

BY BLACKHELM LOCK
CHOSEN



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Chosen

by blackhemlock (frzn.coffee@googlemail.com)

Torchwood | PG-13 | General, all canon pairings - Jack/Ianto, Rhys/Gwen, Rhiannon/Johnny | 22,000 words

They stole him. Just a little. Seconds of him, snatched out of time, out of space, taken beyond the World. To protect it. To protect Him.

Betaed by: ebonyflames

Warnings: None

Spoilers: Through Children of Earth

Notes: A sort of CoE fix-it. Or reworking. And I really hate writing summaries.

Art by LauraTW (lauraislost@gmail.com) and wnnb_darklord (wannabe_darklord@yahoo.com)

The world seemed unnaturally quiet as Steven Carter's slight body made its soft death drop to the floor. Blood dripped slowly, quietly, from his mouth to the floor, the chanting stopped and flames tore across the skies. One little life ended, exchanged for millions. The deal is just. It is worthy. The moment Steven's body hit the floor the Earth was saved... and Worlds fell. Lives that had existed mere moments before winked out of existence, swallowed effortlessly up by Time, as if they had never been. The Future shifted, buffeted by the ripples of one boy's death, and shadows rolled...

Something stirred.

The second hand moved, just once...tick... and Time snapped. Like a ball of yarn, spinning and whirring, Time unravelled, spooling all the way back to the Beginning. Humans, proud and tall, fell back through the Missing Link, twisting like Alice down the Rabbit Hole, crawling back into the primordial slime that birthed them. Planets collapsed, imploding into mere fragments of rock and dust free floating in space. Gravity fell away from stars leaving just hydrogen and helium spinning around in the vast emptiness of the Universe. The Black crawled forwards, gaining momentum, and atoms raced towards one another, contracting, faster and faster until...

Nothing.

A heartbeat. Two. The flutter of a butterfly's wings and then...

Someone flicked a switch.

It all raced back. Stars bloomed into life, forcing the Black back and away. Rocks and dust swirled into typhoons of gravity and planets were born, once again, colossuses in the vast nothingness. The old races roamed once more, the Time Lords, the Guardians, the Osirians. The Daleks came, created angry and thirsty for blood and power. Gallifrey rose and fell like a Sun and the Moon spun around a small planet called Earth.

The twentieth century arrived with a herald of gun-fire and violence as fire rained from the sky. Twelve children were rounded up by a man who couldn't die but whose heart had faltered long before and promises were made, deals were bartered and the cries of the innocent fell on deaf ears. They just wanted *Them* to go away.

They came back. There was no warning: they crept out of the blackness they had hidden in for decades, breaking blackened promises, and their war-cry was the staccato chanting from innocent mouths rolling over the world, its hypnotic beat surging through the lands:

"We. Are."

"We. Are."

"We. Are. Coming."

This time it was met.

"We are waiting."

There are forty-two cracks in the tiled wall. Jack is quite sure, he's been sat in the cell long enough to count every single one of them. Long enough for Gwen's mole to stop screaming his name from the cell next door. He can't answer her; he isn't Captain Harkness anymore. Captain Harkness died in Thames House and the man who woke up was a stranger with a hole in his heart. He can still taste - Him - on his lips, warm coffee and bitter-sweet chocolate and Jack can't decide whether or not he wants to scrub his lips right off his face, He is gone. Preserving his taste isn't going to bring him back. He doesn't even have enough for a cloning sample.

There is the squeak of rubber-soled boots on the laminate floor and there is a voice asking if he wants anything. He doesn't answer.

If he concentrates very hard he imagines he can see the damp patch on the ceiling growing. If he concentrates even harder, he can pretend he is dead. It doesn't take much. He slows his breathing, clears his mind so all he sees is black and slowly reduces his heart rate. It was something they taught Agents at the Academy. High heart rate indicates stress, or nerves and can get you killed. They all knew how to control their hearts.

Jack wishes he'd controlled his a bit better. Not let it get away from him so easily.

The sky was blue. A brilliant blue, dotted with candy-floss clouds of white. It reminded him of his childhood summers, the days stretched on and on and sometimes it seemed as if they would never end. The air smelled sweet, like freshly mown grass, and he could feel the velvet blades poking between his fingers. The ground was soft, the grass cushioning and welcoming, but he didn't know where he was and he couldn't just lie there doing nothing. Bracing his arms, he levered himself up and looked around.

There was green as far as he could see. Rolling hills and open vales, dotted with daisies and buttercups and broken up with twisting trees of willow and oak. There was a stream a little ways off, the sunlight tripping over its surface as it tumbled over the rocks; he could hear it babbling to itself. The wind brushed by him, soft and sweet, caressing his face with gentle fingers. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, savouring the freedom.

It was a mistake. The moment his eyes shut he saw it all playing out on the back of his eyelids like an old film, staccato and scratched.

He'd died. In Jack's arms, lying there as his heart stuttered out its final beats... He should have known, the plan was flawed from its inception. He'd known that, but he was tied to Jack with heart-threads of gossamer and nothing in the world would have stopped him following Jack. He'd needed to be by the

man's side, prove that he believed in Jack after all the doubt that had been thrown their way. After all the secrets. And he'd died for it.

It wasn't worth it.

The door opens with a clang of metal, the key in the lock draconian and loud. He doesn't open his eyes, chooses to remain focused on the black that is promising oblivion, although he learned long ago that promises are shiny and insubstantial and it's a correlation: the more shiny and attractive they seem, all the more elusive they become. But he still keeps his eyes closed and his breathing shallow as he chases the darkness.

A warm hand burns a grip into his shoulder and his eyes flutter open. He doesn't know the face but the uniform is immediately recognisable. UNIT. The United Nations Intelligence Taskforce. A fancy acronym and pretty uniform but Jack's seen prettier and they all die in the end anyway. The man is young, too young for this life and if Jack were in the mood to escape his side-arm is within easy reach. But he's not and the boy lives to see another day. Jack's eyes flick from one uniformed man to another, there are five in total, before landing on the bureaucrat standing behind the soldiers. And further back, Lois Habiba, still handcuffed and looking very small between two burly soldiers.

His gut clenches at the irony. Now, now, after he has lost so much, now they are coming to ask for his help. He knows what the folder the man clutches contains. Orders. Not the Blank Paper that orders executions, that never exists as a hard piece of data. That is just an illusion that can be explained away and forgotten about. Other orders are real. Made of tree pulp and ink and carried around in fancy black leather folders.

Jack closes his eyes and leans back against the tiled wall. He doesn't care what they want and if he ignores them, maybe, just maybe, they will go away.

"Captain Harkness I presume?"

Jack cracks one eye open and it is enough to glare the man down. He proffers the folder and Jack lazily takes it.

"You need to come with us."

He'd always thought that Jack was wrong, that there had to be something more than darkness after death. He was not a man of faith, the idea of God seemed too small for the universe they lived in, but looking around at the picturesque valley he couldn't help but wonder, "Is this Heaven?"

His voice was unrecognisable, scratchy as Death's icy fingers slipped from around his vocal chords, and it wasn't until it came back at him, bouncing off the rocks and waters that he realised he'd spoken out loud. Or that he was completely alone.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

He didn't expect an answer, but he couldn't shake the chill that trickled down his spine when one didn't come.

There was a buzzing by his ear and he snapped his head round. His hair ruffled as something flew over his head and he looked up. He could feel eyes on him, pin-pricking his skin, and he shut his own suddenly scared that maybe it wasn't Heaven after all. The buzzing came again, not quite the deep drone of a bumblebee and not the high pitched squeal of a bluebottle; something in-between that was as familiar as it was unnerving. Something alighted on his hand, feather-light and delicate, and lanto's eyes snapped open.

The saliva drained from his mouth, his heart hammered - making him suddenly aware that it was *beating* -

On his index finger perched a fairy. It was not the horrendous visage of war-mongering demons he had seen in the archives. Nor was it the sparkling image of the Cottingley photographs. They were not magical in any way he could discern; he could feel the creature's weight, see the tiny veins in its butterfly-delicate wings and feel the heat against its skin.

Whether it was male or female, lanto didn't know, its androgyny foiled any attempts to tell, but it was beautiful. It wasn't beautiful in the way a person was but in the way a storm or a volcano could be. There was the feeling of barely restrained power that had the potential to be raw and unforgiving. It was a terrifying beauty that was sharp and precise and it hurt lanto to look at.

There was a whirring and more fairies appeared around him. Gingerly, careful not to disturb the little being on his finger, lanto got to his feet. Standing he became aware that he hadn't just been laying on the ground. He'd been laying in a Fairy Ring. His heart leapt. There was a chance, an infinitesimally small possibility, he could be in England still. Even Wales. But he didn't dare to hope, because with hope came heartache and lanto had had enough of heartache.

"Where am I?"

"*This is the Wild,*" the fairies whispered.

Turning slowly, lanto looked around. The green rolling hills and rippling waters he'd earlier mistaken for Heaven where indeed Wild. The grass waved in the wind ready to ensnare the unwary, like kelp that entangled divers and drowned them in dark waters. The trees were old and gnarled, their bark weathered into horrific faces and their branches grasping fingers that he automatically shied away from. Nothing was calm; not even the babbling brook that had become torrential.

It was frightening. Even the most benign flower suddenly looked alive and angry; like guard dog lurking in a shadowed corner.

"*This is Ours.*"

Ianto turned to the voices, but it was like trying to talk to fireflies. They were everywhere, hanging from the grass blades, fluttering around his head - their wings vibrating against his ears - behind him, above him, on him. He settled for focusing on just one: the one still settled on his finger.

"This is where you bring them? The Chosen Ones?" Ianto didn't know why he had asked. He already knew the answer. But it was better than standing and gawking.

"Yes," they hissed. "*They are Ours. We bring them to the Wild.*"

Ianto's expression crumpled. "I don't understand. Why am I here?"

"We Chose you," they answered as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm a Chosen One?" he asked, all at once stymied and worried. As far as his experience went, Chosen Ones were pre-pubescent girls with curling blonde hair. They only interacted with adults long enough to kill them.

The fairies giggled. It wasn't like tinkling silver bells or whatever crap Disney fed small children and their naive parents. "*No! No! No!*" they laughed, tumbling through the air like swallows. One pulled at his hair in gentle rebuke. "*We Chose you long before there were Chosen Ones.*"

Ianto rolled his eyes. His heart might still be hammering away, adrenaline flooding his system, but they weren't telling him anything and Ianto was infuriated. His hands tightened into fists and he willed his breathing to even out.

"I don't-"

"*Understand! You don't understand!*" they mocked, although there was nothing malicious in their tones. They were understanding - as much as they could be - yet amused. "*You can't understand. You don't remember.*"

For a moment Ianto worried that he'd been retconned, but then he remembered. These weren't Torchwood. They were worse. Fear curled in his belly and his mouth ran dry. The fairy on his finger stroked the hairs that were standing on edge, its little fingers leaving trails of static as they passed.

"What-" he coughed, swallowed, let his mouth flood with saliva and tried again, "What don't I remember?"

They giggled. Ianto had never thought that the sound of childish laughter could ever be horrifying. He remembered hearing Mica giggle when she was just an infant, in her nappy and blue jumper-suit, crawling around the play-mat on the floor of his London flat, chasing the sunbeams reflecting from Lisa's art deco mirror. He'd smiled, exchanged a fond look with Rhiannon over Lisa's head as she cooed at the flaxen haired baby. The sound had been happiness, pure and sweet. It wasn't anymore.

"*The first time you died.*"

Whatever Ianto had been expecting them to tell him that was not it.

General Pierce's uniform is immaculate. The brass buttons shine, every single medal is in place, all present and correct, and his jacket is laced with that much starch it's a wonder he can breathe. Jack's met soldiers like him before. They think in straight lines and follow orders no matter the fallout. He used to be one of them until the Time Agency stole a part of his life. When you are thirty-three, two-years feels like an impossible loss. After over two thousand, with millennia more to come, two years is petty and insignificant. But it's still enough to keep him questioning orders. Pierce has obviously never met an order he did not like and it sets Jack's teeth on edge.

He's never been inside COBRA before, he avoids politicians like the plague - they only make problems - and is rather disappointed to find it is just a room; albeit one drenched in the stench of fear. The metal of his handcuffs clank against the table, scuffing the high polish and there is a part of Jack longing for a snide rebuke. Naturally it does not come, and Jack's heart hurts just that little bit more.

They are looking at him, all of them, a curious mix of hope and fear in their eyes, like he is going to save them. They don't seem to realise that he just doesn't care anymore. The only person not looking at him is the Prime Minister. Jack knows how hard it is to look a man in the eye after you've tried to have him killed but he is strangely lacking in sympathy. None of them are speaking, they won't talk first. Breaking the silence is tantamount to rolling over and baring your throat, so they all sit, in silence, whilst an invisible clock ticks down the seconds until the Earth is robbed.

Two years compared to ten percent of the world's children, Jack feels oddly humbled at the comparison. But he still cannot find it within himself to care.

"Captain Harkness, I have heard *interesting* things about you." It is the American that breaks the silence, somehow Jack knew he would and Jack says nothing. General Pierce does not seem surprised at his recalcitrance; he merely focuses on the folder in front of him. "According to all current intelligence, you are the premier authority on alien life on the planet." Jack snorts. He's known that for years, it's about time others caught up. Pierce continues, his attention still firmly affixed on his notes, "It would seem that the entity known as the Doctor left instructions that UNIT should contact you if they came across anything *beyond* them."

Once more Jack finds that he hates the Doctor just as much as he loves him. Days ago such news would have stroked his ego nicely. "I'll bet that pissed off more than a few people."

"I'm sure it did." The General narrows his eyes. "But it seems as though we have reached that point."

"What point?" Jack isn't in the mood for games. In all honesty, he was more than content in his prison cell, counting the cracks and watching the damp spread across the plaster.

"The point at which your help is required."

Jack's eyes narrow and a brief spark of anger lights in his belly; but it is no more than a touch-paper: quick to light and quick to burn out. He leans back and offers a bored look to all present. "Now you want my help?" There isn't as much venom in his voice as he'd have liked but it's the best he can do.

"We admit, there have been some mistakes in the past few days-"

"A few *mistakes*?" Jack growls, very aware that their 'mistakes' cost him his lover.

"But to dwell on them would be inadvisable. At this point we must deal with the situation at hand. I trust you are aware of the 456's demands?"

Jack is still glaring at the man, his blue eyes bright with something feral and cold, but he isn't rude. He could be, a part of him wants to be: wants to rise from the table and punch the man in his politic mouth, lay him flat out over the shiny table and then go to work on him. But he doesn't. Instead he gives a curt nod and curls his hands into fists.

"They want ten per cent of the world's children. That means Britain would have to surrender three hundred and twenty-five thousand children. The United States has demands for two million more than that; two million, three hundred and forty thousand and France -"

"I can do the math General. I know what ten per cent of the children of Earth adds up to." He hadn't, lanto had. It was one of those strange little statistics that the man has - had - stuck in the back of his head. But the General doesn't need to know that.

The General stares at him for a moment, his eagle sharp eyes are trying to weigh Jack up, understand him and Jack remains as he is. "What it adds up to Captain is a very large problem. On one hand we have a hostile with the capability of wiping out life on this planet in minutes if the disaster at Thames House is anything to go by." Jack grits his teeth at the mention of that place, which doesn't go unnoticed by the soldier. "On the other, all we know is that if we deploy nuclear arms we will poison the atmosphere and may not even manage to terminate the threat."

Jack rolls his eyes. He can almost understand the Doctor's aversion to weapons - once they are there it is so very tempting to use them to solve everything. He doesn't believe that nuclear weapons are the answer here. If their biological weaponry is anything to go by, the 456 are far more advanced than the human's they are attacking. Jack briefly wonders which other worlds they have poached from, they are obviously scavengers: they steal children so it is probable that they steal weapons and technology. There are thousands of species just like them out in the universe, too lazy to evolve the hard way. At least humans can be proud that they have taken the long route into space.

"What do you want me to do about that? Any weapons Torchwood might have had were destroyed when they came after me and mine." The Prime Minister blanches; obviously he underestimated Jack's intuition. Lois looks uncomfortable too, even though she had nothing to do with it. Bridget Spears shifts closer to Frobisher, both sitting in the back of the room and looking nervous at Jack's mere presence. He imagines that it is because you don't expect to have to face a man you've had

killed, no matter how many times you send out that order. Jack has no idea why they are present, perhaps because Frobisher's office was the first informed that the 456 were back.

It doesn't matter. They are all guilty men at the end of the day. If only for keeping this from the world.

"Nothing," the Prime Minister asserts. He seems more composed, or at least he is trying to appear that way. "That is a matter for politicians not for you." His voice is all but dripping with contempt as he refers to Jack, he is not the first to do so. Politicians seem to have a natural abhorrence for the rogue Torchwood leader, and Jack doesn't care one whit for it.

"Yeah, because you're handling it oh so well already," Jack snarls. This was why Ianto always took calls from Downing Street. Brian Green was only a species away from Harold Saxon in Jack's mind.

"Gentlemen," Pierce cuts in smoothly, "Neither of you are handling anything at the moment. UNIT has sent someone to get more information out of the alien" he searches for the right word, "*delegate* as we speak. We have another problem."

Jack feels something cold run down his back. Something ticks in his head, something familiar, but it is a Will-o'-the-wisp of a thought and is gone before he can grasp for it. He raises an enquiring eyebrow.

"Well?"

"Mr Dekker?"

Jack recognises the oily man immediately and is filled with an incandescent rage. "How did you survive?"

"Hazmat suits in the basement. You could have gotten there, if you'd had thought." The man is arrogant and cruel and Jack wants to put a bullet in his gut. Not his head - that is a quick and painless death - but a gut wound... that can take hours to kill. And it's very painful.

"You mean if you'd have told us?"

Dekker smiles and Jack's skin crawls. "Semantics Captain."

"What do you mean, 'the first time' I died?" Ianto asked. He was somewhat sure that they hadn't heard the squeak of fear in his voice but their laughter indicated otherwise.

"The first time you died, curled in your lover's arms - filthy thing that he is. Sobbing and begging for love. Love he couldn't give. He isn't built that way."

Ianto flinched away from their words but it was no good, they were everywhere and their malicious whispers fed the part of his psyche that already thought those things about Jack. Not that Jack was filthy, but that Jack wasn't built to love.

"Couldn't even give you the words to cling to as you went into the Black."

lanto refused to cry. He didn't care how much it hurt - how true their words were - he wouldn't show them any weakness. "Stop it. I already know about that death."

"No. You know about the second time you played that scene. The first was a rehearsal. Like a play."

lanto spun round, his confusion and their flight making him dizzy. The Faerie on his finger lost its balance and tumbled a little way then its wings fluttered to life and it soared up into the open sky before spinning back towards lanto in a dizzying dive. It perched on his nose, and beat a tiny fist between his brows. "*Mean! Don't make me fall! I'll make you fall! And you won't get up!*"

He tried focusing on the little figure but it made him cross-eyed, and his head started to hurt with the effort. "I'm sorry," he said, and he meant it. Whilst he didn't want them on him, he hadn't wanted to hurt it and hadn't meant to send it tumbling. He just wasn't sure what was happening and they weren't making things easy. "Just, please, tell me what is going on."

He could feel the tears building and lanto suddenly felt very alone. He was alone in this alien place and the only familiar things were the Faeries, and they were not trustworthy.

"*Want to know a secret?*" The one on the end of his nose asked.

The others had stopped talking. Stopped whirly-gigging through the skies. They were hovering ominously around, as if waiting for something to happen. It spooked lanto just a little.

lanto fought the urge to nod. "What secret?"

The Faerie giggled and clapped its hands, childishly enthusiastic about whatever it knows. "*We've changed the Future. Changed the Past. Changed the Present. All to change the Future.*"

lanto closed his eyes, screwed them shut tight in a desperate attempt not to shake his head. "I don't understand."

A gentle hand stroked the furrow between his brows, "*We'll show you.*"

Jack shakes his head, listening to Dekker's recording. He isn't quite sure who Dekker is, but obviously he spends a lot of time listening to things he shouldn't. He also cannot comprehend how the assembled officials in COBRA expect him to know who this second voice belongs to especially considering that he had no clue as to who the 456 were when he first heard their message.

"I don't know." His voice is flat, sounding every one of his two thousand years. lanto's passing - he cannot, will not, dare not say death, even to himself yet - has drained every bit of life from him, as if with that final kiss lanto took something with him into the Dark. Jack hopes so; he hates to think of lanto alone in that place, hiding from whatever Suzie believed was waiting for them. His emotions come in flashes now, small sparks that break through his blanket of apathy like sunbursts through a

cloud. It is interesting. He always considered himself a passionate creature, quick to rouse and quick to rest. He finds he quite enjoys the ennui.

"Captain," the American General glares at him, "I understand that you feel that you have been ignored by this government. However, now is not the time to be belligerent."

If he'd had the strength, Jack might have rolled his eyes, or even shrugged. He doesn't though. Apathetically he meets the general's stare and holds it. "This isn't belligerence. It's hopelessness."

The general's lip curls into a derisive sneer and his dark eyes fix on Jack like he is some sort of particularly repellent insect that has dared to mess up his uniform. "Any man wearing the rank of Captain - no matter how he got it - shouldn't give in so easily."

Jack is surprised that he is not upset as his honour is called into question. This man has no right to judge him; only four people in the Universe have ever had that right and one - maybe two - of them is dead.

"Listen again," the PM insists, fear bleeding into his words.

Dekker quickly taps at his laptop, forcing the data to scroll back to the beginning and soon the droning of thousands of childish voices fills the room. Everyone, but Jack, shifts uncomfortably in their seats.

"We are. We are. We are coming"

He can feel all eyes on him, from the heavy accusing glare of the American, to the desperate gaze of Frobisher and Gwen's recruit, standing like a handcuffed wall-flower in the corner. Both of them are willing him to pull something out of the proverbial hat.

"We are waiting."

The speakers pump out static before the children speak again. The date and time-stamp of this recording are different and the list of numbers is both mind-boggling and sickening all at once. Academically, Jack knows that he should feel more horror at what he is hearing, but all he hears is a list of numbers, before...

"Zero. None. Nothing. Not one. You shall not take anyone."

There is power in that voice. It is defiant, strong for all its childishness and everyone in the room responds to it. Jack can see the shudders working their way up spines and the way Spears is gripping her pen is just as telling. Had Jack been a religious man he might have been tempted to believe that it was God's voice rolling across the world. But Jack isn't and really, what God would put them into such a situation?

"I don't know," he sighs. And he really doesn't. He might not care as much as he should but he is not childish, he will tell them the truth.

"Then, what species exist that could do this?"

Jack can only think of one species, or rather one being, that would have the balls to stand up to the 456 in such a manner, but he was far away, floating through Time without a care in the world. Or even the Universe. He's left them to burn, as Jack always feared he would and Jack cannot take his place. It doesn't matter how hard he tries he isn't the Doctor. Because if he was the Doctor, his half-baked scheme of taking the 456 on would have resulted in victory and not the needless death of someone he lov-cared for. The Doctor lost Rose, he didn't get her killed. He sacrificed Donna to save her and she is living happily now, she just doesn't know. The Doctor saves people, he saved Jack after all, but Jack just seems to curse those around him. Alex, Suzie, Tosh, Owen, Grey, Ianto; the Doctor would have saved them all. He might be Jack's hero, his salvation, but Jack hates him... just a little.

"None." He answers eventually, his tone final. There is no hope.

"Are you saying that there is nothing out there that could do this?" the incredulity in the General's voice is etched into every line of his face.

"I am saying," Jack explains patiently, "that there is no alien species living on this planet that has the numbers or the technology advanced enough to pull this off." He could explain that the only other species of significant numbers living along side humans are the Weevils, swarming city sewers, but he doesn't think that they need to hear that right now. Besides, he really can't imagine them crawling out of the filth for this. And they've never struck him as particularly altruistic either.

Ianto followed the Faeries, they didn't give him much of a choice. For all their small size, they were effortlessly strong and Ianto couldn't help but feel like a piece of china in their tiny hands. They could break him, so easily, smash him to pieces no one would ever find. Their tiny hands pulled at his hair, ripping strands from the roots - along with pieces of scalp if the pain was anything to go by - and he heard the ominous tearing of fabric as his sleeve was seized by a little fist. They propelled him along what could be termed a path, if one was very lax about definitions. Really, it was little more than a winding route of shorter grass, no less wild, which scaled the side of the tallest hill. They maintained a fast pace, forcing Ianto to make long quick strides that made his heart pound against his ribs and his lungs burn. Ianto didn't really care though, all the effort and pain just proved that he was alive, though they hadn't told him why that was yet.

He slowed for a moment, trying to catch his breath.

"*So slow,*" they sang, flitting about his head. "*Why so slow, sweet I-an-to?*"

Ianto ignored them. Taunting was their way, Ianto had learned that much. They spoke in riddles and rhymes, and Ianto assumed that it was because they were, in part, eternal children. Doomed to play and tease forever, like Jack, and being serious forever would bore anyone. Rather than respond, he started walking again, one foot in front of the other, wincing as the dew-damp began to seep through his shoes.

At the top of the hill was a circle that reminded Ianto of the fairy-ring he woke up in, however, this one was made of roses. Deep red roses, the colour of blood and passion: all the primal parts of life. Their perfume hung over the entire area and the Faeries darted from flower to flower as though they were bees. Had he been anyone else, someone who didn't know what he knew, hadn't seen what he had seen, Ianto would have found the crown of the hill beautiful. Heavenly. As it was, it terrified him. These were the death flowers; they created the petals stuffed down people's throats so that they died unable to scream.

In the middle of the roses was a pool. To his eye it looked as though the walls had been woven together with something like willow, long thin branches petrified over the years, twisted and twining to form a perfect circle that cupped the water like a bowl. It was a beautiful structure and Ianto was quite aware of the reverence that the Faeries seemed to have for this place. None of them were perched on the pool rim. They were hanging off the roses nearby but seemed to be making a concerted effort to avoid the water. This pool was the nearest these creatures came to having a place of worship.

Following their whispered instructions Ianto moved closer until he was standing over the pool, staring into his own eyes reflected in the obsidian depths. The water was calm; not a wake or ripple breaking the surface, it was like looking into a mirror; every detail was perfectly reflected back at him. He looked a mess. He leaned closer, careful not to touch the surface, and examined himself closely. They'd caused a lot of damage. The collar of his waistcoat had torn, his tie was mostly undone, and his hair looked like it did after Jack had spent hours running his fingers through it. It looked Wild.

The longer he looked at his reflection the more he became aware that something wasn't quite right with it. The scratch on his cheek was gone for one thing. His hair seemed slightly longer and much curlier than usual; he doubted that the Faeries managed that just by tugging him along with it. His eyes were brighter, clearer and... He looked younger. He looked like he did just after he had finished university, fresh and alive and ready for a new experience. It wasn't nice, realising the toll only five years had taken on him. Torchwood had stolen more than his life from him; it had taken his youth, his vitality. The pool was showing him what he should have been, what he could have been, without Torchwood, and Ianto did not like it one bit. The slap of realisation over what he had sacrificed hurt.

There was a light touch between his shoulder-blades, almost a caress, and he pitched forwards into the icy water. His body tumbled down, like a stone in a well, falling through the water as if it were air. His lungs burned, bubbles streamed from his mouth as he screamed into the inky blackness. He'd believed them. He'd trusted them, followed them willingly to the pool and now he was going to drown in its depths. The cold water pricked at his skin like thousands of tiny needles and Ianto flailed frantically trying to right himself, find which way was up. But it was black, black, black. Everywhere he looked was black and it was so cold, he was so tired...

The General is a patient man. It is how he has gotten his position in life, out waiting his competitors, procrastinating until all the evidence is in. He is a patient man, but Harkness is testing the limits of that

patience. He was informed, whilst his men were out collecting the Captain, that Harkness pushed people's boundaries, that he was a wild card. He is sure, looking at the man across from him, that they were talking about a very different man. This one is broken.

He's seen the footage of Thames House. At the very least the Captain lost a member of his team, and that always hits a leader hard. What separates the good leaders from the great ones is how they bounce back from such events. The Captain might be a good leader, but all the evidence suggests that he isn't a great one. It also suggests that Ianto Jones was perhaps more important to the man than anyone thought. His death seems to have stripped the Captain down to the bare bones and the General is somewhat relieved that he thought to have Jones' body swaddled and transported and placed under guard. If all else fails, his lover's body might provide necessary leverage.

He smiles and leans forward, folding his arms on the table. It is a calculated move, one that usually invites trust and cooperation. "Captain, I know that this is a difficult time for you. That the last few days have been, shall we say, an ordeal?"

Jack scoffs and narrows his eyes. Placation suggests that his captors are running out of ideas and are about to do something very nasty indeed. It was how it always went. It was how he'd played it when he'd worked for the Agency. First the hard act, demand the answers you want and leave no quarter for obfuscation. When that failed, which it always does, move on to seeming reasonable, kind, wanting to help them out and then in that moment when they soften like butter in the sun, you hit them with whatever nasty little surprise you've dredged up to shatter them into pieces. He's played that game a thousand times.

"It hasn't been the best of weeks, I'll give you that." He smiles at the General and leans into the man, mirroring him perfectly. "But I've had worse." And he has. He's had two thousand years of worse buried beneath Cardiff. The General cannot beat that, no matter what he pulls.

"Maybe you have." Pierce is magnanimous in his condescension. "But I believe that we can work this out, together."

Jack shakes his head. "There is nothing to work out. I don't know that voice. I've never heard it and nothing like this has ever been reported in the history of the Earth." And Jack means the whole history right up until the fifty-first century, not that Pierce is aware.

"Then you won't mind if we mind if we make *doubly* sure?"

His tone alerts Jack to the fact that something is off. He looks round, Frobisher is studiously looking elsewhere, as is the PM. Spears and Lois seem as confused as he is, whilst Denise Riley looks viciously satisfied by something. The hairs on the nape of Jack's neck begin to rise, slowly, like a storm brewing the static forcing them upwards crackle against his skin and he knows that something is coming.

"Bring them in please." Pierce is talking into a small intercom unit to his left, but his eyes are on Jack. Watching. Waiting.

The door opens and Jack's head whips round just in time to see his daughter and grandson being, unceremoniously, shoved into the room. Johnson, the agent that destroyed his home - though Jack has not even begun to comprehend the ramifications of that - and tore up his body, is holding Alice's arm. Her eyes are sharp, predatory, and Jack can see that the gun on her hip is primed and ready for action. It is the most Jack has felt since yesterday, the anger that surges through him that his family are about to be used against him jerks him out of his torpor.

He snarls, like a caged tiger or maybe a lion, he's always seen himself as a lion, and his eyes flash a warning to anyone who is bothering to look. "Leave them out of this."

Pierce smiles, his white teeth all the brighter against his dark skin, all the more menacing, "They are merely here for insurance purposes Captain. Nothing more."

Jack doesn't trust him. He's never trusted bureaucracy, it has too much to lose to be truly truthful but he has all Jack has left at gun point and Jack feels just a little lost. He'd always believed, back in his Time Agency days, that emotions, feeling for people, was the most foolish thing a being could do. It left you weak, vulnerable, it placed a readymade hole in your armour waiting for the right person to exploit it. But Jack had still be drawn like a moth to the light of other souls and here was the right person ripping that little hole open, stripping Jack bare and there was nothing he could do about it.

"I've told you everything." His voice is strong, but the note of pleading undermines his words and the General catches on pretty quick.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Jack clenches his fists so tight that the knuckles crack. Steven looks bemused, not quite scared but not exactly comfortable either and Jack wants him away from the soldiers. Alice, on the other hand is glaring at him accusingly. Her dark eyes are fixed unwaveringly on her father and recrimination burns bright in their depths.

The guilt wells up in him like Bay after a storm. They are here because of him and Alice knows it. She's proved him right; all those years she kept him at arm's length because of Torchwood and its inherent dangers, all of them have come crashing down on them now. And it isn't just her paying the price.

"I'll make this easy for you. You tell us what is standing up to the 456 and we won't have young Steven here sent off to join the other children."

"You can't!" Alice screams. "He's my son!"

"He is just a statistic. Unless 'Uncle Jack' decides otherwise."

"What's happening?" Steven asks, looking scared for the first time since he entered.

General Pierce leaves his seat to stand before Steven. His hands are clasped behind his back and there is a small smile on his face. "Hello Steven, my name is General Pierce. We have a problem and your Uncle Jack can help us. Do you want him to help us Steven?"

Steven nods dumbly, not really understanding what is happening. All he knows is that he doesn't like the man in the uniform.

"Well Uncle Jack? Are you going to help us?" Pierce's glittering eyes are fixed on Jack now, but he is still hovering over Steven.

"Dad?"

Jack's eyes are full of tears and he shakes his head. "I don't know."

Pierce sighs, his shoulders heaving with the effort. "That is a shame." He signals to two of the guards and they step forward, their heavy hands gripping Steven's thin arms. "It was nice to meet you Steven."

"Wait! He's innocent!"

"You knew the deal Captain."

"I can't tell you what I don't know!" Jack all-but screams at them. "I don't know who they are."

"Then we have nothing more to discuss."

The soldiers holding Steven begin manhandling him towards the door. Alice surges forwards but Johnson intercepts her, digging a gun into the soft flesh just above her hip. She shakes her head, a warning that she will pull the trigger if pushed. Jack automatically reaches for his Webley but it's gone, they took it off him at the police station. He doesn't think, he reaches out and grabs the soldier nearest to him, head-butting the man before punching him with both handcuffed fists, sending him crashing to the floor. Steven screams and begins to thrash, calling for his mum and Uncle Jack and the soldiers are forced to lift him, one by the legs and one by his arms. Two soldiers are restraining Jack, who snaps and kicks and twists like a live-wire and Johnson's grip on Alice just gets tighter.

They almost have Steven through the door when the soldier holding his legs begins coughing.

He landed with a jolt, though it was on his feet, and his bones rattle with the impact. Somehow he had lost his shoes - and socks - in his tumble through the water and was rapidly coming to the conclusion that that was no ordinary water. The ground between his toes felt gritty and he wrinkled his nose at the sensation. Jack once said that he had OCD, Owen had thrown his opinion in too, but he didn't have that. He never did. He just liked things to be neat and clean. It made the world efficient and easy, not to mention hygienic. He didn't know what had happened to his footwear, but he was grateful that at least the Water left him with his clothes.

He looked around and it quickly became apparent that he was not in the Wild anymore. There were buildings. Shiny steel and glass monoliths stretching into the grey overcast sky. People hurried past, scurrying like ants, and they all seemed unaware of Ianto standing barefoot in the middle of them.

Ever since he was little Ianto had always had something ticking in the back of his head. He had always been aware of time. By the time he was revising for his GCSEs he could tell what time it was after only looking at the clock in the morning. This little clock was telling him that not only was it three minutes after one o'clock in the afternoon, but that he was in the year 3092. To be more specific, it was Wednesday, August the third and furthermore he knew that he was on Earth. He wasn't sure where but he was definitely on Earth and that was an important detail, the human race had already scattered itself throughout the Universe by this point. Small colonies cropping up on distant planets and colonised moons. Or at least that was what Jack had told him when he'd asked when the human race moved out into space. But then again, Jack hadn't believed in an after-life and, although Ianto knew he hadn't been in Heaven, he was in some kind of after-life. He was on Earth, a thousand years in the future, and Ianto was just a little scared that he knew all of that instinctively.

Something soft and light landed on his shoulder and out of the corner of his eye Ianto saw a Faerie, the same Faerie that had been perched on his nose minutes, centuries, before. He returned his gaze to the people hurrying about. Despite the passage of time, it still appeared as though people took lunch breaks. That was comforting.

"Where are we?"

"Paris, France. Or at least it used to be. Cities rise and fall, like bricks tumbling down, down, down."

There was no Eiffel Tower, no Sacre Coeur. There was no wafting smell of baking croissants or Gallic cursing. Ianto could have been anywhere, but something felt right. This was, this had been Paris, a very long time ago. "Why are we here?"

"For answers. You need to know. Need to understand."

Ianto could feel his irritation build. They talked in circles giving answers without really giving away anything at all. Obviously the Faerie on his shoulder felt it too because it patted him gently on the neck. *"Need to start moving. Can't see if you're not there."*

Frowning Ianto took a step forward. *"Wrong way. You're going the wrong way!"*

Gritting his teeth, Ianto politely enquired, "And which is the right way?"

Launching itself from his shoulder, the Faerie hovered in front of Ianto's face, and gave him a patronising look. *"Forward of course. One foot in front of the other. Step, step, step."*

"Of course it is."

"Come on Ianto! Things to see! Things to learn! Follow me!"

The Faerie zipped off, its wings buzzing in that distinctive way, in exactly the direction that lanto had been heading. For the first time in his life, he knew the desire to punch something. It wasn't that he wasn't a passionate man, because he was. You couldn't be in a relationship - however lax - with Jack Harkness if you were anything other. It's just that for the most part, he could compartmentalise, keep his emotions and his work separate. But these Faeries were really pushing the limits. It was as if the recent events had blurred his thinking. Yesterday, today, hundreds of years ago, whenever it was that he had died, was the first time since Lisa he had let his heart rule his head. Any other time he would have had three, maybe four, plans and options for every scenario and even more get out clauses. But he hadn't. Jack had been so gung-ho lanto had let himself get swept up in his wake, in a way he never had before.

He was beginning to think that the Faeries had been messing with him before he woke up in the Wild.

Nevertheless, he followed the firefly being as it effortlessly wove its way through the crowds of people. No one took any notice of it or the scruffily dressed man trailing faithfully behind it, they just seemed to move out of the way a split-second before the Faerie reached them. It was unbelievable.

As he passed, lanto took time to study the world a thousand years in the future. For a start, everyone was speaking English, or at the very least a version of it. He imagined that the French of his time would be horrified to learn that they would eventually be speaking English and not just to humour ignorant tourists. They were all dressed similarly too. It wasn't like something out of a science fiction movie where the future was painted with skin tight lycra in varying shades. It was more that the clothing felt the same; individuality had waned away since lanto's time. Trousers and shirts, well more fitted tops, of varying muted colours but all similar styles, and glasses. Everyone appeared to be wearing glasses.

"It's the Ultra Violet light. Lots of rays in the atmosphere. And dust. Ozone crumbling and repairing, but has to crumble first."

The Faerie was quite a way ahead of lanto, but he could hear the little being as clearly as if he had been stood next to him. lanto nodded non-committally, accepting the fact that the ozone layer would be a problem for humans for years to come and tried not to think about the fact that Faeries were apparently telepathic.

The Faerie paused for a moment, giving lanto chance to catch up to it, before ducking through a doorway. There was no door, not even a glass sliding one with motion detectors; it seemed to be an open doorway - which lanto couldn't imagine was very secure - until lanto moved through it after his guide. There was a tingling, like static dancing across his skin, and lanto turned in time to see that there was some type of force-field covering the door that shifted as he moved through it. He couldn't help the smile that broke out on his face; of all the things he'd seen during his time with Torchwood this was the first thing that the movies had gotten right. He felt like a kid and swiped his hand through the force-field again, just to see it flicker around his flesh and then drew it back quickly as there was a

sharp tug on his ear. The Faerie was frowning sternly at him and lanto felt absurdly abashed that a being a tenth of his size was rebuking him.

"No time to play! Naughty!" it hissed, before flitting off down a corridor. *"Follow!"*

Scratching his head and hiding a small smile, lanto did, imagining that, had the little figure been standing, it would have been stamping its little foot in temper. They wound through clean white corridors with bright strip lighting, passing officious men and women in sleek white uniforms with a blue Rod of Asclepius on the left breast of their fitted tunics. He was in a hospital, or a medical centre of some sort, though other than the uniforms there was no way to tell. Nor was there anything comforting about the environment. No strategically placed chairs for visitors to wait in, no soothing wall paintings or potted plants just white corridors with strange symbols at every junction. The NHS may not have been perfect, but at least it was friendly. There weren't even information posters and leaflets littered about. The place was sterile, cold and whilst he imagined it probably functioned very well, it was in no way reassuring.

lanto was relieved that the Faerie seemed to know where they needed to be because he was quite lost. He could find his way back out, of course, his sense of direction was as immaculate as ever but as he had no idea where he was going it didn't really matter that if he could get back out. His feet squeaked slightly on the highly polished floor, but as in the street no one noticed him and he was beginning to tally a mental list of things he needed the Faerie to clear up.

Just as soon as it stopped.

"Nearly there. Hurry lanto. Can't miss this!"

The voice floated back to him, meant for his ears alone, and something about its tone compelled him to run. His feet slapped against the floor as he dashed down the corridor, not sure where he was heading and not even needing to watch out for the other people milling about as they moved out of his way just before he reached them. The Faerie was waiting for him outside a windowed room, hovering by the shoulder of a sandy haired man, though the man seemed unaware of his companion. He didn't even flinch when lanto drew up and used him as a prop to catch his breath.

"Can't see you. Can't feel you. You don't exist."

"What?" Something squirmed in lanto's stomach at the Faerie's words.

"Outside Time. We stole you, seconds of you, just a little. Snatched from Time just in time. You don't exist."

lanto's mind ticks the words over, rolling them around until they make sense. "I don't exist," he whispered, "I'm not dead because I'm not alive."

"Clever boy! Now work out the rest."

"How long?" he begged, "Tell me how long?"

"Til this is done. 'Til he is safe."

"Who? Until who is safe?"

The Faerie cupped Ianto's chin and turned him so that he was looking through the room's window. On the bed, tended by numerous physicians was a woman. From her positioning and the tiny swaddled package in her arms it was obvious that she has just given birth. *"Him. And all that come before."*

Ianto looked at the baby, cradled in his mother's arms. He could only see the child's forehead, with a tiny mop of dark hair, and one tiny fist peeking out from amongst the blankets so he has to take the Faerie's word that the child was a boy. But there was something about the child. His skin... it was almost glowing. It wasn't ruddy, the way a newborn's flesh usually looked, it was almost golden.

"What the -"

"You can see it can't you? We made it so you would see! Made you a part of it."

Ianto was bewildered by the explanation. "Made me a part of what?"

"The Wild silly! Took you out of Time, beyond Time, to the Wild. Like us." The Faerie gleefully fluttered around his head, singing as it went, *"Like us. Beyond the world, outside of Time, part of the Wild! You can see!"*

Shying away from the idea that they have changed him, Ianto focused instead on the baby. There was only one thing that they would protect. "He's a Chosen One."

The Faerie clapped. *"Clever Ianto!"*

"I thought they were all girls."

"It's not about gender. Gender is ephemeral - that is something Humans care about. It's all about energy. Sparkling sweet energy. All a part of the World. A part of the Wild. All linked, like a spider web."

"And occasionally someone has too much." Ianto could see it. Now that he knew what he was looking for, he could see the energy thrumming through the people in the room. But for everyone else, the energy was contained, under the skin. For the baby it poured over it, dusting it with gold dust - fairy dust. "And you have to take them. They power the world."

"They hide behind the wind."

"They keep us alive."

The soldiers are dead, rose petals pouring obscenely from their mouths. Suffocation is not as quick as the movies make it seem. It's painful and ugly to watch, eyes bulge and veins pop and both men have scratched welts on their throats, which is probably why most of the people in the room are studiously looking elsewhere. Jack chances a quick look around, viciously satisfied at the horror on their faces, Gwen's little helper even has her hands over her ears, her eyes wide and white. Gwen was very wrong,

she isn't Torchwood material, she's too soft. Softer than Gwen, for all her bleeding heart and feelings, ever was.

"What, what was that?" Bridget Spears asks, her hand wrapped round her throat. Jack isn't sure if she's preparing to save herself from a similar fate or trying to comfort herself.

"Faeries."

They turn to him, accusation and terror in equal parts. Even Alice is scared, her knuckles white as she grips her sides. Jack holds out a hand to Steven, encouraging him to come away from the twitching dead bodies, but another soldier grabs him before he can move.

"I wouldn't do that," Jack warns, feeling safer than he has done in days. It's all manner of perverse. The Faeries are cruel and unforgiving, immoral and childish with an obscene penchant for torture. But Jack is grateful they are here and somehow he knows that the 456 cannot defeat them. Nothing can.

The soldier spares him a glance, his fist tightening on the scruff of Steven's school jumper and Jack gives him a shark like grin. If he doesn't let go of Steven, if he tries to remove him from the room, the man will die. Jack knows this. Oddly enough, he doesn't feel any sympathy. He seems to have lost the capacity for it.

"What are Faeries?" the Prime Minister asks, sinking back into his chair. He has aged at least five years in the past few days and is looking more worn by the minute. It is perhaps a blessing that his regime will be over as soon as this debacle is.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you fairytales?" Jack mocks.

"They can't be real," a generic suited man breaths.

"They are. Very real. Very powerful. Older than anything on Earth. Talk about a rock and a hard place."

"You said," the American begins, attempting to gather some indignation, but it's like trying to grasp smoke: his voice is too shaky to hold it. "You said there was nothing that could do this."

"You were asking about aliens," Jack points out reasonably, "Faeries are not aliens."

"Then what are they?" It is Alice who asks the fear in her voice cuts into Jack, like tiny razorblades. He's been killed like that before; Emily Holroyd tried out hundreds of different knives over the years, so he knows it's an apt metaphor.

"They are Faeries. Some call them Mara, and they are part of the Earth." It is not an explanation, but it is all he really knows about them. Everything else is just hearsay and half remembered stories. "I've met them before and they've killed everyone that's ever gotten in their way."

"So, Steven's..." she trails off, looking at her son.

Steven's looking at them both curiously; he seems so innocent even though he is stood between the bodies of two men who died because of him. It's probably why he looks so innocent; he is untouched and unmarred by the carnage carried out on his behalf. He is entirely blameless.

"Safe, completely safe." It's sort of heartbreaking to realise that those soulless creatures can protect his grandson better than he can.

"I'm sorry," Pierce blusters, "You're telling me that Tinkerbell and her little friends are going to sort all of this out. How? With fairy dust?"

There is a smattering of laughter; more a breaking of tension than real humour and Jack feels his mouth twitch into his first real smile in days. "Don't underestimate them. You have no idea what they are capable of. This," he says, pointing at the dead men, "is child's play to them. This is fun."

He feels the disbelief his words engender, it pricks at him, and part of him hopes that they don't need a real example of the Faeries power in order to be convinced. A larger part of him, one he thought he buried long ago wants to see what the Faeries will do to them. Obviously they are watching things carefully; Jack isn't sure how they do it. He is sure they don't have satellites, always recording and seeing and listening, floating around in space waiting for things to happen. But, does that mean that they are always on Earth? Always watching and waiting for a Chosen One to appear? Or do they just know? Can they simply feel it when one of their own comes into being? Jack knows he doesn't know anywhere near enough about them to judge how they will handle this, handle the 456 but he knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that at the very least the children will survive.

The adults are quite a different story.

lanto felt the tears as they rolled down his cheeks. They were hot, and tasted salty on his lips. He knew now what the Water was for. What it did. His clothes were still damp, his shoes and socks were still missing and his hair felt longer than before.

His heart was broken.

He hadn't lied when he told Jack he loved him. He did. He hadn't chosen to, he hadn't planned to and a part of him really hadn't wanted to but he did. It was a consuming love, one that had snuck up on him and wrapped its coils around his heart and head and seeing Jack broken had broken lanto.

"Will you do it?"

There was no choice. "Not for you. I am not doing this for you."

The Faeries laughed, for the first time since lanto had arrived in the Wild it sounded sweet. *"But you are doing it. That's all we want."*

"This is ludicrous! You're asking us to believe that fairies are going to save us!"

"Not us. Them," Jack points at Steven. "They are going to save the children."

"Every time a baby laughs a fairy gets its wings is that it?"

"Don't mock them," Jack warns, his voice thrumming with all the tension of a brewing storm. He doesn't know how to warn them with anything other than words. Words they don't care to hear.

"I do not know what game you are playing Captain but it ends here. Take him."

The soldiers seize Steven once more and the world goes to hell. The lights flicker, a false lightening, that streaks across everyone's faces bringing with it a calm terror. A wind, fierce and forceful rips through the room, flipping the highly polished mahogany table and all its chairs like they are nothing more than leaves on a blustery autumn day. Someone screams and laughter rings out, high and childish and bordering on maniacal. The soldiers are swept up, the wind taking them prisoner and these ones are not going to be granted the mercy of a quick petal-lined death. Jack can see it, the way the wind funnel is squeezing the air from their lungs and suffocating them. And so can everyone else.

The terror in the room is thick, like tar, and the smell is similarly appealing. Even the battle hardened soldiers are pale, agape and wide-eyed. They've shot aliens and humans alike, tracking down their frail fleshed out bodies before riddling them with bullets, but they can't understand how they are meant to fight the wind. It's like an ancient Chinese conundrum that philosophers have puzzled over for millennia. They point their guns, a fruitless gesture that seems to bring them no comfort. One tries to shoot at his comrade dying in the wind but the bullet merely falls from his gun with a thunderous crack before he is flung into the wall.

Alice is screaming and it is then that Jack notices that Steven is in the centre of the wind funnel. Elbowing Johnson out of the way, he grabs his daughter and forces her to see what is going on. "Look!" he hisses, his voice low and urgent. "Look at his hair."

The fine blond strands are lying limp against his head, not even tickled by the cyclone he's trapped in.

"It's not moving." There is a question behind Alice's statement.

"No, they won't hurt him. He's a child. They don't hurt children."

The laughter rings out again, more gleeful than before. They are obviously enjoying their little show and Jack wonders whether he should ask for mercy. Scream at them to stop like the others are doing. But he doesn't. He stands, holding his daughter and watching his grandson as the wind howls and the Faeries laugh and the humans scream.

It's the end of the world.

Rhiannon has her arms wrapped around her husband, gripping onto him for dear life. She had always known, somewhere in the back of her mind, in a place she refused to acknowledge, that she would

outlive her baby brother. It's unnatural. She is five years older than him, she remembers helping to change his nappies, squealing when they were dirty and smelly. She should have died first.

The woman, Gwen, all wide-eyed and dripping with sincerity, is trying to assure her that her brother was brave and died trying to save others but Rhiannon doesn't care about that. Bravery is just another term for idiocy and foolhardiness and she doesn't want to hear that anyone else survived where he did not. Johnny's arms squeeze her tighter, sensing that she needs something more than a hug, it's one of the reasons she loves him. Despite his rough edges and abrasive humour he always knows what she needs - just like Ianto does... did.

She'll have to get used to that now. Thinking of her brother in the past tense.

Because he'll never be there to see David get his GCSEs or his A-Levels and advise him on where to go to university - because Lord knows she and Johnny know nothing about getting a further education. He'll never see Mica grow up or go to her school play or be there to help Rhiannon calm Johnny down when some boy breaks her heart for the first, second, third time. Her kids might not even remember him and that just breaks her heart.

She sobs into Johnny's shirt, it was dirty anyway, and shrugs off Gwen's sympathetic pat. She doesn't want them, she just wants her brother.

The wind stops, dropping the dead men to the floor like broken rag dolls. It is eerie, suddenly everything is so quiet and still, as if the wind has taken every little sound and movement with it. Nobody moves. Nobody speaks. Nobody dares to even breathe.

"I thought you would have gotten my first warning. These men did not have to die." A familiar voice, reasonable and rebuking at the same time, cuts through the silence like a katana through silk. Jack jerks round, like one of Pavlov's dogs he reacts to Ianto's voice and Jack drinks in the sight of him. He looks different. His suit is torn, his tie askew and his shoes and socks are missing. His hair is a mess of curls and tangles and his blue eyes seem electric in the bland conference room. To Jack's eyes he is the most beautiful thing in the Universe.

Ianto's eyes don't stray from the General, his stare is cold and judging and Jack doesn't like that expression on Ianto's face. Of all of them Ianto never judges, he's never once judged Jack, not even the first time they danced with the Faeries and he let Jasmine go. That Ianto is judging these men so easily scares Jack. Makes him wonder what Ianto has thought of him in the moments Jack wasn't there to watch.

"Well General Pierce? Do you have anything to say?"

The General is stupefied, they all are. Ianto waits impassively for a few moments before turning from the men gathered around the ruins of the table. His body language dismisses them as insignificant, he doesn't care that there are still armed soldiers in the room; his attention is suddenly fixed

unwaveringly on Steven. As he moves forward Alice jerks, an instinctive movement to protect her child from this new threat and Jack is confused. He can't work out why Alice is worried. Ianto would never hurt Steven. It takes him a moment to realise that Alice has no idea who Ianto is. He reaches out and gently pulls her back at the same moment Ianto reaches a hand out to Steven.

"Hello. You're Steven aren't you?" Ianto kneels before the little boy; his blue eyes are bright and cheerful. He smiles and hesitantly Steven returns it, but there is still a cloud of fear lingering around the boy and no one really can blame him. "Do you want to see a magic trick?"

Steven shoots a look at his mum and Uncle Jack. All day men have been pulling and pushing him around and this is someone new. Jack smiles at him, nodding him towards Ianto and Steven takes a slight step forward.

"Ok," he says his voice soft and sweet.

Ianto smiles and shows Steven his empty hands. He closes one fist, then the other before banging them together. When he opens them they are filled with white rose petals. Not red. There has been enough death. In the language of flowers white roses represent innocence and heaven and secrets. All the sweet things childhood should be. Steven giggles and Ianto throws the rose petals over his head. Lightening quick Ianto's hand darts out and plucks a stem of white hyacinth from behind Steven's ear and he presents it to the boy, tucking it into the pocket of his school shirt. The little white buds peak out over the collar of his grey jumper making him look like a schoolboy from a bygone age.

"You died." The accusation comes from the Home Secretary, Denise Riley, her voice wavering as she speaks. She is pale, a new horror etched on her face as yet another dead man walks before her.

Ianto turns slowly, eying the woman who is talking to him. Or rather, talking at him, as if he were something and not someone. Not a person anymore. He isn't sure that she is wrong. Ianto can feel everything. He can hear their hearts beating and feel the exhalations of their breath on his skin. Each one of them feels slightly different; Steven feels sweet and young, Johnson feels like a steel trap, cold but coiled with lethal power and Ianto sees the warrior Faerie perched just behind her, his hands full of red petals. Then there is Jack, his body barely containing the energy thrumming under his skin. The Faeries are giving him a wide berth and Ianto knows it isn't because they fear him, they have no concept of fear - they only know fun - but they don't know how to classify him. They can't work him out and so they will avoid him because he means something to Ianto.

Ianto knows the minute his back is turned they will turn on Jack, but for now they hold off.

But Denise has caught their attention and they are hovering around her like angry wasps. Ianto can't understand how she cannot feel them, they are so close and so angry and Ianto can feel them from where he is. Ignoring her he turns back to Steven, wanting the little boy away from the bodies surrounding him like some macabre wall of flesh.

"Close your eyes," he whispers and waits until he does so before scooping the boy up. Steven isn't small for his age but Ianto is surprised that he feels weightless in his arms. Carefully he steps over the

dead men, watching Steven closely to make sure his eyes are still closed. The boy grips Ianto tightly, his fingers wrapping themselves in the silk and cotton of his torn waistcoat. His legs are clamped around Ianto's waist and the tension in them suggests the terror the boy has been living in.

It is unsurprising that no one moves to impede their progress across the conference room.

Alice's eyes are wide as they approach; she looks as though she is torn between wanting to greet Ianto as a saviour and grab her child and run far, far away. Her hands are only slightly desperate as she takes Steven from him, running all over his body checking for any possible damage. Briefly she glances at Ianto and whispers her thanks before murmuring softly in her son's ear; cooing words of comfort that a mother instinctively knows how to give her child.

Jack reaches out a hand, brushing it against the back of Ianto's, and his handcuffs tumble from his wrists forcing Ianto's attention to switch from Steven to him. Ianto's eyes are wide and he blinks owlishly, as if he doesn't recognise Jack.

"Ianto," Jack breathes, moving closer; he's never had a lover returned to him before and it feels sweet. But he is desperate to touch, check Ianto is really there and this is not some wild flight of fancy. Even if it is, Jack doesn't want to wake up. His hands move on their own, sliding up from Ianto's side, up his arm and over his shoulder until he is cupping the back of Ianto's neck. The wild curls are silky soft, tickling the back of Jack's hand and it's that electric touch more than anything that proves this is real.

He jerks Ianto forward, roughly, using his tight grip on the back of Ianto's neck to pull the young man into his arms. Ianto's hair smells of coffee and something fresh and he feels firm and warm under Jack's fingers - not cold and hard as he was the last time Jack saw him. Their reunion reminds him of Abaddon, only this time it is Ianto that has come back from the dead and Jack needs to kiss him, needs to taste and touch and he doesn't care that they have an audience that includes his daughter and grandson. His hand slides up to cup Ianto's cheek, his twin still at Ianto's nape and he remembers they did this before, back when Ianto was shy and hesitant about their relationship, offering his hand rather than his lips. Moving in for the kiss Jack is somewhat affronted to find that Ianto has a firm hand on his chest, stopping him and though Jack leans forward, almost desperate for his kiss, Ianto is firm in his resolve.

Ianto smiles at Jack's confusion, a soft smile that gently lifts the corner of his mouth, "Not now Sir, work to do."

Jack groans at his catch-phrase falling from Ianto's lips in those Welsh vowels and his head drops to Ianto's shoulder. He nuzzles briefly at Ianto's neck and starts, "Ianto I-"

"Don't."

Jack swallows his words. Ianto's reaction is completely fair, even though Jack is sure Ianto has no idea what he was going to say. What he wants to say. But then it is Ianto - he knows everything.

"Mr Jones, I presume?" Their brief reunion has given the room a chance to regroup and General Pierce is now stood, straight and tall, like the soldier he is.

Ianto turns his face into Jack for a brief second, long enough for him to feel the smirk on Ianto's lips against his cheek, before turning to face the General. "In the flesh."

Pierce's dark eyes narrow into slits as he takes in the unkempt man before him. He had been assured that Harkness was an aberration, an anomaly, but now there is another man with Lazarus like abilities and he is Harkness' lover no less. A lover who's body his men were supposed to have been guarding. It is all quite irregular but he will not let it show on his face. "I was lead to believe you had died in Thames House. I see the reports were wrong."

"Not wrong," Ianto shrugs, "perhaps merely - pre-emptive?"

His confusion must show because Ianto smiles and moves towards them. The politicians shrink back whilst the soldiers' stance gets stiffer, but Ianto doesn't react in any way. He keeps his focus on Pierce and the general is aware that something is not right with this man. Besides the fact that he has come back from the dead.

"Pre-emptive?"

"Time isn't a fixed construct General. The sooner you learn that the easier life becomes." Ianto looks around the room. The Faeries have made quite the mess in their fit of pique over Steven and Ianto feels his not-OCD need for neatness rearing its ugly head. "I'd suggest we sit and discuss things civilly but..."

"Yes. You made quite the entrance."

"That wasn't me. That was them."

"The fairies."

Ianto laughs. "You don't believe? Even after all of this?" He gestures to the mess and the dead men.

The General shrugs. "Torchwood. Who knows what little toys you've got?" Pointing at a couple of guards he gestures to his dead men. "Get them out of here."

The dead men are dragged out; there is little reverence for the bodies of their fallen comrades. Despite the fact that they were brothers in arms, their dead bodies only serve as a reminder of the strangeness of the day and their bodies are just as chilling as the manner of their deaths. They were good men, they fell in combat but this isn't the time to honour the noble dead. That time will come later, when peace falls and the war is done. A couple of men move to right the tables, leaving the politicians to pick up their own chairs and gather their notes.

"You destroyed Torchwood." Ianto notes, moving to an empty chair. He is the first to sit, sprawling elegantly into one of the chairs, leaving the others to hesitantly take their seats.

The General chooses to sit directly opposite Ianto and he shakes his head. "That wasn't me."

"No, it was them," Ianto's attention turns to the Prime Minister and Frobisher, who freeze. "But you play with them so I am holding you responsible too."

"That hardly seems appropriate."

Ianto's eyes glitter dangerously and he turns to where Jack is still stood, protectively hovering over his family. "It hardly seems appropriate that you would hold a man's family hostage to get what you want."

The General swallows, Ianto has him there. There are no innocents in this room except the child, and even he has blood spattered on his hands. The General steepled his hands, resting his elbows on the table, it is similar to the pose he adopted with Jack. "What is it that you want Mr Jones?"

"Me? I want nothing. I'm just the mouthpiece." He stretches, linking his hands above his head as his body arches in its chair. Ianto has always dealt with the bureaucracy but he has never had centre-stage before, it was always occupied by Jack's shining star. He finds he rather likes this little taste of it. "They on the other hand have already delivered their demands."

"And by 'they' you mean the fairies."

"Faeries. And yes."

"Faeries," Pierce says slowly. Almost mockingly.

Jack guides Alice and Steven to a chair in the corner before moving to stand behind Ianto. It is a reverse of their normal positions, him not leading, but Ianto is quite capable and he seems to be the only one who knows what is going on so Jack does the only thing he can: he offers support. His hand slides up to rest on Ianto's shoulder. "They don't believe."

"So I see, Sir." He looks up at his captain and raises an eyebrow. "Perhaps I need to do another magic trick? Steven?"

"Yes."

"Come here," Ianto holds out a hand and pulls Steven on to his lap, looping his arms loosely round the boy. "Have you read *Harry Potter*?"

Steven nods, looking over his shoulder at Alice. Jack follows his gaze. His daughter is wringing her hands nervously, her face is wan and Jack's heart goes out to her. She spent so long cultivating a life that would keep her son safe and it's all been blown apart. Seconds, mere moments, have destroyed years of toil. He offers her a comforting smile, "it's ok," he mouths, running his hand over Steven's blond head.

Alice nods.

"Mum read it to me."

"Did she? That was nice of her. Which was your favourite book?"

Steven thinks for a moment, chewing on the corner of his lip as he does so. "*Prisoner of Azkaban*," he whispers, aware that everyone is watching him.

"Why?" lanto is genuinely curious. He's read all the books himself, they are on a shelf in his bedroom next to his Bond DVDs and he knows that Jack has at least flicked through them during his nights at lanto's house.

"I like the Marauders."

There is a huffed sigh from the corner of the room. "Is this relevant?" Brian Green asks, his tone petulant and displaying his disregard for all childish things.

Jack glares him into submission whilst lanto carries on as though nothing has changed. "Did you like their Map?"

"Yes! It's really funny when Snape tries to find out what it is and the Map talks back." He leans closer to lanto, "Mum even tried to do the voices," he confides.

"Did she?"

Steven nods. "She wasn't very good though."

Jack laughs, as does Alice, though it sounds like more of a sob than anything and she covers it with her hand.

lanto smiles indulgently. "Do you remember the spell to reveal the Map?"

Steven nods furiously. "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good!*"

The second the words leave his lips the room is filled, Faeries fluttering everywhere and the smell of roses blooms bright. Most of them are in their warrior guise, bearing their sharp teeth at the assembled adults. The only pretty ones are near lanto and Steven and one twirls down through the air to land on Steven's knee. It curtsies prettily and blows him a kiss. Steven's eyes are huge and round as he watches them, just like the adults in the room. "Wow."

"Yeah. Cool?"

"Very." He reaches out a finger and the Faerie grips it, shaking it as if it were his hand. "So cool."

Jack isn't so charmed. Many of them are looking at him, snarling when they catch his eye but they seem more hostile towards the politicians and Jack thinks lanto has something to do with that. They are gentle with Steven, but then children are their favourites and Jack cannot believe he didn't realise

who the second voice was earlier. They too need the children to live, but as horrific as it seems, they only need one child and it is always the child's choice. The 456 are something completely different.

"My God." The General is astounded. Hesitantly he reaches out to touch one close to him but it snaps at him, twisting away and darting towards Ianto, landing on the shoulder not occupied by Jack's hand.

"God isn't here General. There is only us."

"What do they want?" Green asks, his words are those of everyone else.

"*We told you! We told, said, spoke, sang! Nothing, not one, never, no way!*" the Faeries are not singing now. They are hissing and spitting, little doodlebugs of anger and malice that swarm round the room. Ianto raises his hand and they still, still buzzing and angry but they are still.

"You don't want us to give up the children," Pierce confirms, wrestling the floor away from the Prime Minister, determined to still be in charge - even though he is quite aware that Ianto has all the power.

"No. Not one single child."

"No no none."

Jack can't help but smile; the Faeries are saying exactly what he had tried to say yesterday. The only difference is that they have more than enough power to back up their demands. They are going to win.

"That is absurd!" Denise exclaims, "They will kill us if we don't do what they ask!"

"You saw what they did at Thames House," Green interjects.

"And Clement MacDonald," Johnson adds softly.

"Clem's dead?" Ianto asks, turning an almost heartbroken face to Jack. He hadn't known the man well, but he had felt for him. He had led a tragic life. "How?"

"Screaming."

Ianto's face hardens as he turns back to Johnson. "I trust that is sympathy not apathy in your voice - otherwise you won't get the luxury of screaming."

The Faeries giggle, twirling closer to Johnson, their hands full of petals. "No, no I - I was just -"

"I don't care. He was a good man." Johnson nods, speechless. "Is Gwen ok?" Ianto asks Jack. Lois twitches in the corner, Gwen was the only one of the team she knew and she is perhaps more determined to hear the answer than Ianto is.

"She's fine. She's with your sister."

Ianto barks out a hollow laugh. "Well, that should be interesting."

"*Your house of cards will fall. Lie on lie, down down down.*"

Ianto glares at the Faeries "You say lies..."

"*You say need to know,*" they laugh. "*Trickster!*"

"Ianto?"

"Later, Jack. Let's deal with the problem at hand. Gentlemen?"

"Our satellites have locked on a ship just outside of our atmosphere. We have considered a nuclear launch but..." Pierce begins.

"The chances of it working are slim to none. The reality, Mr Jones, is that we have to go along with what they want. We have no other choices."

Ianto laughs, shaking his head at the Prime Minister's naivety. He is glad that he never voted for the man. "Quite honestly, I'd be more worried about my friends than the 456. We have other options. The first is that you stop rounding up the children. It ends now."

"Look," Gwen says, knowing that this is not the right time. She's just told them about Ianto's death and now she has to tell them something just as, if not more, horrific. "Ianto was trying to stop something."

"Those voices yeah?" Johnny asks, his arms still around his wife. "Don't you look at me like that. I might not be a college boy but I've got a brain. Can put two and two together y'know."

Andy huffs out a breath, "Sure."

"You saying somat PC Plod?"

"Johnny, don't," Rhiannon begs. She can't do this: she has no energy to deal with him getting into a fight with a police officer. Not today.

"Andy," Gwen warns, glaring at her former partner.

Andy rolls his eyes. "Sorry." The thing Gwen doesn't seem to realise is that Ianto was Andy's friend too. Of all the Torchwood lot, Ianto was the only one who spoke to him. Gwen spoke to him when she needed something, Jack Flash when he was dismissing the force from one of their spooky-dos and the others had ignored him. Ianto didn't. Getting into a fight with the man's brother-in-law seems like a good way to get out some of the anger he has for Torchwood, for Jack. Gwen hasn't said but Andy knows, Jack got him killed.

"So it is about them? About the kids?" Rhiannon asks, horribly earnest. Her eyes, Ianto's eyes, are asking questions Gwen doesn't want to answer but given that she's brought the subject up she knows that she'll have to.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's about them."

The drive to Thames House is tense. Jack is itching to ask Ianto questions, hundreds of questions all fighting for first place on the tip of his tongue, but Ianto isn't paying him any attention. He is too concerned with showing Steven slight of hand games with a shiny fifty pence piece. That would be the first question he thinks, why Steven and Alice are with them. He thinks he understands why the politicians and the soldiers have to come, whatever Ianto has planned is as much for their benefit as it is for the 456 but Alice and Steven have no place here. Jack would rather them be miles away; but ironically, Ianto is the only person who he'd trust to take them. Either Ianto or himself, but Ianto has to see this through and Jack isn't letting him out of his sight.

The more he thinks on it, he realises that Ianto didn't even demand that Alice and Steven join them. He simply took hold of Steven's hand and led him out of COBRA. The rest of them just trailed behind like lambs to the slaughter, herded out by the Faeries. Who have disappeared. They haven't gone anywhere, Jack can still feel them, but they are out of sight for the time being and it seems to have calmed some of the nerves. They are an odd group. Three cars carrying an assortment of civilians and military personnel, all flanked by police outriders even though the streets are deserted. London is deathly still, even the air. It is as if the whole of nature is waiting for them to act. Idly he wonders if the 456 can feel what's coming. If they know that they are in trouble.

Jack hopes that they do. That they can feel the storm that's following the slow procession of cars.

Ianto is watching Steven with an almost melancholy look as the boy tries to work out how to tuck the coin between his fingers. There is a look, a strange look, one that Jack has only ever associated with the Doctor. It's that of a man who knows too much, and for all his seeming vitality, Ianto looks old.

"Ianto?"

"Hmm."

Ianto doesn't look at him. He keeps watching Steven, almost obsessively. Alice isn't watching her son as much as Ianto is; she's watching the scenery flash by, her head resting against the cool glass. To Jack it seems as if she is trying to escape reality, if only for a few moments.

"Ianto," Jack calls again. He wants his lover to look at him.

Eventually, Ianto does, turning in his seat so that he is facing Jack. He smiles, that quiet indulgent smile that has always been given just to Jack. It says that Ianto knows him and accepts him. It's not the starry look Gwen gives him, imagining him as a hero, because Jack hasn't been a hero - well ever.

"What happened?" His voice is low, he doesn't want Alice or Steven listening in, even though they won't be able to help it. "What did they do to you?"

Ianto lifts a hand to card it gently through Jack's hair. Somehow it feels like goodbye. "They stole me. Took me out of time."

"I don't understand."

lanto moves closer, it's the closest they've been since he died, shifting until he's leaning against Jack. "I didn't either."

"You do now though?"

lanto hums, his lips press against Jack's throat.

"You know what you're doing right?"

"Always, sir."

Jack doesn't know why but he feels like he's going to cry. "That's my lanto."

lanto leans away and carefully scrutinises Jack. His hands slide to hold Jack's face, almost desperately, between his palms. "Nothing will happen to your family. I promise that."

"I trust you."

lanto closes his eyes, seemingly forcing back his own tears, and leans to rest his forehead against Jack's. "Thank you."

"Don't."

"I'm scared." lanto whispers.

"Why?"

"I don't want to go back there"

"Oh lanto," Jack barely has time to breathe the words before lanto is falling into him. "I'm not leaving you. Not this time."

The door to the kitchen creaks open and Rhiannon hastily wipes her eyes. She will tell the children about lanto, but not now, not while all of this is happening. She feels sick. What Gwen has told them - it can't be possible but she has never been a dreamer. There were no flights of fancy in her family when growing up, just cold hard practicality and so she knows that what the woman says is true. Mica is peering around the door, her hands so small on the wood and her eyes are the same as lanto's; that same watery blue that their mother, and their grandmother, gave them, that Rhiannon feels the tears well again. "Yes love?"

If Rhiannon's voice trembles at all, Mica doesn't notice. "Mummy, you have to come look."

Rhiannon sighs and Johnny rubs her back. Gwen offers her a tight smile, one that says 'children have bad timing don't they?' but Rhiannon ignores her. Ignores the woman who claims to know her brother; nobody knows lanto. He's been a mystery to the family since the day he was born. So

secretive. So quiet. Always keeping diaries and having so few friends. Now she'll never get the chance to know him, or his man, to show him how she didn't care even if he was gay.

"Not now sweetheart. I'll come in a minute."

"Mica, go back to the sitting room. This is grown-up stuff."

Mica sticks her tongue out at her dad, the way she always does when he cites 'grown-up stuff' as a reason for not explaining anything. "You have to come now!"

Rhiannon groans, she can't deal with this now. Not now. Mica has inherited the Jones stubborn streak; she isn't going to let this go. Johnny folds round her, glaring at his daughter, but his glares ceased being effective long ago. Gwen, desperate to help Ianto's family, walks towards the little girl. "Hi Mica, I'm Gwen. I need to talk to your mummy and daddy for a moment, sweetheart. Could you be a good girl and just pop back to the living room, pet?"

Mica narrows her eyes, she might be a little girl but she can obviously sense when someone is being patronising. She bangs on the side of the door, a fit of pique to catch her parent's attentions. They won't send her to bed with company here, they will yell at her later though but she doesn't mind that. "Mica! Behave."

"Mum! You need to come now!" She pushes past Gwen to grab her mother's arm. "Uncle Ianto is on the telly!"

The Faeries are tricky and not a little egotistical. They are content to hide in shadows but they have Ianto now. Ianto doesn't need to hide, he's like them, the humans, and they are going to make sure that he is seen everywhere. Humans make it so very easy, wires and signals connect everything and flipping switches is easy. No-one sees them do it. One switch and the world can see and hear the battle. The world watches as the politicians and military and Jack and his family follow Ianto into the room on Floor 13.

Dekker is already there, hovering like a sadistic satellite, the fire of bloodlust in his eyes. Ianto brushes past him, knocking him with his shoulder. Dekker coughs and Ianto spins. Something about the man is wrong, his energy doesn't vibrate so much as crawl and Ianto wrinkles his nose in disgust. "When this is over," he whispers, pushing into Dekker's personal space, "I am going to destroy you."

The Faeries agree. If Ianto doesn't bury the man in some squalid prison they are going to stuff him with petals and thorns until he pops.

Moving in front of the group of people, Ianto approaches the tank. Looking at it now, he has no idea why he tried shooting at the glass. It's clearly bullet-proof and shatter resistant; it would have to be to contain that noxious gas. He has no idea why he didn't try shooting the hoses feeding the tank. He was already dead, the fumes would have only made it quicker but he would have taken the alien out

with him. He'd have liked that. But that moment is gone and he watches as the alien's shadow looms through the gas. He knows what's in that tank, what the strange creature has brought with it. What it's feeding off.

The Faeries are hissing in outrage. The child was never one of theirs, none of the twelve were, but they still are angered. They revere children in a way that makes humans seem callous and abusive. If they could, Ianto imagines that they would steal every child and take them to the Wild for good. But they can't. Only the Chosen can live in the Wild. Ianto ignores the spitting voices, and focuses on the tank.

"Hello, I'm Ianto Jones."

"We know. We remember killing you."

Ianto narrows his eyes, he can feel Jack shifting behind him and knows that if he turns round Jack will have his jaw locked and be trying to burn holes through the glass with his stare. Ianto thinks it's sweet. "Then I don't really need to say why I'm here do I?"

"You've come to beg for us to change our demands."

Ianto doesn't know if they can see him, he hopes they can, because he has the most sinister smile on his face. "Not quite."

Rhiannon is pressed as close to the television as she can get. For once she is grateful that Johnny bought a huge ugly widescreen that is far too big for their living room. Gwen is hovering over her shoulder, just as desperate to see that Ianto is truly alive and Rhiannon has to concede that maybe the woman does care about him.

"Uncle Ianto is pissed."

"David!" Her scolding is half-hearted: it's not as if David has it wrong. Her brother is wearing the same face he wore when Johnny really got him riled up.

"Well he is."

"What's in the tank?" one of the children asks. Rhiannon thinks it's young Thomas from two doors down.

"'S an alien."

"No!"

"Yes," Mica whispers. "It is."

"Aliens aren't real."

"Are too."

"Quiet the lot of ya," Johnny blusters. "I'm trying to listen."

Rhiannon isn't trying to listen, she's content just to watch, watch her brother. "He's alive." She turns to Gwen, "You said-"

"I know. He was. Jack must've..." Gwen trails off, frowning at the screen. Rhiannon isn't sure what Jack has supposedly done, it doesn't matter really.

"Which one is he then?"

Gwen looks at her, "Sorry?"

"Jack." Rhiannon's face is suddenly alive. She wants to know who it is that her brother is seeing. To see if he's as good looking as Susan said he was. Like a film star she said, can't be that hard to make him out really. "Which one is he?"

Gwen's face twitches into an impish smile and in the background both Rhys and Andy groan. They've bonded somewhat over their dislike of the Torchwood boss, and their admiration for Ianto. She points at the screen, at an undeniably handsome man in a long blue coat, holding the hand of a little boy.

"That's Jack."

There is something smug in her tone and Rhiannon looks at her curiously. "Well," she says, breathing out, somewhat shocked over just how good looking the man is. "Our Ianto's got taste. He's gorgeous."

"What's that then?" Johnny asks.

"That's Jack."

Johnny squints at the screen. "He doesn't look like a ponce."

Rhys laughs; it's a belly laugh because he wishes that Jack could hear this. Not the bit about him being gorgeous - he's big-headed enough - but he'd really like to see Johnny and Jack meet. "Trust me mate, you won't think that when you meet him."

"Rhys," Gwen hisses, smacking him with the back of her hand. "Stop it."

"He is gorgeous though, isn't he?" Rhiannon seems dumbfounded at Jack and she's looking for someone to agree with her. Tell her that her eyes aren't deceiving her.

"Wonder how your brother got him then?"

Gwen snorts. A year ago she'd have been uncomfortable with such talk, her feelings for Jack would have clouded the issue, but after seeing them together, seeing the lengths they went for each other she's forced herself to move on. She loves Jack, but she loves Ianto too.

"You know!" Rhiannon's watching her carefully; desperate for all the juicy details and Gwen feels to have found the kindred soul she lost when Tosh died. Here is someone to share her fascination with Jack and Ianto's relationship and Gwen is itching to tell. The only problem is that they are in a room full of kids and she doesn't want to let Ianto out of her sight. She suspects that Rhiannon feels the same.

Gwen nods, looks deliberately at the kids before responding, "Let's just say Jack doesn't take no for an answer and Ianto gives as good as he gets."

Rhiannon isn't satisfied with that answer, but it's the best that she will get for the time being. When all of this is over though she and Gwen are going to have a long chat and maybe a glass of wine. "They're good together though, yeah?"

"Oh yeah," Rhys butts in, "Ianto's got him wrapped round his little finger."

Andy nods. Even he'd seen it. "Yeah, Captain Flash doesn't even flirt when he comes into the station anymore. It made Swanson's day last time."

"Why would he?" Gwen mutters, her mouth moving faster than her brain, "Ianto's there to play naked hide-and-seek."

Four pairs of wide eyes turn to her and a little voice pipes up, "Why's Uncle Ianto playing naked hide-and-seek?"

"Our demands remain the same. We want ten per cent of the children of Earth."

"And if we refuse?" Ianto asks, his tone even.

"Then you will die."

There is no sound. No one dares to even breathe after the 456 representative makes its pronouncement. There is a finality about its tone that everyone recognises, despite the difference in species and a heavy tension settles in the air. The only one apparently unfazed seems to be Ianto, who is watching the gas-filled tank with an amused smile. Alice shifts uncomfortably.

"Why is he smiling?" she whispers to her father, her eyes trained on her son, who is watching Ianto avidly. Steven hasn't taken his eyes off the young man since the magic tricks earlier. The little sprig of hyacinth is still tucked in his pocket and he is swinging his mother's hand. He seems almost cheerful, there is no sign of his earlier fear and Jack stops him swinging, by squeezing his little hand. Steven offers him a brilliant smile, his attention on Jack for a split second before it returns to Ianto.

lanto stuffs his hands into his pockets and shrugs nonchalantly. He is looking more unkempt by the second and Jack is seriously having inappropriate thoughts; lanto all mussed is quite delicious, it's like he has just rolled out of bed after a long hard shag. "I think we are going to have a problem then."

There is a wheezing sound from the glass tank, as if the alien is laughing at them, and lanto ducks his head, almost demurely. Behind him the soldiers are shifting restlessly, their fingers tickling nervously at their weapons. They are men of action and all this talking is making them nervous. "You are going to sacrifice your world for children?" the alien asks.

lanto laughs and Jack thinks he can hear a soft childish echo behind it. "I don't know how things work where you are from, quite frankly, I'm not sure that I care. But here, on Earth? Here we look after our offspring. We protect them. On every level imaginable."

Across the world television sets, radios, internet sites broadcast everything lanto says. Mothers and fathers gather their children closer, compelled by the softly spoken Welsh-tinted words. Teachers, forced to work despite the crisis, watch their charges. No one speaks; they simply gather together in clusters that haven't been seen since humans believed themselves too evolved to need such basic comforts as company and watch as one man stands up for all of them.

"We gather in family units, and no matter how hard we try not to, we are forced to put our children first. We feed them, clothe them, put roofs over their heads and when we can't do that then the state steps in. Do you know how many government departments are dedicated to the welfare of children?" lanto shakes his head. "We even have medical specialities dedicated entirely to care for their needs. They have their own museums, films, television channels, clothes stores, toy stores and even charities. Children are central to our lives. We are biologically hardwired to protect them, just like every other species on this planet. Do you really think we are going to give them up without a fight?"

The alien wheezed again. "Then you will die."

"I don't think so." lanto's voice is cold and hard and Jack is quite sure that he has never heard anything like it from his lover before. He sounds inhuman. "Ten per cent of the children of the Earth correct?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what ten per cent of nothing is?" lanto asks, almost childishly.

"Nothing."

The grin on lanto's face widens and his eyes light with an almost unholy glee. "Correct."

The wind whispers and Steven vanishes.

A wind whips through the Davies' small council flat in the outskirts of Cardiff taking with it every child in their care. That very same wind steals its way all through Cardiff, London, Madrid, Tokyo, Marrakech, Sydney, Johannesburg, New York and all the cities in between, smelling of rose petals and fresh sweet water and leaving not a single child behind. It is the legend of Changeling children made real, Faeries stealing them away from the world but they haven't left anything behind. Nurseries are empty, toys abandoned and a forlorn swing rocks gently in the wake of it and across the world parents don't know whether to mourn their loss or be grateful that the aliens can't hurt them anymore. Wherever they are it has to be better than this threatened world.

Or so they hope.

"Steven! Steven!" screams Alice, looking frantically around for her son before launching herself at lanto. Jack, like everyone else around the world, is too stunned to even move, let alone stop her. But lanto catches her easily, thwarting all attempts she makes at hitting him and laughing all the while. "What did you do?"

The alien is screaming, its cries are visceral and one of its limbs thrashes against the bullet-proof glass of its cage.

"I changed the game," he answers, as if it explains everything. To him it really does but everyone else seems confused. "You can't steal ten per cent of the children of this planet if there are no children."

Jack moves forward, approaching lanto as if he were a spooked wild animal. "lanto, what is going on?"

lanto smiles at him, as if sharing a secret, and he looks so young that it hurts. Jack had always been aware that lanto was young, but it's always hidden it behind his suits and capability so it lulls him to forgetfulness. For the first time he sees how truly young his lover is. He caught a brief flash of it when lanto lay dying in his arms but the virus had fogged him enough that it was only a momentary realisation. Now though, whatever else the Faeries have done to him, lanto's youth is very apparent. Especially here, amongst all the suits and uniforms and stern expressions, lanto seems like a wild free thing and he is beautiful.

If a little mad.

lanto spins from Jack, almost pirouetting on his toes and neatly ducks around Alice to stand in front of the glass cell. "So now, we are in a quandary. You were holding us hostage for our children but I've

taken away your prize, Come away o' human child." The more he speaks the more he sounds like them and Jack is finding it just that little bit unnerving. The alien is just as disquieted if his thrashing is anything to go by. But Ianto carries on, his voice almost sing-song. "If you wipe us all out then there will never be another child for you to try to steal. You'll eradicate your own pleasure drug. So the way I see it, there are three choices. You try to kill us and we retaliate. You leave here and come back in however many years, hoping we've forgotten, and we retaliate. Or, you steal off back into whatever hell spawned you and we let you go."

"Bring them back!"

"No."

"You will bring the children back or we will kill you."

Ianto laughs. "No you won't."

"We have killed you before. We will do so again."

"Try! Try! Try!" Ianto cries, and Jack is terrified. This is not his lover. This windswept madness is belongs to the Faeries. He wraps his arms around Ianto, pulling him away from the containment cell, but Ianto continues to goad the alien. "Poison us. Release your virus. Come on!"

Around him the people shift, their eyes wide with terror. Ianto is a madman amongst mortals. Only Alice is unafraid, everything she had to live for is gone. Stolen by the wind. Death would be a welcome reprieve from the heartache she is feeling right now. Dekker flees, running for the containment suits that are floors below. He can hear the pounding of boots behind him and knows that he isn't the only coward in the room.

"Very well."

The alarm broadcasts itself quite clearly over the television and Rhiannon barely has the chance to realise that her children are gone before her brother begins to beg for death.

The contamination alarm sounds, harsh and piercing, and the sound of the locking doors echo through the empty building. Some start to run but Ianto remains motionless. Watching.

Waiting.

The alarm stops.

"What?" The alien smacks the glass wall with one limb, making the glass shudder. "What have you done?"

lanto shakes his head, mockingly forlorn. "It's so hard to spread an airborne virus when you don't control the air."

Jack laughs. It's a real laugh; it bubbles from him like champagne and forces lanto to smile. "Jones, lanto Jones - you gorgeous man!"

"I'm offended Sir, you almost sound like you doubted me." lanto raises a challenging eyebrow at his Captain.

"Never." Jack vows before he ruffles himself and almost struts towards the tank. "You didn't see that coming did you!"

The alien is screaming, thrashing and spitting at his cage and Jack is alight with vengeful glee. Which appears to be spreading. The politicians are grinning, self-congratulatory smiles as if they have won this war and the soldiers are looking relieved.

"This is not over," the alien spits, a splash of bile splattering against the glass. "We will wipe out your insignificant little race."

"I don't think so," sings Jack, his grin almost blinding. He's bouncing in a manner stolen from the Doctor and, although lanto and the Faeries have pulled this off, he knows how it feels to be indestructible. "They are going to destroy you."

In the middle of the madness, lanto is an oasis of calm, his emotions determined to do the exact opposite of everyone else. He is the night to their day. "You cannot defeat us. We are the air. We are the water. Every element is ours."

The alarm sounded again.

"It's sweet really," lanto laughs as the alarm drones to a stop. "You only have one trick, and we have so many. You can't handle our atmosphere, what about our cold?"

As lanto speaks ice begins to creep up the glass, Jack Frost tracing little patterns as it crystallises over the spit and the scent of roses permeates the room.

"I am just one of many. They will come," the alien intones, "Kill me. They will avenge me."

"Can they feel it? When you die?"

The ice is creeping higher and the smell of roses is getting stronger. The alien has stopped trashing.

"Yes. The can feel it."

"So you are telepathic? You communicate."

"We do." lanto moves towards the tank and presses his hand against it. "You can leave. You don't have to die." The ice melts a little, a show of compassion. "We are not monsters."

There is a gurgling, and Alice whispers, "Is it dead?"

"No." Thames House begins to shake. "Foolish humans. Cold does not hurt us, we were born in ice. This is your last chance."

Ianto moves back from the tank and the temperature in the room plummets. Ice creeps across the floor, racing away from the tank and towards Ianto.

"Surrender."

"Never."

"You will be eliminated. You might be able to control the air in one place but can you control it all over the world? All it will take is one person, one infected and our plague will spread. You will take that chance?"

Ianto is far from the whirling euphoria he displayed earlier. He is like the ice at his feet, so controlled he is almost robotic. The other humans shrink away from him, retreating further back into the room. "We control the air. We control the water. We are in everything. We are everywhere."

"Very well."

The shaking gets worse and Ianto closes his eyes. There is a rumble, and the Prime Minister yells, "The building is coming down!"

"No it's not." Ianto grits out, still searching for his target. "Shut up."

He can hear the 456's ship entering the atmosphere, a sonic boom that pierces the limits of his reach.

"Ianto?" Jack asks, his arms wrapped around Alice, as the shaking worsens.

"We are the air. We are the water. We are in everything. We are everywhere." Ianto repeats, it's a mantra helping him search out the threads he needs. The Faeries are gone, protecting the children just as he'd planned, and all he can do is use what they gave him. Be what they made him.

Chosen.

Before the Chosen.

Outside of Time. Outside of the Earth.

Aware of the energy thrumming through everything.

"Ianto!"

Parts of the building are falling, the tiles in the roof are dropping like stones and there is screaming. But he can't help that now. His web is too important to worry over the little things.

"Goodbye."

It's like a solar flare. The light erupts from Ianto like lava from a volcano. It sweeps through the room, rushing like an avalanche straight towards the 456. The alien barely has time to scream before the energy engulfs it in a flaming ball of fire that spirals up into the sky. Despite the death of the one, the energy pours forth, spiralling and twisting and rushing towards the ship that's within its reach. The minute they broke through the atmosphere they doomed themselves, because the web only reaches so far. It's tied to the Earth, tied to the air and Space is the one thing it can't breach.

Ianto's body is silhouetted against the golden light and Rhiannon can't bear to look. She turns herself towards Gwen whose arms come around her, although she doesn't turn away.

The ship explodes, debris raining down like flaming snow and the energy dissipates. Sent back into the Earth it comes from. The absence of sound is as deafening as the light was blinding and Jack's vision isn't quite right when Ianto drops to the floor.

"No!"

They've played this scene before. Jack clutching Ianto's prone body on the floor of this very room. The tank is empty now, a twisted mess of metal and glass that has melted into obscure and macabre shapes.

"Ianto?" Jack pats at his face and Ianto's eyes flutter open. "Hey there."

"Jack." Ianto's hands clutch at the arm around his chest and he motions for Jack to help him up. "Need to call them back. It's over."

"They're gone?" Pierce is moving towards them, Colonel Oduya trailing behind him.

Ianto nods. "Dead. Blown out of the sky."

"What are you?" Johnson asks her gun in her hand. Across the world there are others thinking the same thing. The only difference is, Ianto Jones, to them is a saviour. To her, he is an unknown threat.

"Back off," Jack growls, curling himself around his lover. They did not go through all of this for her to shoot him.

"I'm the only one who can call the children back," Ianto murmurs, "The Faeries are keeping them until I call. So get that gun out of my face right now."

Johnson doesn't waver. It is another soldier, a man obviously with kids of his own, that disarms her before glaring the others down. There seem to be more parents in the room than non and the soldiers are suddenly Ianto's to command.

"Help me up?" and Jack does. He helps Ianto to stand, to face the destruction he's caused and he tries not to worry when Ianto leans heavily against him.

"It's over." Ianto says. He pauses slightly before choking out what they need to hear. "He's safe."

The wind stirs, slowly picking up speed until it roars across the world, stirring up leaves and uprooting trees but gently placing each and every child in the places they came from.

"Steven!" Alice runs towards her son, wrapping herself around him like a blanket. The boy seems nonplussed and he stares at the destruction of the room in wide-eyed wonder. Her hands frantically fly over his body, searching out any small imperfection. There is none to be found. "You're ok."

"What happened?" he asks, his voice small.

"It doesn't matter," his mother answers, tears in her eyes.

"He's safe," Ianto murmurs, leaning more into Jack with every passing moment.

"You said that before." Jack whispers, adjusting his grip so that Ianto is comfortable.

Ianto hums and around them all those with children are frantically talking into their mobile phones, checking that their children have been returned just as Steven has. If Ianto is their saviour, then Steven is the miracle proof that they needed.

"What did you mean?" Jack whispers, "Why did you say "he" and not they?"

"Steven."

"I don't understand." Jack pulls Ianto in tighter. "What about Steven?"

Ianto doesn't reply. His head is resting on Jack's shoulder. His weight is warm in Jack's arms.

"Ianto?"

Rhiannon has Mica in one arm and David in the other. Johnny is wrapped around all three of them. She can hear Gwen, Rhys and Andy celebrating with the other children. Her phone is ringing and the doorbell is chiming and she can't see for the tears of joy running down her cheeks. Her baby brother is a hero and everyone knows.

"No!"

Jack is on the floor, Ianto is still in his arms but he isn't breathing. He isn't moving and Jack can't find a pulse. "Come on! Don't leave me... Not now!"

"Captain, move." Someone is tugging at his arm. "We have a med-kit sir, let us in!"

But Jack can't. Ianto is his, his lover and he is dead on the floor once again. His hands fly over Ianto's body, checking for some sign, some tiny insignificant sign that he hasn't just lost everything. The past few hours were nothing more than a beautiful dream and Jack's mended heart shatters. He didn't even get to say goodbye.

"Captain!"

"Dad?"

Jack can't look at them. All he can see is Ianto's pale face behind the sheen of his tears. "Don't leave me. Please."

He's lost lovers before, but this feels more. Ianto was more than just a lover. Ianto was his friend, his colleague, his confidant. The sex was a bonus. He'd have loved Ianto without it. "Ianto."

A petal falls, black as night, then one crimson like blood, and they land on Jack's hand. Then another. And another. It's snowing sweetly scented petals and Jack wonders if the Faeries are mourning. If they care at all for what's been lost.

"*We took him.*" Jack looks up. The men and women, Alice and Steven included, have gathered around him and Ianto but that isn't what catches his attention. Hovering above them all, all around filling every little space, are Faeries. "*We took him. Out of time. Stole minutes and took him out of the World.*"

"So he could save it."

They shake their tiny heads. They are mournfully beautiful, scattering their petals instead of tears. "*He did it for you.*"

"I don't understand." Jack clutches Ianto tighter, scared that they might try to steal him again. "What did he do for me?"

"*Saved you. Saved him. Saved us.*"

Jack shakes his head. The tears are streaming down his face and he doesn't understand. They are talking in riddles, twirling dolefully around his head and Jack just wants to understand. "Steven? He did this for Steven?"

They nod. "*Father of the father of the mother of the father of the great great great great grandmother of the father of the father of the grandfather of the mother of the father of a Chosen One. Scattered across Time. Only One.*"

"All of this for a Chosen One!" Jack roars and some of the people stumble back. The Faeries don't though. If anything, they hover closer. "All of this for one of your precious Chosen Ones!"

"You don't understand. You can't see. He could. We Chose him. Guardian of the Chosen Ones. He agreed... For you."

They are right. Jack doesn't understand. He doesn't even care - he's lost Ianto to them and it hurts more than had Ianto just been killed by the 456. "Leave. Leave now or I'll find some way to destroy you." That said, Jack buries his face in Ianto's neck, hauling his dead weight even closer so that there isn't an iota of air between them.

Any other day the Faeries would have laughed at his threat. But not today. *"Bad Wolf."*

Jerking like he's been electrocuted, Jack's head snaps up. *"I bring Life.' You're wasting Time."*

"Move!"

Rhiannon is sobbing. Even Johnny has tears on his cheeks. Gwen is clutching Rhys' shirt in one hand and Andy's hand in the other but she can't take her eyes off the television. Jack has to do something. He came back from the dead after days and Ianto's only been gone minutes. He brought back Owen, with that damned glove but this... Gwen wants to scream. This isn't fair.

They'd won.

It feels wrong, laying Ianto on the floor like that, with nothing cushioning him but Jack needs to. He's done this before, though Ianto has no idea, and Jack thinks that maybe he'll keep doing this forever, just as long as it keeps Ianto with him.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

Jack ignores his daughter, in favour of laying himself over Ianto's body. They are touching from nose to toes, their hips snug together, their chests pressed tight and Jack thinks that perhaps this is the closest they've ever been. It flickers into his head that the only way they could be closer would be if they were naked but Ianto would kill him if he stripped them down, even if it was a life saving effort. He hooks one hand behind Ianto's head, while the other threads through his wild hair and dives in for the kiss he was denied earlier.

"What the hell is he doing?" Johnny yells, entirely sure that what he is seeing is inappropriate.

"Being Jack," laughs Gwen, not caring that everyone is looking at her funnily. She knows, deep in her gut, that everything is going to be ok. Just the way she knew that Jack would come back after Abaddon.

There are more people in the room now, parents retrieving their children, but all of them have been caught up by the drama on the screen. It's more compelling than Coronation Street. No-one even seems to care that it's two men kissing and Gwen thinks that Jack would be proud. And somewhat smug.

And then angry when he realised that no one had recorded it.

Jack pushes more and more energy into Ianto's body, searching out that elusive spark that he'd been able to grip the last time. Ironically, his search is like Ianto's earlier one but Jack would probably consider it more important. His hands are now cupping Ianto's face, pulling him into the kiss. It might be his imagination but Ianto feels warmer than he did earlier.

Disturbed by the necrophilic display one of the soldiers step forward, determined to stop the man defiling Ianto Jones. He gets within inches of them, his hand ghosting over the wool of Harkness' coat before he is tossed into the wall. When he opens his eyes, he is staring into the cruel visage of a warrior Faerie, its teeth bared.

All of them are in that visage now, no longer sweet and sorrowful. They drive the humans back and away, preventing intervention. Ianto Jones will live. The Bad Wolf brings Life.

The petals are still falling and the floor is covered with them, black and bloody crimson but slowly more are turning white and red and the scent of sage begins to build. If anyone bothers to look, to realise, they would see that the Faeries are painting pictures in the flowers, speaking their own language of death and love and life in twirling petals strewn on the ground.

Jack delves deeper into the kiss. He doesn't see the crumpled soldier or the warriors protecting them. He doesn't see the petals all around and over them. All he sees is Ianto's face, wild and beautiful and alive and he chases after it like Spring does Winter. His lips are tingling, burning from the energy and for all its length and depth the kiss is entirely chaste.

Until Ianto kisses back.

He comes to life in an instant, his hands wrap around Jack and bury themselves in his hair and his tongue sneaks its way to Jack's mouth. His eyelids flutter, and Jack can feel the movement against his cheeks. He can feel Ianto breathing, his heart pounding and his blood pumping and Jack just keeps kissing him because he dare not stop.

Eventually though Ianto needs the air and he takes in great lungfuls. Jack doesn't move far away, just draws back enough to watch Ianto breathe and it's a sight he rates up there with the birth of a star.

The Faeries are laughing, pin-wheeling above them and the only person they let past is Steven who races towards them, kicking up drifts of rose petals.

"I love you." Jack whispers, determined to say it - if only once.

Ianto smiles and whispers back, "Good to know. I might just pass out now, Sir," before his eyes flutter closed.

He sleeps.

When Ianto wakes he is lying on a very comfortable hotel bed. He can hear a television blaring and wonders if maybe it was all a dream. But he can still smell roses and sage and feel Jack's Kiss on his lips and he knows it was real. He saved Steven. He saved Jack.

He'd been saved.

The Faeries hadn't told him that he would survive it. He'd gone into it, knowing that he would die the minute the Future was safe and he was ok with that. Jack would have been ok too, eventually, because this time he wouldn't have destroyed everything he had. He'd have still had his family and Gwen and probably Rhiannon and he wouldn't have gone chasing the stars. But that future doesn't matter anymore.

He stretches, feeling his muscles coil and relax and he wriggles his toes in soft cotton sheets. He hopes that it was Jack who put him to bed because he is quite sure he is naked. The pile of clothes on the floor kind of gives it away but in all honesty, he's alive and doesn't care if the Queen herself tipped him into bed. He's saved the world. He thinks he deserves it.

The door cracks open and the scent of coffee wafts at him, followed immediately by the scent of Jack.

"Hey there hero."

Ianto blinks lazily and smiles up at Jack. Who is clutching only one coffee cup and doesn't look inclined to share it. "Coffee?"

"Later."

"Now."

Jack grins. "Not until you've showered and dressed."

Looking down at his crumpled clothes Ianto scowls. There is no way he can wear the clothes he'd been in earlier, yesterday, today, they were torn and destroyed and have been lying on the floor for God knows how long.

"There are fresh clothes in the bathroom." Jack knows his lover too well. It was the first thing he sent the soldier assigned to them out for when he'd settled Ianto into their suite at the hotel. The second thing he'd done was ring Gwen.

lanto looks disinclined to move, burrowing his way beneath the covers and so Jack really has no other choice but to rip them off him. The view is entirely worth the furious glare he receives, lanto's long pale body stretched out just for him and Jack just has to kiss him. It's a slow, gentle kiss that isn't heading anywhere. Jack traces his tongue over the back of lanto's teeth, stroking at his palette making lanto's toes curl into the mattress. His hands smooth down lanto's flanks, assuring themselves that he is still there and still his and his knee worms its way between lanto's thighs.

A phone beeps in the other room and Steven shouts out something unintelligible but it's enough to break the kiss. Jack draws away slowly, with soft presses of lips to lips, until he can bear to let go. "They'll be here soon."

"Hmm." lanto's arms are looped round Jack's neck and his nose is tucked between Jack's throat and his collar. There is something undeniably erotic about Jack fully clothed and pressing him into the mattress, but he is just too comfortable to do anything.

"Your sister and Gwen - they'll be here soon."

"What!" lanto sits up, barely missing head-butting Jack, and looks round the room wildly. "How long?"

"Ten minutes?"

lanto growls and pushes a laughing Jack off him, hurrying into the bathroom. "UNIT sent a chopper for them, by way of a thank you!"

"Some thank you," lanto mutters twisting the shower knob.

"Want any help in there?" Jack leers.

lanto puts his head round the door. "No. You stay there." He ducks back into the bathroom. Then changes his mind. "Actually, go get me a coffee. Then maybe you can scrub my back."

Jack stretches as he gets off the bed. "Mr Jones," he says, kissing lanto gently, "You are a whore for coffee."

"I only said you could scrub my back. The rest depends on how good the coffee is."

Jack swats him, catching his bare buttock with a satisfying smack of flesh on flesh. "Shower. I am not facing Gwen alone."

"It's my sister you have to worry about. They've had time to compare notes."

Jack groans and lanto laughs, feeling freer than he has done in a long time. Jack starts shoving him back into the bathroom. "Get in there and clean up."

"Sir, yes sir." lanto says, saluting Jack before dashing back into the bathroom before he gets another smack.

"Don't sass me Jones!"

Ianto chuckles as he hears the door to their room shut before stepping into the shower. The water tumbles over him, warm and clean, and Ianto smells roses and sweet water and he smiles. He thinks that maybe, just maybe, he's still a part of it.

"Chosen."

