Jane, like Lois said, but it wasn't near enough. And anything Torchwood One had fell with the tower."

"Torchwood London's archives were much the same as Cardiff's," Ianto says impatiently. "Well, much bigger, of course, but the same general principle. That was never where the real records were stored."

"Where, then?"

"Torchwood Two. Scotland. The original Torchwood House. That's always been the Archives, right from the start." Ianto taps the side of his leg, trying not to lecture. It feels distinctly odd to be the most senior Torchwood operative present. He much preferred it when Jack was around to give the history lessons. "One was the primary force, Three was established to watch over the Rift. Two was the base for the Archives. That's all it's ever been. Every written account, every original document, every recording - the great library of Torchwood dating back to 1879. Even if you just want the videos, there are still tens of thousands to sort through for what you need. So for Ms. Smith's alien supercomputer - that's, what, maybe ten minutes of work to cull the best for your little broadcast?"

They all stare at him for a moment.

Ianto rolls his eyes. "No, seriously, Archie's had this stuff lying around this whole time. Did *no one* ever think to contact him?"

"The nutter from Two," Gwen murmurs. "That's all anyone said when they mentioned him. I never knew there was anything there to look for."

"The Torchwood Archives." Mickey starts to grin. "I *knew* Martha wanted to save you for a reason! Yeah, that might just do the trick." He sobers. "Provided UNIT doesn't try to blow us up first, so we'd better get cracking."

Everyone starts talking at once, hashing it over, and Ianto's mind wanders. He lets his gaze drift around the room, this new Torchwood. It's...an office. Plain walls, fluorescent lights, ordinary desks. Sure, there's nothing typical about the bric-a-brac strewn about the place, nor the complex array of computer equipment at each workstation, but there's still a certain feel of uniformity, of normalcy, that sets Ianto's teeth on edge. No, maybe not *normalcy*, not exactly, but an uncomfortable sense of *deja-vu*. Add in a bit more polish and chrome-

Ah. That's what it reminds him of. The tower at Torchwood London, albeit on a much smaller and shabbier scale. Back in his first days with the Cardiff branch, he would've vastly preferred this to the ramshackle idiosyncrasies of the Hub, taken comfort in the familiarity. But that was a long time ago.

This is not what he came back for.

His gaze rests on one workstation in particular. The empty pair of handcuffs is still attached to the desk leg. *Shit.*

Ianto hasn't forgotten how to make himself invisible. He gets to his feet unobtrusively, the ill-fitting denims stiff at his knees. Only Andy notices, frowning at him, but Ianto just shakes his head and gives him a slight shrug, and Andy looks away. No one else seems to have realized that John Hart's gone missing.

He slips out the side corridor, the closest and least conspicuous exit from the group discussion. This is also the hallway that leads to the medical bay, if he recalls correctly. Well, that makes sense. Up one flight of stairs, take a left, and there's the door standing wide open.

Ianto is unarmed. He has no idea where the armory even is in this new Torchwood. In his experience, it's distinctly unwise to confront John without a weapon in hand. He couldn't care less.

John has his back to the door as he rummages through some cupboards along the opposite wall. He doesn't hear Ianto step into the room. It's still raining outside, unnaturally dark with storm clouds, drops pelting the windows with determination. The overhead lights buzz faintly. Ianto never minded the dodgy lighting in the Hub, possibly because it was its own subterranean world, with no point of reference. In here, though, with these wide windows, the thwarted possibility of natural light renders the fluorescents irritating, almost garish.

After a long moment, Ianto clears his throat and pulls the door shut behind him. It's almost funny how quickly John whirls around, hand at his empty holster.

"The filing cabinet next to the window," Ianto says. "Bottom drawer." His voice sounds very loud in the near-empty room, in this stillness after the cacophony of the team meeting.

John studies him, head half-cocked to one side, then shrugs and saunters over to the cabinet. He looks surprised to find it temperature-regulated, cold fog emerging from the open drawer. Since when does anything at Torchwood match its outward appearance? John really ought to have learned by now.

When he turns back to Ianto, he's holding the test tube with the 456 virus sample. "You've not been awake for twenty-four hours yet, how is it you already know where everything is?"

"I saw Dr. Zhang put it away," Ianto replies. "I'm not even going to ask how you managed to nick your wriststrap back from Gwen."

John fastens the vortex manipulator around his wrist smugly. "She's not terribly observant, for a copper. Shouldn't you be raising the alarm, by the by? It's what you tend to do. I've escaped, after all."

"They'll figure it out soon enough," Ianto says evenly. "You've got what you came for. Thanks for saving my life. Now get the hell off my planet."

John leans back against the cabinet, hands on his hips with a studied casualness. "Ah, so this is you being *honorable*. I saved you, so you let me go."

lanto inclines his head in acknowledgement.

"You do realize where I'm going, right? Or, rather, *who* I'm-"

"Yes," lanto says sharply, cutting him off. "Gwen told me. Assuming you were telling her the truth about that in the first place."

"I was." John's eyes narrow, intent on lanto's face. "He's never coming back. You do realize that, don't you? I saw the look in his eyes when he talked about the 456, about Earth. He's through with this place. You might think you two had a good thing going, but listen to someone's who's been there: he's *done*."

lanto's hands clench into fists at his sides. "He had to kill his own grandson to get rid of the 456. Do you really believe I'm so self-centered as to think this has anything to do with *me*?" He forces himself to loosen his fists, breathing slowly. "But Gwen still thinks you can bring him back, so you'd better leave while you still can."

He doesn't let himself remember dying in Jack's arms, doesn't think about the look in Jack's eyes the last time lanto saw him. The last time he ever expected to see anything at all. Because if lanto allows himself to remember that - or the way Jack smiled at him when no one else was there to see, the smooth warmth of his skin under lanto's fingertips, the cadence of his laugh - there's no way he'll ever let John leave now without him.

But there's still work to be done here.

John fondles his wriststrap, running his fingers along the buttons. It's practically obscene. He glances back up at lanto, just once. "Any message you'd like me to impart?"

"No," lanto says quickly, before he can change his mind. It would be far worse to know that Jack *knows* he's still here, alive, and still chooses not to come back. No. Best not to dwell on it. "Just - don't come back."

"Believe me," John says, voice dry as dust, "if I never see you people again, it'll be far too soon."

He taps out a sequence on his vortex manipulator, tosses lanto an ironic salute, and disappears in a flash of blue-white light.

It's so quiet in the wake of John's departure. lanto wanders over to stare out of the window, listening to the rhythms of wind and rain, like a thousand distant heartbeats, like waves on the shore, white noise fading out to nothing at all.

The Rift didn't rest in the wake of Tosh and Owen. Not that it was any *worse* than usual, but they were fewer now, and the city was already reeling from the explosions. Gwen spent most of her time liaising

with the police and emergency services to coordinate cleanup and recovery, while Jack took point for any new Rift flare-ups. Which left Ianto with - everything else.

He took over maintenance of all of Toshiko's ongoing computer programs, not to mention the servers and alien mainframe. He monitored Rift activity so the Jack could know which new crises were theirs to handle and which could be fobbed off on the police or even ignored. He did his best to keep Owen's scientific logs updated and spent a full afternoon at A&E with a friendly nurse getting a crash course in first aid. He spent hours on the phone working to keep UNIT from stepping in and wresting control from Torchwood. And, of course, he kept up his usual myriad duties. His one concession to the disaster was to close the tourist shop indefinitely for "repairs."

The other two were in open mourning. Gwen got teary at the drop of a hat and Jack looked lost, a leader without his team, and Ianto just kept his head down and made sure everything ran smoothly around them. He'd grieve later. Right now he didn't have the *time*.

Gwen did her work well and without complaint, but Ianto made sure she left at a reasonable time every evening to go home to Rhys. She clung to Jack, and even to Ianto a bit, but as much as she needed them, Ianto knew she also needed to get the hell away from it all - from the Hub, the reminders of those lost, the survivor's guilt that could so easily swallow her whole. That couldn't happen. Gwen was too important.

And then - Jack. Jack, who'd been buried alive for two thousand years, a number so vast and unthinkable *real* that Ianto couldn't even begin to wrap his mind around it. Jack claimed he didn't remember the time passing - after the first few deaths and resurrections, his lungs had been so thoroughly choked with dirt that he never woke up properly again until Torchwood unearthed him. But for all Ianto's practice in sorting through Jack's stories, he couldn't tell if this one was truth or fiction. Jack was never as good a liar as Ianto; his talent was for outrageous truths to complement Ianto's plausible lies.

Maybe Jack really had slept through the entirety of his submersion beneath Cardiff, because he sure as hell wasn't sleeping anymore now. Nor had he so much as touched Ianto since they'd found Tosh's farewell message. Ianto imagined the weight of thousands of years of soil pressing down upon his chest, and he couldn't blame Jack if he never wanted to be touched again.

Ianto buried himself in Torchwood and tried not to think at all. It didn't work.

Exhaustion made him clumsy, and he was worrying about the latest Rift predictions and when he'd have time for a Tesco run and whether Jack was not sleeping because he was *Jack* or because he was suffering PTSD from being buried underground for centuries - thoughts chasing each other around and around in his head and he'd gotten sleep only in scattered catnaps over the past week and he simply forgot the safety protocols when dealing with unidentified alien dodecahedrons. There were two of them, made out of some coppery-looking metal, with what looked like hieroglyphics etched along each of their twelve sides. When Gwen passed them over to him for archiving, Ianto distractedly dropped them into the same box together, where they bounced off each other and exploded.

Ianto had some experience with explosions, and this wasn't particularly catastrophic on the scale of things going boom. Nothing caught fire, for starters, which was a relief. But it made a rather impressive noise, and Ianto threw Gwen to the ground, covering her. The blast felt like a great pulse of energy, rushing through them, knocking Ianto's breath out of him. Somewhere, glass shattered.

Then there was quiet. Ianto reminded himself how to breathe - it didn't hurt terribly, which was probably a good sign. Gwen squeaked, and he hastily pulled himself off her, rocking back on his heels. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," she said, sounding dazed. She sat up carefully. "That was - what *was* that?"

He glanced over at the worktable, getting shakily to his feet. There was nothing left of the box; the alien dodecahedrons were just lumps of melted copper now. "They must have had some sort of repulsion to one another. I shouldn't have tried to store them together." He steadied himself on the table; his lungs ached, and his head felt thick and muggy. "I know better than that."

And that was when he started shaking - because this was Gwen, and he'd been tired and clumsy and he could have got her *killed*.

"Shit," he said. He sat heavily down on the couch, dropping his head into his hands. "*Shit*."

"Ianto?" Gwen's voice, sounding very concerned. "Are *you* okay?"

Ianto waved her off, keeping his eyes closed. He didn't want to see the expression on her face right now. "Fine, I'm fine-"

Of course, that was when Jack came clattering up from the sublevels. "Gwen! Ianto! I thought I heard-" There was a sharp intake of breath. All at once, Ianto imagined the picture this must make - the workstations in complete disarray, him folded in on himself on the couch, Gwen leaning over him. He looked up. Jack stood by the stairs to the autopsy bay, hands gripping the railing, face pale.

"My fault," Ianto said hastily. "The metal - I was clumsy. We're fine."

"This time," Gwen said. When Ianto winced, she sighed and reached out to thread her fingers through his hair, just for a moment. It felt nice. "You've been doing too much," she went on softly. "Don't think I haven't noticed. We haven't done a very good job of looking after each other lately, have we? Or - no, you look after *us* just fine. All the time. Don't you, Ianto?"

Ianto didn't know what to say to that. It didn't seem like he was doing a very good job of it.

She pulled away, turning to Jack with grim determination. "Do *you* know what Ianto's been up to for the past week and a half? Because every time I think of a new task that needs to be taken care of, I turn around and find he's already done it. And there aren't that many hours in a day, Jack. When was the last time he got any real sleep - do you even know?"

Jack kept staring at Ianto, like he was actually *seeing* him for the first time since - well. Ianto had to look away. "No," Jack admitted quietly. "I don't."

"That has nothing to do with-" Ianto started, but Gwen cut him off, whirling to face him again.

"You're going to run yourself into the ground," she snapped. "Ianto, *please*. We can't lose you, too."

"Gwen." Jack's eyes never left Ianto. "Give us a moment?"

Gwen glanced between them, then sighed. "Fine. I'll just bring this up to the lab and see if we can salvage any useful data out of it." She scraped the inert gobs of alien metal into a plastic bag. As she passed Jack, she hesitated, then touched his arm. She murmured something too low for Ianto to catch; he looked down, studying his hands intently. He couldn't bear to watch her walk away, so fiery and determined and alive.

After a moment, Jack came over to sit on the couch beside him. He maintained a careful inch or so of space between them. "I could hear the explosion from a full level down," he told Ianto in a low voice. "When I heard it, I thought-"

"I could have killed her," Ianto said quietly. "I was tired and careless and I could have-"

"You protected her." Jack's voice is firm. "You shielded her with your own body. She told me. You slipped up, yes, but your first instinct was to keep Gwen safe. Everyone screws up sometimes; what matters is how you handle yourself afterward. You did exactly the right thing."

Ianto shook his head. "I shouldn't have even let her handle those things without running a full set of scans beforehand-"

"You're not a technician, you didn't know. It's not your fault."

"I *should* have known!" Ianto insisted, finally bringing his head up to meet Jack's eyes. "I have to know, have to be the one to take care of these things, because there's *no one else left*."

Jack looked stricken. "Ianto-"

"It should have been me," Ianto whispered. He'd never admitted it before, not even to himself. "Before either of them - it should have been me."

Because a doctor and a tech were far more valuable than a glorified office boy. Because Tosh had been brilliant and kind, with a huge heart just waiting to be filled, and because she'd forgiven Ianto for Lisa before anyone else could even look him in the eye. Because Owen could patch a person up with little more than spit and chewing gum and held the Hippocratic Oath as the goddamn gospel truth even if he believed in nothing else, and because he felt so much, so intensely, all the time and it was unthinkable that he couldn't feel anything else ever again. Because Ianto had watched his people die around him time and time again and his number was up.

He'd had a good run of it. It should have been him.

Jack gripped his shoulders hard enough to bruise. It was the first time he'd touched Ianto in a week and a half. "Don't you dare."

"I was supposed to have been the one at the nuclear power station," Ianto went on relentlessly. "We couldn't get through because of the Weevils, so Owen-" He swallowed hard, keeping his eyes on Jack's. "If it had been me, then Owen would've gone back to the Hub - he'd have been there when Tosh-"

"*Don't.*" Jack gave Ianto a rough shake. Ianto let him, feeling loose and empty. "Ianto-"

"It should have been me."

"Never," Jack said fiercely. "Not you. Don't even *think* it. God, Ianto, if I'd lost you-" He pulled Ianto in close, pressing a hard kiss to his temple. It felt like a dam breaking, walls crumbling down. "If you were gone, I don't think I could have come back."

Ianto closed his eyes and finally, finally let himself go.

No matter how good their intentions or alien technology, nothing can be accomplished all at once. It took a full week of planning and preparation before they were able to hit the UNIT facility where Ianto had been kept; getting Martha out of UNIT's clutches won't be any easier.

And when she's not busy worrying about what exactly UNIT is up to, Gwen worries about Ianto.

It's not because he's doing anything to *make* her worry - far from it. He brushes off her offers of time off, saying he prefers to keep busy. She knew that already. And God knows he's a great help - for starters, handling all negotiations with Archie from Two, who's a cantankerous old bastard on the best of days. "Way back when, I was his point of contact for London," Ianto tells her, shrugging. "We got on well enough."

"I'm almost surprised you didn't go to him after Canary Wharf, rather than risk everything on Cardiff," Gwen remarks.

Ianto shoots her a Look. "He didn't exactly have the resources I needed at the time."

"I did say *almost*."

But when he isn't working, Ianto just seems to...go blank. She catches him sometimes standing in the middle of the office, watching the rest of the team buzz around him, looking completely lost. Ianto had been master of the old Hub, knew all its secrets, could find anything or anyone in five minutes flat. This new base of operations is much smaller, much less secret. Lois has all of the administrative duties covered and then some, Mickey is the tech whiz, Yuan is quickly making himself indispensable in the lab, and Andy handles any remaining operational logistics and interfaces with the locals on their behalf. Once they move back to the Hub and get the archives back in place, Ianto will have a proper job again,

but at the moment it's clear that he feels...unnecessary. Unwanted, even. Gwen wants badly to show him he *is* wanted and needed here, very much so, but she doesn't know how.

What's really worrying is Ianto's demeanor. He's reverted back to Gwen's earliest days with Torchwood, before they'd discovered Lisa - polite, impersonal, and all but invisible. Even when he's standing right with the others, it's easy to forget he's even there. Gwen brought her best friend back to life only to watch him slowly disappear right in front of her, and it's breaking her heart.

Three days in, he raps lightly on the door to her private office. She waves him in. "Please tell me there's news from UNIT."

"Nothing in particular, I'm afraid," he says, placing a folder on her desk and taking a seat. "No one knows what they're up to, not even Whitehall. Mickey says Sarah Jane has been trying all her old contacts, with no luck. But something's sure to shake out eventually."

Gwen sighs. She glances down at the folder. "Great. So what's this?"

"Paperwork. Slightly more exciting than usual." Ianto leans back slightly. "Archie's officially resigning as Director of the Torchwood Institute."

"He's - what? There's a *director*?" Gwen blinks. "Who died and made *Archie* director?"

"Yvonne Hartman, actually," Ianto says dryly. "With One eliminated, it was down to Archie or Jack, and believe it or not, Archie had seniority. He'd been head of Two since the early 90s. Jack only took over Three in 2000."

Gwen stares at him for a moment with a sense of impending doom. "Ianto, no."

"Gwen, yes." There's a flash of humor in his eyes, an echo of his former self. "I've drawn up all the appropriate paperwork. All you have to do is sign."

"If it's seniority that matters, *you've* got me beat by several years-"

"Rank counts before longevity, obviously. Besides, haven't you heard? I'm dead." Ianto gives her a brief smile, then opens the folder. "The first sheet confirms you as Director of the Torchwood Institute, bound by the following charters and provisions, et cetera-"

"I don't *want* to be Director!"

"And then the next page is your first official act as Director, dissolving the former Torchwood Institute and eliminating its charter, and in place establishing what will hereafter be known as the Torchwood Archives, which serves its sovereign, nation, and planet to protect, defend, and represent the human race in respect to extraterrestrial races and societies." Ianto lets out a breath. "Try saying that three times fast. There's only an interim charter at the moment - you'll want people more talented than I am to draw up the official language, but it's a start."

It's too much, all at once. "Ianto, I'm not *ready*."

"No one ever is," Ianto says quietly. "But you can't always pick your timing. Sometimes it picks you. And Gwen - you *are* ready, trust me."

Suddenly, she's angry - at herself, for being tired and frightened and uncertain; at Jack, for running away and dumping Torchwood in her lap; at UNIT, for whatever the *fuck* they thought they were doing. At Ianto, for sitting there so calmly telling her that she's this great visionary person that she's *not*.

"What the hell do *you* know about it?" she demands, feeling her face heat up. "Do you know what I really am, Ianto? I'm *scared shitless*. In a few very short weeks I'm going to be a mother for the first time, and I have no idea what sort of world I'm going to be bringing this child into. That's one life that's mine alone to fuck up - and now you're telling me I'm responsible for all *this* as well? For the future of the bloody human race? I'm a stupid wide-eyed ex-copper who thought she could change the world with a smile and a bit of heart, but I was never meant for this job and this Rift and these fucking aliens - but that's all right, we don't need aliens to destroy us 'cause the human race is doing a fine job all on its own! And I lost you and Jack all at once, and all I wanted to do was run back home and hide but there was *no one else*. And now you're here for, what, four days and you somehow think I'm the right person for this job, just because I was the only one left standing?"

She's crying now, and hates herself for it but can't seem to stop, and Ianto is looking at her like he *understands* and it's all too much.

"Yes," he says. "That's exactly *why* you're the right person. You're still standing. You kept going. Sometimes, Gwen, that's all it takes."

Gwen just shakes her head, mute.

"What *is* Torchwood?" Ianto asks intently, leaning forward, hands gripping the edge of her desk. "It's whatever you make of it, Gwen. You've already started. You're not going around guns blazing, retconning people left and right. You've learned to delegate, and sure, maybe some of your trust in UNIT was misplaced, but it was still the right decision. Let the military handle the dangerous shit - but provide them with the information they need to approach it properly. That's what we've got, with the Archives. *So use it.*" He takes a deep breath. "What is Torchwood's mission? To defend Great Britain against alien threat? This isn't a national issue anymore, it's *global*. That's what UNIT is *there* for. The Torchwood Institute is obsolete. But the Torchwood Archives - that's another story. That's the great Library of Alexandria. Knowledge, that's the real power. More than that - information. Controlling what information reaches whom." Ianto's lips twist into a bitter smile. "Jack knew that. He played us all for years by simply manipulating the flow of information."

"Jack wasn't playing us!" Gwen protests, but her heart's not in it anymore.

"Wasn't he?" Ianto just looks at her. "The best cons are the ones your marks never even realized were running."

Of course, Lois chooses that precise moment to stick her head in. "Gwen - oh, sorry, I didn't realize Ianto was in here."

Gwen takes a deep breath, wiping her face. She gives Lois a shaky smile. "Not a problem. Did you need something?"

Lois glances between them, biting her lip nervously. "No, I just wanted to let you know - Andy says he's heard some rumblings from his old friends on the force. UNIT's reaching out to local police forces all around the UK - they've broken radio silence. We should be getting more information soon. Just giving you a heads up."

"Thank you, Lois," Gwen says. "I'm glad you did. Ianto and I are almost finished here, we'll come out to join you in a few more minutes."

"Great, thanks!" Lois darts away, closing the door carefully behind her.

After a few long moments, Ianto offers her a tentative smile. "She's my kind of secretary," he remarks. "Clever, efficient, resourceful. Fancies the boss rotten."

Gwen frowns, bemused. "Well, okay, I guess so. Jack was like that. But she only even met him once or twice, I think she's moved past that by now."

Ianto rolls his eyes. "Didn't say *Jack*, did I? I said *the boss*."

"What, me?" She can feel her eyes widening. "I don't - it's not like that!"

"I didn't think it was," Ianto says, grinning, looking for all the world like the young man he is. She forgets, sometimes, that he's several years her junior. Torchwood is a hell of an ageing process. "You've never seemed to go for women, passing sex aliens aside - though God knows that's not nearly uncommon enough in this job. But even if you did, there's Rhys, and the baby. And you're less daft these days."

"I've changed," Gwen murmurs. She looks up at Ianto's face, searchingly. "The boss. This charter. The Torchwood Archives. You really don't think Jack's coming back, do you?"

Ianto shrugs, looking away. She can't read his expression. "I can't think of a single reason why he would, no."

"He came back for you once before," Gwen points out.

"For all of us, he said."

"Yes. But particularly you."

"It's not enough," Ianto says quietly. "Not this time."

"I wonder sometimes," Gwen says, voice low. "If it had been me instead of you..."

Ianto just looks at her, waiting.

She can't meet his eyes. "If I had died and you had lived, would he still have left in the first place?"

They sit in silence for a long time.

"Maybe," Ianto finally says. "But I would have gone with him."

"If he let you."

"I'd have followed him, somehow. I always did. So it's a lucky thing for Cardiff it was me instead." Ianto sighs, getting to his feet. "Listen, Gwen, you can babysit the Rift for the rest of your life, and watch everyone die around you again and again and again because we're not *trained* for this. Or you can build something real, something that will last. You've got the tools. It's up to what you make of them."

Gwen looks up at him, beseeching. "And I've got you, Ianto. Haven't I?"

He hesitates, just for a moment, eyes darkening. "Of course," he tells her. "Always."

Ianto has always been a good liar, even to himself. She wants him to mean it, and more importantly, *he* wants to mean it. So she doesn't call him on the lie.

She wonders how much longer he'll stay. She doesn't think she wants to know the answer.

Before following Ianto out, Gwen opens the folder and signs at the bottom of every page.

In the central office area, she finds the rest of the team gathered around Mickey's workstation. "Good timing," he calls, waving her over. "We've got company."

"UNIT?" Gwen asks, hustling over as fast as she can.

"Looks like."

Gwen squares her shoulders. "Then let's go see what they want."

The UNIT jeep has pulled up right to the front door of Torchwood's office building. Three soldiers in red berets flank it, faces perfectly impassive. Their ranking officer, a decorated black woman, steps out to meet them. Gwen glances back - her entire team has come out with her, flanking her, facing off the team from UNIT. Mickey is at her right hand, as her second-in-command; Lois at her left. Andy, Yuan, and Ianto stand behind them.

Her team. The reality of it strikes her suddenly. Her heart skips a few beats. All at once, she realizes - maybe she is ready.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Erisa Magambo, mum," the UNIT woman says, saluting smartly. "Interim commander of UNIT in Great Britain. Torchwood, I presume?"

"Yes, I-" Gwen takes a deep breath and straightens, head high. "Gwen Cooper, Director of the Torchwood Archives."

"Excellent." Magambo shakes Gwen's hand warmly. "It's good to meet you at last."

Gwen looks her over, somewhat warily. This is not the reception she was expecting. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant-Colonel, I have to ask - *interim* commander of UNIT?"

"It's rather a long story," Magambo says. She doesn't quite smile, but her eyes glint with amusement. "I'm afraid UNIT's undergone a bit of a coup over the past few days. Let's just say we are operating under new management at the moment."

Gwen glances over at Mickey, who looks about as gobsmacked as she feels. She gives him a nod, and he yanks out his mobile and walks off a ways to call Sarah Jane and the rest of their little conspiracy.

"I see," Gwen says aloud to Magambo. "Not to be blunt, but may I ask what UNIT's new policies are in regards to Torchwood?"

Now Magambo does smile. "We haven't formalized anything, but for now, shall we say - we very much hope to establish a spirit of goodwill and mutual cooperation between our organizations, in the acknowledgment that we both work toward a common goal. For example, right now, I am led to understand that you are working on a broadcast?" Gwen nods mutely. "Good. How can we be of assistance?"

It's too good to be true. "Assistance?"

Lieutenant-Colonel Magambo's smile broadens. "Times are changing, Director Cooper. We can no longer stick our heads in the sand and pretend no one else will notice. This is the Unified *Intelligence* Taskforce. It is time and past we lived up to our name."

Gwen considers this. She can feel a smile beginning at the corners of her mouth. "Then by all means, let's get to work. Oh, and that reminds me..." She glances over her shoulder, giving Yuan a nod. He steps forward eagerly. "You've got a facility in Bournemouth that's currently holding thirty-eight corpses. Our doctor would like to bring them back to life."

The autopsy bay was cleaner than Ianto had ever seen it, gleaming under the harsh fluorescents. Ianto leaned over the railing and clutched his coffee mug like a lifeline. "Keep this up and I'll be out of a job," he remarked sleepily.

Owen glanced up from sorting scalpels with a scowl. "Don't get too complacent there, Jeeves. This isn't going to be a habit."

"Remind me why you're here organizing your equipment at five in the morning?"

"Bored," Owen muttered. He studied a bent piece of metal intently, then deemed it unusable and flicked it into the bin. "There's only so much late night telly a man can watch before going bender."

"And you're such a gentle breed of zombie normally."

Owen grimaced. "Still haven't developed a taste for brains, but seriously, mate, do you have to flaunt the coffee about like that? It's downright cruel. I'm digestively challenged these days."

Ianto took a sip. It burned pleasantly down his throat. "It's not like you need the caffeine anymore."

"No, but that doesn't kill the cravings." Owen shoved the remaining scalpels into a drawer, slamming it shut. He put his hands on his hips and glanced around the med bay for another project.

He looked...lost. Not that Ianto hadn't seen Owen in his more vulnerable moments before, though they were few and far between, but usually he masked it with anger. Now, though, he just seemed empty.

Ianto hesitated, then took a seat on the steps leading down to the bay, stretching his legs out comfortably. He didn't say anything, didn't even look at Owen directly. But after a minute, Owen huffed out a breath (*not real breath - he doesn't breathe anymore, heart doesn't beat, just keeps going and going for no reason but that he does*) and came up the stairs to join him. He sat a few steps below Ianto, leaning back on his elbows, looking straight ahead.

Ianto sipped his coffee and waited him out.

"Jack doesn't sleep much," Owen said finally. "What does he do instead?" Ianto coughed, raising an eyebrow; Owen glanced back at him and pulled a face. "Apart from *that*, obviously. Jesus Christ, I'm never spending the night in the Hub again - you two aren't half loud, you know."

"Didn't know we had an audience," Ianto pointed out. Not that it would've made much difference - Jack probably would have been even noisier if he'd known, actually. Ianto refrained from mentioning that. "But other than that - I'm not sure, really. Paperwork, sometimes. Or he goes out wandering. I don't know. He sleeps more than he used to do, since he came back."

Or at least stayed the night more, while Ianto slept. It wasn't something they discussed. Ianto didn't intend to bring it up - they were no good at those sorts of talks, the ones that felt too much like a relationship. They weren't like that, he and Jack.

But he'd got used to not waking up alone.

After a moment, Owen shrugged, looking away. He stared down at the steps. "This isn't living," he said quietly.

Ianto thought about the weeks immediately following Lisa. Empty days and sleepless nights, doing his job by rote, just going through the motions. Going and going for no reason at all, because there was nothing else.

At least he'd chosen that, however indirectly. Even if it was a choice by omission, by not choosing anything else. Owen had never got a say in the matter.

And in the end, Ianto had found something worth staying for.

He silently reached down and passed his mug to Owen. Owen blinked, bemused, then took it. He held the mug of coffee in his nerveless hands and brought it up to his face, closing his eyes and breathing the aroma in deeply.

They sat together as the Hub slowly came to life around them, and neither spoke another word.

The UNIT cell is small, blank, and perfectly empty. Martha can walk its length in four strides. The walls and floor are water-stained cement, patchy shades of grey, and the door might once have been red. It's clean, smelling of bleach and stone. That's about the only good thing she can say about it. There is a narrow, barred window set very high in one wall, and she follows the shifting light around the cell to mark out the passage of the day. The only colors she ever sees are the rust of the door and the red of her jumpsuit.

She never meets any of the other prisoners, never sees or hears any sign of their presence. The walls are soundproofed and she is kept locked in isolation. She sees the guards twice a day - tasteless meals followed by trips to the lav. Once a day she's also directed into a shower, closely guarded while she hurries herself into some approximation of clean with lukewarm water and a rough bar of soap.

Her effort to engage a guard in conversation on the first day leads to the butt of his rifle smashed into her face. She already had her shower, has to wait until the next day to scrub away the dried blood. She doesn't try again.

No one speaks to her, not once. She knows the device set in the ceiling will record any sound she makes, so she doesn't bother. The sound of her own voice wouldn't be much in the way of company, anyway.

At first, she assumed it would be easy to keep track of time - the sunlight through the window, the regular schedule of meals and loo breaks. But she underestimated how quickly an active mind in isolation could turn in on itself. It might be the third day, or the fourth, when she realizes she's already lost track.

It might be the fourth day, or the seventh, when she realizes it doesn't matter anyway. Did Mr. Smith catch her message? Did Sarah Jane and Mickey complete the broadcast? Did it make any difference at all? Or did they run out of time - was the alien computer destroyed - has Torchwood fallen for good at last - were her co-conspirators arrested and thrown into tiny isolated cells like these-

And she's seriously considering talking to herself aloud before the only sound she can make is a scream.

She'd never thought her natural extroversion would be a disadvantage; now, she *needs* to speak with someone, hear another person's voice and feel the warmth of their touch, *anyone*, more desperately than she ever would have believed possible.

Martha hugs herself tightly in a corner of her cell and tries to tell herself she isn't going mad.

The patch of sunlight is streaking across the door when it opens. At first, Martha just frowns at it. It's not supposed to open when the light is on it - only when the light is high in the upper left corner, or fading away in the upper right. She doesn't ask any questions, though, because she'll get hurt. So she pulls herself to her feet and prepares for inspection.

Then she blinks, because the guard at the door isn't dressed like a guard, black uniform and red beret. He's dressed like a *person*.

"Martha Jones," he says, and smiles. Then he turns back to call over his shoulder - "She's here!"

Now she's *really* not certain she isn't going mad. "Ianto?"

It the first word she's spoken in - she doesn't know how long.

Before Ianto can say anything else - *oh please, oh please, keep talking to me, be real* - someone barrels past him through the dried-blood door and into her stormcloud-grey cell, throwing his arms around her. "Oh God, oh God," Mickey chants into her neck. "Martha, oh *God*."

"Mickey," she breathes. He's warm and solid and *real*, and she starts to cry for the first time since her capture, however many days ago. She clutches his back, pressing her face into his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she says, muffled against his shirt. "We weren't ready, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but I didn't know what else to do-"

He pulls back to look at her, rough hand cupping her cheek. "Don't you dare apologize."

Martha can't quite meet his eyes yet, feeling too raw with days and days of nothing but guilt and grief and loneliness and worry. But when he tilts her chin up and kisses her, she can almost believe everything will be all right.

Someone coughs. They break apart to see Gwen and Ianto in the doorway, looking amused. "They managed to hide this from you for *seven months*?" Ianto remarks, eyebrow raised.

Gwen flashes him a grin. "They used to be *much* more discreet. But yeah, I have no excuse, really."

"Gwen," Martha says, feeling a renewed rush of guilt. "I'm so sorry that I had to lie to you-"

"But UNIT was watching, I know." Gwen waves a hand. "Doesn't matter. Are you all right?" she asks, more seriously, coming forward to them. "Yuan's just outside, I'll have him look you over."

Martha brushes her off. "I'm fine." Well, maybe not, but physically, at least, she'll do. "But how did you-"

"It was a bit tricky to figure out where you'd been taken, what with the havoc wreaked upon UNIT's databases," Mickey says, taking her hand. "But Ianto knew about this facility-"

"They held Toshiko here once, a long time ago," Ianto puts in quietly. "It was in her file. Jack kept pretty close tabs on UNIT, luckily, so it was easy enough to find the place. I'm glad you were actually *here*, not in one of their other holding cells."

"Good old Torchwood," Martha says, smiling shakily. Then she thinks about what Mickey just said. "Um - havoc? What happened to the UNIT records?"

They all exchange wry looks.

"You have some *very* good friends within UNIT," Gwen tells her with a smile. "When Mr. Smith sent out the news that you'd been captured, they staged a bit of a coup."

Martha blinks at her.

"You'd be amazed at what a small, dedicated group of disgruntled civil servants can accomplish," Ianto says dryly, still leaning against the doorway. "Even under new management, it'll be weeks before they finish sorting out the mess."

Martha makes a mental note to get *that* full story later. In the meantime - "The broadcast?" she demands, gripping Mickey's hand. "Did we-"

"Come and see for yourself," he says, grinning, twining his fingers around hers.

They lead her out of her cell - down the horrible corridors - out into a communal area she's never seen before. There are TVs mounted in the corners, all showing the same broadcast. Sarah Jane is speaking calmly into the camera, positively radiating assurance.

- so much life beyond what we could possibly imagine, she's saying. This hardly scrapes the tip of the iceberg. A covert Unified Intelligence Taskforce was established by the United Nations in 1964 to investigate, monitor, and combat potential extraterrestrial threats. Until 1976, it was headed by Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, a man I have long been honored to call my friend. She turns with a smile, and the camera pans over to reveal the Brigadier himself, a robust-looking elderly gentleman.

As the Brigadier speaks, Martha reaches out to grip Mickey's shoulder. "Mr. Smith had it broadcasting on every television across the world," Mickey tells her. "No one could shut it off, no government could suppress it. And now all the news channels are showing it again, of course."

"People are paying attention at last," Gwen adds. "They're discussing it on every internet forum, in pubs, on the streets. They've started calling it all the Xylok Tapes, after Sarah Jane's computer. I hear Mr. Smith is just tickled pink."

"Oh, my God," Martha whispers. "She did it. She and Mr. Smith-"

"And Torchwood," Mickey says, glancing over at Gwen and Ianto with a grin. "That was the last key. You have no idea what sort of gold mine they were sitting on, this whole time."

The TV screen begins flashing image after image of people telling their stories. Some are clearly recently filmed, in much the same style as Sarah Jane and the Brigadier; others are older footage - updos and clunky glasses from the 80s, sepia-tinted film from the 60s, black and white -

My name is Mike Yates. I attained the rank of Captain with UNIT before my retirement in 1974. In my time with UNIT, I encountered some of the most astonishing things...

My name is Professor Celeste Rivers, and I am one of the senior scientists representing the Pharos Institute. Our organization drew strong governmental scrutiny during the attempted invasion of the 456...

...assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint, it's more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly timey wimey stuff...



I'm Shou Yuing, live in a village called Carbury that no one ever bothers with, and quite right too - but last week at the local pub, right, I ran across this crazy cool girl, Ace, she knew nearly as much about explosives as I did, and you wouldn't believe what we got up to...

My name is Emma-Louise Cowell. I was born in 1935. I am now twenty-one years old. When I was eighteen I boarded a small passenger plane called the Sea Gipsy...

...shop dummies coming alive and walking the streets, I swear to God!

My name's Linda, I used to work with a man called Eugene. He had this collector's item he was really proud of, said it was an alien artifact. He called it a Gorgon Eye...

They go on and on, cutting from face to face, story to story, and Martha's heart feels too big for her chest, and it's *glorious*.

"I once spent a year walking the Earth, telling one story," Martha says softly. "Just one story, and it saved the Earth from the Master. If just one story could change the world, I thought, imagine what hundreds could do."

Mickey gives her hand a squeeze. "You thought right."

My name is Alan Jackson. I'm a computer security consultant in Washington, DC. While my daughter Maria and I still lived in England, she ran afoul of a creature called a Graske...

...all of space and time he promised me. Now I've got a job in a shop, I've got to support him!

My name is Carol Ganatra. My ex-husband once tried to attack me and our son Danny, but we were saved by a good Samaritan, I never caught her name. She wore this beautiful pendant...

...used to work with an organization at Canary Wharf, just an ordinary sort of job really, filing and fetching coffee, you know, but the sorts of things in those files...

My name is Sally Sparrow, and this is my boyfriend Larry Nightingale. We run a used book and DVD shop in London. A few years ago, while I was photographing an old house in Wester Drumlins, I came across a strange message...

I'm D.I. Kathy Swanson, out of Cardiff, and you wouldn't believe the stories I could tell about the special ops group that keeps poking its nose into police business...

"It's quite the achievement, you know," Ianto says softly. He looks strangely sad, and Martha doesn't know why. "After all those years of secrecy..."

Gwen shakes her head, smiling. "Everything changes."

My name is Bridget Spears. For twenty years I served as Personal Assistant to Home Office Permanent Secretary John Frobisher. During the incident with the 456, I was able to record these meetings of the British Cabinet in conjunction with representatives from UNIT and the United States military command...

My name is Maggie Hopley. I once met a man on a rooftop who told me the most extraordinary story...

So this is what the future might look like, Martha thought, not bothering to wipe away the tears spilling down her cheeks. Now it's just up to them to keep telling the right stories.

Ianto awoke with a jolt, disoriented and breathing hard. It took him a few long seconds to acclimate himself. He was in the back seat of the SUV. It was dark, apart from streetlights passing blurrily outside the windows. Tosh was curled up against his side, the side of her face pressed into his shoulder, her hair tickling his chin. He felt oddly divorced from his own body, as though watching it from somewhere far away. Painkillers, he noted, distantly. Very strong painkillers. Which he'd needed because-

Tenderize the meat.

Oh, right. That.

He looked out the window, blinking to bring the world into sharper focus. City streets. So they were back in Cardiff. Ianto didn't recognize the neighborhood - must not be at the Hub yet. But soon.

"I'm dropping Tosh off at home first," Jack said quietly from the front. Ianto glanced up to meet his eyes in the rearview mirror. "Then we can catch up with Gwen and Owen at A&E and get you checked out properly."

That's right, Owen had gone with Gwen in the ambulance. Because she'd been shot. And loudly protested that she was fine and didn't need hospital, but Jack had insisted, and the ambulance was there anyway so it wasn't exactly out of anyone's way.

Ianto knew how Gwen felt, though. The thought of hospital - strangers touching him, poking and prodding and asking questions... Bile rose in the back of his throat. He swallowed hard.

"I just want to go home," he told Jack. His voice felt hoarse, raw. "Not A&E. Please, Jack."

Tosh murmured something unintelligible, curling closer into him. She was so small and warm. Real. Familiar. Ianto breathed in the scent of her hair and skin, reminding himself that not all humans were monsters. Not all touch was meant to hurt.

The SUV was at a stoplight; Jack twisted to look back at him, probably to argue about hospital. His expression softened when he saw them.

"Please," Ianto said again.

Jack sighed, eyes unreadable. "All right."

They pulled up outside Tosh's flat a few minutes later. Ianto hesitated, not wanting to wake her. But Jack just came around and opened the door on Ianto's side. He rested his hand on Ianto's shoulder, and Ianto nodded. Together they gently maneuvered Tosh out of the car. She was already tucked up against Ianto's chest; it was easy enough to pull her up into his arms.

Carrying her was a bit tricky - Tosh was small, and not heavy, but Ianto had taken a hell of a beating a few hours before, and Owen's industrial strength painkillers could only do so much. But he ignored the way his muscles twinged and protested. He'd be feeling it tomorrow anyway - a few more aches wouldn't make much difference in the grand scheme.

Jack led the way, unlocking the door for them. Ianto was entirely unsurprised that he had a spare set of keys to Tosh's place. He certainly had keys to Ianto's, probably did for Owen's and Gwen's as well.

Tosh stirred as Ianto carried her into her living room. "Ianto?" she murmured against his neck. "Where-"

"Home," Ianto told her. "You're home. Almost there."

He found the bedroom easily and set her down on her bed. She blinked up at him. He could see exactly when she started waking up properly - she flushed scarlet. "I didn't mean to nod off, I'm so sorry. You didn't have to-"

"It's all right," Ianto said. "Don't worry about it."

"And don't worry about getting up in the morning, either," Jack said from the doorway. He gave Tosh a gentle smile. "Take tomorrow off. Get some rest. And don't hesitate to call me if you need anything - anything at all. I'm serious."

Tosh nodded, looking around with the slow, stiff movements of the truly exhausted. She kicked off her shoes and curled up under her coverlet, already half asleep again before Jack and Ianto left, Ianto closing the bedroom door carefully behind them.

Out in the living room, he had to stop for a moment, leaning back against the wall and closing his eyes. The painkillers must have been wearing off - his arms and back were killing him.

"Ianto?"

Ianto opened his eyes to see Jack studying him with some concern. Jack stepped in closer, eyes darkening. This was probably the first time he'd got a good look at Ianto since the village, Ianto realized - and then, there'd been too much chaos, what with Gwen's more serious injuries and the police and ambulances on the scene, dealing with questions and giving orders.

"How bad do I look?" Ianto asked, trying to keep his tone light. He knew how he *felt*, and that was bad enough.

"Like I want Owen to have a very close look at you," Jack replied, voice tight. He reached out to trace a gentle line down Ianto's neck, fingertips barely brushing the skin. That was where the cleaver had bit into him, Ianto remembered, and wished he didn't. "Jesus, Ianto..."

"I'm fine," Ianto said. He kept his eyes on Jack, standing so close. Maybe it should have made him uncomfortable, so soon after the cannibals in the village, so have another person so near; but it was like Tosh in the car. He needed this, to feel someone else's familiar touch on his skin, warm and real. To write over the sense memory of the Brecon Beacons with something better.

No one had touched him since the night he lost Lisa.

Jack's hand was still hovering at his collarbone; Ianto leaned into the touch. He reached up to grab Jack's shoulder, to hold him in place. Jack raised his eyebrows, lips parting to say something; Ianto leaned in and kissed the words out of Jack's mouth.

And after a moment, Jack opened his mouth, deepening the kiss. Ianto tugged him closer, and Jack slipped his hand around to cradle the back of Ianto's neck, pressing him against the wall. His touch was careful, mindful of Ianto's many bruises, but his mouth was anything but, weeks of not-touching since the discovery of Lisa abruptly forgotten, bodies moving together in familiar patterns. Ianto's head was all muggy from the painkillers, the memory of the cleaver still stung his neck, and when he kissed Jack, it tasted like *life*.

He hadn't felt this alive in a very long time.

Finally, Jack broke away, breathing raggedly. "All right," he murmured, forehead resting gently against Ianto's. "Let's get you home."

Jack doesn't bother keeping track of time these days.

It's kind of a moot point anyway. Which system of measurement is he supposed to use - Earth time? The planet he's currently visiting has twenty-nine hours to the day and a solar orbit of 472 days. What's a week, a month, a year? And there's no day or night in space. As a Time Agent and beyond, he'd gone by Galactic Standard Time, which was only really considered "standard" in about eleven galaxies anyway. Being human, he'd stuck to the terracentric dating system that most of the human colonies still clung to, but even that was fudging it, at best.

And his life now - it doesn't matter how much time passes in its relentlessly linear march. He's here now. He'll still be here in a hundred Galactic Standard decades, a thousand Boeshanian centuries, a billion Earth years. Time is something he'll never run out of. Who bothers measuring every grain of sand on a beach, every drop of water in the ocean?

At first, he'd been driven by such a strange sense of urgency - *get off Earth. Find the 456. Make them pay.* But that's since cooled to a low burn under his skin, a patient vengeance. He has all the time in the world to find the 456, to bring them to justice. Their hours are already numbered. They just don't realize it yet.

So Jack's not really sure how much time has passed since he gave John the job. He could do the calculations easily enough (his wriststrap isn't *entirely* useless these days, after all), but can't really be bothered. Once he's exhausted his previous line of investigation - not quite a dead end, he did get *some* useful intel out of it - he finds himself a secure location and sends John his coordinates, settling in to wait.

Knowing John, Jack had expected some time lag - at least a few hours, possibly even a few *days* if John's feeling particularly tetchy. So he's mildly surprised when John materializes in front of him less than ten minutes after his transmission was sent.

"You're definitely buying me a drink this time," John says without preamble, slouching against the hull with a purpose. Then he takes in their surroundings and grins. "Ooh, a GF-87 Vinvucci Starglider, very nice. Classic. Bit primitive, of course, but there's linear time for you, yeah? Still, handy little teleport pod, bet you've already got that tuned to the frequency on your vortex manipulator."

"It's a useful way to planet-hop, yes," Jack says, reining in his impatience. He's lucky John's not already down on hands and knees in the engine room. It's one thing they've always had in common - a fondness for tight little ships. "The virus?"

John shoots him a hard look. "The drink first."

Two shots of straight hypervodka later, John's finally ready to do business. He fishes a packet out of his coat pocket and shoves it across the table at Jack. "Have at it. And that's the last time I ever visit Earth on *your* coordinates, Jesus fucking Christ."

"First Contact a bit too exciting for you?" Jack asks idly. He only has eyes for the sample, currently wedged tightly into a freezer pack. Once he finds a good lab run by people he can trust...

"Yeah, I only nearly interfered with the people compiling the bloody Xylok Tapes," John grouses. "Because *that* wouldn't have snapped any timelines, or anything."

Jack glances back up at him, frowning. "The what tapes?" Something about it itches in the back of his mind, like a bad dose of Retcon.

"Peripherals again, I take it," John says. His tone isn't quite as caustic as Jack would expect. In fact, he sounds almost...pensive. He eyes Jack narrowly. "You know, Jack, I've got to wonder what exactly you did, that they erased *these* memories in particular."

"You and me both." But it's an old wound now, not worth reopening. There are far, far worse things than a couple of years' lost memories. Jack's learned. "Anyway, the credits should be in your account within the hour. Thanks. You can get back to your life, whatever that is."

And for a moment, he actually thinks that might be it - job done, John dispatched, he can return to his business in peace.

He really should know better by now.

John drums his fingers on the table. "You have no idea what you've got there, do you?"

"A virus that wiped out a building full of people within minutes," Jack replies promptly. "And which hopefully contains some clues as to where it *came* from."

"Oh, it's got clues, all right, though damned if they won't just muddle your little 'investigation' up further."

"And you'd know this how?"

"Ran a few scans on the bloody thing, what d'you think?" John says, exasperated. "Had to make sure it was the real deal, for starters."

Jack rolls his eyes. "Right, because you're a scientist now."

"Remind me which one of us took a course in biomedical engineering at the Academy?"

"You were just trying to engineer yourself a bigger-"

"Someone encoded a Trojan Horse into the virus, Jack."

Jack stills.

John raises an eyebrow. "So do I have your attention now, class?"

"For what purpose?" Jack asks, quiet and intent.

"Damned if I know, but it definitely wasn't the 456 who did it. Unless they *wanted* to sabotage their own biowar."

"The 456 are druggies and profiteers, but they're not idiots. If they bought the virus elsewhere, they must have scanned it pretty carefully themselves. How'd this get past them?"

"Because no one would think to look for *this*," John says, fidgeting excitedly. He always did enjoy knowing things other people don't. "It was completely recessive, activated by residual serological resonance. Well, in a manner of speaking."

"*Blood* control?" Jack says incredulously. "But only a handful of advanced races still believe in that sort of voodoo-" He cuts himself off, eyes widening. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

John taps his nose. "See, now *that*, I hadn't known about. The Sycorax tried to stage an invasion of *Earth*, of all places? Seriously? How the hell did *that* get hushed up?"

"Torchwood London blew their ship out of the sky before they could tell anyone about it," Jack explains automatically, mind still racing.

Activated by residual serological resonance, John said. That means anyone who'd been controlled by the Sycorax, that ever so irritating Christmas morning, years ago now. That means-

"What was the Trojan Horse?" he demands. His voice sounds wrong in his ears, scraped raw.

John grins. "You're never going to believe this."

"Try me," Jack grates out.

"A Jericho Rose."

The words hang in the air like a gas, like a toxin. Jack almost recoils from the package on the table between them. "You're right," he finally says, tone flat and distant. "I don't believe you."

John leans back in his chair, challenge in his eyes. "Yeah?"

"A Jericho Rose," Jack repeats. "A bit of medical engineering so vastly advanced you'd need a time traveler to obtain it finds itself planted into a home-grown twenty-first century bioweapon? The only people within a million *years* of this time with a stash of Jericho are the Agency, and God knows even they don't have anything remotely approaching the medical technology you'd need to encode it into *any* sort of virus, let alone sneak it round the back door as a Trojan Horse. The Agency could barely even replicate what they had for their own private use!" He's practically shouting by now, pacing

around the small galley of his ship, John's delivery in hand. "And you expect me to believe it turned up in *this*?"

He slams the packet down on the table so hard that John winces, making an abortive motion as though to protect the virus sample inside. It's well insulated, though, and doesn't break.

It's not possible. It *can't* be possible. If it were true, Jack's own blood would have activated the Jericho Rose, and he wouldn't have died at Thames House. Just - slipped into stasis until his body healed, and then woken right back up again.

Which for Jack is just like dying. And he'd never experienced a resurrection so tranquil as the one in Thames House.

"You're right," John says at last, a faint smirk brushing his lips. "Still, had you going for a while there, didn't I?" He laughs. "God, your *face*. I'd almost have pulled this job for free, just for that."

He gets to his feet, stretching. Jack watches him in silence, heart still racing, chest tight.

When he realizes he's not getting any further response, John shrugs and taps his vortex manipulator. "I'll just be getting out of your hair, then. Lovely working with you, as always. We should do this again sometime. Like perhaps never."

"You wouldn't even have the technology to pick it up in your scan," Jack says, very quietly. "Not if it was encoded as a Trojan Horse. Not from the virus sample. You'd need-"

"One of the hosts." There's a strange glint in John's eyes. It's almost triumphant. "Funny story, actually. You wouldn't believe who I ran into in that UNIT compound-"

Jack shakes his head mutely. Not possible. He can't even let himself think it *might* be possible. He's crammed his grief into a tiny box in his chest and locked it up tight. The slightest crack, and it all comes pouring back out, and he *can't do this anymore*.

"Yeah," John says, and it sounds almost like a laugh, short and cutting. "He didn't think you'd go back for him anyway."

The whole world is like a graveyard.

"I can't," Jack whispers.

Steven and Gray and Owen and Toshiko-

"Still, I did warn them, didn't I," John says, with some relish. "Told them you weren't to be relied upon. Love 'em and leave 'em, that's good old Jackie boy."

and Suzie and Alex and Estelle and Lucia-

"Not my fault they didn't want to believe me." John gives Jack a hard stare, all metallic eyes and cruel smirk. "So, *partner*, where to next?"

and lanto.

Jack remembers the old silver stopwatch, lanto's sly smile, *that's ten minutes and counting*, and has no idea how long ago that was. He doesn't even know today's date.

He's been wasting so much time.

V.

The open palm of desire
The Rose of Jericho
Soil as soft as summer
The strength to let you go
(Paul Simon)

New Torchwood, same Weevils. Andy's least favorite thing about Torchwood *by far* is the Weevils.

Oh, sure, he can't blame the *existence* of Weevils on Torchwood. (At least as far as he knows.) He definitely knows that the Weevils would still be here even if Torchwood weren't, and if there weren't any Torchwood he'd still be on the police force, and so probably the task of sorting Weevils would wind up falling to him anyway. This is the sort of luck Andy Davidson has.

Actually, if Gwen hadn't rebuilt Torchwood and recruited him straight out of his unpaid suspension, he might well have been formally sacked from the force, and he could be enjoying a peaceful life on the dole right now. Unemployment sounds gorgeous from where he's standing at the moment. Or sprawled flat on his back in a puddle, to be precise. Andy bloody *hates* Weevils. Just in case that wasn't clear.

The Weevil in question collapses, moaning inarticulately and scrabbling at its hideous face. Mickey, spray can in hand, looks a bit winded but still ridiculously pleased with himself. "That never gets old," he remarks with satisfaction, pocketing the Weevil spray and producing a handful of industrial strength zip ties to truss up their victim.

Andy glares up at him balefully from the puddle of filthy drain water. His temple throbs with what will probably blossom into a truly spectacular bruise. He's soaking wet and battered and it's gone half nine and it's bloody freezing out here. "Trust me, mate, it really does."

Mickey just grins at him. Martha's back in town, which means Mickey is utterly insufferable. He was pretty insufferable when she was stuck back in London with UNIT business, actually, but in more of a miserable bastard sort of way. The irrepressibly cheerful bastard way is far, far worse.

His comm crackles. "*Mickey, Andy, are you still out hunting?*" Lois says.

Mickey taps his earpiece. "Just finishing up here. What's up?"

"Got another Weevil alert. Looks like it's that kind of night. Ianto went out to investigate on his own, but he should really get some backup."

They exchange a look. Andy shrugs, wincing as he pulls himself to his feet. Should've worn the Wellies tonight. "Give us the location, we'll head right over," Mickey tells Lois. "Just got to toss this ugly bastard in the boot. Oh, and the Weevil, too."

Andy expertly flicks a gob of muck off his jacket and into Mickey's face.

The second Weevil sighting is out of their way, in the opposite direction from the Hub. By the time they get there, Ianto's car has already been abandoned. "Oi, Ianto!" Mickey calls over the comm. "Where'd you wind up?"

"*Two streets down*," Ianto says. His voice sounds strained. "*Just give me - fuck!*"

By mutual agreement, Andy and Mickey break into a run.

In fairness to Ianto, this particular Weevil is rather larger and bulkier than the usual lot. Not that they're usually fluffy little bunnies. And he's more or less holding his own against it, but given that Andy finds his can of Weevil spray rolling down the street away from him, Ianto's kind of at a disadvantage at the moment.

Just as Andy gets in close enough with the spray to maybe make a difference, the Weevil throws Ianto against a wall, snarling. Ianto's head slams back with a very audible crack. He crumples to the ground, and the Weevil dives after him.

"Fuck this," Mickey snaps, and shoots the Weevil in the back of its head.

It's not official Torchwood policy, but neither of them are going to tell Gwen.

Andy helps Mickey haul the alien body off Ianto, who sits up with a groan. "Shit," Ianto mutters, rubbing the back of his head. "That was fun."

"You all right there, mate?" Andy asks, offering him a hand. Ianto takes it, and together they pull him up to his feet. Ianto's a right mess, what with the rain and muck, and he's got a hell of a bruise forming on his cheek, but he's not bleeding, so Andy's going to call this one a win. Mickey keeps back, watching them with his jaw clenched and shifting his weight from side to side.

"Fine," Ianto says with a wince. "Thanks."

Andy nods and backs away, looking over the dead Weevil cautiously.

All at once, Mickey steps in to shove Ianto up against the wall. "What the hell were you thinking?" he demands. "Trying to take down a Weevil without backup, are you out of your fucking mind?"

After a startled moment, Ianto shoves him back, scowling angrily. "Get off me."

"Are you *trying* to get your sorry arse killed?" Mickey yells. "Gwen gets back from maternity leave in a week, what am I supposed to tell her then? 'Oh, sorry, your boy ran off half-cocked and got eaten by a bloody Weevil on my bloody watch!'"

"Sorry, *sir*," Ianto says scathingly. "After all, it's not like I was hunting Weevils for several *years* before you showed up."

"Then fucking well act like it," Mickey snaps. "A call comes in, you *wait for backup*. There's a bloody panda car patrolling two streets over, we passed it on our way in - why didn't you recruit a constable to help, at least? It's not like we're keeping aliens secret anymore - or did you forget that, too?"

Ianto *had* forgotten that. Andy can see it in the way his eyes dart away from Mickey's. It's a brave new world out there. Everyone knows about aliens. There's even a new cabinet position been created to act as extraterrestrial liaison. But Ianto's still all Secret Agent Man - it would never even occur to him to ask a PC to help him subdue a rampaging alien, when there's no one else at hand.

He's not adjusting.

Mickey's still ranting at full tilt. "Maybe you got confused 'cause it was just three of you for so long, but we've got a bloody *team* now, and you *aren't* Jack. A Weevil gets lucky and snaps your neck, you won't be getting up again!"

Ianto glares at him. For a moment, Andy's genuinely worried he's going to punch Mickey in the face. He steps in between them awkwardly, palms extended. "All right, guys, come on..."

Mickey bats Andy's hand away, but he's visibly calmer now. "Look, Ianto, I know what it's like to have to come back and start over from scratch. The world's moved on without you, and I'm sorry, I know it sucks. But you work through your near-death-experience issues on your own time, okay? You don't bring that shit to work. Not in this job."

When Ianto doesn't reply, Mickey sighs and turns away. "Come on, let's get this brute back to the Hub," he orders brusquely. "We've still got a lot of work to do before Gwen gets back."

He stalks back toward where they parked the jeep. Andy glances over at Ianto, who looks caught somewhere between rebellious and embarrassed.

"That's me told," Ianto finally says.

"Sorry," Andy says uncertainly. "That wasn't entirely fair of him."

Ianto's mouth twists into a wry smile. He looks up to meet Andy's eyes. "Have I been that much of a miserable bastard lately?"

Andy shrugs helplessly. "Not so's you'd notice, really, you're that quiet about it."

"So, yes." Ianto rubs the back of his neck, then winces when he hits a sore spot. "Shit," he says, more quietly. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Andy doesn't really know what he's supposed to say to that, so he doesn't say anything at all.

It's a very busy week for them all, what with putting the final touches on the old Hub and all. Lois and Ianto had cooked up the idea together, that they should finish the last of the renovations and get everything moved back in while Gwen was off having her baby. To surprise her with the new-old Torchwood base when she got back from maternity leave. Even Martha had come back to Cardiff to

help out for the last week or so, and Rhys snuck away from his wife and new daughter several times to requisition lorries for the move. In the chaos of the next few days, Andy doesn't notice any particular tension between Mickey and Ianto. If they're still having it out, they keep it well away from the rest of the team.

When the big day comes, Rhys is tasked to bring Gwen to the Hub, the baby at his parents' for the day. The rest of them hang about and wait.

Andy had never seen the Hub before the blast, so he doesn't know how this new one compares. They'd used blueprints from the original, but Ianto and Mickey had redrawn the schematics in a few places, making improvements. It's pretty damn impressive - tiled walls gleaming, walkways curving almost organically around the base of the water tower, catwalks leading up one level to Yuan's lab and up again to a sort of control center, designed to be the access point for the remote Archives in Scotland. Workstations with Mickey's reconstructed tech are set up around the atrium; Gwen's private office is in the back, past stairs leading down to the medical bay. There are countless sublevels below, many relatively untouched by the explosion - or, well, nothing a good week of hard scrubbing hadn't fixed.

It's not perfect, yet - especially in the lower levels, the physical archives, which Lois optimistically calls her next project and Ianto calls *that fucking mess*, with a despairing roll of his eyes heavenward. But it'll do for a start.

"She'll love it," Martha says, looking up at the fountain with a grin. "It's just like old days. Right, Ianto?"

Ianto looks around himself quietly, appraising. An odd expression flits across his face, almost wistful. "Yeah," he murmurs. He looks over at Mickey. "You did well, you know."

Mickey gives him a hesitant nod. "Yeah. You too, Ianto."

The cog door rolls open to reveal Gwen and Rhys, mid-conversation. Gwen is glancing behind them, saying, "I don't know why we couldn't just stop by later for-"

Then she sees. Her jaw drops as her eyes widen.

Andy can't help but laugh at her gobsmacked expression, and a glance around shows the others feel just the same. Mickey's got his arm slung around Martha, both grinning fit to burst. Yuan claps his hands appreciatively, and even serious Lois has a smile on that could light up the whole Hub. Rhys hugs his wife from behind, chuckling.

"Oh, my God," Gwen whispers. "You did it."

And she shoots one long, wrought look over at Ianto, who stands at the doorway to her office. Jack's old office, Andy realizes all at once; it must have been.

Ianto pushes the door open for her with a smile and steps aside.

Somehow, unbelievably, Ianto had not actually planned for this.

To distract Jack Harkness - yes. To quietly seduce him with suits and small, private smiles - to keep his eyes on Ianto's arse over CCTV and not on what Ianto was *doing* - to make himself an attractive part of the scenery so that Jack kept him on. Ianto had never thought of himself as much of a flirt; he'd worn Lisa down by being so inept at it that she'd fallen laughing into his arms, more or less. But necessity was the mother of invention, and apparently desperation was a hell of an aphrodisiac.

It was all supposed to have been a ploy, a tactic. A con. Just a temporary measure until Lisa was well again, and then they could disappear and leave Jack none the wiser. It was never supposed to amount to anything.

Which was rather a moot point when his tongue was halfway down Jack's throat and his hand down Jack's trousers, sweat trickling down the small of his back even in the chilly air of the Archives. Someone moaned; Ianto couldn't for the life of him have said whether it was him or Jack, but he felt it vibrate all along his teeth. Jack flicked the buttons of Ianto's waistcoat open, ran his hand up Ianto's chest to thumb his nipple through his shirt, and Ianto twitched and nipped Jack's lower lip.

He hadn't planned this.

It had just been all too much, all of a sudden. Lisa's blank-eyed stare, too far gone from pain and morphine to even respond to him; closing his eyes at night to jolt back awake in a cold sweat, the tower at Canary Wharf collapsing in flames and warped metal around him; filing report after report of monsters and pain and witnesses Retconned while the rest of the team forged ahead in blithe unawareness of how close they came, every day, to losing everything. Maybe it was because Toshiko had run afoul of that spiky slug thing this morning; Suzie had half-carried her back down to the Hub, both women white-faced and bloodstained, and Ianto could do nothing but stand back helplessly as Owen grabbed the bandages. Jack had returned half an hour later with a spiky slug corpse for Ianto to dispose of; it had smelled like seaweed and candle wax, with a faint, inexplicable hint of peaches - like Lisa's favorite lotion.

And after doing his job, he'd gone down into the Archives and filed the report; and when Jack followed after to check on him Ianto had pressed him up against the filing cabinet and kissed him. Jack smelled of sweat and cordite and that indefinable not-aftershave scent that was just *Jack*, and Ianto had closed his eyes and focused on this, only this: Jack's smooth skin and hot mouth and teeth clacking awkwardly until they found the right angle, the right rhythm, rough and vital.

Eventually he'd needed to breathe, and pulled back, hands still fisted in Jack's shirt. Jack's eyes were glazed and lips wet and swollen; he'd gripped Ianto's hips tightly.

You know this isn't part of your job description, right? Jack had said seriously, looking intently into Ianto's face. *You can say no* - as if Jack had ever *asked* him in the first place.

All Ianto could say was *please. Please, sir.*

He hadn't known how badly he wanted this, something that was just for him, just for a moment.

So here they were, getting each other off in the Archives, while the rest of the world paused around them. Ianto took and took and took from Jack, selfish in the way he never allowed himself to be, and when Jack came with a groan, Ianto swallowed the sound from his lips and took that too.

About a month after they move back into the Hub, Gwen finally hires Martha. Well, she'd only been practically *living* in the Hub's labs for the past few weeks.

"Technically, the terms of the contract call you a freelance consultant," Gwen says, almost apologetically. "It's the only way I could get UNIT to agree to let go of you for a bit."

Martha grins. "Suits me to a tee, honestly. I'm so sick of the bureaucracy I could scream. Mickey's been pushing the freelance angle for months now - it sounds glorious. I assume my primary duties will be continuing as Yuan's impromptu research assistant?"

"I'd like you out in the field as well, when need arises. You've got more operational experience than most of my team."

"Fair enough. At least we don't have to retcon unlucky bystanders anymore." Martha looks down at her hands, fidgeting slightly. "I wasn't fond of the way Jack used to run this place, to be honest."

"It was a different world then," Gwen reminds her gently, but she doesn't disagree. Jack had never fully understood why his repeated efforts to recruit Martha had fallen flat. "And Jack wasn't a bad boss."

Martha stills, looking back up to meet Gwen's eyes. "He cares for you all so much. The stories he used to tell my sister, on the *Valiant* - it was just shining out of him."

"Yeah, he cares so much he swanned off and left me to fend for myself." It comes out much more bitter than Gwen intended. Well, she's *tired*. Little Beth experimented with sleeping through the night and then decided it really wasn't her thing; Gwen's been up at 3 AM for four nights running now. "He cares so much that he can't even be arsed to come back for-"

"He planted the Jericho Rose."

Gwen blinks rapidly. "How is that even possible?"

"Time traveler, remember?" Martha gives her a strained smile. "Oh, I've got no proof to back it up, I know. But Mickey and I think - well, it must be Jack. Or it will be, at some point - probably in the very distant future. Apparently it had originally been developed by a sisterhood of cat nuns? I've met them. Way in the future. Oh, it's an impossibly long story, but they were associates of an ancient being that - well, he's Jack. What Jack will become, someday. Hart couldn't figure out what motive the nuns would've had to plant the Rose. There's the motive. It's Jack."

"So he does find out about Ianto," Gwen murmurs. "So he might still-"

Martha shrugs helplessly. "Don't tell Ianto, please. It's just a theory, it would be too cruel to make him think...well."

She's right, of course. Not that Ianto's pining, or anything ridiculous like that - he never mentions Jack at all, unless someone else brings it up. He does his job efficiently and well, as always. But he's not really *here* anymore. He'd focused on rebuilding the Hub with single-minded fervor; with that project finished, he's just...drifting.

Gwen isn't sure what's still keeping him tethered to Torchwood, but she knows it's a tenuous connection at best. She doesn't want to risk snapping it for good.

Later that day, Ianto turns up at Gwen's desk with a list of people for potential recruitment. "Oh God, please tell me I don't need to think about this right now," Gwen groans. "I just hired new staff, I don't want to look at anyone's CV."

"Martha's only a temporary solution," Ianto reminds her. "She'll go back to UNIT eventually - probably once they finally get a proper Cardiff office open to handle the Rift."

"And in the meantime, she and Yuan are working through the backlog of organic samples in the Archive *very* efficiently, so tell me why there are three additional scientists on this list?"

Ianto sits back in his chair, looking smug. "Archives, Gwen. The more detritus we collect, the more science types we'll want on hand to study and catalogue it. You can never have too many smart people, anyway."

Gwen glares at him and looks back down at the list. "D.I. Kathy Swanson? She *hates* us!"

"She hated *Jack*. You, she likes just fine. And she's got a great head for organizational structure. Plus, she's hitting the glass ceiling pretty hard with the force. Unless she relocates to London, she hasn't got much room for advancement in her current position. If you approach her correctly, she'll leap at the chance to flex her abilities with us."

"I'm surprised you're not trying to tap more people from UNIT."

Ianto shrugs. "We're not looking for soldiers anymore."

Gwen gives him a hard look. "We never were."

"*You* never were. The old Torchwood-" Ianto sighs, looking down at himself. "For queen and country and the British Empire."

"Ianto," Gwen says quietly. "That's not you."

"No, not really," Ianto says, meeting her eyes evenly. "I am what Torchwood made of me. I can't change now, Gwen."

"Someone once told me that the twenty-first century is when everything changes."

"And I'm a relic." He grins without mirth. "A dinosaur. I never did ask - did you ever find out what happened to Myfanwy?"

Gwen shakes her head. "I don't think she was caught in the blast, though. We never found any...remains."

"Well, I caught her once before," Ianto says thoughtfully. "I suppose I could find her again."

There's something distant in his gaze; she feels suddenly sad, and can't explain why.

She taps the list. "These people, they're your replacements. Aren't they?"

"What, all of them?" Ianto asks, feigning shock. "How much work do you think I do around here? I'm good, Gwen, but I'm not *that* good."

"Don't play stupid, Ianto," she snaps. It comes out more sharply than she intended. "You know what I mean. All of Yuan's other patients - the Jericho Rose survivors - they've all gone back to their families, to their lives-"

"And I haven't?"

"You're not really here!" Gwen says, slamming her hand on her desk. "You're a million miles away. It's like you never came back from Thames House. You still haven't told your own sister you're alive-"

It's become an old argument between them, but when he looks up to meet her eyes, for once she thinks she might actually get an honest response out of him. Of course, that's when the alarms go off.

"Rift activity!" Lois calls. "Looks like we've got a breach out near Penarth. I'm narrowing down the coordinates as we speak."

Gwen and Ianto exchange a look, then walk over to stick their heads out of her office. Mickey and Martha have already gathered behind Lois, who is seated at her workstation. She's not sure where Andy or Yuan are, but it's a big Hub.

"Any useful CCTV cameras around there?" Mickey asks.

Lois's fingers fly across her keyboard. "Capturing footage - ugh, that looks like some kind of bad joke."

"Rogue potatoes in Cardiff!" Mickey shouts across the atrium. "Please advise!"

"Potatoes? I'll ring Rhys," Gwen quips. Beside her, Ianto snorts.

Martha sighs. "It's a Sontaran. Damn, I really *hate* those guys."

"Sontaran, Sontaran - right!" Ianto clicks his fingers. "The ATMOS debacle a year or so back. I remember that. Trapped us in lockdown for days." He exchanges a grimace with Gwen. "But we never dealt with them ourselves-"

"The Doctor did for them," Martha explains. "And they're right nasty buggers - it'll take too long for a team from UNIT to get here, you need to take care of this one *now*." She hesitates. "I was there last time, I know how to handle them. Um, that is, if you'll have me, Gwen?"

Gwen leans back against her office doorway and grins. "Anytime. Mickey, please gear up to accompany Ms. Smith-Jones. But don't take any stupid chances - assess the situation and report back to me. If you think you can take it in on your own, go ahead; if it's too chancy, call back and we'll get you backup."

"Yes ma'am!" Mickey offers Martha his arm, with a mocking bow. "Shall we to the armory, milady?"

Martha laughs. "Let's."

As they head off, Ianto quirks his eyebrow at Gwen. "Sending a married pair into the field together? You sure that's wise?"

"Absolutely," Gwen says without hesitation. "Sontarans are pretty brutal, if I recall correctly. They'll keep each other from taking unnecessary risks. Besides, it seemed to work well enough for you and Jack--"

Sometimes, she really wishes there were better communication between her brain and her mouth.

But Ianto just gives her a crooked smile. "Well, Jack was more than usually effective as a human shield, so I don't think the comparison quite applies. I'd better get the jeep prepped for them."

He moves as if to go, and she catches his arm. "Ianto. Don't think this conversation is over."

"No," he says quietly. "I know. Not quite yet."

But soon.

Gwen stands back and lets him go.

These days, the Hub was generally empty when Ianto arrived in the morning. He knew the others' habits pretty well, knew how early to put the coffee on so that it would already have percolated by the time Tosh got in. She was always first. Next would be a toss-up between Owen and Gwen, generally dependent on whether Owen had pulled the night before - he was always bright and early when he was running away from last night's shag.

But this morning, Ianto emerged from Jack's office to find Gwen sitting on the couch, alone in the semi-darkness of the predawn Hub, knees tucked in to her chest. Ianto straightened his jacket and tried not to look like he'd spent the night in Jack's empty bed.

"Gwen?"

"Ianto," she said tonelessly, still staring out into empty space. "Good morning."

He hesitated for a moment, then cautiously walked over to join her. He and Gwen got on well enough, but he'd never had much to say to her, nor did she tend to seek him out. Until a few days after Jack had vanished, when she made her way up to the tourist office with determination, sat him down, and demanded he teach her all of Jack's important passcodes and day-to-day managerial duties.

They'd reached a sort of mutual understanding that day. Ianto gave Gwen his full support in her assumed leadership of the team, and Gwen didn't press him about anything personal. It was a good arrangement. He didn't want to push it. But she was here, too early and looking utterly lost, and months of assessing Jack's every mood and responding accordingly meant Ianto couldn't just walk away now. Gwen would never be his captain, but she was his leader; he owed her more than just the combination to Jack's safe or contact number for the PM's personal aide.

He sat down beside her on the couch and waited her out.

Gwen brought her hand up to her knees and stared at it. Something glittered on one finger, winking in the wavering blue light from the Rift monitors.

"Oh," Ianto said softly.

"Rhys proposed," Gwen told him, still studying the ring with a blank expression. "I said yes."

Ianto shifted closer to lightly bump their shoulders together. "Congratulations."

"Yeah," Gwen exhaled. "I mean, thanks."

"Are you..." Ianto trailed off, uncertain whether or not he should pry. But there was no one else who would. "Is that what you want?" he asked, as gently as possible.

"Of course," she said at once. She looked up at him for the first time. "I love him. And I'm thrilled, I really am. It's just..." She sighed, waving her hand to indicate the world around them. "This job, you know? It's so - God. I'm going to get up there and vow to love, honor, and obey, and I can't even tell him what I do for a living. What sort of a marriage is that?"

There was no good answer he could give her to that. Ianto wouldn't insult her by even trying.

"I'm not like the rest of you," she said, voice breaking a little. "I can't lose myself in this place and stay sane. It's too much. I *need* Rhys, I really do."

"Then hold on to him." Ianto thought of Jack, tried to imagine what he'd say in this situation. *Don't let it drift*. But that would sound hollow coming from Ianto, who'd let the rest of his world drift away long, long ago. He couldn't remember the last time he'd so much as spoken on the phone with Rhiannon. His nephew and niece had probably grown half a foot apiece since he'd last seen them.

Torchwood was all he was anymore, and Owen and Tosh were just the same. Maybe that was why Gwen was the only one who could step up as leader now. She still connected with the world outside.

"You're lucky, Gwen," Ianto said, reaching out to grasp her hand. The ring was sharp and real when he brushed his thumb over it. "You've got someone to remind you what we're fighting for."

She laughed a little, wiping her eyes with her free hand. "I forget that sometimes."

"We all do."

"I know." Gwen took a breath. She squeezed his hand in hers. "Thanks. You know, I woke up this morning and all I could think is that - this marvelous man got down on one knee and asked me to marry him and I didn't have anyone to *tell* all about it."

Ianto smiled. "Sure you do."

They sat together for a little while longer, just holding hands. Ianto tried not to wonder how Jack would have reacted to this news. Thrown an engagement party, probably. Or sulked about it for days. It was hard to tell with Jack sometimes.

Well, sod what Jack would have done, anyway. He wasn't here. Ianto was.

"I'll put the coffee on," he said, standing. "This calls for the really posh blend. Mocha?"

Gwen grinned up at him. "With the little chocolate shavings on top? And real whipped cream?"

"Anything you like."

He offered her a hand, which she took gladly, getting to her feet. She glanced toward Jack's office, then back at Ianto. Her grin faded as she studied him. He winced inwardly and waited.

"You spent the night here, didn't you?" Gwen asked. Her tone was very gentle. "How often...?"

Ianto glanced down and away, shifting his weight uncomfortably. "Someone's got to keep an eye on the Rift monitor overnight."

Gwen gave him a small smile, compassionate and sad. "Yeah," she said softly. "I know." She cleared her throat, then took his arm. "Come on, it's ridiculously expensive coffee time. You promised."

Cardiff hasn't changed at all.

It's been nearly a year since the 456, months since Jack left this planet for good. (*Promises, promises*, he thinks humorlessly.) He doesn't know the exact date and doesn't bother finding out. He's not *back*, he's not staying. He's not even visiting. He's just - he needs to see for himself. To be sure.

The Plass looks the same as always, as though there had never been any explosion here. Cardiff is very good at rebuilding. The Rift - and Torchwood - give the city constant practice. Jack slips behind a large gaggle of tourists from the Millennium Centre, blending in with the group as they wander over to investigate the water tower. He steps up onto the paving stone. One woman gives him a curious look

and he shrugs, leaning in as though he wants a closer look at the sculpture. So the perception filter must have been destroyed in the blast. No more invisible lift.

It occurs to him that he doesn't even know if Torchwood rebuilt the Hub. John mentioned that they were working out of a different base. Maybe they never moved back. Well, this is still his best bet. He follows the tourists in their slow crawl across the Plass, then splits off when they make a beeline for the Pierhead Building. He continues strolling toward the waterfront and Mermaid Quay.

Dusk creeps over the Bay. The skies are clear and the air is chilly but not bad for the season, and the swift sunset makes the roof of the Millennium Centre shimmer orange-gold. In the ordinary, beat-up leather jacket he found in a thrift store by the Centre, Jack looks like any other random passerby, enjoying the evening. He left the greatcoat behind on his ship. The last thing he needs is for anyone to spot him over CCTV and kick up a fuss.

He keeps an eye on the dock that leads down to the old tourist office, but doesn't approach it himself.

After about half an hour, he catches motion out of the corner of his eye. Two people emerge from the tourist office, a slender black woman and a round Asian man. They make their way down the dock, chatting animatedly. They aren't paying the slightest attention to anyone else around them, and he's far enough away to escape notice anyway. The man is a stranger, but he recognizes the woman as she gets a bit closer: Lois Habiba. Huh. He really shouldn't be surprised that Gwen recruited her.

So this is still the right place. Good to know.

He watches Lois and her friend cross the Plass and disappear into the streets around the Millennium Centre. Then he leans back into the railing, sea breeze in his face, and settles in to wait.

Five minutes later, the door to the tourist office swings open again. Jack hands clench convulsively on the iron railing. It feels like being punched in the stomach, like falling off a building, like traveling by bust-up vortex manipulator. He has a pretty wide frame of reference.

Ianto looks - God, he looks the same as before. In the dusky half-light, Jack can't tell if he looks a little older. Maybe a little thinner - the suit fits him slightly differently than it used to. Or maybe it's just a different suit. It doesn't matter. He's *Ianto*, fussy and harried and *alive*.

All at once, this isn't enough, could never be enough. To just watch Ianto from afar for a few minutes and then walk away - how the hell had Jack ever conned himself into thinking this was all he wanted?

And now he's basically fucked, because Jack knows full well that he's a greedy bastard, and he'll just keep taking and taking until Ianto has nothing left to give. Ianto's here, he's safe, he's got his whole life back. But Jack - no, Jack destroys everyone he touches. He's already killed Ianto once. He's never doing that again.

So all he can take is this one stolen, perfect moment - Ianto walking briskly along the pier, breath misting in the cool air, lost in his own thoughts. Jack drinks in the sight of him, mesmerized, committing

the moment to memory. This is his. Just this. It's not enough, it's nowhere near enough, but it'll have to do.

Ianto hustles up the steps from the dock and then hesitates. The lights around the Plass and Mermaid Quay have all come on by now - Jack made sure he was standing well out of range of the nearest streetlamp, but Ianto is fully illuminated. He frowns, shifting his weight, looking around. It's as if he's expecting to meet someone.

Then he turns his head and looks straight down the walkway toward Jack. *Shit*. It's gotten pretty dark, and there's some distance between them. It's not eyes meeting across a crowded room, no sudden flash of electricity. Even if Ianto sees him standing here, in the shadows, there's no reason he'll recognize him as *Jack* rather than a random stranger. But it reminds Jack that he's taking a risk, coming out in the open like this; he's indulged himself too long. Ianto is there. Jack has seen him. That's all he came here for, and it's time to *go*.

Turning and walking away now isn't the hardest thing Jack has ever done. It doesn't even make it into the top ten. But that doesn't mean it's *easy*. It's a bit like ripping a bandage from a wound; he has to do it all at once, or not at all.

He doesn't look back.

Jack walks at a reasonable pace, casually, nothing to raise suspicion, just another guy out for an evening stroll. Mermaid Quay has a decent nightlife, and even on the Plass, there are too many people about to access the teleport back out to his Starglider. Not that Jack has any particular reason to care about causing a stir - it won't be *his* mess to clean up, after all - but old habits die hard. If he keeps following the waterfront past the carousel and Pierhead Building and out toward the church, he should be able to find a nice secluded spot to dematerialize...

He gets as far as the carousel before he hears rapid footsteps behind him, and then a low voice. "Don't you dare."

Jack's heart doesn't know whether it should start racing or stop dead in his chest, so it settles on awkwardly skipping a couple of beats. He stops walking, but doesn't turn. He *can't* look back, because if he does-

"*Jack*."

He couldn't move even if he wanted to, so Ianto comes around to him.

"Ianto," Jack says, the word rusty and raw in his throat. He can't remember the last time he's spoken Ianto's name aloud. "How did you know...?"

Ianto lets out a short laugh, a huff of breath. "The invisible lift, Jack, really?"

Jack shrugs, giving him a wry smile. "I couldn't help myself. Had to see if it was still there."

He's not just talking about the lift. Ianto knows it, too, judging by the slight lift of his eyebrow. And oh, *fuck*, he's gorgeous. Jack can't believe how many details had become hazy in his memory - the way the cold stains Ianto's cheeks dark pink, the particular curve of his cheekbones, the precise shade of blue of his eyes. He wonders how much more of Ianto he's forgotten, wants to rediscover him all over again. *Not touching him* is suddenly very, very difficult. He takes an involuntary step closer in.

Ianto's breath hitches slightly, like he can feel the rise in the air temperature between them. He remains perfectly still. "No one else noticed," he says, voice low and rough. "I had to wait until they all left before I could - *fuck*." He runs a hand through his hair, then rubs the back of his neck, looking anywhere but at Jack. "I thought you'd be long gone by the time I could come after you."

"You could have told them. Raised the alarm."

His eyes snap back up to meet Jack's. "No, I couldn't. Not when you so clearly didn't want anyone to - you know me better than that."

Jack wants to touch him *so badly*. He balls his hands into fists at his sides. "But you came after me anyway."

"Yes," Ianto says simply. Like it's the most natural thing in the world.

That's so *Ianto*, it makes Jack's chest ache. Much as he'd always pushed back, demanded *more* from Jack, stood up to him at every turn - at the end of the day, he'd follow Jack anywhere. To the ends of the earth and beyond, or straight into death, without question. It's a terrifying power to hold over another living being. Terrifying and terrible. Jack can't drag Ianto down into his mire again. It'll only get him killed - *again*, and Jack can't, he just *can't*.

"You're not here to stay, are you," Ianto says.

It isn't a question, but Jack answers him anyway. "No."

Ianto nods, looking down. "I didn't think you'd be coming back at all," he admits. "I never thought John Hart would actually-"

"Tell me you were still alive? Yeah, I'm kind of surprised he mentioned it myself."

"And you even *believed* him." There's something like wonder in Ianto's voice, and something like hurt, and it's all mixed up with everything else and suddenly it hurts to even *talk*.

"I didn't," Jack whispers. "But I couldn't - just in case, I needed to - I had to *see*."

Ianto is still staring down at his shoes, and Jack abruptly needs to see him properly, to *be* seen. He reaches out reflexively, fingertips brushing down the line of Ianto's jaw and coming to rest just under his chin, tilting his head up. Ianto looks back up at him, eyes wide in the twilight darkness, heat flaring between them. Jack's breath catches in his throat. He pulls away as though burnt, but Ianto follows,

like he *always* follows. He catches Jack's hand with his own, gripping too hard; and then there's nothing Jack can do except kiss him.

There's no hesitation at all. Ianto immediately wraps his arms around Jack's shoulders, holding him in place. He groans softly into Jack's mouth. Jack's hands come to rest at Ianto's waist, gripping his hips too tightly. The kiss is sloppy and desperate and painful and *amazing* as he rediscovers the taste of Ianto's mouth, the heat of his breath mingling with Jack's, the soft noises he makes in the back of his throat. Ianto presses his thigh up between Jack's legs and bites his lip, and Jack inhales sharply, reveling in sensation.

It's getting colder as night falls around them and Jack doesn't feel it at all.

"Come back to mine?" Ianto murmurs, breath ghosting against Jack's lips. It's phrased like a question, but he must know Jack doesn't have a choice.

They don't hold hands as they walk to Ianto's car, but then, they were never that sort of couple. Or whatever they were - Jack still hates that word. But he walks too close to Ianto, their arms brushing together with every step, hips bumping. Ianto keeps sneaking sidelong glances at him, like Jack might vanish if he looks away too long; the feeling is entirely mutual.

Ianto's flat is in the wrong direction. At first Jack thinks he's just misremembering the route, but after a few minutes he's certain: Ianto's driving somewhere else entirely. "You moved?" he asks.

Ianto shoots him a wry look. "I was legally dead for seven months. No one was going to hold the flat for me."

Oh. Right.

The new flat is in a dull middle-class part of town. It's a second story walk-up in a townhouse. When Ianto flicks the light switch, he reveals a blandly anonymous one-bedroom apartment - beige walls probably inherited from the previous lessee, tiny kitchen, and sparse furnishings. There are no decorations of any kind, nothing that marks the place as *Ianto's*. He'd never been much of an interior decorator, but his old place had been filled with books and photographs and DVDs, kept more or less tidily, with a large TV and comfy couch and shockingly ugly armchair. A bit eclectic, a bit fussy, entirely Ianto. This, though - this looks like a place no one intends to stay in for long.

Jack hovers in the doorway to the living room, feeling oddly hesitant. But then Ianto comes up behind him and slips his hands across Jack's shoulder blades, plucking gently at the leather. Jack shrugs out of the jacket and lets Ianto hang it on the coat rack. The familiar gesture in this unfamiliar place makes his blood quicken pleasantly. This really is his Ianto; the more things change, the more they stay the same. Jack should really be used to this by now.

He takes a seat on the couch while Ianto divests himself of his own jacket. When Jack looks up, he catches an uncertain expression flicker across Ianto's face. "Do you want a drink or anything?" Ianto asks, amusingly awkward. It's like they've suddenly regressed back to their first stumbling attempts at

proper dating, before they gave it up for a lost cause and tumbled gratefully back into bed together again. "I can brew up some coffee..."

It sounds gorgeous, actually, but right now Jack couldn't care less about Ianto's coffee. "Maybe later," he says, shoving back the nagging thought that there's not going to *be* a later, because Jack needs to *leave*. "Come here."

But Ianto doesn't; he leans against the doorway instead, hands stuffed in his pockets. "What have you been up to for the past year, Jack?"

Jack exhales, looking down at his hands. "Drifting, for a while. All over the planet - hit six out of seven continents. Got word that UNIT was hunting me - the myth of immortality piqued the new regime's curiosity, apparently - so I went to ground. But it was just...drifting."

"Looking for a way off-planet?" Ianto asks, too perceptively.

Jack rubs his vortex manipulator, feeling the new leather band, still supple under his fingertips. "Yeah. Turned out it was right here in Cardiff the whole time." He glances back up.

Ianto's watching him the way he used to do, sometimes, when he thought Jack wasn't paying attention. The naked emotion in his gaze cuts Jack to the quick.

"And since then?" Ianto asks softly. He doesn't look away.

Jack smiles. He's pretty sure it isn't a pleasant smile. "Hunting the 456."

Ianto doesn't so much as flinch. Good for him. "That's why you sent John Hart to get the virus."

"It might help me track them down," Jack explains. "The species hasn't been identified - they're sneaky bastards, always operating through third parties. They're wanted criminals, actually. But no one seems to know who they are. The virus was engineered by *someone*. Once I find a sufficiently advanced lab run by people I can trust, there will be markers in it that can point me in the right direction..."

Ianto takes a few steps closer. "Like the Jericho Rose?"

It's absolutely maddening to be in the same room as Ianto, after all this, and not be touching him.

"Yeah," Jack says quietly. "Like that."

"And if you find the 456? What then?"

"There are courts out there, pretty high ones. It's time and past someone brought those bastards to justice."

"Sounds tricky."

"It'll take a while, yeah, but I've got the time." Jack smiles again, ruthlessly. "They'll slip up sooner or later. And when they do, I'll be there."

lanto takes a deep breath, keeping his eyes intent on Jack's. "Need a hand?"

It takes a few long seconds for what lanto's *really* asking to sink in; when it does, Jack's stomach twists sharply. He pulls himself up in one fluid motion to stalk over and grip lanto's shoulders, too hard. "No, lanto. You're - you've got a life here. Against all the odds, and God, you have no idea how grateful I am that-" He swallows hard, wanting nothing more than to drag lanto close and never let go again; instead, he gives lanto's shoulders a quick shake. "Don't let it drift."

lanto pulls away, mouth pressed into a thin line. "You can drift without ever leaving one place. It's what I've been doing for the past few months. Do you know, I never even let Rhiannon know I was still alive?" He rubs the back of his neck, looking away. "I couldn't do that to her. Couldn't put her through all that again. Maybe we're more alike than you think."

"You are *nothing* like me, lanto Jones," Jack says fiercely. lanto looks back up at him, as if startled by his vehemence, and Jack reaches out to cup his jaw, thumb pressing against the pulse point in his neck. "Don't ever think - the things I've done, you can't even - *lanto*. You are so much better than this."

lanto covers Jack's hand with his own, meeting his gaze steadily. "Gwen told me about Steven. Jack, I'm so sorry-"

"*Don't.*"

"It was a terrible decision that should never have been made," lanto goes on, determined. "But that doesn't mean it was the wrong one-"

Jack yanks away. He turns his back on lanto and stalks over to the window. The street outside is poorly lit, only one streetlamp halfway down the block. Jack presses his palm against the cold glass and stares out at nothing in particular, trying to keep the memories at bay.

He feels the warm weight of lanto's hand settle on his shoulder, thumb rubbing gentle circles up to the nape of his neck. "Jack," lanto says quietly. "Why did you come back at all?"

At that, Jack has to laugh - a harsh, broken sound. He looks back over his shoulder to meet lanto's eyes. "For you," he says. How could lanto not know this? "I always come back for you. Every, every time." He turns in the arc of lanto's arm, tilting his head to press his lips into the curve of lanto's jaw. "And you never seem to believe me."

lanto lets out a long, shaky breath, eyes closing. He braces himself against Jack for a moment, and Jack can't help but take advantage of his proximity to continue slowly kissing his way down lanto's neck. The collar of his dress shirt poses a blessedly simple problem; Jack solves it by flicking open the top button of the shirt, then the next and the next.

"Jack," lanto breathes. He pulls back to force Jack to look back up at him, and smiles properly for the first time since he died. It's wide and bright and just a bit sly, and makes Jack forget the months and miles that lay between them, if only for a moment.

Ianto takes a few steps away, stopping at the open door to his bedroom. He turns back to hold his hand out palm up.

"Come here," he says, voice warm and vibrant with life, and Jack goes.

The first time Ianto Jones died was at Canary Wharf, and it didn't count. Not really. He hadn't been converted or deleted or exterminated, hadn't been much of anything at all beyond trapped in sublevel nine of the archives when Torchwood Tower had gone into automated lockdown. That was what had killed so many of his coworkers, actually - no one could get *out*. But that part of the archives had been sufficiently out of the way that the Cybermen hadn't reached him for hours. They were still herding him upstairs toward the conversion chambers when the end came.

Lisa hadn't been so lucky. And somewhere in the burning corridors, listening to her partially-converted screams, hands slick with her blood or his as he tried to drag her out and yelled for help that never came - well. By the time they emerged, they were both only shells of their former selves, empty broken husks.

Twenty-seven people came out of Canary Wharf. There were no survivors.

The second time Ianto died was at Lisa's hand. Or, rather, the Cyberman still calling itself Lisa. He hadn't realized it until long after the fact. At the time, all he knew was her steel hand at his throat, choking him - flying through the air across the Hub, limbs flailing helplessly - sharp pain and a sickening crunch in his neck - and then nothing else until he awakened gasping in Jack's arms.

Later, much later, after Jack had died and come back and died and come back and left and come back - that's when he finally put it all together. He was going through some old case reports that had never been properly filed, and came across the girl called Carys and the alien that had inhabited her body. Gwen's first case, and a fairly memorable one - even from Ianto's entirely Hub-based experience of it. He reread the team's reports for amusement value, mostly. Death by orgasm. Torchwood sure knew how to pick 'em.

Jack had passed life into the alien inside Carys with a kiss. Which hadn't made much sense at the time, but Ianto knew a lot more about Jack now. And suddenly his hazy memories of waking up to Jack's mouth on his and no broken neck - well, that made a lot more sense now, too.

The third time Ianto died never happened. It was during the time Jack was gone (*a year*, Jack told him later; *a year that never was, thank God*). Ianto didn't remember it himself. He didn't know *how* he died, though he suspected it had something to do with that utterly pointless field trip to the Himalayas. But he got a funny sense of vertigo, sometimes, like he was in two places at once; here in the Hub and somewhere far away, on his knees and not in the good way...

The first (looped) night after Jack's return, in the hotel, Jack trailed his hands along Ianto's body like Ianto was something precious, something fragile. He'd never touched him like that before. Ianto

cupped Jack's chin to look at him properly, and the guarded hope in Jack's eyes was too much, all too much. Time oozed and crackled about him in odd dilations, looped around itself, and Jack's mouth on his tasted like desperation, like second chances. Ianto closed his eyes and kissed him back, hard, to keep himself from asking *how*.

The fourth time Ianto died, he was killed by the 456. The less said about that, the better.

You're not here! Gwen shouts in his head. *You're a million miles away.* And she's right.

The next time Ianto dies will be the last, God willing. The one that takes. He doesn't know when or where or how it will happen, and that's just fine by him. Until then, his life is his own, so he'd better start living it. He never had near enough time to start with; he'll be damned if he wastes any more of it on regrets.

Ianto doesn't sleep that night. He knows that if he lets himself get that comfortable, allows himself to drop off, it'll all end. It's not fanciful - not trying to prolong the encounter, to revel in the feel of Jack in and around and against him for as long as he possibly can. (Well, not *just* that.) But he knows that if he falls asleep, he'll wake up alone.

He's already done enough of that in this lifetime.

There's no guarantee he won't be losing Jack again anyway - in all likelihood, this is the last time Ianto will ever see him. But if Jack is leaving, Ianto wants it done in the open. No sneaking away like a thief in the night. He's going to watch Jack Harkness walk away from him, and know it for sure. For good.

That doesn't mean he won't put it off as long as he can, though.

He never bothered hanging curtains on his bedroom window. The world outside has taken on a bluish-grey tone, sky lightening with false dawn. Ianto watches the smooth rise and fall of Jack's chest as he breathes, traces the line of his jaw with a fingertip, committing as much as he can to memory. Just in case, just in case. They've been tangled together in silence for some time now, the fervor of their reunion not exactly abated, but - gentled, somewhat. Jack presses quiet kisses across Ianto's collarbone, and Ianto runs his hands through Jack's hair with a sigh.

It's nearly time.

"They'll be expecting me at the Hub soon enough," Ianto says softly.

Jack makes a noncommittal sound, muffled against Ianto's neck. He runs his hand down along the curve of Ianto's spine.

"Jack." Ianto pulls back, gently extricating himself enough to look Jack in the eye. "Gwen will-"

"How is she?" Jack asks, cutting him off. He rolls onto his back. "Gwen, I mean."

Ianto smiles to himself. "She's thriving. Her and Rhys and the baby - it's a girl, by the way. They called her Beth. The biggest grey eyes you ever saw. She'll be a real heartbreaker when she grows up."

"Good for Gwen," Jack murmurs. "And - the rest of the team? I saw Lois Habiba at the docks, with some other guy - round face, Chinese?"

"Yuan Zhang. He used to be UNIT. He's the one who autopsied the Thames House victims-"

Something caught between pain and guilt crosses Jack's face. He moves away from Ianto abruptly, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

"You couldn't have known," Ianto reminds him. He sits up in bed, folding his legs beneath him. "Jack-"

"So, Lois Habiba and Yuan Zhang," Jack says quickly, talking over him. He keeps his back to Ianto. "And Mickey Smith, judging by John's description."

"Yeah. Andy Davidson, too - you remember, Gwen's PC friend? And Martha as well, these days, though I'm not sure how long that will last. She's very popular with the new UNIT higher-ups."

At that, Jack does look up, turning a bit to glance back at him. "Sounds like there's a story there."

"There is. It's very long and complicated."

Jack smiles - a pale approximation of his usual, but it's something. "Aren't they all? You know, she's about set to take over the world, our Martha. I didn't recognize her at first, but - Martha Smith-Jones. She's in all the history books. Call it, oh, thirty years from now, she's elected Secretary-General of the UN - when it actually means something again." His smiles shifts into something fond and genuine. "Credited with being the leader who helped guide humanity out into the stars. I asked the Doctor, once, while I was still on the TARDIS after the thing with the Medusa Cascade - well, I'd finally put the pieces together by then. I asked him if he'd always known exactly who he'd been traveling with."

"What did he say?"

"That he hadn't known for sure, but he'd hoped."

Ianto watches him, sees the play of emotions across his face, the memory transforming him. He looks - younger, lighter, more alive. It's almost like happiness, just for an instant. "You care for them so much," Ianto says softly, trying not to burst the moment. "Martha, and Gwen - they would love to see you. Even if it's only a hello and goodbye."

But Jack is shaking his head, as Ianto expected. "You know I can't."

"I know you *won't*. That's something else entirely."

Jack turns away, elbows propped up on his thighs, head in his hands. "Please don't."

"It's your choice," Ianto tells him quietly. He doesn't know why he's disappointed. It's nothing new. Jack always runs away. It's not because he's a coward; he just doesn't see any alternative.

He tried to run away from Ianto, too, on the Plass last night. It's just that Ianto didn't *let* him.

Ianto gets out of bed, walking around to face him. When Jack doesn't look up, he crouches down and puts his hands on Jack's knees.

"I fell a little bit in love with you all," Jack says quietly, still staring down at his hands. "Martha's devotion, her impossible endurance against all odds. Gwen's fierce passion for justice, her faith in the goodness of humanity. Owen's rough edges and unexpected kindnesses. Beautiful Toshiko and her even more beautiful mind. And then...you."

Ianto quirks his lips into a wry smile, stomach like lead. "You fell a little bit in love with me, too, then?"

At that, Jack does meet his eyes. He looks - God, he looks so *tired*. "Ianto." Jack exhales sharply on his name, eyes far too old. "No. I fell all the way in love with you, and that scared the *shit* out of me."

Ianto's pulse is racing, making him light-headed. It's now or never. "Then ask me to come with you when you leave. You're hunting the 456. I can help. I *want* to help. They did kill me this one time, after all. You're not the only one with a score to settle." His fingers press into Jack's skin, probably too hard. Jack doesn't protest. "And it's real work, important work - something worth fighting for. Something that'll give me a sense of purpose again. You don't have to do this alone."

"You'd follow me anywhere, wouldn't you?" Jack murmurs. "Straight into hell. I can't do that to you again."

"I'm a big boy, Jack, I can make my own decisions." Ianto gets to his feet, feeling stretched and sad. "Do you want me to go with you?"

Jack just watches him. He looks like he's already saying goodbye. "I can't watch you die. Not again."

It's not an answer. But it may be all the answer Ianto will ever get. And so that's that.

"Okay," he says. He walks over to his closet and pulls out a clean change of clothes, starts getting dressed.

"Where are you going?" Jack asks quietly.

Ianto pulls on his trousers. "Torchwood," he says. "Gwen will be in soon enough. I'll leave my letter of resignation on her desk if she's not."

Jack blinks. So Ianto actually managed to surprise him. "You're leaving Torchwood? Why?"

"I've had the letter drawn up for weeks now," Ianto admits, running a hand through his hair. "Just never quite got up the nerve. But this - whatever this is - this is over. I don't fit there anymore." He grabs a shirt. "There's nothing left for me there."

"Where will you go?"

Ianto shrugs, looking out the window. Somewhere, dawn is breaking. The sky is going pink around the edges. "Anywhere but here. I got a second chance on life - well, third or possibly fourth, actually, but who's counting?" Ianto turns back to give him a wry smile. "Point is, it's time and past I started *living* it again, with or without you. And God, Jack, I'd rather do it with you. But that's up to you."

Jack looks away.

"I'll go with you," Ianto says softly. "In a heartbeat. But you've got to *ask* me, Jack." He gets to his feet, buttoning his shirt with fingers that don't even tremble. It's amazing how calm he feels now that his mind's made up.

Jack's voice is low and rough. "I can't be what you need."

Ianto almost laughs. "Jack, you've rarely had the faintest idea what I need." He sees Jack wince, recoil as though from a physical blow, but forges on all the same. Maybe he has to be a little cruel. Maybe that's the only thing Jack knows how to respond to anymore. "And it's not your place to decide, but no, Jack, I don't *need* you. That much I've learned. And sure, maybe a month, a year, a decade down the line, we'll be sick of each other anyway. Nothing in life is certain. I'll take my chances." He takes a step forward, reaching down to trail his fingers down Jack's cheek. Heat sparks at the contact, even now. Jack closes his eyes, and Ianto presses a kiss against his lips.

Jack leans into it, bringing a hand up to cup the back of Ianto's neck. They linger like that for a long moment, foreheads pressed together. Finally Ianto has to pull away.

"The only thing I know for sure is that if I walk out this door right now, you'll never see me again," he says, words dry in his throat. "I can't wait for you any longer, Jack. I've already wasted too much time - and as you keep reminding me, I never had near enough to start out with."

Jack watches him with dark eyes and doesn't say a word.

All right, then. Ianto turns away, shrugging on his jacket. He feels the finality in every step he takes as he crosses the room, in the resounding silence. The doorknob is smooth and cool under his hand. He turns it, pulls the door open.

"Ianto." His name sounds as though it's been ripped from Jack's throat. "*Wait.*"

Ianto does, hand still on the door.

Jack asks.

"Guess who's up there with Herself?" Lisa set her lunch tray down with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Heard there was some to-do upstairs," Ianto said, poking unenthusiastically at his chips. Soggy again. The Torchwood canteen's ability to muck up the most basic foodstuffs was the source of legend. Their coffee didn't even bear speaking of. "A couple blokes from Research tried to get a look in, but no success. What's going on?"

"Apparently Two and Three finally found something they could agree on," Lisa explained. "They're *most* displeased with the way we dealt with the Sycorax last week."

"Hard to disobey an order direct from the Prime Minister," Ianto remarked, abandoning his lunch. This was much more interesting. "They've sent representatives, then?"

"Yup." Lisa speared a cucumber out of her salad and munched it. Harder to make a mash out of salad, Ianto supposed, but that's only because it had no flavor to begin with. How Lisa actually enjoyed the stuff, he'd never understand.

"All right, so who was it, then?" Ianto asked. She did love dragging out her stories. "Archie, I suppose, and from Three...?"

"Harkness himself." Lisa grinned. "In the flesh."

"Seriously?"

Captain Jack Harkness was a bit of an urban legend among the Torchwood One archivists. He'd only been in charge of the Cardiff branch for five years or so, but his name had a way of turning up in the most random places. An artifact confiscated by Torchwood in the 1930s had Harkness's initials in fading ink on the original file; a blurry mission photo from 1958 seemed to show him lurking in the background. Things like that, scattered throughout the archives. The rumors were widely varied - that he was a time traveler, that he didn't age, that he'd cloned himself and kept spare copies in cryogenic storage. Somewhere, supposedly, there was a complete file on Harkness, a full record of everything he'd done and everywhere he'd been. Ianto had never seen it; no one had, as far as he could tell, but *everyone* who worked Archives knew a bloke who knew someone who'd seen The Harkness File.

And then, of course, there were the *other* sorts of rumors, common knowledge throughout Torchwood as a whole.

"I saw him," Lisa said with relish. "I had to give Hartman's staff the briefing on the Ulapi incident - remember, with the smugglers in Milton Keynes? - and when I came out of her office, there he was, waiting in reception with the old bloke from Two. And yes," she went on, before he had a chance to ask, "he's exactly as gorgeous as everyone says, and a terrible flirt. I swear he had the office *plants* spreading their vines for him."

Ianto raised an eyebrow. "Should I be jealous?"

Lisa laughed and leaned across the table to give him a quick kiss. "Don't you worry, love, it's only window shopping. Besides, I think you're more his type than I am."

Ianto shrugged. "I never heard that he was gay. Just indiscriminate, maybe."

"Yeah, well, he was definitely chatting up Hartman's receptionist."

"Not Danny?" Ianto laughed. "He'll be out of luck, then. Danny's seeing Nathan Spencer, in my division. Trust me on this. I've accidentally walked in on them in the Archive Seven stairwell at least five times this *month*, it's a bloody nuisance."

"Really?" Lisa looked intrigued. "Next time, you could take pictures, you know."

Ianto just shook his head, glancing down at his wristwatch. "Shit. My half hour's almost up, and I promised Heather I'd finish the cross-references on her Area 51 report by the end of the day."

"Oh, I think I ran across something along those lines a couple of months ago." Lisa toyed with her salad thoughtfully. "There was an Elysatian artifact we bartered from an American businessman out there, Van-something-or-other. I did the write-up on the trade, it should be in the database."

"Great, I'll look it up, thanks." Ianto stood, going around the table to give her a proper kiss before heading out. "See you tonight?"

"Might be a bit late," she warned him, with a quick smile. "But yeah, I'll grab a curry or something."

"My place?"

"Probably for the best, you're closer."

That settled, Ianto cleared his tray - dumping half his lunch in the bin, untouched - and headed back down to the Archives.

He found Lisa's report, but thought the artifact itself might be worth dragging out. That was being stored - all right, over in Archive Seven. Should be easy enough to access. He headed down the hall to that stairwell, pushed open the door-

"Oh, come *on*, Danny," Ianto groaned, averting his eyes. "Can't you two find a bloody storage closet or something for a change?"

"With vowels like yours, I'll go anywhere you like."

That definitely wasn't Nathan.

Captain Jack Harkness, shirt undone, hand down the front of Danny's trousers, gave Ianto a leer that could only be described as lascivious. Ianto gaped at them for a second, then prudently closed his mouth.

Danny's eyes were wide with a combination of lust and abject panic.

"Right," Ianto said, using every ounce of composure he had to maintain a straight face. "I'll just take the lift, then, shall I?"

"Hey, always room for one more," Harkness said with a grin.

Ianto lifted an eyebrow. "I believe you already have your hands full, Captain, but I appreciate the offer." He gave Danny a nod, with perhaps just the hint of a smirk. "Enjoy your break, Danny."

Danny the receptionist and Jack Harkness of Torchwood Three, Ianto thought gleefully, as he closed the stairwell door behind him. Not that he'd tell anyone - Ianto appreciated a good secret when he met one. But *really*.

Well, there was no accounting for taste.

Lois comes in early, because she always does. Sometimes she thinks she and Ianto are in some kind of unspoken competition to see who can get the coffee on earliest. (The rest of the team prefer it when Ianto wins, but it's the principle of the thing, damn it.) Today, the lights in the Hub are already on when she arrives. She drops her purse on her desk and then notices that the light in Gwen's office is on, too. That's somewhat unusual. Generally Gwen prefers to spend mornings at home with the baby, then heads in around noon.

But every now and then she arrives hours before dawn, muttering about 3 AM feedings and not being able to get back to sleep after. Those are the days she plows through paperwork with grim determination until her desk is completely clear. Ianto calls it her Triple-Shot Espresso Mood.

Lois had better make sure the coffee is on.

She checks, and it is, which means Ianto has to be around somewhere. Probably sorting out the sublevels. On her way back to her desk, she goes to poke her head in Gwen's office. The door is standing open, so she heads right in. "Morning, Gwen. Do you-"

Gwen's there, but so is Ianto, and from the looks of it, they were in the middle of a pretty intense conversation. They jerk apart. Gwen looks like she's been crying. Ianto's usual impassive mask slips down over his face as soon as he sees Lois, and she can't tell what he's thinking or feeling at all.

"Sorry!" Lois squeaks. "Sorry, sorry - the door was open, I didn't realize-"

"Not a problem," Ianto says quickly, getting to his feet. "My fault. I didn't realize it had gotten so late."

Late? It's seven in the morning, hardly even dawn.

Lois must still look awkward and guilty, because Gwen gives her a reassuring smile. "It's all right, Lois. Ianto was just...leaving."

Her breath hitches slightly on the word, and maybe that's when Lois realizes. *Leaving*. She doesn't mean he's just running out to the shops for breakfast, either.

"Sorry," Lois says again, quietly. "I'll just let you..."

She backs out of the office.

But she doesn't close the door, instead leans against the wall beside it, breathing. It's not that she specifically wants to eavesdrop or anything. Just...

"I'm so sorry, Gwen," she can hear Ianto say in low tones. "I owe you so much, I can't even begin to-"

"It's all right," Gwen says fiercely. "It's *your* life. I only ever want you to be happy. And he had better fucking make you happy, I *will* kick his arse if he doesn't. Oh, Ianto - he doesn't deserve you, you know."

"I know," Ianto says. And somehow, Lois can hear the smile in his voice. "But maybe I deserve him."

Lois can feel the heat rise to her cheeks. She shoves herself away from the wall, moving back to her workstation. One last glance back over her shoulder through the open door shows Gwen hugging Ianto tightly, her face pressed into his neck.

She sits at her desk and stares at nothing in particular for a minute. Then she boots up her computer and starts going through her usual morning routine, mechanically, because she doesn't know what else to do. As always, she starts with a quick review of last night's CCTV footage around the Hub, to make sure nothing weird happened. It's all perfectly ordinary. After she and Yuan left for the evening, it looks like Ianto closed the place down in a bit of a rush; then nothing until Gwen came in about an hour ago, followed shortly by Ianto again-

That's when Ianto emerges from Gwen's office. He looks subdued but not unhappy - more like his mind's made up. He's moving with a purpose, like he's got somewhere to be. Somewhere he *wants* to be.

Ianto taps her monitor gently as he passes. "See you around, Lois."

"Yeah," she says, trying on a smile. She knows it must be a lie. "See you."

"Top left drawer of your desk," he murmurs. She looks up into his eyes, startled. He gives her a wink and a wide grin before heading out.

It takes her a long moment to figure out why that struck her as so odd. Then she realizes: she's never seen Ianto smile like that, bright and reckless and free. It's something like happiness, and her throat aches with it.

She opens the top left drawer of her desk to find a book, thick and heavy, bound richly in pebbled blue leather. There's no title embossed on the cover or spine, so she flips it open to the first page. And laughs aloud.

The Care and Feeding of the Torchwood Archives, it reads, in large block letters. And below that, in neat cursive, *courtesy of Lois Habiba*.

The rest of the book is blank.

She runs her fingers along the empty pages, smiling to herself, then abruptly stills. Struck with sudden urgency, she pulls up the citywide CCTV feeds on her computer screen, narrowing in on Mermaid Quay. Ianto has just emerged from the side entrance. She follows him over the CCTV as he makes his way up to the Quay. This early in the morning, the area is nearly deserted. She keeps flipping from camera to camera, tracking his progress. He passes into a blind spot as he diverts down an alley, and she nearly panics for a moment, surprised at the strength of her own reaction. But he emerges again at the other end, slipping down another side street-

Someone else appears in the frame, approaching from the opposite direction. She almost doesn't place him at first, without the military greatcoat, but the camera is well-angled and she can see the grin spread across his face as Ianto meets him.

Captain Jack Harkness. Oh, she should have *realized*.

She can't hear them, obviously, but Jack says something that makes Ianto respond scornfully, rolling his eyes. Jack laughs, a *real* laugh, head tossed back, then catches Ianto's wrist with his broad hand, stepping further into Ianto's personal space. Their conversation continues, heads bent close together, achingly intimate. Unconsciously, Lois reaches up to touch her monitor, fingertips hovering over the two men on her screen, as Ianto reaches out to run his hand down Jack's arm as if to hold him in place.

"Lois!" Gwen calls from her office, and Lois drops her hand with a start. "Do you have the Sontaran report handy?"

The report is in a red file folder, on top of the pile in her bottom right drawer. Lois turns away for just a moment to respond. "I'll have it on your desk in a minute!"

When she looks back at the CCTV, the street is empty.