A secret movement within the government successfully placed Lois Habiba as a spy inside Torchwood, and the trap is ready to be sprung. Meanwhile, Jack has received worrisome news, leading Gwen and Ianto from one danger into another. Loves, loyalties, and everyone's lives are on the line as the force behind the conspiracy finally comes to light.

Notes

Warnings: AUTHOR CHOOSES NOT TO WARN (but will answer PMs at Livejournal for any content questions)
Spoilers: up through COE
Betas: Eldarwannabe and Fide_et_spe both performed major heavy lifting on this story, and have my deepest thanks for their efforts
A/N: Final fic in a fake third series where Lois, Johnson, and Rupesh have joined the team. Can be read as a stand-alone but will make more sense in context of the other stories.

(In case of archive issues, this fic may also be read at LJ, Teaspoon And An Open Mind, and fanfiction.net.)
Jack gave up on sleep around two in the morning. For three nights in a row he'd been unable to rest for more than ten minutes at a stretch. Tonight would make four. Careful not to wake Ianto, he slipped out from under the covers, tugged on jogging bottoms and a shirt, and padded out to the sitting room. Not in the mood for a film, he booted up the laptop and checked the Hub remotely.

Technically, work was supposed to stay outside the flat. Anything said on the doorstep could be Torchwood. Jack was an incredibly dashing and handsome leader and Ianto his adorable if sometimes insubordinate subordinate, and even if they didn't always like those roles, they were used to them. The second they stepped inside, Torchwood was nothing more than the firm employing them both, and they were just another couple who argued over whose turn it was for washing up. Jack found excuses to drop casual kisses on Ianto's neck or his hands, something forbidden during work hours. Ianto helped the neighbours with odd jobs and shouted at the telly as though the people on the screen could hear him.

Theoretically, home was theirs. In practise, Jack never stopped being on-call. Until three weeks ago, Ianto had ever been alongside him when yet another world-shattering event needed attention in the middle of the night. But they tried.

All that aside, Jack reckoned checking his email wasn't really working. When the screen loaded, he found the usual missives from UNIT, another nastygram from Mr. Weeds regarding the budget, Jack's weekly newsletter from Purple Pleasures, and a reply from Tish Jones (the conversation had lasted four months, and tonight involved comparing notes on pubs in Islington). He ignored the UNIT and budget emails, scanned the newsletter for anything interesting before deleting it, then settled in to write back to Tish.

His wrist strap beeped.

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Ianto woke up alone. The alarm had been reset later than it ought to have been, part of Jack's eternal war on punctuality. That meant he'd been awake all night again and was compensating by wanting Ianto to sleep in. "I can get more done with an early start," Ianto told him often, but Jack always countered with, "You'll run yourself down." Ever since the incident at the UNIT co-training, Jack had been a mother hen on the matter of rest and recuperation, never mind that the gunshot wound was almost healed.

Ianto said as he went into the sitting room, "I see you couldn't ... "

The room was empty. There was a note in the kitchen: "Running an errand. Took the car. Will meet you at work." Jack's aversion to using subjects in his notes would have been more amusing had Ianto not now been forced to take the bus or beg a ride off Perry. If he didn't dawdle, he could make the earlier bus.

Showered, shaved, dressed, and fed (unless Jack cooked them breakfast, Ianto stuck with toast) Ianto gathered up his things to hurry down to the bus stop. He had his keys, he had his wallet, and he had a different, much-folded note he'd been carrying as a sort of good luck charm since he found it months ago. It hadn't prevented him from being shot, true, but then again, neither had he died.

The landlady had left another wedding magazine out in what she thought was a subtle, even helpful hint. With no time to hide this one, Ianto merely flipped it over and hoped Jack didn't notice.
On her way into work that cold Friday morning, Gwen stopped by the cash point. Rhys had mentioned going shopping this weekend, trinkets for the new house. The last time they'd tried this, Rhys had insisted on buying an expensive, terribly ugly lamp. Gwen hoped having money in hand to spend would help them keep to a budget.

As the machine dispensed the notes, she noticed a girl standing on the pavement across the street. She stood stock still, but for the wind lifting strands of her long hair. Gwen felt as though she knew her from somewhere, had met her before, but she could not place the face. The girl stared at Gwen, stared through her, until Gwen felt uncomfortable and turned away, pretending to count her money. When she looked back, the girl was gone.

Lois dropped her report at the usual place on her way into the Hub. Stopping by the newsagent's had become habit, and she chided herself. The moment she became lax about her assignment would signal the day she'd be caught out. She spared a quick smile for the seller, an elderly gentleman with a soft, flyaway head of white hair. He grinned back in cold mirth. "Got something for ya," he barked, and handed her an envelope, still warm from his pocket.

"Thank you," she said, and gave him a coin. The envelope went into her handbag. She felt him watch her the rest of the way down the street. This particular contact was new, and he made her skin crawl.

There was a short stretch between one street and the next where the CCTV didn't cover. She pulled out the envelope and read the message inside, then crumpled it and threw it in the closest bin. No evidence. She hurried her steps and continued to her bus stop.

The note was in Mr. Frobisher's hand, but she held no illusions he was the author. Mr. Gloucester wasn't pleased. She'd been given her orders. If Lois didn't follow through within a week, she would be removed from her assignment. Threats lurked under the words. She'd been working for the government for four years, recruited when she was still in uni and trained to infiltrate. She had yet to fail on an assignment. Agents who did fail in their tasks were not given a second opportunity, but given how Torchwood dealt with threats, a mistake on this end would mean her death anyway, either by gunshot or permanent amnesia.

Lois offered her normal smiles for the bus driver, for the regular passengers who took this route. She found a seat by a window, and she stared out into the cold, bright morning as she went over her plan.

Problem the first: Torchwood as a group was heavily armed and willing to take anyone down who opposed them. Solution: Separate them from the majority of their weapons.

Problem the second: Captain Harkness could not be killed, not permanently. Any operation must focus on capturing him, but due to his physiology, very few methods that would incapacitate him would not as a consequence kill everyone with him. Solution one: Separate him from the rest. Solution two: Accept the need for casualties. Gwen, Ianto, and Perry were listed in her mission as acceptable losses. Lois disagreed.

A woman she knew by face sat next to her. They exchanged sociable nods as the woman opened her book, a mass-market self-help title. She had a vivid red scar on her left arm, obscured by the sleeve of her coat, and her hair was brushed forward to hide the traces of a paler scar on her cheek under her makeup. An old injury? Reminders of an encounter with extraterrestrials she wouldn't have been allowed to remember? In Cardiff, there was no way to tell.
Lois looked away from her, back out the window.

Problem the third: Torchwood had embroiled non-Torchwood personnel into their illegal schemes, making simultaneous capture of all relevant parties more difficult. Solution: With assistance from UNIT, Lois would arrange for Dr. Jones and her sister to be brought in at the same time. The same would have to be done for their London operative Smith, and the new hire in Glasgow.

Problem the fourth was personal. Lois had come to like and respect Captain Harkness and his people. Yes, they'd committed acts that required her to bring them to justice, but they viewed themselves simply as doing their jobs, risking their lives and protecting Cardiff from alien threats for no recognition. Under other circumstances, she'd be proud to work with them.

The solution was for Lois to let go of her personal feelings.

The bus deposited her on the Plass. She wrapped her coat and scarf firmly around herself and made her way down to the TIC entrance. Gwen met her up along the way, and matched her brisk steps.

"Morning," Gwen said with a cheer that didn't cut through the chill.

"Good morning."

"Quiet night?"

"Yes. You?"

"Oh, the usual. Rhys had me looking at furniture half the night." As they reached the door, Gwen launched into a story of the latest round of house-decorating with her husband. She drew Lois into the debate, and onto her side on wallpaper versus plain paint. Wallpaper gave the room a finished look, Gwen believed, and she described with fluid hand motions the crown moulding she wanted to install. Torchwood might hunt aliens for a living, but Gwen was good at convincing people what she found interesting was in fact just as amazing. She was easy to like, and big-hearted enough for the whole world.

Problem the fourth was going to be a big problem.

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She'd promised herself she wasn't going to act this way. She'd promised herself that under no circumstances was she going to well up in tears, or nag, or God help her, whine. And she'd sworn not to blame her hormones in any fashion.

Dammit.

Martha managed to angrily brush the tears away before he saw them. "I know it's only a week. I know you'll call." Her voice sounded bitter even to her own ears.

Tom sat down on their bed, and took her hands. It would have been much sweeter had he not been sitting next to his suitcase. "I can tell them I can't make it." He rubbed the skin at the base of her thumbs. The gesture was tender but she was having another prickly nothing-feels-right day, and she pulled her hands back. "If you really want me to."

Martha stamped down on the words she wanted to say. That he always did this. That he set up situations where he was needed elsewhere, then put the pivot point on Martha. Yes, he'd stay in the country if she asked him to, but it would be her fault. The other doctors at the site needed him, and yes, someone would die, there was no question, and Tom would never directly accuse her, but the
knowledge would remain there between them.

Martha sat down beside him, turning her head so she couldn't view the black bag whose presence meant her husband was leaving again.

"Go," she said with a heavy sigh that no doubt sounded overdramatic and forced. But she had no room left for pretending she wasn't hurt. "I'll ask Tish to come with me to the ultrasound."

"That's not until ... " His face changed. "I thought it was two weeks from now. Martha, I'm sorry. I'll tell them ... "

"You'll go. They need you." She smiled without feeling it. "Tish wanted to know first anyway. She thinks it's going to be a boy. Leo thinks it's going to be twins."

"Leo's wrong," Tom said, bringing his arm around her and kissing her hair. "I love you."

She couldn't bring herself to say it back without crying. "Get your things together, mister. Traffic's going to be hell."

And it almost ended there, fight averted. Then Tom said something quietly, and Martha asked, "What was that?"

"Nothing." He put on a smile as false as the one she'd just used.

"It's not nothing."

He turned away, and put the last of his shirts into his suitcase. "I said, I don't get cross every time you run off with Captain Personal Space."

"I'm not cross," said Martha, in defiance of what she was now certain would be her mood in the next minute. "What do you mean 'run off'? It's for work, the same as yours."

"I'm saving lives." Tom waved his hand before Martha could shout, "And I know you are, too, and saving the planet from galactic threats to boot. Your work is important. I've never questioned that."

"Then what?"

He continued packing. "Every time Jack whistles, you go running off to Cardiff or to the middle of nowhere. If I was going to be upset and jealous, that would be why. But I'm not."

"Of course you're not. There's nothing to be jealous over." Martha took a breath. "I'm not jealous, and I'm not angry at you for leaving. You said you were done until after the baby came."

"Yes, and you said you were leaving Cardiff for good because of the baby, but how many times has Jack called asking for favours since then?" He took her hand again. "But you've said it's all for work, and for good reasons, and I believe you."

"What else would it be?"

Tom wasn't one of those people who could raise one eyebrow. He tried anyway, and looked surprised rather than suavely cynical as he intended. "He flirted with you at our wedding."

"He flirted with you, too. It's how Jack says hello." Jack had even kissed her mum. Martha thought she'd seen tongue.

Her mobile chirped. Tom stared at her. Martha broke the stare first, and looked at the caller ID
hopelessly.

"Answer it."

She flipped open the phone with, "I'm going to kill you."

"I'm calling a taxi," Tom said, closing his suitcase with a snap. "I love you, and I will see you in a week."

As he walked past her, Jack said on the other end, "What?"

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Jack stayed in his office most of the day. Ianto had minimal time to wonder why, as calls came in and Jack sent the team out in waves, himself staying back to coordinate. Ianto went out with Johnson to take down a Weevil. Gwen and Lois took witness interrogation on a pensioner who swore her cat was stolen by little green men. (The cat turned up midway through the questioning, none the worse for wear.) Rupesh and Perry were busy at a murder scene, thanks to a tip from Gwen's friend Andy, but the victim's wounds were human-caused, no matter how gruesome. In between assignments, they dealt with the never-ending stacks of paperwork.

The day was like any other Friday up until the point where the six of them returned from an impromptu trip to the sewers and headed directly to the showers. Jack would normally take this opportunity to stand outside and make lewd comments. The lack of sexual harassment sent alarm bells through Ianto's mind as he scrubbed, ignoring Perry and Rupesh whilst they sluiced off beside him. Voices came over the barely-adequate modesty partition separating them from the women's side, and not one conversation scrap was interrupted by a borderline sleazy Jack Harkness come-on.

When he'd dressed, Ianto went directly to Jack's office. "What's wrong?" He stood in front of the desk.

Jack looked up from his keyboard. Ianto didn't miss the quickly-doused appreciation of his damp hair and rumpled jeans; the last spare suit was with the dry cleaner, leaving Ianto with the old clothes he kept around for when the SUV needed maintenance. "Nice outfit."

Ianto folded his arms. "Something's eating you."

Jack turned back to his keyboard. "It never rains," he said, closing the window he'd been reading. "Come on. I'd better announce this to everyone."

Mystified at the sudden change, Ianto followed him out to the Hub proper, and leaned against the railing as Jack did his favourite schoolteacher's clap. "Gather round, kids. I've got some news."

Gwen took in Ianto's confused expression and matched it. "Good news? Bad news?"

Johnson said, "Captain, if you're pregnant, all I ask is to be in the room when you tell Alice."

Jack glared at her, but Johnson kept her insouciant face. Ianto felt a nervous flutter go through his stomach and depart. Jack had joked about that in the past. Martha had even tested him once to be certain. Surely ... No.

"Please," Jack said, after a beat. "Everyone knows you don't tell until after the first trimester."

Perry's bewildered voice cut the joke. "Jack?"
"I've got the word from Mr. Weeds." Jack managed to convey every ounce of disrespect he held for Her Majesty's Esteemed Bean Counter. "Our funding has been frozen as of the end of business today."

"Again?" Ianto said right before the chorus of "What?" and "He can't do that!"

Jack held up his hands for quiet, which Gwen broke into with, "That's twice now, isn't it?" She caught Ianto's eye, and he gave her a quick, tight smile.

"Since you've been here. He did it another time after I took over the Cardiff branch, and his predecessors defunded us off and on for the past twenty years. This isn't anything new." Jack didn't mention that the predecessors had been the bureaucrats from Torchwood London, who'd thought to keep their other branches under heel. Ianto had read the budgets for the last fifty years after he'd taken over that task, and found, instead of a dry chronology, a cut-throat and vicious mutual antipathy where brinksmanship had nearly cost the planet everything over a discrepancy of a few shillings in an expense report.

Ianto cleared his throat. "We operate with a two-month buffer in the official accounts, and another month in the unofficial accounts. We'll be able to keep the lights on until this is sorted."

Gwen said, "Except for our pay." Jack frowned at her, but she was right.

"Yeah. We're paid directly from the Crown, and those accounts are frozen. Each of you was warned to set up a savings account when you signed your paperwork. You may be living out of it for a while. When the hold is lifted, you'll receive your back pay. It'll be fine." For Jack, things would be fine. He had money stashed away in multiple accounts, and he owned investment properties all over the city. Jack could live on those assets for years. This wouldn't take years, though. Mr. Weeds would have his day, Jack would force the issue, Jack would win, and everything would go back to normal.

Jack fielded questions, nothing Ianto didn't already know. His own position was less precarious than the rest: Jack had given him access to his private accounts months ago, and Ianto was used to spending the money, obtaining food and other supplies for the flat, purchasing gifts at Christmas for their families and friends.

"What about the Glasgow location?" Gwen asked, as the meeting broke up.

"The funds are already approved and held separately. They haven't said anything about stopping those."

Rupesh raised his hand. "Request for a transfer to Scotland?"

They all ought to go, Ianto thought, and then dismissed the idea. True, Jack had offered Ianto the position as Director for Torchwood Two, which he'd declined. (Gwen had declined the same offer, but Gwen didn't have to consider if she'd been presented with a career opportunity or a convenient excuse for a break-up.) The new Director wasn't an ideal choice. They needed someone familiar with the inner workings of Torchwood and loyal to Jack yet willing to tell him to go fuck himself when necessary. Walter Trent had been given Torchwood Glasgow based on Jack's prior dealings with him in a timeline that never was. The transition was going to be rough all around now that Glasgow had funding and Cardiff did not.

Ianto followed Lois back to her workstation. "I'll pull up the unofficial accounts for you. We'll need to watch our spending around here, but honestly, this is like a fire drill. It happens all the time."
"Thanks." She took a quick glance at the others, her gaze resting a fraction of a second longer on Perry. "I feel terrible," Lois said in a low voice. "I'm officially temping. I don't think this affects me."

Ianto thought back to the contracts everyone had signed when they'd first brought the new people on board. Johnson had transferred. Perry and Rupesh were both recruited directly. Lois herself had never converted to Torchwood properly and was still considered temporary help from the Home Office.

"Don't feel bad. Just be careful in case someone asks you for a loan."

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Gwen found one of the few spots in the Hub where her mobile picked up a signal, but before she could dial, Jack walked over to her. "You okay?"

"Fine." The house payment would be less fine. They'd been counting on her pay to cover the fees. It was a grand house, absolutely beautiful, and they could not afford it on Harwood's wages. "I need to tell Rhys the bad news."

Jack's face went strange. "Are you doing anything tonight?"

The question was asked in a very prelude-to-asking-on-a-date voice. Gwen's brain stuttered to a halt before restarting. "What?" Jack wouldn't ask her out. Not when she was dialling Rhys. Not when Ianto was across the room talking to Lois. That would be ... "What?" she asked again.

"I said, are you doing anything tonight?" His arms were folded, a classic Jack gesture that screamed nervousness, and although his face was in a pleasant, teasing pose, his voice had a catch.

"I don't think so. No." She was stammering. "That is, we don't have any plans that I know of. Rhys and I. Why?"

"Good. The two of you should come over to ours tonight for dinner. Will Rhys eat lamb chops?"

The picture of her beloved husband ploughing through a plate of chops made her smile unexpectedly. For good lamb, Rhys would even be nice to Jack. "He'll eat all of them if you don't stop him. Should we bring anything?"

"Don't worry about it." He squeezed her arm. "Tell him seven o'clock unless the world ends."

"I will." An old warmth washed through her as Jack walked away, heading for the medical bay. She found the spot with the signal and dialled Rhys.

"Bit busy," he answered, affection in his tone. "Make it quick? Working late tonight?"

"Not unless the world ends. I've got some good news and some bad news."

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Johnson stopped her in the corridor between the Hub and the Tourist Office. Lois flicked her eyes to the camera, and saw it had been put into sleep mode. Johnson followed her gaze. "I'm running a diagnostic. We have two minutes. Was that your doing?"

"No. I don't talk to Mr. Weeds."

"What game is he playing?"
"I haven't the faintest. Jack said he does this all the time."

"The Captain is hiding something. Can't you tell?"

Lois had noticed the same distant behaviour that had Ianto pensively watching Jack's window most of the morning. "He's always hiding something. He's probably worried about a shutdown. He doesn't get paid either."

"When is this going to happen?" Johnson moved closer, not menacing, not friendly. "If you don't act soon, he will find out."

Lois looked at the camera again, but it was still dormant. "It will be the beginning of next week. Tell the doctor."

Johnson's face remained impassive. "What's your plan?"

The camera made a soft click as it returned to service. Lois continued walking as though she'd never stopped. "I'll put that on the next shopping list. I'm going to have to run comparison prices."

"I understand," Johnson said, and she rounded on her heel to go back to the Hub.

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"We're entertaining?" Ianto read the shopping list Jack had scribbled. Along with the usual "those crisps I like with the vinegar" and "that cheese stuff," Jack had included parmesan, fresh mint, and a wine Ianto knew for a fact Jack himself would not be touching.

"Gwen and Rhys. We'll all have dinner together and chat."

"We don't chat." He amended mentally, "You don't chat with Rhys, and we're all happiest that way."

As if he'd heard the thoughts, Jack sat back in his chair. "You and Rhys have spent quality time together before. This will be fine."

"I didn't say it wouldn't be fine. It's just unexpected." Of course, it was within Jack's purview to invite another couple over for dinner, and as it was Jack's home too, he hardly needed to ask permission. And this was Jack. He bothered with social niceties when they suited him. This was probably about the budget announcement, Jack's way of reassuring Gwen, with Rhys present to defuse any questions of how or why Jack was taking care of her.

Ianto glanced over the list in his hand again. "Is there anything else you can think of that we need?"

"Not now." Jack took a look out his window. "We're slow this afternoon. Why don't you leave early? I'll meet you at home in a few hours."

"Do you want me to pick you up?"

"No need." He wore an expression Ianto didn't like and couldn't read. They'd just finished addressing their need to reduce consumption and reserve their resources. Surely Jack wouldn't turn around and use the SUV as his personal car on a frivolous whim?

"All right. I'll see you at home." No kissing at work, no hand-holding. For a worried moment, Ianto wanted to drag his lover down into the bunker beneath their feet and demand to know what he was thinking, not that it would do him any good.

"See you."
"What's this about, then?" Rhys asked for the third time as they parked in front of the block of flats where Ianto lived. Gwen scanned the street out of habit, looking for anything out of the usual. Except for the fact that she and her husband were meeting Jack and Ianto for dinner, everything was perfectly normal.

"It's just dinner," she said, getting out of the car and brushing her hair from her face in the stiff wind. "Jack's probably aiming to apologise for annoying the auditors."

The building was a bit grubby, she'd thought every time she'd waited impatiently for Ianto to sprint out the door. As they stepped into the front hallway, she took in the fading décor, straight from the early 1970s, with sad old paper on the walls. The doors to the first floor flats had all seen better days. Still, someone clearly loved this place. A three-legged table stood by the one small window, with a hopeful bunch of flowers stuck in a pink porcelain vase. Yesterday's newspaper sat neatly beside it in offering to the interested, as well as a small assortment of magazines. Taped to the wall by the stairs was a reminder of the upcoming tenants' meeting, which would be potluck.

Gwen tried to picture Jack attending a potluck with Ianto's neighbours, a mix (in her mind) of elderly women who talked to their cats, and single mums with toddlers. They would chat about rent increases, whose job it was to shovel the path, and issue reminders of when the rubbish would be collected.

"Come on," said Rhys, leading her up the stairs. A moment later, a mouth-watering smell reached her nose, and Gwen hurried up with him.

Ianto opened the door on their first knock, a nervous but pleased smile on his face. "Come in. Make yourselves at home." He took their coats, hanging them up beside Jack's greatcoat and his own warm black wool coat. Gwen patted his arm and gave him a squeeze.

"Thank you for inviting us over."

"We brought this," said Rhys, handing Ianto the loaf of bread they'd picked up from the bakery. Gwen didn't know good breads from bad, but this one had looked nice in the window.

"Thanks." From Ianto's face, he didn't appear to know good bread from bad, either, and she relaxed. "Won't you sit down?"

"Dinner will be in a few minutes," Jack called from the kitchen, not coming out to greet them. Gwen imagined he was busy with the last-minute preparations. Rhys tended to shoo her out of their kitchen when he was nearly finished, despite her desire to lend a hand.

Ianto's flat was not terribly large. Gwen remembered few details from the last time she'd visited. He'd been living out of boxes, nothing on the walls, a few pieces of second-hand furniture. She recalled best the crisply polite expression he'd worn the entire time, offering her something to drink, answering her questions with short replies, not asking any of his own until she'd given up and fled this dark room.

Ianto came up behind her. "We've decorated since you came over last." He always had been good at reading her mind.

The broken-down sofa had been replaced with something out of a bachelor's dream catalogue. Fat brown leather cushions yielded beautifully when she sat down, with a perfect view of the television. Wood-trimmed lamps perched on tables to either side, warming the room with their golden glow. A
few trinkets were set out on display: a bowl with pebbles, some candles, an old music box. One lonely but healthy green plant sat on the windowsill. Bookshelves lined one wall with battered old novels and new DVDs, and the other featured a spray of photographs in metal frames. Gwen saw Lisa in two different snaps, did not know the faces in most. With a jolt, she recognised a young Alice in one, and Steven grinning in another. Amidst other pictures was a black and white photo Gwen had seen before: Jack and Estelle, from sixty years ago.

Heart fluttering uncomfortably, Gwen excused herself to freshen up. Her world had been askew all day, and the visit to this alien planet wasn't helping her composure. As she splashed water on the back of her neck, Gwen took in the small details of the bathroom as though assessing a crime scene. Someone had tidied in here recently: no toothpaste on the mirror, and the bath mat was freshly laundered (rather than having the slightly distressing smell of any lavatory carpet regularly frequented by a sleepy man taking an early morning slash). But the room wasn't obsessively cleaned. She could see the build-up in the tub where the soap line lingered just out of easy notice, and the towels were hung neatly but had been used.

A second door led from the bathroom directly to the flat's only bedroom. With a glance to the other door, Gwen silently opened it, unsure if she was ready to gaze upon Jack's playroom. She didn't know what to expect in the unlit room, if she was about to scar her mind with heavy-duty chains and elaborate costumes set up for an evening's entertainment. Worse, her thoughts supplied as her eyes adjusted, she didn't know why Jack had invited her and Rhys to visit, it could be his motives were as impure as the rest of him.

Her eyes finally focused on the very normal bedroom set, with a dark duvet, rumpled pillows, and a wardrobe with one door ajar that revealed familiar-looking blue shirts neatly hung in a row. The only significant difference between this space and the bedroom she shared with Rhys was that this bed was made and none of the drawers overflowed.

If there were any items of unusual note, they had already been stored inside the beside table, and she was not about to go looking. A sense of unease filled her, and the knowledge that she didn't belong in this room. This was prying. She closed the bedroom door, and flushed the toilet as she ran water.

When she came back out, Ianto handed her a glass of wine.

"I like what you've done with the flat," she said, and meant it.

He made a pleased face. "You should have seen the place at Christmas. Someone insisted on stringing fairy lights."

"I maintain they added an ambience," Jack said, finally emerging from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a towel. "The food's ready." He'd changed out of his typical clothes, and Gwen hardly knew him. He wasn't flashing his 600-watt smile, nor had he started in on the inappropriate comments yet. She had long ago accepted her infatuation with someone she saw as an action hero and matinee idol brought to immortal life. The man waving her into the kitchen tonight was just some bloke with questionable taste in fashion, whose lover was right behind her. This was their home.

"You all right?" asked Rhys. "You look peaky."

"What every woman wants to hear," she replied, taking his arm a little proprietarily. "Let's eat."

The food was delicious. To Gwen's delight, Rhys and Jack managed a thoroughly polite conversation about cookery. Rhys was kind enough not to mention the potatoes Gwen had accidentally exploded in the oven last week, though he did use the word "menace" with the phrase "in the kitchen."
"Now then," she said, "it's not that I can't cook. I can. It's just that the bloody appliances keep trying to kill me."

Jack said, "That happened once. One of the local factories got outfitted with a Deneezian replicator. They made toaster ovens that tried to eat their owners." He laughed at the memory. The rest of them stared in horror. "What? There were some burns. I got to wrestle a vicious glass door off some poor chap with a wooden leg. He was fine."

Rhys gave Gwen his usual, "This is what you do for a living?" expression but didn't comment.

They kept up the conversation, easy enough with Jack around. Gwen complimented the risotto, which Ianto thanked her for.

"You're getting better," Jack said. "For your final exam I'll make you fix dinner for the whole team."

"There's an exam?"

"Sure."

Gwen said, "I can't imagine Jack teaching you something." Actually, she could. Her imagination was unfortunately clear regarding Jack conducting naked cooking lessons.

Ianto took a drink of his wine. "It's better than his firearms training." They shared a laugh, which Rhys picked up on.

"Can't teach someone to shoot a gun?" he asked Jack.

"I take them out of their comfort zone."

Gwen said, "I've been teaching the new recruits. Less hands-on, as it were." She coughed.

Jack said, "And that's why Lois still can't hit the side of a house. Twenty minutes of lessons and she'll be a master markswoman."

Ianto stood and took their plates. "I'll remind her where the harassment forms are stored."

"You should take Johnson down there," Gwen said.

"Hell, no. She'd shoot me. Several times. On purpose."

They retired to the lounge, Gwen sitting comfortably against Rhys, warm and content. Ianto sat next to Jack on the sofa, stiffly at first, but relaxing as Jack stroked the smooth skin on his wrist. Gwen hadn't even noticed the little touches at work had stopped, not until she was reminded all over again of how tactile Jack could be.

Jack cleared his throat. He looked at Ianto, contrition open on his face. "I'm going to break one of the rules now, and I am very, very sorry."

Gwen tensed inside, and sat up, just as Ianto pulled his hand away and stared at Jack. "What is it?"

Jack looked at Gwen instead. "We have this rule, he and I, that Torchwood business doesn't come home with us. We can talk about work, but the way normal people do." He broke off and asked Rhys, "How do normal people talk about work, anyway?"

"Jack," Ianto said, not exactly with impatience.
"Yeah. Okay. Short story, we're on the clock, and I am your boss." He cleared his throat again. Ianto had already moved away on the sofa and was fixing him with an annoyed stare. "I invited you here because we have a scrambler in place to make sure nobody's eavesdropping."

Gwen asked, "Is something wrong?"

Jack blew out a breath. "I'm transferring you both to Glasgow, effective Monday."

"What?" Ianto said, as Gwen said, "No, you're not." Rhys swore. Gwen pushed his hand down to the cushion and mouthed, "Let me handle this."

Ianto said, "I'm not going to Glasgow. We have been over this." He stood, putting more space between them. "I'll resign first."

"You're not resigning," Jack said, as Gwen started in with, "This is ridiculous. You picked someone to be the director for Glasgow."

"Trent starts next week," Ianto said. "All the paperwork has gone through."

She said, "Exactly! I'm not transferring to bloody Scotland."

Ianto said, "This is completely unfair of you."

Jack stood. Gwen expected him to move toward Ianto, take his hand or something, but Jack walked away. He went to a large silver bowl on a table near the door and picked up his wrist strap. He hadn't been wearing it, she realised. The ubiquitous reminder that Jack didn't belong in this time, on this world, and he didn't wear it at home. She didn't have time to consider what that meant. Jack held it in front of him and pressed a button inside.

A holographic figure appeared. Gwen's blood ran cold.

"Hello, lover," said John Hart.

***
"It never rains but it pours," said Jack. He'd sat back down and coaxed Ianto into the seat next to him. Ianto couldn't always read his moods, but for the first time today, Jack's opacity had cleared. The quiet touch of hands and the simple pressure of ankles brushing were for him necessary reassurances, and Ianto gave them, however reluctantly.

Jack played the rest of the message, then turned it off. "He contacted me last night. I've spent today working on a plan."

Rhys asked, "Who is he?"

Ianto had names for John Hart, but let Gwen explain. "He's bad news. Remember the bombs? He set those."

Jack said, "He's the guy you never invite to a party because you don't know if he's going to dance naked on the table or nail the dog to the ceiling."

"Bloody hell." Rhys took Gwen's hand at that. He knew enough to understand what they'd lost that night. "And he's coming here again? Expecting a job?"

"I don't know what he expects," Jack said. "The last time I saw him, two people I cared about died."

Ianto took a gulp before he spoke, not wanting the anger building up inside himself to take over. "He killed you. He helped," he didn't want to say Gray's name and make things worse, "I mean, he was the one who captured you so you were buried alive for over a thousand years. He's not coming near you again." The anger was winning.

"The worst he can do to me is kill me. The two of you won't come back from it, and believe me, there's far worse he can do to you than kill you. You're right," Jack said to Ianto, "this isn't fair. I'm going to be selfish and get you as far away from him as possible."

"Jesus," Rhys said, and for once, didn't launch into a diatribe about how Jack managed to entangle everyone into his messes.

"The others will be in danger too," said Gwen.

Ianto said, "You have to send Alice away."

"He doesn't know about Alice," said Jack. "And he won't. She'll be safe. He's met the two of you. All I have to do is tell him you've been transferred to another city, play it like I don't care, and he won't bother with you. You won't be interesting. I hope. After he's gone, I can recall you to Cardiff."

"How long?" asked Gwen.

"I'd give it a month," said Jack. His face twitched in the way it did when he was avoiding saying something.

"How long really?"

"Could be longer. He wasn't specific. Maybe six months."

Rhys said, "Are you fucking kidding me? You are not sending my wife away for six bloody months!"
"You can go with her," said Jack. "I'm not stopping you. I have to stay here, though." His thumb traced a circle; Ianto shivered. "And I need you both completely on board with this, because we have to tell the rest that you're leaving because you want to. If they think you're being sent away, he'll find out."

"He'll find out anyway," Gwen said. "We can handle him, Jack."

"You really can't. And there's one more thing."

"Of course there is," said Rhys in disgust.

Jack glanced at Ianto again, and he knew what Jack was going to say. "This is also a good excuse to get you both out of sight. I think our security has been breached."

The conversations they weren't supposed to have at home, but did regardless, had touched on concerns they'd both had, noticing the accumulation of odd details and forming an unpleasant conclusion. Added to this, Jack had received friendly warnings from their other contacts.

"Our London branch has picked up a lot of chatter about us lately. That L'dosian incursion made it to UNIT's ears, and I know I didn't tell them."

Gwen said, "You think it's Johnson."

"She's the most obvious candidate, yeah. And we vetted Rupesh but he's way too chummy with her for having just met." Jack leaned forward. "I'm not going to point fingers at anyone yet. It could be a coincidence. But I'd feel much better if you both were elsewhere and not under their eye. Especially if I need to call in the cavalry."

He glanced at Rhys. "Did I say the part out loud where you both continue to get paid because Glasgow's setup budget was approved separately from ours?"

This appeared to convince Gwen, who had clearly heard the previous implication that Rhys could go with her. She'd pretend to stubborn it out a bit longer, but her mind was made up to go, now she was playing for extras. Ianto sat back on the sofa, observing. Yes, they could buy that van Gwen had been pushing for, with the extra room for seating and equipment, with discretionary funds from the Glasgow account. Ianto could load it with their pick of the field equipment from here, and their luggage, and drive everything. No, they couldn't take Lois with them.

"I need someone here who knows where the paperclips are and how the filing system works."

"It's an alphabet," said Ianto. "Even you can manage that."

"Lois is staying. I may transfer Perry once you've established the site." Not a surprise; Jack had an uncomfortable history with their new technician, just as he had an uncomfortable history with the new Glasgow director. He'd be happy to have them on his side, working somewhere else.

"You're sure about this?" Gwen asked, but her eyes were back on the wrist strap. "I'm not certain the others will believe we're going as our own idea."

Jack leaned back again. "Oh, but the two of you have been talking to each other about transferring for a while. Cardiff's got a lot of bad memories, you need some breathing room, and this is the perfect opportunity. I was against the idea, but you stood firm, and I gave in because the other option was watching you both walk away from Torchwood entirely and I couldn't face that."

The cover story wasn't perfect, but they wouldn't have to hold it up for more than a few days; Jack
had to keep the façade for months, and this would explain his melancholy.

Mouth dry, Ianto asked, "When do we leave?"

***

Jack saw Gwen and Rhys out. Rhys wasn't any happier, but spared them a rant, which Jack decided he'd count as considerate. Realistically, Rhys couldn't go to Scotland, find a job, and come back whenever it was safe, not if he intended to keep the position he had now.

At least Rhys could go visit. Jack didn't dare.

He wiped his face with his hand in the corridor outside the flat. Ianto hadn't said much, which meant "We'll be talking about this later." Now it was later.

"Hey," Jack said, opening the door. Part of him expected it to be locked. Ianto wasn't in the kitchen cleaning up, but had already pulled out his bags and was rummaging through the wardrobe.

"We should plan on going in tomorrow," Ianto said, looking critically at a shirt before folding it carefully. "I need to make sure all my access codes are signed over."

Jack walked up behind him, wrapping his arms around Ianto's waist. "Easy enough. We put most of it in place when you were on medical leave."

Ianto winced, and Jack moved his hand quickly away from the tender spot on his abdomen. The bandages were gone, and even the bruising had faded thanks to Torchwood's proprietary wound treatments. Jack didn't think for a minute it was physical pain he was reacting to right now.

One hand on the other hip, Jack said into his ear, "Say you're not mad at me."

"I'm not mad, I'm tired. It's been a long day and I have a lot to do this weekend."

"You know this isn't forever. He'll come, I'll deal with him, he'll go, and you can be home the next day."

"This time." Ianto stopped pretending to fold. "Where are you sending me next time?"

"There won't be a next time."

A noise growled down in Ianto's throat, rumbling through him. "John Hart isn't your only ex out there. Tell me honestly none of the others are psychos. You can't send me to another country every time one of your old shags is in town."

"I'll protect you." Jack pressed a kiss into his neck.

Ianto turned in his arms, and pressed a kiss of his own onto Jack's mouth, face drawn into the saddest smile Jack had ever seen. "Congratulations. I didn't think you'd find a way to do it without Retcon."

"Do what?"

"When Glasgow is set up, you'll have my resignation on your desk."

Jack moved his arms, mindful of the old wound this time. "You know, that's the second time today you've threatened to quit. It's going to lose power as a threat if you keep it up."

"I'm serious." Jack aimed for a laugh but Ianto kept his gaze as he said, "You're making decisions
based on my safety instead of the good of the team. That makes me a liability to them and to you, and if I'm no longer useful to you as an employee, I can't stay."

Jack finally dropped his arms. "What do you want me to do? John's dangerous."

"He was dangerous before."

"Yeah, and look what happened. Before, he was too busy conning me to worry about anything else. If he comes back now, there's no way he's not going to notice what you and I have, and he will hurt you to get to me."

"You don't know that for sure."

Jack sat on the edge of the bed. He didn't like thinking about this. "Back when he and I were together, during that time loop, I got bored. I found someone else to spend a couple of loops with, and when he found out, he kidnapped her in the next loop, and the one after, and the one after that. Don't make me tell you what he did." The memories slithered back anyway: the cold pit in his stomach as he'd caught onto what was happening, the days spent searching for where John had left her, and what he'd found. And worst of all had been the next loop, when John had found her first, and befriended her this time, and met Jack with a predatory smile that said more than any threat ever could.

"I won't let that happen to you if I can possibly help it. And when he's out of the picture, you'll be back here." Jack took his hand. "Speaking of, we should talk."

"I've been thinking the same thing."

"Good," Jack said, a little relieved. He'd been mulling this over well before John had interrupted his night. "I'm glad we're on the same page." He pushed the suitcase off the bed and sat, pulling a reluctant Ianto to sit next to him. "After this is over and you're back home," he took a breath. "I think we should ... "

"Take a break," said Ianto, right as Jack said, "Get married."

Ianto blinked. "Not on the same page, then."

"No."

Ianto took a shaky breath and touched his ear. "Gwen, Jack's been compromised. I can't tell if he's been taken over or replaced. Get Rhys to safety and get back here."

"What?"

He had reached "replaced" when Jack jabbed his own comm and started speaking over him. "Gwen, ignore him."

"I'm serious."

"Can it. Gwen, we'll see you tomorrow."

"I'm closing the line now."

***

Gwen stiffened beside him in the car. Rhys watched her touch her ear. "What?" she asked.
She blinked. Rhys stayed silent as she listened for a moment, and then said, "I'm closing the line now." She touched her ear.

"What was that, then?"

"Couples' spat. The dangers of getting domestic all of a sudden." She made a noise. "I never thought I'd see the day."

Rhys kept driving. He couldn't see anything 'sudden' about the situation. In another month and a bit, they'd be coming up on the first anniversary of the bombs, and Rhys couldn't think of a single time he'd seen Jack since without Ianto nearby. They'd shared a flat for months, they'd gone to that wedding together, and Rhys himself breathed a bit easier every time he considered the pair as a unit. Kinda like him and Gwen, he mused, but with fewer arguments about the toilet seat.

"You know, speaking of getting domestic," he began, working at a thought that had been preying on him lately, "we never did finish that conversation from last night."

Gwen turned from staring out the window to face him, her lips pressed together for a moment in annoyance. "This isn't the kind of world I'd want to bring a child into. You've seen what I deal with everyday. It's not that I don't want children, you know that."

"I know, and I have seen what you do. But Jack's got kids, you said, and Martha's having one. You wouldn't be alone."

She sat back in her seat. "Talk to me when I'm back from Glasgow. I can't deal with the conversation now."

He bit back his reply, and kept driving.

***

"You want to break up?"

"You want to get married?" The expression on Ianto's face and the tone of his voice were the same as if Jack had suggested they strip, paint themselves blue, and go streaking at the Assembly. Actually ...

He twitched his head. Time to focus right now. "Why not? We're together, we're happy. We'll sign some papers, make it legal and tidy." He'd tested the waters before, and Ianto had reacted positively on each occasion. Jack had been looking for the right opportunity to bring up the subject again. "You like tidy."

"You don't." Ianto glanced around Jack's part of the bedroom, which okay, could be neater.

"I could learn."

"And you're allergic to labels. When we went to Mica's birthday party, and I introduced you as my boyfriend, you nearly choked."

"I was just surprised."

"None of this sounds like you." Ianto closed his eyes. "I can't believe we're having this conversation. I need to pack," he said, standing again, putting the suitcase back onto the bed and opening his sock drawer.
"Why do you want to break up?"

"I don't. I didn't." He paused in mid-grab, black socks dangling in his grip. "I need time to clear my head. Everything has happened so fast." He put the socks into the bag. "If we're going to be apart, you shouldn't be tied down. Do what you want. Do whom you want. I'll do the same. When I get back, I'm going to quit, and afterwards, I won't remember your name."

"I'm not Retconning you because you're not resigning." He could feel the annoyance creeping in around the edges, whispering that this was why he didn't bother with relationships. Wouldn't it be simpler to go back to nameless fucks he never brought home, and his own bed at night? No worrying about rules, no trying not to say something upsetting, no anxiety deep down wondering when Ianto would leave him as he absolutely must one day. Jack's whole life would be easier if they called it quits now.

And he'd considered this, and he knew he didn't want easier, not this time.

He was uncomfortably aware that he'd proposed marriage without ever saying "I love you" out loud, and that Ianto was bright enough to have noticed and drawn his own conclusions.

"We'll talk when I get back."

***

"I need to come in," Kate said, because she never was good at hellos. Alice stood aside and let her in, watching as she wiped her boots carefully on the mat.

"I've put some coffee on," said Alice, aware of her own dressing gown. It was late, and she couldn't sleep. Apparently neither could Kate. She'd called on her way here.

"Thanks." She followed Alice to the kitchen, watching her as Alice found mugs and the sugar bowl.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't."

They'd reached a ticklish spot between them. Kate had visited frequently since September. Originally they had chatted about aliens and their shared antipathy towards Jack, but the conversations had drifted to much better topics. Kate liked the same era of artists, liked the same musicians, liked the same films. They met for dinner, met for drinks.

Alice didn't hold any truck with labels, one thing she'd picked up from him whether she'd wanted to or not. If she was inclined to hang names on things, she'd call this the beginning of a relationship.

"I have something for you," said Kate. She held out a manila envelope. Her mouth twisted as their fingers brushed.

Curious, Alice opened the envelope. She found two passports, two birth certificates, other documents. Her own face was on one of the passports, but her name had never been Penelope Madison. "What's this?"

"It's for your security. You may be advised to leave the area in a hurry, and these will help you and Steven go underground."

"We're already underground." Worry burned through her. "What's going on?"

"I can't tell you that. Neither can the Captain." She tilted her head. "He would tell you if he could."
Worry churned into anger. Jack was using Kate to talk with her? This was a new low. "Has something happened? Where is he?"

"Safe, for now. But he can't guarantee your safety, and you should refrain from contacting him in the near future, for your own sake. Think of this as insurance. If you get the call, run."

Alice found a chair and sat down heavily. She hadn't imagined this in all her idle thoughts about tonight. When Kate had called her so late, she'd pictured them sitting up with coffee, talking for a while until one of them finally made that half-laugh, the one saying they were both thinking the same thing. Alice would bend in for a kiss, and Kate's mouth would be warm from the coffee, and firm, knowing. Perhaps they'd stay on the couch, perhaps they'd walk hand in hand up to Alice's bedroom.

Instead, Kate stood uncomfortably in the kitchen, spine straight as a stick, telling Alice she might have to drop everything and run away thanks to Alice's idiot of a father. Again.

The worst part was that this was not the first almost-relationship Jack had managed to end for her, and would surely not be the last. Bastard.

"Get out."

"Alice ..."

"Go."

***

Saturday and Sunday passed in a blur. When Gwen called Jack to ask if she could take the weekend to settle things at home, he was curt. She had to work Saturday and could deal with her personal life on Sunday, he told her before ringing off. They spent most of Saturday tracking a phase-shifted creature that was blundering through two shopping centres and a greengrocer's, and the shoppers walked through it all unawares. When they'd contained and disposed of the thing, Gwen still had to go through what inventory she wanted to take with her to Scotland, and she'd hardly packed yet. Ianto was out purchasing the new van, and promised he'd load everything she selected on Sunday.

Sunday was a mess at home. Not only did she have to pack what could be six months of her life, she also had to field questions from her mam, and then from Brenda Williams.

"It'll be fine," she said, resting the phone on her shoulder as she chose between two jumpers.

"If you're leaving him, I'd understand," said Mam. "Do you want to come stay with us? Do you need money?"

"I'm not leaving Rhys. This is just for work. It's a good opportunity, I couldn't say no. And it's temporary. Very temporary." God, she was of a mind to kill Jack.

"Is it that tall man? The good-looking one in the wedding photos? Oh, what was his name?"

Twice. She would kill Jack twice. Bloody Retconning her wedding, and still managing to make an impression from the snaps the wedding faeries hadn't wiped. "No. In fact, his boyfriend is going with me." She could hear the gears spinning in her mother's head. "Look, Mam. I've got to keep packing. I'll ring you when I get settled in Glasgow, yeah? Love you."

As soon as she set the phone down, it rang. Brenda again. "Rhys, you talk to your mother." She pulled out two more jumpers to compare them. She hadn't even looked at the kitchen yet, though Rhys would hardly let her take most of it. There was a lot of takeaway in her future. She and Ianto
Gwen didn't dare.

"Stress-induced amnesia," Gwen said in as soothing a voice as she could. "She was wandering in the cold for days, poor lamb. And she's just four. Everything's going to be a blur." She switched ears. "If it would make you feel better, I can ask my boss to have a chat with her. He's good with children," she lied. "Maybe he can help her sort out what she's scared of." And he can dig, carefully, into what she might be remembering after all, and take that away, too.

"Do you think so?"

"I'll ask him first thing tomorrow. Oh, I'm going to be leaving town tomorrow on a business trip, so if you and Lauren have any problems at all, you can call my mobile, and I'll give you his, too."

"Thanks, Gwen."

She rang off. Gwen returned to sorting. So many damn things to do today.

***

His orders had Walter stand down permanently as of Friday. He could stop being Sergeant Trent, maybe set aside everything he'd done, and been forced to do, and find out who Walter was without the red cap. If Jack's magical forgetfulness pills wouldn't work on him, a new life somewhere else sounded like just the ticket.

Saturday was spent packing, and after that, he took Linnie out to dinner. "When I'm settled, you can come visit. It's a nice area, Glasgow. Scenic."

"Okay." Linnie barely talked to him these days. He always tried to get her to smile, but whatever her mum was telling her at home, it kept her distant, and he didn't dare tell her different. He remembered
too well the previous timeline, the one where everything had gone to shit. A man he'd tortured to death, under orders and threats on Linnie's life if he didn't, had offered him a hand, and a way to make amends in his own head. His daughter couldn't smile in that timeline. Perhaps she'd eventually learn to like him in this one.

"I love you," he told her over and over, while she settled her shoulders deeper into the too-big winter coat and waited for him to pull up outside her mum's house.

"Bye, Dad." She pecked him on the lips and got out.

He got home to packed boxes and a life that didn't fit him anymore. He slept uneasily, and woke before sunrise, his body used to a lifetime of UNIT regulations that wouldn't be well switched to whatever passed for Torchwood's version of same. He had the car loaded by eight AM, picked up a bacon butty for his breakfast, and was about to get on the M6 just before nine.

The road was blocked, some sort of accident, he guessed. He'd chosen Sunday to drive for less traffic and still he'd have to reroute or wait.

A police officer approached his car. Walter rolled down the window, letting in a blast of February cold air. "I need to see your license," said the cop, face mostly covered in the chill.

Walter said, "I was about to turn around."

"Your license, please." The 'please' was a meaningless word. He'd used it himself loads of times. He got out his license.

"This you? Walter Trent?"

"That's my picture, yeah." Now that he was out of the military, maybe he'd grow his hair a bit from the severe cut in his photograph. Everything could change.

Walter had just enough time to see the gun, not enough to react, or even feel sad that he was never going to see Linnie smile again after all.

***

"So I'll be out of touch," said Ianto, pretending to enjoy the mug of weak tea. "I'll let you know when my schedule will change."

Rhiannon took a long drink from her own mug, then set it on the table. She fixed him with a long stare that reminded him too much of the times Mam had caught him out in a lie. He held himself back from shifting in the seat and confirming her suspicions. Mam and Rhi both had an uncanny sixth sense for bullshit. That was half the reason he'd barely contacted her after joining Torchwood. He could tell she smelled something off about his story, and he didn't dare give her any more reason to doubt him. Strangely, it was also probably why she (mostly) liked Jack: he was so full of lies, half-truths, and pure cheek that he overloaded whatever damn sensor she used when Ianto said it hadn't been him to use of the last of the loo roll.

"What kind of business trip, did you say?"

He hadn't. "Training. Lots of training. They've got some new people for me to mentor, and I'll be picking up training of my own." True. He and Gwen would be showing Trent how to operate, help him hire new people, and Ianto had no doubt he'd learn plenty playing through the archives at Torchwood House.
"Why are you going to Scotland for training? You work for Visit Wales."

"The idiot who gave me the orders said something like 'the spirit of cooperation with our sister programmes.' I tuned him out after that." Sort of true.

"Is Jack going with you?"

He saw the barb hidden in the question, and answered as carefully as he could. "He can't."

"How is he? We haven't seen you two since Christmas."

"Busy. We've both been. Sorry." He wasn't about to open up about his latest work-related injury. He'd been able to pass off the broken arm, even if Rhi still didn't believe him entirely that Jack wasn't involved somehow. Ianto's job wasn't supposed to include getting shot.

"Hey," said Johnny amiably before plopping down in the other chair. "Finally got their light out. What's this about you leaving town without your man in tow?"

Rhi was hard to lie to, but Johnny Davies was absolutely loathsome to speak with. Rhi could have done so much better, and fine, he didn't hurt her and he didn't drink away the little money they had, and she could have done far worse as well. Ianto didn't have to like him.

"It's a temporary assignment." And if Ianto found himself Retconned at the end of it, then explaining everything to them would become Jack's problem.

"You owe me five quid," Johnny said to Rhi. "She bet you were coming over to tell us you were signing papers."

Rhi shushed Johnny. "Don't listen to him. We were just talking. You be careful on your trip."

"Yeah, don't pick up any strange Scotsmen." This time, Rhi punched Johnny in the arm.

***

Saturday morning's meeting had been terse: "We're splitting the team. With the budgeting problem, we're better off minimising resources here and supporting the Glasgow rebuild. Gwen and Ianto have volunteered to help Trent re-establish the site, effective Monday, indefinite duration. If you need last minute training -- Lois, I'm looking at you -- see them today or tomorrow." And a minute later, the alert had sounded, and a phase-shifting alien had neatly cut off further questions.

Lois had barely slept since then.

Lois spent her weekend getting the information to her superiors in order to capture the outside players. Trent would be simple. She'd given his itinerary and planned driving route to her superiors. He hadn't engaged in any illegal activities to her knowledge, so he would be apprehended, interrogated, and released. Torchwood Glasgow would be under the umbrella of the new Torchwood Glasgow. If Trent was amenable, she didn't see why he wouldn't be allowed to stay on after the reorganisation. Sunday afternoon, she was informed he'd been collected, and she faked a phone call to let Jack know Trent had arrived safely at his destination.

Dr. Jones and her sister, as well as Torchwood's sole London-based agent, had been involved in breaking Lucy Saxon out of prison back in December, and would need to be brought into custody. Curiously, both Doctor and Miss Jones had already been under surveillance, even before Dr. Jones spent time working as Torchwood's medic. Smith, the London agent, had vanished for two years before suddenly re-appearing with a Torchwood-provided cover story; Lois suspected he was a Rift
refugee like Perry.

Gwen and Ianto could be picked up en route to Glasgow. With them out of play, she'd give Perry a doped cup of coffee, and when the sedative took effect, lock him in a cell until it was time to transfer the prisoners. Once the Captain was alone he would be easy to subdue. If she was lucky, another cup of coffee would do the job, and if not, a bullet to the head. She hoped for the former.

Monday dawned cold and clear. She'd been awake since four. Showered, dressed, prepared for a long day, Lois was the first to arrive at the Hub. She loved this time of day. The lights were low, Mainframe hummed to herself, the pteranodon cooed in her nest, and below it all the hush of water. No wonder Jack had lived here so long -- past the chill and the strangeness of an underground laboratory and base, the Hub had a quirky beauty.

She put the coffee on.

Ianto was in next, the circles under his eyes attesting how stressful the weekend had been on his end. "Good morning." Typically he made a beeline to the coffeepot, but this time he sat at his station, looking around as though for the last time.

He and Gwen had told the team how they'd talked this over for months. Lois wasn't sure she believed him; they weren't the best of friends, but they were close, and she thought Ianto would have said something to her if he planned on leaving Cardiff. Gwen rarely kept her own feelings on any subject hidden, for that matter, and had been sharing her experiences in decorating her new house with anyone who'd listen. She'd muttered something about her husband looking for a position in Glasgow. Ianto made no similar suggestion, and he hadn't looked at Jack at all.

Curious. But useful.

"Cheer up," Lois said. "Off on a new adventure, right?"

"Right."

"Is Jack coming in?"

"No, he wanted to check out something from the Rift overnight report." His eyes dropped to his desk. "He'll be in later. Or he'll be eaten by a creature from beyond the limits of human imagination. Hard to say."

Her opening presented itself. "Ouch."

"It's fine. He's not big on goodbyes."

Lois went to the kitchenette and retrieved their mugs, very careful to choose which was which. "Come on," she said, handing him a drink. "Drink up and you can tell me all about it."

"I really don't have time to talk." But he took the mug. She made herself not watch him, but took an encouraging drink of her own. She could make this simpler, subdue Ianto and Gwen now and pretend they'd gone, assemble a full set of sleeping agents for UNIT to come collect.

The cog wheel alarm sounded. Gwen hurried in, flustered. "Morning, pets. Ianto, we should get on the road. Where's Jack?"

Ianto stood, leaving his untouched coffee on the desk. "Out. We're to call when we get there."

Lois managed to pour another cup for Gwen without showing her nerves. "Here you go. One for the
road."

"Oh, you're a love, but I can't. I don't want to have to stop."

"Good idea," Ianto said.

"Right," said Lois. "I'll make you a flask to go, then." She smiled.

***

Jack arranged not to be at the Hub when Gwen and Ianto left. Let the rest assume he'd said his goodbyes in private. He had gone by Gwen's last night to check in, apologise again, and wish her a safe trip. Ianto had visited Rhiannon at the same time, spinning whatever lie he thought best to keep her in the dark about why he was leaving so suddenly, and without Jack.

They'd barely spoken about anything other than work. Neither had slept on the sofa but an uncomfortable pall lay between them in their bed as neatly as a bolster.

"I had a thought," Jack had said when Ianto got back from Rhiannon's on Sunday night. "Next weekend, I could drive your car up so you'd have it in Glasgow instead of in storage."

"You aren't coming to Glasgow. That's why you're sending us there."

"I'll risk a weekend."

"No." Ianto went into the bedroom and began undressing for bed. Jack followed him. "You're not to risk Gwen's life for the sake of a quick shag."

"That's not why I'd want to see you."

Ianto hadn't answered, but fell upon him hungrily, almost savagely. The sex had been frantic, and a little weird even by Jack's tastes, and when they'd finished, he hadn't been sure if he'd just experienced a pity fuck, a goodbye fuck, or something else entirely.

"Call me as soon as you're there," he'd said, and Ianto had agreed, and had fallen asleep wrapped around his body.

Jack didn't dare watch him leave this morning in front of the rest of the team. He thought himself a fine actor but he was sure anyone looking would see his heart break, and no amount of lying would hide that away.

No, much better to be checking out the overnight reports, knowing full well the bloody Rift would be more active and unpredictable with his two best people leaving. He could bury himself in work, and the others would hardly notice if he growled at them more. They'd probably mumble to each other this was par for the course when the boss was no longer getting laid. And next weekend, Rift permitting, he would drive Ianto's Audi to him, maybe talk Rhys into driving him home after they both indulged in conjugal visits. Fuck John Hart anyway. He could let Jack have this.

So wrapped up he was in this mood, he barely said hello to Lois as he trudged in through the TIC. She fluttered at him nervously, following him down to the Hub. "Sir, they left an hour ago."

"Not a problem," he replied, flashing her a smile he didn't feel. "Do you have the agenda for the morning meeting ready?"

She nodded.
"Fine." The cog wheel door opened. Jack stepped inside a world that promised less fun and more lonely nights. Yeah, he was driving to Glasgow Friday, and he didn't care what tried to get in his way.

Johnson was making a call, and closed her phone as he approached. He reminded himself to take Lois aside later and have her put Johnson back under tighter surveillance. He'd put Rupesh under the same higher level of scrutiny, although Lois had been monitoring him and reported nothing unusual.

Rupesh was down in Medical working on something. Jack didn't see Perry.

"Where's Perry? We can get the meeting over early."

"Fletcher is feeding the Weevils," Johnson said.

"The coffee's up," Lois said. "I've got your mug."

"Just have it ready for the meeting."

"Sir," said Rupesh. "Could you come look at this?"

Jack's eyebrows went up. Something exciting at last. He jogged over to the railing. "What?"

"This is highly unusual. Come take a look." Rupesh was bent over another autopsy, a Gr'nash from the morgue. He'd been dissecting the older specimens for practise lately.

Jack walked down the stairs. "What is it?"

Rupesh stepped back from the body. "Take a look."

They would have words about the guessing game later. Jack liked to know what was unusual before he poked his nose into dead bodies, as a rule. But he humoured their new doctor, wet as he was. He was learning. Jack bent over for a better view. "I don't ..."

The first bullet hit his spine. The second shattered a rib on its way into his left lung.

He had time to turn, and only just enough energy. No air to draw breath, no way to warn the others. Everything hurt. Rupesh's face was still as he raised the gun again. Jack closed his eyes.
Chapter 3

Ianto insisted on driving. "My name's on the title," he said, and not much else as he stowed the last two suitcases in the back.

"Suit yourself." Gwen had brought her laptop and a road trip bingo game she'd bought on the spur of the moment. Eight hours in a van together didn't sound so bad when they could take turns looking for road signs and livestock.

He kept himself to pleasant but terse answers as they drove through the city and caught the M4. If he was going to be in a snit the rest of the drive, car bingo might not be enough after all. She had charged her iPod. She could survive this.

Gwen phoned Rhys to let him know they were on the road. He'd spent their last morning together offering token complaints about this whole mess, and kissing her goodbye. "I'll ring you when we stop for lunch," she promised. "Crossing the Severn now. Wish us luck."

They held back on their usual mutual teasing, Gwen because she had an audience, Rhys because he sounded preoccupied. The world of haulage, it was a brutal mistress. "Love you," she said, and got his distracted, "Love you, too," in return.

She pressed the 'End' button. "Want to ring up Jack next?"

"We'll phone him when we're at the site."

"That's work. This is when you phone your boyfriend to tell him you've left on holiday with a gorgeous woman and you won't be in tomorrow."

"I'll tell him when we're in Glasgow."

"You're no fun." She sat back against her seat. He'd bought the leather interior, the easier for cleaning she supposed. That raised a question they hadn't gone over: who was in charge of the little maintenance details during their extended stay in points north? She'd assumed Ianto would perform his Man Friday role again, but he wasn't support staff anymore, and she never had been. Washing up loomed in both their futures.

"What's the Glasgow site like?"

"The office is above a shop. I think Archie last dusted in 1987. Torchwood House is all right. There's a groundskeeper. We'll have to decide if he's going to stay on." It was the longest thing he'd said to her all day. For that matter, it was the longest he'd spoken to her since Friday. She'd caught sight of him on Saturday in the kitchenette. Ianto had wrapped and packed away Toshiko's coffee mug with reverence into a cardboard box, placing it beside his own, the new one with the unicorn that Gwen had given to him at Christmas. Instead of loading the box into the van, though, she'd watched him carry it in the direction of the basement, silent and sad.

"How're you doing, Ianto? This is all kind of sudden, isn't it? One day, we're at dinner. Like normal people, she nearly said, but he might take that the wrong way. "The next, we're moving to Scotland."

"Torchwood means never making plans more than five minutes in advance."

"I suppose." He hadn't answered her question. "If you're not all right about this, you can tell me. I don't much like it, either. I'm hoping Rhys will be able to visit. It's going to be hard not seeing him
every day. We'll talk but it's not the same." She worried her lip with her teeth, thinking about the long, lonely stretch of time in front of her. "You and Jack will have the same problem."

He didn't reply.

She found the jack for the iPod and plugged it into the dashboard. Ianto didn't raise an objection, and she chose a soothing playlist to ease her own nerves. "You can always call him and we'll both pretend it's work-related."

He changed lanes. For the first time, she noticed how white his knuckles were on the wheel.

"We're taking a break from each other while I'm in Glasgow."

Her mouth closed with a snap. Among her friends, 'Taking a break' was usually polite code for, 'The pre-break-up, during which we both go sleep with other people and use that as ammunition when the other inevitably finds out and makes the break-up permanent.' Given that one of the two involved was Jack Harkness, he might already be well on his way into bed with his next flavour of the week.

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't. It's fine." He smiled at her. She didn't believe the smile for a second.

"Maybe you should phone him now."

"It's fine," he repeated.

She worried with the rings on her hand. Then she said something she regretted for years after. "Maybe it is for the best. You two, it was never going to be a permanent thing, yeah?"

Silence.

"Jack's Jack. You ought to find someone nice, someone more your type." She tried to picture a more suitable lover for Ianto than their charming, immortal boss. He needed someone who'd be kind to him, who would accept the late nights and odd hours without complaint, who'd keep the flat tidy and make the meals and kiss him every night. Rhys was taken, obviously, but surely there was a woman or man out there who would make a good match for Ianto.

For no reason, she remembered Friday evening, and the sight of Jack stroking his hand like he'd been petting some treasure, something precious.

Ianto wasn't focusing on the road anymore.

Gwen shot him a look. "Want me to take over driving for a bit?"

"No."

She reached into the back. "How about a quick perk? Lois packed us a nice flask, and her coffee's almost as good as yours." Gwen unscrewed the lid and held the flask out as a peace offering. A warm aroma filled the interior of the van, covering the fresh leather smell of the new upholstery. Outside, everything was cold, but in here, they had a cosy oasis with heat, coffee, and Joni Mitchell.

After a moment, Ianto took the flask. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

***
Alice stared at the phone. Kate had said, "It's me. Run."

Steven looked up from his bowl of cereal. The red sleeves of his shirt rode up on his arms. He was growing again. Every time she turned around, her baby was an inch taller.

"Can I play at Tim's house after school?"

She set the phone down on the table. "Stay here, sweetheart." Upstairs in her bedroom she had two bags packed, one for herself, one for him. She gathered both, taking a quick glance around her room for her keys. She picked up the manila envelope last and hurried down to the kitchen.

"Mum?" Steven had juice around his mouth.

"We're going on a holiday. Get your coat."

She phoned the school, telling the secretary her son had a fever, and put on her own winter jacket.

"Get in the car."

***

Martha showed up to work Monday feeling much better.

She'd spent the weekend crying on Mum's sofa with a box of tissues and a bottomless mug of tea. Tish had dropped by with a handful of romantic comedies and a bag of chocolates to share. Mum had been careful to offer a sympathetic ear as well as the funnier anecdotes she remembered from her own hormone flux, without ever saying Martha was being melodramatic. Martha appreciated the effort. She called Tom Sunday night, and they'd talked.

Although she was always on-call for the infirmary, her primary work with UNIT was research-based, examining the effects of their latest innovations on the humans who were using the new tools. Her slate of patient tests began at ten; she arrived at eight-thirty to give herself time to catch up on paperwork and get ready for the day.

The small office she shared with another UNIT doctor had that musty smell of a room which had been closed for the weekend. As was her habit by now, Martha opened the small window for a minute despite the cold, then sprayed a fine mist of scent in the air.

Better.

As her computer booted, she put away her things, listening to the sounds of the base around her.

When the sounds changed abruptly, Martha opened the desk drawer with her handbag and checked for her sidearm. She didn't like to carry a gun, even now, but she'd survived too many alien encounters to believe she didn't need one from time to time: Sontarans, Daleks, the Cybermen "ghosts," the other ghosts at CERN. Frankly she was frightened sometimes, thinking about bringing a new life into a world this dangerous.

Boots stopped outside the door to her office. The gun was not in her hand, but was within reach.

Being arrested by humans came as a relief.

***

Jack gasped back to life with the need to pee and the urge to murder his employees. Neither one was for the first time, and when he saw he'd been put into one of his own cells, he decided to deal with
the one he could have a say over. The small grating in the corner served as a urinal for any Weevil bright enough to be trained, and Jack reckoned himself at least that smart. He thanked whatever fortune was still looking out for him that his bladder rarely let go whenever he died. Maybe it was a god, Uranus for preference.

He laughed, stress crawling down his spine and making him spill the last few drops before he put himself away.

"Jack?" The voice came from the cell next to him.

"Perry, are you okay?"

"Yeah. I fell asleep and woke up a minute ago. What's going on?" He sounded tired rather than scared.

"We've got a problem. Rupesh shot me."

"We all told you not to make a pass at him."

"Not even a little bit funny, Perry." That had happened more than once. Jack didn't like remembering.

"Sorry. Why did he shoot you?"

Jack heard Janet -- he hoped it was Janet -- rustling in her own cell to the other side. "I don't know for sure. I've been working on information we might have been infiltrated. Guess we were."

"Where's Lois? Or Johnson?"

"I'm pretty sure Johnson is working with him. I don't know what they've done with Lois." He'd made his choices. Ianto and Gwen had escaped just in time, and he had to be grateful for their safety. Perry and Lois were caught up in the trap. Jack would do what he could to get them out.

He could start with freeing himself. He went to the panel at the side of the cell and opened it. Ianto had installed a code to unlock the doors from inside as a safety precaution after what had happened with Gray. All that Jack needed was to punch in the right sequence and ...

... watch as nothing happened.

"I can hear you moving around. What's going on?"

A sinking feeling hit Jack hard as the door at the far end opened. Lois came into the room and stood in front of the Perspex, watching Jack.

"Lois!" said Perry happily.

Jack stared back. "You're not here to let us out."

"Captain, you are hereby detained until you can be properly arrested. Due to your unique circumstances, I am authorised to take you into custody prior to the arrival of proper authorities." She spoke as if rehearsing a speech, meeting his eyes the entire time.

"Why?"

"You in particular are wanted for questioning in the matter of the murder of the American President Winters."
He pounded one fist into the wall. "That was dealt with two years ago. Harold Saxon murdered him on live TV."

"You're also a person of interest in the murder of PM Saxon, as an accessory after the fact abetting the escape of his wife."

Horror and terror nibbled at him, reminders of those dark days, and what he'd done to try and put them in the past for good. After the Valiant, Lucy had been declared dead and was held under another name without a possibility of parole, appeal, or pardon. He'd offered her a second chance, courtesy of a prison break.

"The names of your collaborators in the incident have been noted. Perry, that's the sole charge against you."

"This is stupid," Jack said. "Lois, there was more going on with that situation than you know."

She continued in a louder voice, "The surviving members of the previous incarnation of Torchwood, namely yourself, Gwen Cooper, and Ianto Jones, are going to face additional charges. Multiple counts of attempting to destroy the world. Multiple counts of disobeying direct orders of the British government."

Jack said, "We don't report to the government."

"The government thinks you should. You have no oversight, and it's led to the near-destruction of the Earth, not to mention repeated loss of life. I was given the order to bring you in. The Institute will be placed into more trusted hands with a much tighter leash."

"You? Johnson and Rupesh?"

"We'll be a part of the transition team. This isn't my job. My assignment is complete."

"To be a traitor."

"No." Her face was calm, and her head raised, giving him the perfect angle to strangle her if she hadn't been out of reach. "I have been under contract to Torchwood, not a direct employee. I have been working for my supervisors, and I have not betrayed their trust." Her mouth quirked at the end.

He made himself relax. "I'm the big fish. I gave everyone their orders, and you know how Torchwood operates: disobey and you're Retconned or worse. You don't need to involve the others in this."

"The order has already gone out to detain them. They will be brought to justice with you. You can share a lawyer if you like."

"So we are getting a trial?"

"Of course." He read her face carefully, but she'd been lying to him for months. If she was lying now, he couldn't tell, but he thought she believed her own story. "Justice means you all get your day in court like anyone else."

He stood back from the doorway and looked around the cell. Jack had been a prisoner here before, had been promised 'justice' before, and he didn't believe it this time any more than he had then. The government couldn't afford a trial open to the public, didn't dare bring Torchwood's doings before the light of day. They would disappear, would be disappeared. Perry and Martha, and Tish too if Lois reported her, might get away with prosecution on the escape of 'Allison Frye.' Martha would
lose her registration. Perry, when his background unravelled, would find himself on a boat to Flat Holm. Ianto and Gwen would meet with 'accidents.' Jack himself would be locked away someplace secure. Depending on who took charge of Torchwood, he might end up back in this very cell, dripping and cold, being experimented on all over again, knowing he was the cause of the deaths of the people he loved.

"You don't know what's going on here if you think we're going to get out of this alive."

"No-one is going to be hurt. You have my word." Lois walked away.

"I thought I already had it."

She paused, then kept walking.

Jack punched the wall again.

***

On his very best days, Mickey felt a little like Batman: he had all this cool technology, he had a sweet flat he'd fixed up where he could monitor the goings-on of weird alien stuff and what UNIT thought were its secrets, all laid out bare for anyone who knew how to mine the Deep Web. He intended to set up a proper London office once Jack got the paperwork finished for the new Scotland site, recruit himself some competent and attractive assistants, then really go all secret vigilante alien-hunter.

Batman, yeah. (Mickey loved the films. He'd never heard the name "Oracle" except as a database programme.)

His hours weren't normal office hours by any means. He'd been up past four in the morning chasing rumours he didn't like the sound of, and was only now rolling out of bed. He poured himself a cold cup of coffee, took a quick rinse of his mouth, then spat it out, followed by dumping the clumpy remains of yesterday's last pot into the sink. He started a new pot to brew whilst he washed his face and brushed his teeth, letting his computer boot to life.

The new pot was almost ready when he sat down to check the morning news.

Three minutes later, the coffeepot was turned off and empty, his flat was vacant, and his computer had been set with a shredding-wipe of everything he hadn't backed up on his thumb drive.

When UNIT arrived two minutes after that, all they found was a blank hard drive and the fading smell of fresh coffee.

***

Lois could not operate the coffee machine as well as Ianto could. Also, she added too much sugar. He'd taken one rough swallow and set the flask between them, but kept nipping more as he drove. Gwen had retreated into the music, humming along as she read something on her laptop's screen. Every so often, she shot him looks that may have been pity.

He wished he hadn't told her. He wished none of this had come up, and that he and Jack could go back to where they'd been before either had spoken. Jack was a con man. Ianto was a liar. The true things were the words they never said out loud. The truth was in Jack's face, the mixture of pride and longing with which he watched Ianto when he didn't think Ianto was paying attention.

When they stopped for lunch, he'd ring Jack and ask him to bring the car next weekend.
He reached for the flask again when he saw the lights in the mirror. His eyes darted to the speedometer. They were going a little over the limit, only keeping up with traffic. He sighed about overzealous police, and wondered when he could get the van fitted with Torchwood's blue Don't Bother Us lights. His stomach did a flip, queasiness suddenly lurching through him. Nerves.

"Hold on. This day needed to get worse, apparently." The van pulled over to the side of the highway.

"You should have let me drive."

"Not helping." He closed his eyes. He really was feeling unwell. After the stop, Gwen could take over if she pleased and Ianto would have a lie down.

"Are you all right? You look ... " She didn't find a word, waved her hand in the air instead as the policeman reached the window.

"License."

"Right." Ianto reached for his license and was struck by a wave of dizziness. He rested his hand on his head a moment as the officer looked his identification over. Ahead of them, another marked police car stopped along the road. Two policemen stepped out.

Gwen frowned. She lifted the flask of coffee and pretended to drink as she said, "Ianto, this isn't right. Traffic stops don't work this way."

He took the flask from her and mouthed, "What do you see?"

The first policeman said, "We've had a report of a van matching this description transporting dangerous chemicals illegally. I'll need to search the back."

Ianto felt like hell. "Sorry, no. My colleague and I have proprietary equipment back there. I'll show you our documentation." He reached for the paperwork, which they carried in their own cars for cases just like this.

"They have guns," said Gwen.

"Get out of the car." The policeman pulled out a sidearm of his own. What the hell?

***

Tish was walking out the door to get to work when she saw them from the window of her flat: five armed men, sunglasses, dark suits. A sudden, nauseating flashback came to her, of being taken, imprisoned, hurt and degraded. All of it hit her in a burst, as though a cold hand had brushed hair behind her ear and smiled like a serpent.

Surprised and horrified, she barked a hysterical laugh, fear scooting her feet back from the window. Seconds later, her shoes were off, she'd grabbed a bread knife from the kitchen, and she was climbing her back stairs to get to the fire escape at the other side of the building.

As she opened the door, a man waited for her.

***

Ianto's gun was in the back. Gwen clutched her handbag, where he knew she carried hers when it wasn't feasible to have it in a proper holster. Jack moaned at her for it, but Gwen wore tight jeans and
short jackets, and she hated scaring people.

She gave the policeman her sunniest smile. "There's been a misunderstanding. We have the correct paperwork for transporting these materials."

The other two officers had reached the van. The flow of traffic around them had stopped. Everything was still like a dream.

"Get out of the car, Miss Cooper."

They looked at each other.

Ianto gunned the engine, squealing the tyres as they peeled out from the roadside. Behind them, shots fired. One caught the side mirror, smashing it with a loud pop and crash.

"Shit!" said Gwen, grabbing for purchase. "What the hell was that?"

"A trap." He searched the road, but it was empty. They must have blocked traffic behind the stop point. "We have to get off the road before they catch up." The next exit was two kilometres away. He floored it, and was cheered to see the speedometer smoothly ride up. Good van.

Gwen had her mobile out. "Jack's not answering."

"He might still be on that Rift call." Ianto glanced at Gwen, but she looked as disbelieving as he felt. She hit 'End' and dialled another button.

"Rhys, love, you need to pack a bag."

Ianto found the exit and turned off. Whoever they were, they hadn't closed the road yet. Heart racing, head still not focusing, he forced himself to slow down.

"I know, I know. But that thing Jack told us about, it's happened. No, I'm fine, but I don't know if they'll go after you. Get a bag, go to that place." She closed her eyes. "Where we took that holiday right after uni. Don't say it out loud. I'll meet you there. Love you."

Ianto said, "We need to get back to Cardiff."

"They've IDed the van. We can't keep it."

"I know." He tried to think. They couldn't simply leave the van, or allow its cargo of alien-derived technology to fall into the wrong hands. "The warehouse." At her blank look, he said, "Torchwood owns some storage sites. We can hide the van and come back for it later."

"Won't they find it there?"

He shook his head. "Not all of them are owned via, ah, legal channels. I'm not even sure Jack knows them all." Ianto pulled up the satnav for the best out of the way route back.

"Are you feeling all right?" Her hand was soft on his, but everything prickled.

"I'll be fine." He took another drink of the too-sweet coffee to steady himself. "Try Jack again." They'd have to get rid of their mobiles. They'd have to regroup somewhere safe and determine how bad this really was.

His head swam.
Gwen reached for the coffee flask, and suddenly he knew. Before she could drink, he swatted the flask from her hands, spilling it to the floor. "Don't touch it. I think ... I think."

"Ianto, pull over." Her face was wide with fear, the same thought clearly going through her head. What a simple, brilliant plan: Johnson probably poisoned the coffee beans last night, knowing Ianto or Lois would make a pot first thing for everyone.

A horn sounded.

The road was closed ahead. More men who weren't police stood there with guns visible. Ianto veered the van in a quick 180, scraping two cars around him as he turned, accelerating. Gwen was thrown in her seat.

The street they were on wasn't made for driving this fast. Ianto prayed to whatever friendly god looked out for pedestrians, small animals, and other vehicles that nobody got in their way as they swerved in and out of lanes, desperate to get away.

***

Tish already had the knife out, but he backed away, and said, "Wait!" in a hushing voice. He wasn't dressed like the suited men, just a normal bloke in a jacket and jeans, and a second later, she remembered him from a car ride back to London.

"Mike?"

"Mickey. Come on, there's no one over this way." He took her hand and they hurried away from her flat. "You ruined my entrance, by the way. I was gonna say, 'Come with me if you want to live,' like in that one movie."

His car was parked a block away.

Tish hesitated. She'd met this man once, another of Martha's friends tied to the Doctor, but what if he was there to deliver her to whomever was knocking on her flat door right now? Or worse?

"They're after me, too. That business with Lucy Saxon. I'm leaving. Are you coming?"

She got in. "Why did you get me? Where's Martha?"

"You were the closest to my flat. Martha's at work now, right? I can't get us on a UNIT base. Get down."

She hid as they drove. From her crouch she could see streets go by. Mickey drove them slowly, not attracting attention.

"You got your phone?"

She checked her pocket. "Yeah." Before he could even tell her, she dialled Martha's number, then Jack's. No answer.

***

"We're going to visit Auntie Gia," Alice told Steven as their taxi pulled up at the kerb outside Heathrow. "It's a surprise."

She hated lying to him, hated worse that she could see the disbelief on his face. Steven was getting older now, just a bit, and had grown canny enough to tell when something had gone wrong. But he
kept his lips shut, and nodded, vanishing his attention into his Nintendo when they had to wait in line.

Alice scanned the list of departing flights, and chose one that looked reasonable. False identification in hand, she and Steven went to the ticket counter. "We'd like to book two tickets for the one o'clock flight to Lisbon. It's a family emergency. My sister is in hospital and needs someone to take care of her kids." She'd worked out the story on the way to the airport, about her sister Janice, Janice's do-nothing of a husband, and their three children, the youngest barely a month old, poor lamb.

Steven watched her lie, and returned his attention to Mario and company.

After Portugal, they'd take a train into Spain. Her mate Netty from uni lived outside of Toledo. Alice and Steven would stay with her for a few days, and consider their next move. Her friend Phillipa was in Copenhagen, and had offered Alice an open invitation ages ago. Mum had often extolled the virtues of multiple bolt holes at the ready.

"Here you are, Mrs. Madison," said the agent behind the counter with a pleasant, false smile. For a moment, Alice didn't know whom she meant, then she recovered, thanked the woman, and took their tickets.

They had some time. "How about a snack?" That perked him up, and guilt flooded her: Alice did not want to be the mother who bribed her child with food. For that matter, she didn't want to be the mother on the run from God knew what. Her father, as usual, had a lot to answer for.

As they passed the security guards, she tried to smile.

***

Gwen held on tightly as Ianto drove. A glance in the still-intact mirror showed cars in pursuit, and gaining on them. She grabbed the satnav, scanning it for a safe route. "Make a left at the next light." The light turned red in front of them. Ianto floored it, tearing through the intersection just ahead of the cross traffic. Gwen turned to watch one of their pursuers smash into a red Golf, and she winced.

They sped down the street, coming up on an open area. "Past this, make a right. We can get back on the southbound road." Behind them, she could see figures in the closest car. One of them had a phone or similar at his mouth. Hurriedly, she looked for another route. "Hard left. Now!"

He complied, tearing the wheel and scraping the door against a post. "Now left again."

They veered, and Gwen pointed to an alley. Ianto backed the van into a spot, sheltered from view, and they watched as the other cars whizzed by thirty seconds later.

"Good call," he said.

"I'm good with maps." His face had gone terribly pale. "Ianto, let me drive."

He shook his head. "Get out, go on foot from here. I'll lead them off with the van. Get to Rhys, find Jack."

"We shouldn't split up. Come with me. Leave the van, it's ruined anyway."

"If we don't split up, they'll catch us both." He closed his eyes. "Gwen, I don't think I can walk that far. Hurry."

Gwen dug in the back seat. Her suitcases had to stay, but she had a quick bag she'd packed her
necessaries in. She gave Ianto another frightened look. "We'll meet you at ..."

"Don't. If you don't tell me, I can't tell them."

She pressed a kiss against his cheek. "Be safe."

The alley wasn't dark, wasn't dirty, was just narrow enough to give her a chance to flee down to the other end behind the van. She tucked her hair up inside her hat, wrapped her scarf so that her face was partially obscured, and walked at a normal pace away from him. A moment later, she heard the van driving out the other end of the alley.

Get to Rhys. Get to Jack. Gwen shivered deeper inside her jacket. The sunlight was thin here, and cold. From a near distance, she heard sounds of the rejoined pursuit. Other bundled-up pedestrians out for the day rubbernecked as unmarked cars zipped by, heedless of the traffic laws. She watched with them, blending in with the crowd. In this press, she could lift someone's mobile.

Gwen's hand went casually beside a woman's open handbag, darting in and out. Prize seized, she slid the new mobile into her pocket and walked casually away. Her own mobile would be tracked. She'd drop it in the next bin she came to.

The van raced past them, miraculously not striking anyone. Gwen blanched when she saw two oversized lorries parked end to end at the next intersection. Ianto saw them, and turned in time, but he was caught between the lorries and the approaching cars. The first of the pursuers parked. Two men emerged with guns. Someone in the crowd screamed.

Another car came close by and parked near the onlookers. Gwen affected to look away, then down at her hands, as she began walking in the other direction. Over the shouts, she heard the woman pretending to be a policewoman say, "Please get back. Clear the area. We are attempting to apprehend known terrorists."

Gwen swore inside her head. Someone wanted them caught, right enough, and this was the best cover story they could come up with?

She heard an engine rev. It was the van. He couldn't. If he came this way, he'd ram into the parked cars, he'd never get by.

Then she saw a man in the third car pull out a larger gun, something big enough to take out the heavily-armoured vehicle the SUV was and their new van really was not. All thoughts of escape forgotten, Gwen rushed back, tackling him. But not before he'd fired directly at the van.

She was on the ground with him, wrestling for the launcher, when she saw the explosion plain as day, blooming red and black and orange against the blue of the February sky.
Chapter 4

Gwen refused to think about what she’d seen, pushing away from her the thought that her friend was dead. This was here, this was now, and she had the job in front of her to do. She punched the man she struggled with, felt a satisfying crunch when her fist impacted his jaw. He went limp. She wrenched the huge gun from his hands, and tried to remember how to disarm the bloody thing.

The part of her brain that had paid attention to the fireball, the part that knew what it meant, whispered she didn't have to, that the worst was done already, but Gwen needed to use her hands, needed to ignore the stink of burning fuel and the screams around her.

The gun was pulled from her hands.

Turning her head, she saw booted feet. They'd come back for her, surrounded her.

Poor Rhys, frightened with her last message to him, not knowing she'd die with her mind on him, loving him. She focused on an image of her sweet lug of a man, the way his face lit up with a grin at just the sight of her. He would always love her first, always love her only. She needed to be wanted that way. Of all the possibilities she'd been given in her life, and all the choices she might have made, it was the singularity of his devotion that had won, and won again every time her thoughts drifted to other paths.

"Love you," she breathed, and Gwen kicked off from the pavement, fists drawn up ready to take down as many of her killers with her as she could. Her first blow landed solidly, the second was blocked, and her left cheek exploded in agony. Knees and elbows came up, bashing into a neck, turning to strike out at an unprotected groin.

All at once, her body seized with electric shock, and it took all her focus not to wee herself. The taser blasted through every nerve, sending her to her knees. She received a kick in the ribs for her trouble.

They'd shoot her now. Rhys, don't be angry with me.

"Get her up," said one of the coppers who wasn't a copper. Gwen was dragged to her feet, and her hands were roughly bound behind her. From a great distance, she heard someone tell the crowd they’d captured one of the terrorists responsible for the Cardiff bombing last year, and kindly move the fuck along. Someone else was shouting at the bloke on the ground.

"Bring her. Tally up the counts for resisting arrest. I for one would be happy to see her locked up another ten years for this little display."

Gwen's eyes focused long enough on the man in charge to see his disgusted face.

"Load her up. Put out that fire!" The stench of it assaulted her, burning petrol and worse. God alone knew what would happen when the weirder alien-derived equipment in the back burned.

It was burning. She turned her head to watch the immolation of the van as they shoved her towards a car. The van was burning, and her friend was dead.

A moan, part sorrow, part rage, slipped past her lips, unheard amidst the shouts and screams and the oncoming sirens.

***
They almost made it.

The plane had touched down safely. Alice and Steven collected their belongings and began to disembark, when she saw the uniformed officers waiting at the end of the gangway. Her heart leaped into her mouth.

Without making a fuss, she turned around. The staff, saying their goodbyes to the passengers, blocked her way. "Forgot my handbag," said Alice. They had to wait until more passengers moved past before they could make their way to the back of the plane. With a quick check to ensure the crew wasn't watching, Alice ducked into the tiny toilet stall with Steven, and locked the door.

It was tight, too tight, and they could barely breathe.

"Mum?" he whispered.

Everything is a weapon, her mother had always taught her. "Your dad and I will show you how to fire a gun, but you won't have a gun most of the time. You'll have to use what you do have. Your teeth, your elbows, your ears."

"My ears?" she'd giggled, because she'd been seven years old and just starting to learn: how to protect herself, why her daddy was never around.

"Be very quiet," Alice whispered to her son. "If we have to run, run as far away as you can. Don't wait for me. I'll find you."

She had a biro. Alice breathed in through her nose, telling herself she could stab a man in the face with it, could slam it into his eye, could kill him if she had to protect Steven. The plastic bit into her hand.

She heard voices at the other end of the aeroplane. They would come checking. If it was the crew, she'd claim they'd had an emergency. If it was someone there to take them into custody, she'd fight.

"They will try to kill you," Mum had said. "You don't give them an opening."

The door to the loo stall rattled. "Is someone in there?" asked a woman's voice.

Alice held her breath.

The door rattled again. She heard the sound of a key. The airline hostess would be able to open the lock. A moment later, the door folded open. Alice made eye contact with the woman, registered the security uniform, and ploughed into her. "Go!" she said as Steven sobbed, climbing over the two of them.

She had her pen, but she'd pictured killing a man, and she hesitated.

Alice heard the click of a gun. "Mrs. Carter, please disengage. Now." She looked up, and there were five more uniformed guards, two beside her, three more entering the plane.

She let go, mentally cursing her father and all his ancestors. Mum had taught her that, too.

***

Mr. Gloucester came with the team sent to transport Perry and the Captain to a more permanent holding facility. Lois led him down to the Hub proper, giving him the basic tour of the facility.

"Agent Johnson, please take the team to the cells so they can ready Captain Harkness and Mr.
Fletcher for transport."

"This way," she said, turning without watching to see if they followed.

"I have forms ready for the custody transfer," said Lois. "They're waiting for you in the Captain's office."

"Good. Good. We'll be transferring troops to your command later today."

Lois startled. "Mine? Sir, my assignment is complete." She'd been looking forward to going home.

"Yes, and now you have a new one. Before UNIT can come in to take over Torchwood operations formally, your team will train them." Mr. Gloucester continued to look past her, gazing at the arches and old stonework that made up the Hub, eyes settling on the Rift manipulator. "For example, you will show me how to operate this machine." He walked over. "They use it to play with the Cardiff Rift, yes?"

She scurried after him. "No, not really. They monitor it from here." She'd been given a basic understanding of what the manipulator did, but not much more. "I think it's more a passive device than an active one."

"But Torchwood has in the past opened the Rift intentionally with it?"

She'd read the reports. "Yes."

"Training will begin this afternoon. You will show me. Find an operations manual if you must."

"Yes, sir." The CCTV in the cells showed on one screen. Lois found her eyes drawn to the images: the Captain with his hands bound being escorted from his own building, Perry behind him almost in afterthought. As they passed under the camera, Jack looked up, straight at her.

"Doctor Patanjali will be kept on to assist you in the transition. We will allow him to stay on in his current capacity unless you have another recommendation."

"No. No, sir," she said, still watching Jack and Perry on the screen. "Will Agent Johnson also be staying on?"

"Negative. She's been compromised."

That got Lois's attention. "What?"

"When we brought in Harkness's daughter and grandson, Mrs. Carter told us Agent Johnson was the one to provide her with escape materials." He headed towards Jack's office. Lois followed. "When she has helped escort Harkness and Fletcher to the lorry, we will take her into custody as well."

"Sir, why were the Carters arrested? They have nothing to do with Torchwood." And why on Earth would anyone want to bring a child into custody? He didn't answer. "Sir?"

"Agent Johnson rightly guessed we will need to keep Harkness under tight control, given his unusual condition. The safety of his family will be a bargaining chip in gaining his cooperation."

Unease settled through her. Lois had undertaken this mission in order to bring Torchwood to justice. They believed themselves above the law and beyond the government. Using innocent civilians to leverage control against someone, no matter how unlawful their actions, was just as illegal as what Torchwood may have done.
"Sir," she said, putting on her most helpful underling persona. "I don't think that's a good idea. Instead, as you'll recall from my report, Captain Harkness has a relationship with Mr. Jones, who is also being taken into custody. Surely any cooperation you need from the Captain can be obtained by reminding him you have his partner."

Mr. Gloucester stepped into Jack's office, turning around and taking a long, deep breath. A quick smile touched his lips and was gone. Mission accomplished, Lois thought, and didn't know why.

"Your concerns are noted, Miss Habiba. However, we do need the Carters. Mr. Jones died evading capture an hour ago."

He closed the door with Lois outside.

***

Mr. Gloucester used the telephone on the Captain's desk to make the call, relishing the prospect of telling Harkness he'd done so. Would he be angry? Heartbroken? Or would he affect a flat, distant expression that would be delightful to break down? Gloucester couldn't wait to discover.

"You can tell the surveillance unit watching the Davies residence to stand down. We won't be needing their services."

He paused. Politeness had its purpose, and Rhiannon Davies would be seeing her brother's picture on the television soon. "Have one of them deliver our condolences to the family."

***

They'd been transported in the back of a lorry with no windows. Jack had heard a scuffle outside after the doors closed, but couldn't understand what had happened. He'd hoped it meant someone had come to rescue them, perhaps Ianto and Gwen arriving in the nick of time just as he'd envisioned when he'd sent them away. But the lorry's engine had started, and they'd driven about forty minutes by Jack's count, and now they were here.

These cells were fronted with steel doors, and a plastic-covered metal grille at the face plate. Jack watched the guards escort Gwen into the cell opposite. He caught a glimpse of Martha as the door swung open. If anyone else was trapped in there with them, he couldn't see.

There were no keyholes on this side of the door, no electronic lock to pick, nothing. Perry sat on one bunk, not looking at Jack, not looking at anything. Maybe he was praying. Jack wasn't asking.

"Gwen?"

A moment passed. Her fringe and her eyes appeared at the window opposite.

"Are you okay?" he asked her. "Did they hurt you?"

"No. Nothing bad."

"She's got bruises," Martha said from behind her. "Mild contusions. She could use an ice pack. Fancy getting us one?"

"I'll work on it," he said.

Gwen backed away from the door. "I'm fine. Bit proud to say the fellow who brought me in will need his testicles surgically repaired."
Jack winced. So did Perry. But Gwen didn't sound proud. Her voice kept catching in odd places, like she was telling jokes through a sucking chest wound. Martha would have said something, and would be treating Gwen right now if she was bad off. Nevertheless, alarm bells itched at his scalp, and he turned to his other worry.

"Did Ianto get away?"

Another strange pause. "No."

"Damn." The cells were built for two at a time. Would he be imprisoned next door? In another wing? A whole scenario spun out in front of Jack in the space of seconds: convicted and locked up in adjoining cells, the two of them would spend the next ten to fifteen years conducting their sex life via Morse code.

"Jack?"

"What?"

"I'm so sorry." He almost jumped to reassure her that getting captured wasn't her fault, that it was his, that he hadn't protected her as carefully as he should have. Then the sorrow in her words swept his own apology away unspoken. "They killed him. We were trying to run, so they wouldn't get the equipment in the van, and we split up, and they killed him."

From a long, long distance, she said again, "I'm so sorry." Gwen choked. He could picture tears welling in her pretty eyes.

Jack found that his knees weren't solid. He moved backward, landing roughly on his own bunk. Perry's head had jerked up, and he was watching Jack in dawning horror.

Clinically, Jack could observe what was going on in his own body. Presented with an overwhelming input, his nerves were firing in all directions, looking for bearing. Adrenalin and endorphins competed, flooding his body with a self-produced chemical overdose to deal with a threat the automatic systems knew must be deadly. His higher functions understood this was not Jack's own life ending, not again. He was merely staring at the end of everything he had stupidly allowed himself to hope for after years of holding back that last swell of emotion because it always, always, always ended in pain.

His hands were shaking, and he placed them on his knees, but that passed the trembling to the rest of his body. His vision settled to a small point on the opposite wall, painted an ugly sherbet green. Someone had been sitting there a moment ago. From a million miles away, Jack was aware of someone moving beside him, wrapping a threadbare grey blanket around his quaking shoulders.

He was fine. He was going to be fine. He would always be fine. Jack would lose everyone and everything that mattered to him, and he would be ... fine.

He turned to Perry. "We need to figure out how to get out of here. We need a plan, or we need someone on the outside." From some faraway planet, his own words were glacially steady, galactically calm.

Perry blinked at him. "We don't have anything to work with." Their captors had seized Jack's wrist strap when he was dead, as well as everyone's watches. For all Jack knew, their personal items were still back in Cardiff. They'd been lucky to keep their shoes.

"Figure something out. I won't let them hurt the rest of you, but I can't protect you in here." The words came out thinly, mocking him as he spoke. He couldn't protect anyone. He'd made that
They hadn't even said goodbye this morning, and it was the least of what neither one had ever managed to say.

Jack tried to focus on the recent fights, give himself something to anchor to, but his memories instead picked out scenes from quiet mornings, the rare days they'd had a lie-in, waking with orange puddles of sunlight. He remembered sleep-mussed hair, and a distinct refusal of kisses until Jack had padded out of the warm nest of blankets into a cold bathroom to brush his teeth. Deep breaths moved into occasional snores as Ianto drifted back to sleep while Jack lay there and watched the rise and fall of individual hairs, tracing with his eyes the prickly unshaven morning beard. The utterly normal sounds of the building's other residents going about their days surrounded them: grandmothers with babies over for care, someone's Pekinese yapping for attention, cars outside. Their bedroom remained a safe zone where the sounds were not intrusions but reminders of the little, wonderful lives they protected with long hours and soul-crushing work. Just because both of them had seen their worlds crashing down around them, death wasn't the only thing. Despite all the worlds Jack had stood on, despite all the adventures he'd lived, late breakfasts filled with good coffee and burnt toast and terrible jokes, and time spent kissing or reading or arsing about online with someone's sock-covered feet in his lap were all adventures too.

Had been adventures.

He could have spent a lifetime of sleepy mornings, would have spent Ianto's lifetime with busy days interspersed with moments of perfection, and not been bored for a moment. One smile full of promise, one glance full of sin, and Jack would have been enamoured all over again, had been. "I'll get you out of here," he said distantly. When their captors came, he'd give them what they asked, whatever they asked, in exchange for the others' lives. It was the only thing left that mattered.

***

The first Rift alert came through an hour after Perry and the Captain had been retrieved. "Deal with it," Mr. Gloucester said, barely glancing up from the computer. Mainframe was refusing to grant him access to view files.

Three of the UNIT soldiers had stayed on. More would arrive soon. Lois looked at Rupesh. "What now?"

He shrugged. "You've got me. Aren't you the one in charge?"

"I've never been in the field."

"Time to learn, then." He indicated the armoury. "We've got the SUV and the weapons. You know how to use the scanners." His tone was all nonchalance, but she read the fear on his face.

"All right, people," said Lois in what was not entirely an unconscious imitation of the Captain, "time to load up."

***

Mum had warned her about this sort of thing, meeting up with enigmatic men who told you crazy things and drove you to the cash point where you drained your account. Usually the lurid tales ended with some poor girl face down in a gutter, and Francine tutting about bad decisions, ignoring the loud sighs and rolling eyes from her daughters.
Tish wasn't sighing now. "Got it."

"Let's go." They'd hit a different station to drain Mickey's account, but his assets had already been frozen. Tish could only get two hundred pounds from this transaction. She had a copy of Martha's spare card -- "for emergencies only," Martha had said, and Tish had given her one in return -- but the machine took the card and wouldn't give it back, the same as Mickey's.

He'd acquired a mobile from someone's pocket, after they'd dropped theirs in his car and parked it. She phoned her mother as they walked, just two young people out together for a stroll in the brisk London air, nothing to see here. Her bare feet were freezing.

"It's me, Mum."

"Oh, thank God. Have you seen your sister?"

"No. The order was to get both of us, and all of Jack's people, too."

"Where are you? Wait, never mind. Get somewhere safe." You could have bent iron rods around Francine's voice. Tish wasn't the only one who still woke up with cold sweats over memories of being seized.

Tish looked at Mickey. They'd discussed it when they'd abandoned the car. "All right, Mum. I'm getting out of the city. Does that cousin of Dad's still live in Chelmsford?"

The light changed, and they crossed the street, Mickey keeping an eye out, Tish trying to control the trembling in her voice.

"Yes, I think so. Do you need the address?"

"That'd be helpful. Thanks."

She sent her love to Dad and Leo, and told Mum to take a quick holiday somewhere else, somewhere safe.

"Hardly. I haven't committed any crimes. I'm going to see who's holding your sister and make some noise about it. How dare they."

Tish smiled, picturing her mother taking her ire to Downing Street itself if need be. They wouldn't know what hit them. "Love you, Mum. I'll call when I can."

The next call was to her brother-in-law. Tom had spotty service at the best of times, and worse than that when he was halfway across the world. The call went to voicemail.

If this was about Lucy, Tom was in danger as well. Tish told him to go into hiding. Martha seemed to think he had a hero inside him somewhere, but for all that Tish liked the man, he was a bit of a wet blanket. "We'll handle it," she said, and rang off.

She closed the phone, and Mickey made a call of his own.

"Sarah Jane, it's Mickey Smith. Remember we met last summer?" He paused, and his mouth broke into a smile. "Yeah." Another pause. "Not so good. Someone's put out a call to bring in a lot of mutual friends. Companions. I don't think it's related to him, but I can't say for sure. You'd do good to lay low for the next couple weeks, go visit relatives in the country or something."

Tish tried not to eavesdrop. She didn't know the names of all Martha and Jack's weird friends.
Mickey asked Sarah Jane to "have your excellently-surnamed computer send Donna on a surprise holiday somewhere."

When he ended the call, he dropped the mobile on a table outside a shi-shi little restaurant Tish had always meant to try. "There's a cybercafé not far from here," Tish said. "We'll find what we need there."

On their way, she stopped by a shop and bought herself shoes and them both large scarves, perfect to cover faces with on a blustery day. Mum would be happy to know she was covering up in the cold. Mum would be less happy to know Tish wasn't planning a trip to Chelmsford anytime soon and she'd be furious when she found out Tish was going to help Mickey steal a car.

Maybe some of Mum's stories did have a grain of truth in them.

***

On Lois's very first day working for Torchwood, a man named Dave O'Mara had died. He'd been on loan from the Home Office, just as Lois herself had been. She'd never had a chance to ask him if he was also working as a spy, if he had signed the Official Secrets Act that morning thinking he was headed off to a temp job, if he had a lover back home. Her first lesson, after where the coffeemaker was and why Gwen would be giving her the firearms lessons, was that Torchwood got people killed.

As the men under her temporary command took her temporary orders, and blasted a not-so-temporary hole in a shop in Butetown, she tried not to think about Dave. She sent two men in with a pincers manoeuvre against the tentacled beast terrorising the shoppers, and the rest of the team came in with their weapons.

Rupesh had already started spinning a cover story, but he wasn't experienced with this kind of fabrication. An escaped octopussy from the Bay didn't sound any better than what it really was.

They should have contained it, but they shot it instead, sending great splatters of alien calamari everywhere. Two civilians had been seriously injured by the rampage before their arrival; Lois saw Rupesh give them both a good dose of Retcon, calling it paracetamol, before treating their wounds.

No-one had died except the alien, bringing Lois's death count today to a healthy two.

"Pack up the large pieces," she told the closest UNIT man. They'd load the corpse into the SUV, take it back, and when they had time, they would scour the records to see what it had once been.

"Yes, ma'am." He turned to his fellows, who started picking up chunks of tentacle.

One of them said, "Can't wait to get back. I could murder a coffee right about now."

She watched them for a seemly ten more seconds before walking determinedly off as though to check the perimeter, but in reality looking for a secluded spot where she could vomit.

***

Death was peaceful. He remembered that Jack and Suzie and Owen talked about the darkness, the thing that moved in the darkness, but Ianto was reliving pleasant memories of his childhood. He knew not to hope for meeting people from his past, knew there was no Celestial Waiting Room where Lisa and his parents lingered for him, but he smiled anyway at the thought of seeing them one more time.

He smiled. He thought.
Dead people weren't supposed to do either.

Ianto felt the fog slip from his head, and a bright light beat upon his eyelids. He opened them slowly.

"Good morning, Eye Candy."
Chapter 5

The van was trapped, lorries to one side, police cars pulling up to the other. Ianto's head was swimming from the poison in the coffee. He didn't have long. He revved the engine, hoping to distract his pursuers, hoping Gwen would get free, go for help, find Jack.

His hands were so tired. Everything was hazy. His body didn't want to respond, and panic closed his throat. There was a sudden flash, and in the passenger seat to his left, he saw the outline of two forms before he passed out.

"Good morning, Eye Candy."

He wasn't in the van, nor could he identify his surroundings. John Hart crouched over him like a scraggly raven, ready to pluck out his eyes or his heart. Ianto drew back, feeling another wave of revulsion at the glimmer in Hart's eyes as he noted Ianto's obvious fear.

His hands were bound behind him, and his arms hurt. His clothes were still in place, a small mercy but not one he held out hope on in the long term. It had been such a nice frying pan, he thought bitterly.

His mouth was dry, and he couldn't make the words come out at first. Ianto wet his lips and tried again. "As trite as this sounds, where are we?"

John, thankfully, leaned back. "Far enough away. Did you know you're dead?"

"I'm not." He was breathing and sore.

"According to the official records you are. As luck would have it, I was planning to visit a certain Captain of your acquaintance, and I checked the news first. Told me you fried like a fish. I had an extra body I wasn't doing anything with, so I dropped him off, plucked you, and now we're here." He grin came closer. "Just you and I, Eye Candy."

"You had a spare body? Whose?"

Hart shrugged. "I didn't ask his name. He owed me money. Dead is dead, might as well use a corpse and save a body." His right hand stroked Ianto's arm through his sleeve. Ianto hid his shudder poorly, as Hart said, "I like using bodies, too."

"I was poisoned."

Hart shrugged. "You looked peaky. I gave you a nice shot of fix-em-up meds."

"What?"

There was a roll of eyes and a sigh that said Hart wasn't going to bother explaining to the stupid caveman.

"Jack will come looking for me." It was meant in threat and came out half-choked. He regretted the words instantly. That would be the plan. Whatever else Hart had in mind for him to pass the time, Ianto was bait.

"Guess again. You're dead. I told you. Right now, they're delivering the news to your blubbering relatives if you have any. I'm sure Jack will take it stoically," he said with a mocking expression of
seriousness, "then bugger off to drown his sorrows in the first hole he can find that wriggles."

"Fuck you."

"Soon enough. First, now that you're awake, I need to decide where we're off to."

It was pointless to say he wouldn't go anywhere with the madman. Instead he lay as still as he could and started working on his bonds. The ropes had a bit of give. He focused on freeing himself.

Now that his vision had cleared, Ianto assessed his surroundings. They were in a house or a flat, matted burgundy carpet, panelled walls, no windows, one doorway that opened onto a room he couldn't see from this position. Everything smelled of stale patchouli and cheap fried food left to rot in an unseen corner, a gagging stench. From outside he heard the sounds of traffic, and hoped that meant they were still on Earth. If Hart had abducted him to another world or time, Ianto would never get home.

Hart's left hand stroked Ianto's chin. The other moved down to his hip, and squeezed roughly. "I can pick up some quick cash by selling you on Occimo Prime. There's a bloke I know who owns one of the classy whore pits, I could name my price for a tight piece of arse trained up by an expert." The hand at his hip moved. Ianto made himself go perfectly still. "Of course, that means no sampling you myself, not and get full price." He leaned intimately close, mouth puffing foul breaths into Ianto's face. "They do insist on their programme. The low-rent whore pits won't care as much what condition you're in."

"Jack will kill you."

"He has to find out about it first, and he won't, because he thinks you're dead." Hart's lips ghosted over Ianto's cheek. "I could take you with me. You're not completely incapable in a fight. It's been a while since I had a partner to work with. But since I know you'll say no," he drew back, "I'll just have to keep you here, enjoy myself, and ransom you off to Gorgeous when I've had my fun. Even used, he'll give me what I want for you."

John's hand slipped under Ianto's waistband, and he chuckled in response to Ianto's terrified shudder. His legs were aching but free. He could get in one good kick, and if he was lucky, John would beat him unconscious in retaliation. Or shoot him. Just because Ianto couldn't see a weapon didn't mean John was unarmed. Be raped or be killed, and Ianto wasn't the one who got to decide.

"You want money."

John's hand was warm, his calluses rough. "Doesn't everyone?"

"You want to ransom me or sell me. You wanted the Arcadian diamond to sell it. You're broke." He tried not to gasp out the words, tried hard to stay calm. "You need money now."

"I need a lot of things now." He stopped fondling, and his hand dug lower.

"I'll pay you. Fifty thousand pounds in your pocket."

John laughed in a low voice. "You think your money is good anywhere else in the galaxy? I see why he likes it here. You people are so stupidly funny."

"You can buy things that are valuable. Gold. Minerals. Something portable. Not my problem. Fifty thousand pounds, on the table now."
John pulled his hand free. Ianto bit back his cry of relief. "You don't have that kind of money."

"Jack does, and I have access to all his accounts." To buy groceries. Jack had been surprised by the Christmas shopping. He might very well hit the roof when he found out about this, but Ianto was desperate. "Your call."

"When can you have the money?"

"By the end of the day, if I can get to the bank." John reached behind him, and Ianto tensed, but it was only to free his hands. Ianto rubbed his sore wrists. "Are we still on Earth?"

"Still on Earth, still in your time."

"If you have a computer, I can start the transfer."

***

They'd been brought food, a meat stew Gwen chose not to scrutinise too closely and a slice of bread. Martha looked faint but washed down small bites with great gulps of water. "Alright, Martha?"

Gwen asked her between unsavoury bites of her own.

"Should do. I am craving fish like you wouldn't believe right now."

Gwen stirred the food in the bowl. "It might be fish."

Martha looked even fainter.

"Sorry."

Gwen cast a glance at the closed door. The men had also been fed, but she hadn't heard them talking. She desperately wanted to be in the room with Jack, to let him know she was there for him, but across the hall was miles away, and he was shut like a clam.

She heard a noise from a cell down the corridor, and a voice. Terrible stew forgotten, she stood up and went to the door. "Johnson?"

There was a long silence. "Here."

Rage bloomed in her gut. "Let us out of here. How dare you put us away like this."

Gwen heard another noise, one she couldn't place. Was Johnson laughing? "If I could right now, I would. I'm in the next cell."

Martha frowned. Jack and Perry had caught her up on their capture, and Martha had filled Gwen in. Why was Johnson with them? "You were helping them."

"It doesn't matter now."

Gwen said, "You got Ianto killed. The three of you." Fire burned in her recollections, orange and black.

Johnson's breath caught. "He's only the first. None of us are walking out of here. I tried to get Alice and her son out of harm's way."

"You what?" It was the first Jack had spoken. Gwen shut her eyes.
"They weren't involved in the prison break. I suspected they would be brought in. I gave her false ID and told her to run. When she was picked up, she thought I'd turned her in. I don't know where they've been taken."

Perry said, "Johnson, you're terrible at faking IDs. You never do the groundwork."

Johnson said, "Captain, the man behind our mission will use them against you. I advise you to cooperate with whatever he asks, for the safety of your family and the people with you."

Jack said nothing.

***

Tish heard the rustle of the undergrowth behind her and spun. Mickey already had his tyre iron at the ready. They hadn't been startled by a soldier, though, but a stout bloke in civilian clothes. His hand was in his jacket pocket. The bulge in his pocket could be a gun or it could be his finger pretending to be a gun.

"Back away slowly," said the man. He gestured with his possibly-finger-possibly-gun. "Put that down."

Mickey put on an annoyed face. "Yeah, no. I don't think you've got a gun, mate. Show me your hands."

From beyond their vantage point, Tish heard the continued movement of the guards. They were going to attract attention any minute.

She said, "If you're with the base, you're going to get us inside." The confusion on his face told her what she needed. "But you're not, are you?"

"I thought you were."

Mickey lowered his grip on the tyre iron. "Which would explain why we're hiding out here. No points."

"Sorry. I'm new to this whole life."

His voice, the mild but constant note of complaint, registered with a memory. "Do I know you?" she asked him.

"Dunno." He looked around, suddenly aware of how close they were to the perimeter and how being loud right now was a bad idea. He crouched to the ground and stuck out a meaty hand. "Rhys Williams."

"You were at Martha's wedding. I'm her sister. We met."

She shook his hand carefully as Mickey stared.

"You know him?"

"He's Gwen's husband. Rhys, this is Mickey Smith. He works for Torchwood."

"In an advisory capacity," said Mickey, trying belatedly to sound stiff, and failing. "Jack calls me when he needs something done." He frowned, realising he probably sounded like a hitman, or God help him, one of Jack's playmates. "I mean, something technical. Or alien."

"And he called you in for this?"
Tish said, "We're here to see if we can break them out. They've taken my sister, and there's warrants out on the two of us."

"And you're here?"

Mickey grinned. "It's unexpected, see. No-one would think to look for us here."

Because it's suicidal, Tish had to admit, but what were their other options? Go into hiding from the law? Wait for Mum to sort things out? No, this was some kind of misunderstanding, and Jack would be able to figure out what had happened. And if he couldn't, this was certainly somehow his fault and being up close meant Tish would have first crack at punching him for ruining her life. She suspected there would be a queue.

Rhys asked, "Did you have more of a plan than that, then?"

Mickey looked at Tish. She was the one vouching for him, but again, he was Gwen's husband. If for some reason he was complicit in her arrest, and happened to be taking a walk in the woods hoping to run into two other fugitives who ought to be far from here, it wasn't as though they had many other allies.

"How did you get here?" Mickey asked him.

"Gwen phoned and told me to go on the run. I went to my mate Banana's flat, and there's his cousin who lives with him, name's Charlie, bit simple sometimes but a madman on the computer. Anyway, I had him use his Google to see if he could find anything about what happened." Anger moved over his face and was gone. Apparently Charlie had found something Rhys didn't like. "I need to get her out of there."

Tish pulled the papers out of her bag. "We did some research before we came. They've got a call out for a funeral director. There's two bodies in there." She showed Rhys the route. "That's our way in."

***

Ianto had no idea where Hart had stolen his computer from, but it was sleek, and nearly as fast as Mainframe. As he went to open one of Jack's less secure bank accounts, he found the way blocked. Dread soaking up from his feet and settling in his stomach, he tried another, and a third.

"They've locked the accounts. Fuck."

John hovered behind him, heat radiating like a sickness. The skin on Ianto's neck crawled. Without the money, he was right back where he'd started, and he hadn't started anywhere good.

"Too bad."

"If I go in through UNIT's servers, I can unlock it." Fool's gambit, he knew, but he sounded confident and Hart appeared to buy the ruse. Toshiko had long ago cracked the UNIT firewall, and shown Ianto the means one bored afternoon. He was inside of a minute, hunting around for emails, orders, locations. Jack and the others were being held at a facility half an hour from Cardiff. That pinged his interest. They ought to be in prison, a proper prison under proper authorities. Why hold them in the middle of nowhere?

Another set of orders caught his eye, and he reared back in the seat.

"No cash there, either?"
"They have Alice and Steven. But they're not being held with the others." The order was for indefinite detention, held as enemies of the state under the Unearthly Threat Act. The Act had passed in secret years ago, but wasn't found in the normal lists of laws. It was the one sop the government had given to Torchwood, the old if-it's-alien-it's-ours Torchwood, legislation ensuring Her Majesty's Alien Hunters and their actions had the full support of law. Among the provisions, the Act declared anyone who hadn't been born on Earth, and any descendents through three generations, not legally human.

"You can look up your girlfriend and boyfriend later, Eye Candy."

Frying pan to fire, where could he possibly go that was worse? He had no choice. "Alice is Jack's daughter."

Hart's entire body snapped to attention. "He had kids?"

"He has Alice." Of Jack's two sons Ianto knew about, Philip was dead and Franklin was elderly. "They'll use her against him. She and her son are listed as non-humans. That means they won't exist in the normal legal system." If someone intended to hurt them now, the perpetrator wouldn't even be subject to a lawsuit. Jack fell under the same category. The others -- Ianto checked again, found Gwen, Perry, and Martha, with warrants out for Tish and Mickey -- were being detained as terrorists, responsible for the bombings in Cardiff. He turned to face Hart angrily. "They're being charged for your crime!"

He was met with a disinterested shrug. "Daughter?"

Ianto closed his eyes. "Another fifty thousand. And you don't touch her or her child."

"Fifty thousand for what?"

"We need to get them out of there. We can work on freeing the others after Alice and Steven are safe. As long as they're in custody, Jack can't do anything. He won't. It'll be an even one hundred thousand pounds for you, but we must go now." He waved his hand at Hart's working Vortex Manipulator.

Hart smiled, showing the tips of his teeth. "One hundred thousand pounds, and if you can't come up with it, I get to take it out of both your hides. Or is it all three?"

His traitorous imagination let fly in horrible, vicious technicolour before Ianto clamped down on the mental prospect. "I'll get you the money."

***

Jack had withdrawn inside his own head, leaving Perry alone in their shared cell. He'd paced the small confines to get a feel for the space (answer: ten by twelve feet, a lidless toilet beside the door, a bunk on either side), had inventoried himself to see if anything could help (answer: no), and sat back down on his bunk to wait for whatever came next (answer: who knew?). He wasn't good at comfort, never had been. When his own parents had been killed, he'd sobbed for a day and the next he'd signed up for the army. He'd lost friends in the war, Jack had lost friends, lost his son, kept losing. Perry didn't know how to do comfort, but what comfort mattered every time the world ended for someone? He offered his silence instead.

The silence was broken by heels clicking on the corridor outside their cells.

Perry looked at Jack, but he was faraway. Perry went to the grille. A woman stood outside: blonde, severe, too-red lips and a look in her eyes Perry could recall from the war, the look of a killer.
When she smiled, he felt the prickle in his bones.

"I hope you've enjoyed the accommodations we've provided."

"Let us go," Gwen said firmly from the other window. "We had nothing to do with the bombings. Perry and Martha weren't even there."

"Mrs. Cooper, you're not here because of the bombings. You and your associates have been arrested as enemies of the state. Torchwood's actions nearly led to the destruction of the Earth on multiple occasions. Captain Harkness has rewritten time. You yourself opened the Cardiff Rift in order to restore your fiancé to life, causing the deaths of hundreds in the process. All of you enabled a murderess to escape."

The woman stood in front of the cells. "I'd be happy to throw the lot of you down into a deep, dark hole, and never let you out again. But needs must. If you tell us the current whereabouts of Lucy Saxon, you will find the fist of justice to be more lenient."

They had helped a woman escape from Broadfell Prison back in December, but the name on her paperwork had been Allison Frye, and Jack had told them her name was Susan Foreman. Jack and Dr. Jones had gone off with her after the escape, and Jack had returned later that night. He'd said nothing about where they'd gone. Perry closed his lips tightly. He felt more than saw her gaze go across his face.

"Come now," said the woman. "We're all friends here. Well, I tell a lie. We're not friends. And I am authorised to hurt you. You have no rights."

He swallowed. They'd said, back then, that the Germans did this. If they caught you and locked you away in a POW camp, they'd torture a man until he told them what they wanted to know, and if he didn't have the intel, until he died. The stories grew grotesque in the telling. A month ago, he'd steeled himself to go looking online for what had been documented by history.

The woman said to someone Perry couldn't see, "Bring Dr. Jones."

Gwen put herself in front of the door. "You will not."

"Cooper is collateral. Shoot her if she causes trouble. Do not under any circumstances kill the good doctor." Her voice was tight, proud. "You and I do not get that honour."

A guard came to the other cell. A second guard stood back with a gun at the ready. "Leave her alone," Perry said, for all the good it would do.

"I intend to," said the woman. "If she doesn't give me the information I require, she will be quite definitely alone. I have my prisoners. However, her child is surplus to our needs. Guards?"

Martha let out a sharp breath that rattled and carried. Gwen growled.

As the key fitted to the lock, Jack said, "Lucy Saxon is in Indonesia. She's working at a free clinic in Palu." He came to the door slowly, and Perry let him pass to the window. "She's using a false name, but she may have changed the one we gave her. I would have."

He watched the woman. Perry could only assume she watched him back.

"Your cooperation is noted, Captain. I will also need the codes to enter and reactivate the Torchwood base in Glasgow."
"I don't have them."

"Don't play stupid, Captain. I have all of your friends. I have your daughter and grandson."

"I wasn't on-site during the lockdown." His face was glass. "Ianto handled it. He never gave me the codes, and I never remembered to ask."

"If you expect me to believe ... "

"Believe what you want. I can't get in, either, unless he wrote the passcode down somewhere. We thought we had time."

Perry recalled seeing Ianto recording day to day minutiae in his diary, but wouldn't dare suggest looking there now. If they managed to get out of this mess, someone would have to.

The Governor was silent for a moment. "I believe I am required by protocol to say, I am sorry for your loss." Her heels clicked down the hallway, and were gone.

Jack rested his head against the door. Gwen said, "Jack?"

"No more deaths today. Martha, all right?"

Her voice trembled. "All right."

Jack went back to his bunk and lay down, staring at the ceiling.

They had to get out of here.

***

She tried to make it a game. "We're not really in gaol, sweetheart," Alice told Steven. "They're playacting. We have to stay here and pretend to be good." And then Dad better bloody well get us the fuck out of here. She petted his head.

"It's not like on the telly." He dangled his feet over the edge of the bunk, looking around in curiosity. He wasn't at all afraid, thank God. She was frightened enough for them both.

"You're not supposed to be watching those programmes."

He grinned sheepishly, turning his two index fingers into a single pistol. "Bang! Bang!"

"Stop it," she chided, but gently.

Alice went over escape plans in her head. This did not take long. Were she alone, she was willing to attack her guard, should a guard be dim-witted enough to enter her cell. But with Steven there, she didn't dare. So long as they had him, they had her. Which was why they had her, because surely Jack was nearby going through similar mental contortions.

So many times, she wished he would leave her alone. Nothing good ever came of interacting with him, and hadn't since she'd been little. Steven needed a place to grow up in safety, where she wouldn't have to worry about someone trying to hurt him because of his grandfather's mistakes.

Alice heard a noise outside her cell, a weird electrical sound she couldn't place. "Ugh," said a familiar voice. "That was awful."

"Not designed for passengers, Eye Candy. I told you." She didn't know the other voice.
Alice went to the door. There was no glass, just a blank wall. "Ianto?"

"Alice? Is Steven with you?"

"Yes." She glanced at her son, who had perked up. He got on well with Dad's current fling, God alone knew why.

"Get back from the door."

She drew back. She wrapped herself around Steven, putting her back to the door. There was a high-pitched noise and a spark. The door fell in with a loud clang. Alice didn't wait to see what was outside, merely took Steven by the arm.

"How are we getting out of here?" She didn't know the other man, a thin man with a languid face, suspect fashion sense, and the same overpowering sexuality she associated with a certain family member. "Who's this?"

Ianto said, "Take his hand," placing her hand and Steven's on the other's wrist, which bore a leather strap with a strong resemblance to Jack's. She heard shouts and running boots.

"Time to go," said the other man, and Alice felt a sharp, sickening tug in her stomach. She cried out, reached out, tried to get Steven, she was falling.

She fell to her knees suddenly, stomach threatening to empty itself, head pounding. She lay on a polished hardwood floor. The room was dark. No, it was a hallway, furnished in old, fine wood. Rich hangings and paintings of stodgy men and women she didn't know decorated the walls. One door cracked open, leading to a room that had the twilight, dusty mien of a forgotten room with long-closed blinds.

Her head cleared, and she steadied herself, looking for her son. Steven was perfectly fine, looking around himself in delight.

Ianto held out his hand and helped her to her feet. Alice said, "If you say 'Welcome to Wonderland' you're getting a pinch. Where are we?"

The other man broke away from them, examining a painting on one wall the way an art appraiser -- or art thief -- would do. Ianto said, "Torchwood House. We're in Glasgow. It's as tight as a fortress from the outside. I needed to get the two of you somewhere safe."

The man, the one who reminded her too strongly of Jack, oozed over. "And we did get you safe." He took her hand without asking and brought it to his lips, merry eyes leering at her. She yanked her arm back.

"Who's this?"

"Call him John," said Ianto, looking unhappy. "He is, sadly, our rescuer."

"How does he know Jack?"

Both men looked at her thoughtfully. John said, "Interesting."

"They used to be partners."

"It was like being married," John said in a delighted drawl. Ianto rolled his eyes. Alice felt her usual disgust for her father's sex partners. Now she was stuck with two of them.
"Are you going to rescue him next?"

John grinned. "Oh yes. We had to spring you first."

Ianto said, "As long as they had you and Steven, Jack wouldn't be able to move against them."

"I know that. I'm not stupid." Glasgow. And whoever had taken them, whoever was behind this, they were happy to play dirty. She looked at John, but asked Ianto, "Is he trustworthy?"

"God, no."

"Right." She took Ianto's hand and half-dragged him into the study, closing the door. John whistled.

Ianto said, "We shouldn't leave him alone in a room with Steven. Or you. Or anyone, really. I've probably endangered you further by telling him who you are." He looked worn out and shocky and desperate, not a good combination, but Alice didn't have time for his problems right now.

"I have a brother. He's in Aberdeen. He's an old man."

"Wait." Confusion drizzled through his tone like caramel. "You know Frank?"

"You know Frank? He told you about Frank and he never told me?" Her voice was rising, and she wanted to punch things.

"I figured it out. I figured you out. He doesn't ... tell me things. Not intentionally." The confession obviously cost him, but she refused to care.

She said, "Dad told my brother about me, little things here and there. When I was a baby, he even took me to meet him once. Frank put the pieces together. It's a habit you get into when you're dealing with Jack." She read that much understanding on his face. "Frank looked me up a few years ago. I almost hung up on him. I thought he was trying to blackmail me or threaten me. He just wanted to talk."

She smiled faintly at the memory. Some mad old pensioner, claiming to be her brother? But not only did he know about Jack, he knew what it was like to grow up under the shadow of what their father was. They chatted perhaps twice a year, and kept it their secret, something of their own to hide away from the man whose secrets had shaped their whole lives.

"The thing is, I called him last week, and I'm certain he's talked to Jack recently. If they've been watching us, they'll find Frank and use him too."

"Right." He took a breath. "Let me talk to John. We'll bring Frank here. Then we can get Jack and the others."

"What are we waiting for?" She was already halfway to the door.

He said, "I need a moment to think. I've run out of money."

***

Intercepting the man from the funeral home went smoothly. He was a hefty bloke, so Rhys donned his dark suit. Tish would act as his assistant in her official and prim yet stylish business suit. Mickey could hide out as their backup in the van. He took a long, searching look at the coffin.

"I'm not claustrophobic. Really."
"They'll search the van," Tish said reasonably. "You'll be safe enough inside."

"Right." Still, he waited until the van approached the gates to the base before unfastening the lid. He didn't know for coffins, except when he'd picked out a nice one for his Gran's funeral. Was this the carry-and-go floor model? The high end government model? He'd seen the names on the list and winced at the loss. Was Ianto's family being contacted even now and told, "Good news, we've got your man's body banged up in a sweet casket?"

"Hop in," Rhys said. But Rhys wasn't the one getting inside his own coffin, and shutting the lid on top of himself. The plush cream-coloured velour smelled antiseptic with an overlay of floral perfume, an Odour-Eater for dead people built into the fabric. He found the scent pleasant at first, then gagging.

In the darkness, Mickey was jostled as the van pulled to a stop by the gate. Soldiers rapped on the window. Rhys played up the sombre yet dotty funeral director's assistant, sent out on a late run to a new address. Tish was his assistant, and they did a nice little improv where she'd been sent with him 'cause of that one body he misplaced in the records, Mr. Yoo's family had been so distraught.

Mickey tried not to laugh, stayed silent as the grave.

He heard the van door open in the back, and held his breath whilst someone stood there, then shut the van again without checking the coffins.

"Go on, then. Building 3C. Take this road, turn right at the sign, you can't miss it. They'll meet you at the door." Building 3C was listed as the same building where the prisoners were kept, if they hadn't been moved since Mickey had looked it up.

"Thanks, mate."

The van jerked into motion, rocking Mickey in his coffin. He daren't get out yet.

"I hope this works," he muttered.

He hadn't let himself consider why he was doing all this, but in the darkness, introspection was high on the list of things to do to pass the time. Jack wasn't his best mate; they had a reasonable working relationship begun with the tenuous connection of having shagged the same girl. (And not at the same time, Mickey was quick to point out to anyone who knew Jack.) Still, with only that between them, Jack had set Mickey up in this universe, and he'd given him a job. Mickey could feel like he owed the man a debt, owed Torchwood whatever shabby loyalty it demanded. But his reason was simpler than that, here in the dark.

All this time, and he was still pushing back against 'Mickey the idiot' and 'Mickey the coward.' Sure, he'd done his part in that other universe, fighting Cybermen and everything, but doing that he'd figured out on his own that he had to work every single day to earn the name 'Mickey the hero.'

***

Gwen took Martha's hand and squeezed. Her own pulse was racing, nervous, but Martha remained placid, her heartbeat fluttering no faster than if they were contemplating a walk by the Bay. Jack hadn't told Gwen much about the strange, missing year. His eyes grew dark every time, and he twitched, and Gwen wanted to know, needed to know. Ianto had taken her arm one day and said to her plainly that she didn't, his own eyes dimmed by what little he'd been told. Once Jack had told Gwen his secrets, and that had changed, and now ...

Now Jack wasn't saying anything, not about the missing year, not about anything. Gwen had only
the crumbs, and the hints. Martha had undertaken a great journey, a mission, had saved the Earth amidst horrors, the memory of which made Jack wake up screaming. And in this cell, Martha's gaze was not shadowed, and she did not quake, and her pulse stayed calm.

All at once, Martha's eyes rolled up in her head as she fell to the floor, moaning and convulsing. Gwen sprang to her feet. "Help! Someone help!" She rattled the door, or tried, but it was solid. She pounded her fists. Across the way, she saw Perry at the window. "Martha's sick! She needs help!"

Perry bellowed, his deep voice carrying further than hers: "Help!" Behind her, Martha's moans grew in volume.

Moments passed before Gwen heard footsteps running her way. Gwen kept shouting as two soldiers came to the cell door. "Please! I think she's having a seizure."

The first turned to his friend, who raised his rifle. Keys were dug out and Gwen stood back as the door swung open. The first came into the cell with them, went to his knees beside Martha's spasming body. "How long has she been like this?"

"Just a few minutes." Gwen cast scared eyes on the soldier with the gun, her arms flat at her sides. "Can you help her? Take her to the infirmary, something. Please, she's pregnant." And never mind what that woman threatened to do to her baby. She wished they'd both come in to check on Martha.

"Yeah," said the first soldier, who looked too young for this job. He nodded to his friend, who walked into the cell, lowering his rifle.

He didn't see the kick coming as Gwen booted his rifle out of his hands and followed up with a fast punch to his face. Before his friend could stand, Martha had grabbed his neck, throwing him to the ground and seating herself on his chest, arms at his throat, cutting off his windpipe.

The other guard struck out at Gwen's abdomen, but she had an elbow for his jaw, and she was faster grabbing for his gun. Seconds later, she was above him with the rifle pointed at his head.

"All right, you two, into the cell and we won't shoot you." Martha climbed off the gasping man, and his friend slowly moved into the cell. "Martha, get his keys."

"You'll be fine," Martha said. "I prescribe about twenty minutes of rest and a new career option." She grasped the key ring and locked the cell door as Gwen covered the guards. They hurried across to the other cell. "Time to go, boys."

Moments later, Perry and Jack joined them in the corridor. Gwen kept her gun. She nodded to the next set of cells. "Johnson?"

"Leave her," Perry said, and Jack said, "Give her the keys."

Martha unlocked Johnson's cell but did not open the door. Gwen said, "Come or go, we're not staying for you."

Jack came up beside Gwen. "Did you have more of a plan than get the gun and get out of the cells?"

"I figured you'd improvise something."

Perry said, "Never mind, I'm going back to my cell."

"More your arse," said Johnson, coming out of hers. "This way." Without waiting, she struck out in
a different direction than the guards had brought them.

Gwen looked at Jack, but Jack wasn't in a place where he could make decisions, and he followed Johnson. "They're going to be here any minute," he said in a low voice. "Do whatever you have to and get Martha and Perry out. Don't stop for me, don't worry about me, just take whatever opening you get. I want the three of you safe. Understood?" He placed a hand on her shoulder like a robe, like a mantle. How many times had he left her in charge in his absence? What absence was he planning this time?

"We need you with us." She kept her voice as low.

"Get them out," he repeated, and Gwen recognised an order when she heard one.

Voices up ahead prevented her from responding. Jack waved them back behind the last corner. Johnson stayed put in the centre of the hallway, arms folded. He gestured at her to no avail, then joined Gwen around the corner.

"Conserve your bullets," he mouthed at her. She nodded.

"Halt!" said a voice from Johnson's position.

"You idiots, the prisoners have escaped." Her voice dripped derision and authority. Even Gwen felt her own spine straightening in fear. "They went out the other end of the prison block. They're armed."

"Ma'am?" asked someone. "What's going on?"

"I just told you. The prisoners escaped because someone was stupid enough to leave the cells unlocked. Go to the other end and you might not find yourself on the wrong end of a hearing!"

"Yes, ma'am." The footsteps hurried in the other direction, away from them.

The four of them shared a glance as Jack quietly counted to fifteen. "Come on."

Johnson was gone, as were most of the guards. One lone guard remained on duty outside the cellblock. Unfortunately, he saw them as soon as they saw him, and his weapon was already up. Jack fronted the group as a decoy. Gwen watched the bullets slam into him, and her own took out the guard's shoulder as Jack fell dead to the floor.

She stood over the stricken guard as he clutched his wound. "Tell us the way out. Do it now or your other shoulder will match and I can aim lower."

He didn't answer, only lay there whimpering, watching her with scared eyes. Gwen steeled herself. She could do this. She'd shot people, shot aliens. Most of the time, they'd been shooting back.

Behind her, Martha huffed as she helped Perry lift Jack's body to a half-carry. Martha was tiny, and Perry wasn't a big man. Gwen prayed Jack came around quickly. She shifted her hold on her gun. "You have to the count of five to tell us the way out. One. Four."

The door beyond them opened, and Gwen cursed. She raised her gun. She wasn't going back without a good fight. Gwen had faced down Daleks and Cybermen.

"Stay behind me!" she said to the rest. She aimed.

"Don't you dare shoot me, Gwen Cooper, you daft woman!"
Shock ran through her. She lowered the gun. "Rhys?"

***
Chapter 6

This wasn't the first time Rhys had come face to face with a gun in the hand of the woman he loved, and he'd be just as bloody furious as the last time if he wasn't so pleased to see her alive. Other troubles forgotten for the moment, he pulled her into a fierce hug and a quick peck of lips.

"Miss me?" he asked.

"Curious what took you so long."

He glanced back. "Jack dead?"

"For now. There's worse." Her face clouded over, and he nodded.

"I heard. I'm sorry, love. He was a good man."

"Did you find them?" Tish came up behind him. Mickey had taken out two of the guards on their way in, and Tish had grabbed their weapons. She looked a bit silly in her business suit with a machine gun, but Rhys wasn't stupid enough to say it out loud.

"You shouldn't be here," said Martha, before hugging her sister.

Rhys grabbed Jack under the other arm to help Perry carry him. Gwen and Tish took the lead.

"Where are the rest of the guards?" Gwen asked quietly.

"Dunno. Most of them ran off in the other direction. We only had our two tour guides, and they'll be sleepin' that off for a bit."

Mickey waited for them at the entrance. The back of the hearse was open and ready.

"Everybody in."

A bullet ricocheted off the back of the van, and a second took out the back window, as Mickey gave Martha a hand up. Rhys, not one to miss a chance, repositioned his own dead man's carry of Captain Courageous to make sure the bullets hit Jack instead of him.

Gwen fired back, scaring the first assailant behind cover. That was his girl, and if he hadn't been busy trying not to get killed, he'd be puffing up his chest in pride. Instead, he dumped Jack unceremoniously into the van, heard the wake-up gasp of air, and slammed the door.

The instant his arse touched the seat, he changed gears and floored it. This van was designed for sedate driving, the respectful carriage of the dead. Now it was filled with tumbling people, and his wife aiming out the busted back window, hurling foul-mouthed epithets like she did when the match was on.

"Hang on!" he shouted, fuelled with adrenalin and not a little madness, as he drove as fast as the poor little engine would carry them back towards the gate. Some idiot of a soldier boy stood in front of the gate. Rhys didn't slow down. The kid was bright enough to dodge out of the way right before the van roared through the gate, scratching and scraping the broken wooden rail.

There was no way they could outrun the military vehicles sure to be in pursuit.

"Go left." Jack had climbed up to the front, heedless of the jerking and jostling.
"You're dead. You don't know where we are."

"I've been here before. Left now!"

Muttering about intergalactic know-it-alls, Rhys yanked on the steering wheel, throwing the rest of them into the side of the van.

"And watch the corners," Jack chided. "There's an access road down here."

"They'll hunt us down."

"Maybe not."

The gravel-paved access road slowed them down. Rhys could only drive so fast when the wheels threatened to skid out from beneath them. Every few seconds he checked his mirrors, watching for pursuit. There was no way they wouldn't be followed.

"Go right," Jack said. Rhys hadn't even seen the little dirt road leading away deep into the trees. The middle of nowhere, this was, and night fallen around them, and Jack seemed to know the space like his own flat. The dirt slowed them down further, but with every metre, Rhys felt his hopes rising nonetheless. This was going to work. They were going to escape. Bloody UNIT, they'd show them.

With a loud thump, the van skidded and came to a stop.

"Tyre," said Rhys. He climbed out to confirm, Jack following. The front left tyre had punctured and shredded on a tree root. "Check for a spare."

"No time," Jack said, pointing down the road. Rhys couldn't see anything, but he heard the engines. Jack slammed a palm on the side of the van. "Everybody out!"

The wooded area was Rhys's idea of Boy Scout Hell, but he took Gwen's hand and ducked through the undergrowth as fast as his feet would carry him. "Stay together," Gwen said, but Jack shouted, "Split up!"

Gwen tugged Rhys closer. "Like hell. Rhys, where are we?"

"Ferndale. The Clydach Reservoir isn't far."

"All right. Jack! If we're separated, we'll meet back at Cardiff."

Rhys squeezed her hand. "We oughtn't be anywhere near Cardiff." Perry came up behind them, joining their flight. He'd come over for Christmas on Gwen's invitation: nice bloke, quiet, making the best of his life in the future. He'd stayed at a Torchwood-owned safe house when he'd first come to 2009. Rhys said, "The safe house!" Martha had been there. As long as Mickey and Tish stayed close to her or to Jack, they'd come to the same location.

They ran. Rhys lost track of everyone but Gwen and Perry. He hated this, hated the woods, hated all of it, but the three of them pushed through together. For a while, he heard the sounds of soldiers, but the voices faded away as dusk turned to full night.

Finally, exhausted, they found a small clearing. Gwen sat down, her back against a log, eyes closing in weariness. Rhys plopped down beside her, back and legs aching. He was still in his mortician's suit, hopelessly ruined now with stains and rips.

Perry took a quick walk around the small area. "We'll need better shelter." He rubbed his arms.
"We're warm now from running, but we can't stay out in damp clothes tonight."

Gwen started shivering beside Rhys, and he wrapped his arms around her.

"We'll rest for a while," she said. "We can't go on much longer. It's a clear night." She pointed. "That's the North Star. If we head south, we can reach a road. Then we just need a car."

Perry said, "And how do you suppose we'll get one?"

"Simple." She closed her eyes and leaned back. "I was a copper, you know. You learn tricks. I can get us into a locked car in under a minute, and I can hotwire it in under five."

Rhys was getting used to Perry's confused face. "Hotwire?"

"I'll show you."

***

Mickey had lost sight of everyone. Some rescue mission this was, but he'd never have been able to forgive himself if he hadn't tried. Given the growing darkness, and his complete lack of direction, he would just about succeed in getting himself hopelessly lost and picked up.

Some days, he thought he'd have been better off back in the other universe. Sure, he'd been feeling aimless there, and watching Rose get all cuddly with her new pet Doctor would have been about as pleasant as a root canal, and his Gran was gone, and ... Okay, this universe wasn't half bad, leastways most of the time.

He paused to catch his breath against a tree. Once upon a time, he'd thought about heading off to the woods, becoming that kind of man who lived off the land and cut his own firewood, and wasn't beholden to anybody. But Mickey knew himself to be a city boy through and through, and he was lost. He heard someone approaching, and hid as best he could in a crouch. It was dark. Maybe the searchers wouldn't find him, and if they did, he'd give them what for before they took him in.

Jack and Martha appeared. Mickey relaxed. As he stood up, Jack went into fight mode and almost clubbed him before Mickey hissed, "Stop it! It's me!"

"Thank God," Martha said. She was breathing hard and she looked haggard. Martha had walked across the Earth, Jack had told him, but Mickey guessed she hadn't been carrying an extra stone of baby weight at the time.

"Where's the others?" asked Mickey.

Jack said, "I heard Gwen and Rhys go off. I saw Tish and Perry with them."

Martha sat down beside the tree. "Tom's going to be out of his mind worrying. Mum, too."

Jack said, "Tell them to blame me if they want."

"They will. Did you know, Tom actually implied you and I were having an affair?" She sighed.

Jack helped Martha back to her feet. "Good thing we found ourselves a chaperone then."

Mickey glanced at them. Sure, Martha and Jack flirted, but Jack flirted with everyone. Scratch that. Jack used to flirt with everyone, but Mickey had seen him turn down a hot ginger Time Lady, and he hadn't even been untoward or grabby around Rose. If anything, Jack treated Martha like his little sister, and Mickey like an annoying but loved little brother. He wasn't the same man he'd once been.
Martha could explain that to her bloke, it wasn't Mickey's business.

Mickey said, "If we can get back to the car, we can drive. I hid it so they might not've found it yet."

As they walked, Mickey stayed close to them, but at a knowing glance from Martha, he made an effort to drop back a few paces and give them the illusion of a little privacy as she took Jack's hand.

"How are you holding up?" she asked him in a low voice.

At first, he had his usual bullshit, "Fine," but even in the dark, Mickey could see Martha's disbelief, and it melted Jack like butter in a microwave. "I've been better."

"If you want to talk about it ... "

He cut her off. "I can't. Not ... not now." Without his hero façade, Jack was smaller in the dark forest. "I'll find a way to get all of you to safety. I swear. But after that, I don't know." He was quiet, and the only sounds were the few animals still stirring in the winter cold, and their footsteps through last autumn's decayed leaves. "I may need to ask a favour of you."

"Anything. You know that."

"I'll want you to make a call for me. The Doctor offered me a ride. I think I'm done with Earth for a while. Maybe a long while."

They continued walking. Martha said, after a long time, "I can call him."

***

She was utterly, hopelessly lost. Tish had gone camping exactly once, out with the Guides in a tent with three other girls, and she remembered nothing. Tonight dusk had taken away her bearings, and she'd lost the rest following Gwen and her husband. When they'd run too far out of sight, she'd doubled back, hoping to catch up with Martha or Jack or Mickey or anyone.

At last, she gave herself up for lost, and sat down. One lesson from the Guides had stuck: when lost in the woods, stay put. Someone will find you.

She heard footsteps crackling through the trees, and breathed a sigh of relief. In this darkness, she couldn't ...

They had a torch. None of her friends had a torch. Before she could run, a hand clamped on her arm, and squeezed hard enough to grind bone, dragging her closer. Tish was ready to strike with her knee but she saw his gun. She relaxed, with an effort.

"Good girl." She didn't know his face or his voice. He shined the light into her eyes, blinding her. "Call your friends."

"I don't know where they went."

He squeezed her arm harder. "Then scream. They'll come for you." She clamped down on her pain, staring through him as the agony shot up into her shoulder. Yes, if she cried out, if she screamed, they would come back for her. Which was why she wasn't going to scream, if she had to bite off her own tongue to prevent herself.

He pulled her close, and she could smell his sweat, stale and unpleasant. "I'll break it. And if that doesn't work, I can find other ways to make you scream. Trust me."
Deep inside herself, Tish had a place she could go. When Dr. Lazarus had murmured his insidious little comments, when the Master had taken her hand and brushed her hair from her face, Tish could flee into her own locked room and scream inside at the mental walls. She’d never been raped, but she knew the fear in her belly, and she remembered the gentle, mocking whisper spoken only for her ears: the monster was saving her up like a sweet. "When your annoying fly of a sister is dead, when my rockets have launched to seize the universe in my name, when the Doctor knows he has well and truly lost everything forever," his breath had tickled the hair on her neck, "then your good behaviour, my dear, will determine whether I make your parents watch." His lips had brushed her skin, feather-light, and no matter how much she’d washed, she’d felt unclean until she’d fled from her revulsion into that dark, inner room, and bolted the door.

The pressure on her arm increased. She closed her eyes.

"Stand down!"

Another soldier appeared behind the first. "Sir," said her captor, "I have one of them."

"I can see that. Miss Jones, if I'm not mistaken. We're under orders not to injure any of the prisoners, particularly Miss Jones and Doctor Jones. Unless you've forgotten?"

"No, sir." The pain in her arm remained, and with a grin, he let her go. Tish drew her arm in and rubbed the throbbing away. She would have to wear long sleeves until the bruises faded. It wasn't the first time.

The soldiers were under orders not to hurt her or Martha. Because they weren't Torchwood, or because Mum had already got through to someone? She had no way to know, but she hoped nonetheless.

"Miss Jones, I'll allow you to walk yourself. But you are under arrest and in our custody, and don't think about running."

***

Mr. Gloucester examined the number on his mobile before answering. "This had better be important."

"They've escaped," said the Governor.

Anger thrilled through him, but he kept his voice calm. "And how did that happen?"

"Cooper's husband, sir. He and Smith mounted a rescue. They also freed the Carters. I have some good news," she said hurriedly. "Letitia Jones was helping them. We've captured her."

He made a fist and relaxed it. One remained out of several prizes, but this was a valuable catch: Letitia Jones with her wide eyes and pretty little pout. "Put out a manhunt for the others. Use the terrorist cover story. Send Miss Jones to Cardiff."

"Are you certain?"

"There are cells in the Torchwood base. I'll want her close by." Should Letitia not be an acceptable offering, he could request she be made part of his own payment for his loyalty. "In the meantime, we need to secure the Torchwood base in Scotland. If our plans do not work as hoped, perhaps something there will aid us."

"Acknowledged."
Alice signed the visitors' log with a false name, then let the nurse lead her to Frank's room. The first bed was empty, with rumpled sheets. The second was hidden behind a curtain. "Thank you," Alice said to the nurse. "We'll be fine from here."

She edged around the curtain. An old man, wisps of white hair around his wrinkled face, lay dozing. Blue veins stood in contrast to paper-thin pale skin. Medical equipment lined the wall behind him, monitoring. With a sharp, unexpected sadness, she realised how near to death he was. Perhaps he'd be safer here. She turned.

"Who's there, then?" His voice was reedy, but awake.

She looked at him, trying to smile. "Frank? You're Frank, right? Not Sam?" Even as she asked, she traced the features, the line of his jaw and the curve of his eyes, and if Jack could grow old, this was the man he'd be.

"Sam's gone to the common room. Only time I get my own space these days. Did you need him?"

"Frank, it's Alice." She went to his bedside, taking in the framed pictures of his children and grandchildren. His family. Alice's family.

"Alice?" He blinked in confusion, and then a smile lit his face, shining through the age, very clearly the image of their father. "I'm so glad," he said, patting her hand. "So glad. Why did you come?"

"Jack's in trouble." He greeted this news with a sigh. "Someone is trying to hurt him. They kidnapped me and my son, and I'm afraid they'll come after you next."

"No-one knows about me, dear. Except the two of you, and that teenager he's dating." His eyes got wider. "Oh, the phones. They're going to use the phones."

"You know about that?"

"They do it all the time on Law & Order." He sat up, and she helped. "Jack hasn't met my children. They can't be held against his good behaviour. That's what this is about, yeah?"

"Yeah."

He pulled at an electrode with tired fingers. "Help me get free of this mess before Sam comes back. Do you have a car?"

"Better."

***

Ianto hadn't felt comfortable sending Alice alone with Hart to fetch her brother, but there was no good alternative. She was right; Frank was a liability. Even if they didn't use the phone records, Phil had mentioned him in front of the team. If Alice and Steven weren't available to be used as pawns, Frank was the next logical choice.

Ianto spent his time worrying, minding Steven with half an eye, and booting up all the defensive systems on the property. Hart's VM could get in and out, but anyone else who tried would soon find themselves perforated, blown up, or vaporised. He left Alice the codes to deactivate everything just in case.
As Ianto scanned for news, his heart gave a jump: the prisoners had just been reported missing. A massive manhunt had been ordered to recapture them, not just Jack, Gwen and Perry, but Martha, Mickey, and even Johnson, with Rhys listed as a Person Of Interest in their escape. Ianto himself was listed as deceased. So was Trent. No mention of Lois or Rupesh.

With a sinking feeling, Ianto hacked into one of Mainframe's remote systems using Tosh's credentials. He'd deleted her login after her death, then had been surprised and heartbroken all over again the following month when an automatic systems from her secondary account had sent him a reminder. He hadn't been able to bring himself to delete that one as well. Now he could use it to track recent activity at the Hub.

Someone was attempting to access the Rift manipulator. Flashbacks to Abaddon pummelled his conscience.

Lois and Rupesh had both logged on within the past two hours. As he watched, Rupesh signed on. There remained a chance the two of them were friendlies and had chosen to stay behind in order to help free Jack and the rest. Ianto wanted to believe. He liked Rupesh well enough, despite Jack's misgivings, and Lois was his friend as well as his protégé. She'd become a confidante of sorts after their mutually friendly one night stand months ago. But someone had been leaking information, and as the despair bloomed, so did his certainty. Who knew better than he what secrets the secretary kept?

In Tosh's account, Ianto opened an IM window to Rupesh. "I see what you're doing." Then he logged off and scrubbed the access trail.

Alice, Frank, and Hart materialised in the front hallway. Frank wore his hospital gown under a dressing gown, and his skin sagged on him in a way that made him look even more frail than the last time Ianto had seen him. He hurried to Frank's side, helping Alice lead him to one of the near rooms.

"It's good to see you again. I'm sorry for the circumstances."

"You again, eh?" Frank managed an impish smile. "But it's been more than a week."

"Very funny," said Ianto, as Alice said, "I know, I know, it's incredibly odd."

"It's not that odd." Carefully, he helped Frank sit down.

Alice said, "Jack and my mother dated for six months."

"I don't know if he properly courted my mother. She told my brother and me he offered to marry her once, but she didn't think he was serious." Frank took a few deep breaths. "I'm not ready to rest yet. I've heard so much about this place. I always wanted to see it."

"Alice can give you the grand tour later. Alice, I need to show you a few things before John and I leave."

"You're going?" Ianto wondered if he imagined the disappointment in Frank's voice. "But we've just arrived."

"Jack's in trouble. I have to find him." That one fact drove him, and had not changed. "The three of you will be safe here." He hoped. "Alice?"}

"Steven, in here, please." The little boy scampered into the room. "Steven, this is ... " She paused. "This is Uncle Frank. I'd like you to stay with him while Mr. Jones shows me something. Be very good."
"Yes, Mum." Steven climbed onto the bed and sat next to Frank. "Hello."

"Hello, Steven. Your mother's told me so much about you."

"Are you my grandfather?"

That caught everyone's attention. "No," said Frank. "Why do you ask?"

"Mum talks about my grandfather sometimes." Steven looked at Alice. "Just yesterday you said you were going to kill him the next time you saw him."

"Don't mind what I say," said Alice. "Now be good for Uncle Frank."

Ianto led her to the control room. "The system is fairly intuitive. The grounds are watched here, the weapons stores are here but you should keep the doors locked when you're not in there. You and Frank should arm yourselves. Did Jack teach you how to fire a gun?"

"No. Mum did."

Once again, he fitted a new piece into his mental puzzle picture of Lucia. This wasn't the time nor the place, but he expected to die soon, and he wanted to know. "How badly would your mother have hated me?"

Alice examined him from head to toe, then gave a half-shrug. "She wouldn't have noticed you." That hurt, but not as much as it could have. "Dad never brought any of his lovers to meet us. I met a few by accident on weekends he had custody. He said he was babysitting for a friend." She cleared her throat. "If she thought you were worth it, she'd have warned you not to get too involved, and told you he's dangerous, but I'm guessing it's too late to warn you."

"A bit." He gulped air. "John and I are headed to the Hub. If I can get into the systems on-site, I may be able to track Jack, or help him in some way." He had no other ideas. Jack could vanish from sight, could vanish from the world, but Ianto would spend the rest of his life if he must searching for where he'd gone. Mainframe was his best place to start. If nothing else, Ianto could raid the Archives for more weapons to defend the estate here.

"Or you'll be caught and executed."

That had occurred to him as well. "Which is why you're safer here than with us. Do what you have to." He showed her one more thing. "And if the worst comes down, we have one last surprise."

***

Rupesh startled as the chat box appeared and Dr. Sato typed: "I see what you're doing."

"What's wrong?" Lois came up behind his chair. He pointed.

"She's dead."

Lois shivered. During the incident four months ago with the ghost bracelet, Ianto had heard Dr. Sato's voice, and he'd told Lois later down the pub that he'd heard her again even when the bracelet was deactivated. Voices in his head, he'd said, and taken a long drink. She knew about his mother from his records, and understood his real fear, but as that hadn't been knowledge she should have access to, she'd merely promised not to tell Jack or Gwen.

"It's probably an automatic watchdog programme." Still, she felt Sato's eyes on her from across the
Hub: the snap of Sato and Harper that Gwen had taped to her workstation but for some reason had not taken with her to Scotland.

Rupesh didn't buy the explanation. "I thought Fletcher scrubbed the last of those."

"And he missed one. Call him in prison and complain if you want."

Mr. Gloucester appeared at her elbow, and she hid her own startle. "That may be a problem," he said.

***

Being the only one of his colleagues who still believed in Hell, Perry was certain that lifting a car from a church parking lot no doubt bought him a ticket directly to those crimson-hued gates. Gwen hadn't been put out in the slightest, even taking obvious enjoyment in showing Perry how to remove the steering column and which wires to attach. Once he saw the method, the system made perfect sense.

"You were a policewoman?" he asked incredulously. "What do they train the police to do these days?"

"Ah, well." She looked outside the car window to where her husband kept watch. "Y'see, there are generally two main reasons you find someone going into police work. My mate Andy's dad was a copper, and so was his granddad."

"What about your dad?"

"The other way," she said, without answering, "is to be a hellion in your teens, spend quality time in police stations, and straighten up enough to want to do it later."

"You stole cars?"

"Just one. I got caught before I got the second running." She coughed. "I was young and stupid, and it could have gone a lot worse for me. Useful skill, though."

The engine purred under them, and without even thinking, Perry listened for engine knocks and pings, diagnosing the little defects that would go wrong in six months or a year. Gwen glanced at him, and Perry nodded. This would take them as far as they needed without trouble.

"Let's go."

***

Mickey and Martha took opposite sides of the street to watch. Martha was uncomfortably aware of the CCTV cameras in the area, two of them pointing in Jack's direction, but they had no means of turning off the signal, nor of wiping the records. Odd, she thought, how working with UNIT and Torchwood had got her used to surveillance being optional and within her control rather than the other way around. Fortunately, no-one was about at this hour in Pontyprydd. Jack waved his okay, and the three of them headed towards the car.

"Good news," he said as they got in. "Five hundred pounds. We won't starve. That's not fun, let me tell you."

Martha asked, "What does this make our tally?"
"Mickey stole the car in London, he's evading capture and we broke out of prison. I just robbed a cash point. He and I are looking at eight to ten. You can get off with a plea."

Mickey said, "I'm not sharing a cell with you, Jack."

"Once this is over, we can deal with the records and put things back. It'll be fine." He'd lost his smile again. "When we reach Cardiff, we'll find a car park and get some sleep."

"What about the safe house?" Martha had pleasant memories of the place. It was simple, but functional for their needs, and she longed for a bed.

"I'll case it before we go in. We can't be sure the location hasn't been compromised. If we're lucky, they won't bother looking, but I won't risk the rest of you until I'm sure Lois hasn't already told them about it."

Mickey drove. "Funny thing, you trusting her. I thought you didn't trust people."

"I do," Jack said, stretching out. "I trust the two of you."

Martha said, "Lois was sent by the home office, though." She hadn't processed her anger yet. She'd liked Lois, and she couldn't imagine the sweet, mousy PA as a traitor who'd murdered one of their friends. Martha wanted to believe there'd been some mistake, that Jack had misunderstood, but she didn't see how.

She wondered if Jack thought she was blaming him. She added, "You couldn't have known."

"I should have."

They each drifted inside their own thoughts as the dark road rolled by. Martha could feel her emotions getting the better of her again. She'd been in worse situations than this. Yes, she was on the run, far from home, and she missed Tom fiercely, but the world wasn't ending around her. She stole another glance at Jack's closed-off expression, his responsibilities to the rest of them choking him like a boa constrictor and leaving him no space to howl in pain and grief.

She would see Tom again, if she had to move the Earth itself to do it. Why not? She'd done it before.

***

She was dragged into the Torchwood Hub in the middle of the night. Tish was tired, hungry, and frightened, and they had covered her head with a bag for the trip. Laughable: if she was going to Torchwood, she knew where the base was. Her sister had worked there. Her friend ran the place and emailed her dirty jokes from his work account.

When the bag was ripped off, she stood in the centre of a large room with an antique train station-cum-mad-scientist's-secret-lair motif, the space filled with equipment she didn't recognise. Above her, a large creature she couldn't see made unhappy noises.

As she waited with her captors, someone stepped out of a room on the top level, an all-glass enclosure with incongruously green plants.

"Miss Jones."

Tish's eyes went wide. "You!"

***
Gwen left Rhys and Perry in the car park two streets over from the safe house. She couldn't remember if they had anyone living there at the moment. The usual safe house residents were humans involved in minor incidents who nevertheless needed extra observation to ensure the Retcon held or to see if they needed to be relocated to Flat Holm for more intensive measures. Those decisions were made by Jack and enacted by the admins. The last thing the fugitives needed right now was to blow their cover by frightening some poor dear whose only crime was being in the wrong place when a Hoix got nasty.

Gwen put on an absent expression, made herself fall into the role of any other busy person on this street late at night, nothing to see here.

On her first walk past, she looked for any sign of lights poking out from between the blackout curtains, past the high privacy hedge. She couldn't see anything, a good sign. She walked to the end of the street, waited a few minutes, and began walking back.

As she neared the building, an arm grabbed her.

Gwen kicked out immediately, but a hand clamped firmly over her mouth as a powerful grip took her legs. "Sh," she heard, and she was tugged around to see Jack pulling his finger over his mouth.

He pointed. There was a gap between the curtains here, and she could see lights. She could also see the people moving from across the street towards the door, and them.

"Come on," he whispered, grabbing her hand. Together they fled into deeper darkness, until they were well clear. "I was checking the place before you got here. We can't use it."

She nodded, disappointed. "We need another location. Ianto mentioned a warehouse?"

She felt the tremor run through him at Ianto's name, a weakness he fought not to show, but his hand in hers betrayed him. She should have said it another way, but her mouth always ran half a mile ahead of the rest of her, Mam had told Gwen since she was small. "I mean ... "

"The warehouse is in the official records," Jack said in a soft, stiff voice.

"Jack, I'm sorry."

"Please don't."

She brushed the objection away. She needed to say this out loud for herself. "He was so brave, you'd have been so proud of him. As soon as we realised what was happening, he did everything he could to get me safe. But Lois poisoned the coffee she sent with us, and he had too much. The sense-memory returned: his knocking the flask away from her before she could drink. "He couldn't run, so he distracted them for me to get away."

Jack's grip on her hand had grown stronger as she spoke, and her bones ground together. With a force, she pulled away, massaging life back into the muscles and tendons.

She couldn't find words to apologise for what she'd never said out loud. For two years, she'd believed, or let herself believe, that whatever Jack had with Ianto wasn't worth half of what she had with Rhys. Inside the privacy of her own head, she'd watched them, assuming Jack had settled for an easy shag and Ianto had taken whatever scraps he might find after Lisa's death. Every time they squabbled, she'd viewed it as more proof of their incompatibility while her own quarrels with Rhys signified how two adults jostled a complex relationship into equal places for both. Gwen had waited patiently for the inevitable break-up, when Jack decided he wanted more excitement or Ianto decided he needed a lover who was more steadfast. She'd been so certain until she'd been to their home and
seen contradicting evidence all around her, until Ianto had told her they were taking a break and she couldn't stop thinking about Jack touching his hand.

How could she ever apologise for failing to notice her two best friends had fallen in love right in front of her nose? And what did she say to Jack now that it was too late for them?

They were almost at the car. Jack said tightly. "You're parked close to here?" She nodded. "Meet me at 34 Lady Mary Road. Can you get there?"

She nodded again. "Another safe house?"

"In a way."

***

Mickey was dead on his feet by the time they parked in front of the block of flats. Jack helped Martha out of the car. "Park two streets over and come back," he ordered, not even bothering with a "please" or whatever. He'd come back from his look-around at Torchwood's safe house in an even worse mood than he'd gone, and gave directions in a clipped voice. Mickey kept reminding himself that Jack was having a bad day, and wasn't being a dick on purpose, and Martha could bloody well deal with him if he was.

A few minutes later, he'd jogged back to find Jack coming up with something from under a rock.

"House key?" asked Mickey, and Martha nodded.

"He owns the flat."

"I own the whole building. Joshua Harding, if anyone asks," Jack said, as another car pulled up beside them.

All three tensed, and then Rhys's distinctive voice came through the small garden: "Is this it, then?" He got out of the car. Mickey heard two more doors in the dark.

"Over here," Martha said, then craned her neck, as Gwen and Perry came over with Rhys. "Where's Tish?"

Gwen said, "Isn't she with you?"

Alarm soaked into Martha's voice, and Mickey placed a careful hand on her arm as she said, "We thought she was with you."

"That's a problem," said Rhys.

Martha said, "We have to go back."

"Can't," said Mickey. "We don't know where she's gone."

"Everyone inside," said Jack, loud enough to get their attention. "Now." He held the door open and ushered the others into the building. "Quiet." They hurried up the stairs to the top floor, and Jack unlocked the door to one flat.

He turned on the overhead light. "The place been empty for a while. The last tenants left in a rush."

"Rift?" asked Perry.
"No, they owed someone money." Jack sat heavily onto the sofa and closed his eyes.

Mickey took a quick look around. The flat was furnished with simple, plain items. No linens, nothing in the fridge, and a glance in the loo made him glad to be a bloke; the girls would be wanting for bog roll soon enough. But Jack seemed to think it was a good hideout. They needed something: a quick check of their stolen weapons showed they were out of ammunition.

Jack said, "There's one bed in the back. Martha and Gwen can kip in there, the rest of us are out here."

"We can't stay here long," said Gwen. "People will notice."

"We'll split off again in the morning. I need to get the rest of you out of the country. When that's done, I'll turn myself in, in exchange for Alice, Steven, and Tish." He didn't open his eyes. Mickey had never heard him sound so tired.

"No, you bloody won't," Gwen snapped. "We are getting out of this together, all of us."

Martha looked terribly upset as well. "I should go with you. They're only after Tish because of me." And there was something to that, something more, because Jack did open his eyes then.

"It's not your fault, it's mine. Just like before. We will get her back safely, Martha. I swear."

"We've got to go to the authorities," Gwen said. "The real authorities. This can't possibly be legal."

Perry said, "They said they had charges against us from Lucy Saxon's case."

"Told you," Jack said to Martha, who only shivered.

Gwen said, "We need to fight them."

"Sweetheart," said Rhys, "we'll all think better after a few hours of sleep."

Unsatisfied, Gwen went into the back with Martha, and they shut the door. Mickey heard them talk for a long time, and he thought he heard Martha crying.

In the dark hours just before dawn, from his uncomfortable sleep on the floor, Mickey heard Jack go out alone.
Chapter 7

This was the Hub, and it wasn't. The space was the same -- the abandoned train tunnel, the cavernous walls -- but the water tower was gone, as were all the familiar details: no computers, no Rift manipulator, barely any lights.

Ianto stepped away from John, craning his head to look around. "This is not the right time."

"You sure? Looks right to me."

"Definitely twentieth century. Early end rather than late end."

John flicked his wrist to check his strap. "Eighty years off. Close enough."

"Who's there?" A woman Ianto didn't recognise raised a pistol at them. Her clothing suggested early twentieth century.

"Don't mind us," John said. "We're friends of ... " Ianto stepped on his foot and glowered. John shrugged. "We'll just be going, then." Ianto took his arm and he tapped his wrist strap.

Sickness loomed inside him again, and they were back in the Hub. Still no water tower. "You do know where we're going, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah." He punched buttons. "I don't know why it's acting up." A gunshot rang out over Ianto's head, and he ducked. Torchwood: good at shooting on sight.

They dematerialised again, and reappeared in a Hub filled with equipment Ianto didn't recognise at all: three-dimensional holographic images floating over flat screens. Technicians manipulated the data by staring at it, or so he thought from the quick look around he managed right before someone shouted. They didn't wait around to be hit by a laser blast.

"What's going on?" Ianto demanded, as they appeared time in what looked like the mid-twentieth century.

"No idea. Come on." John hurried down one of the tunnels, and Ianto followed him, just before he heard voices come into the Hub proper. He froze. One of them was Jack.

Before he could even think about turning around, John had taken his elbow and whispered harshly, "If you intend to destroy the universe, I've got loads more fun ways to do it, Eye Candy. Go."

They went deeper into the tunnel, one leading to the hidden boat house. Ianto took the lead. It'd be a safe place for them to rest while John worked out the issues with his gizmo.

The electrical switches Ianto remembered from his time had yet to be installed, but he found candles and matches. He set a candle in its sconce to illuminate the dark space before finding a crate to sit down on at the waterside.

He watched John. "Tell me you didn't break your time machine."

"I didn't break it."

Ianto enjoyed sitting quietly for a few minutes. This oughtn't be difficult: set the date and time and location, show up. Jack had made using time-travelling technology seem easier than starting a car. On the other hand, Jack's VM was broken.
Ianto heard noises down the tunnel. "John!" he whispered, but the other man was already alert, hand on his one visible weapon. Ianto doused the candles. The two of them retreated into the deeper shadows just as a torch light flashed through the cavern.

"I told you," said a voice. Ianto startled. A child? Here?

"We ought to go back." A second child, voice almost indistinguishable from the first, sounded worried.

"Scared?"

"No."

"Come on, then. It'll be dead cool." The children came into view. Two boys, perhaps ten years old, alike in height and face and form.

"What year is this?" Ianto breathed as quietly as he could.

"1932." John watched the children with an unsavoury interest.

The more frightened boy said, "Dad won't like this."

"So we won't tell him." He began stripping off his clothes down to his pants, and with a whoop of joy, splashed into the dark waters of the dock. "Come on, chicken."

The other boy's torch caught his brother's pale, wet face. "I'm not a chicken."

The boy in the water clucked until his brother set down the torch and began removing his own clothes.

"We're going to get into trouble." He crawled into the water and began shivering. Without the direct light, Ianto couldn't see them at all.

John nudged him. "This way." If they couldn't see the boys, the boys couldn't see them, and it was time to make an exit. They'd gone deep into the dark corridor when one of the boys shouted. Ianto pushed back against the wall, although no-one could have seen them.

The shout turned to a cry. He turned around. John's hand grabbed his shoulder. "You can't interfere. You know that."

The cry got louder. Ianto shrugged off the shoulder and edged to the mouth of the corridor, squinting in the low light. Only one of the boys was crying. The other was shushing him. "I'll move the boat if you stop crying, you baby."

"It hurts!"

"How did you even get your foot in there?"

"I don't know!"

There was the sound of someone taking a deep breath and splashing under the water, while the sobbing continued. A minute later, there was another splash. "I can't move it. Wiggle your leg more."

"Ow!"

There were more splashing noises. John grabbed his arm again. "Come on."
One boy climbed out of the water. He peered into the corridor and Ianto didn't breathe. "I'll get Dad," he said, pulling on his shirt and breeches.

"He'll go spare."

"Doesn't matter. You're hurt." He set one of the torches by the dock. "Here. So you're not scared. Sorry," he mumbled. In the darkness he walked right past where Ianto and John stood, not even pausing. Down the corridor, he broke into a run.

"We need to go before company arrives," said John. "Do not think I won't happily leave you here."

The quiet sobbing had started again, echoing in the dark, damp chamber. "We'll go when he's safe. We can't just leave. He might drown before they get back."

"We can and we will. History."

"You've changed history plenty of times. You murdered people."

John shrugged as a small voice said, "Who's there?" Another splash, and then the sound of choking. "Phil! The boat's ... " Another, larger splash. "Help!"

Ianto only paused to toe off his shoes. John swore loudly. "I'm leaving."

Ianto jumped feet-first into the water, and cold knives ran through him. His head went under, filling his mouth and nose with dank bay water, and he bobbed up again, choking.

"Dad?"

"Your dad will be along," he said, shivering. "Frank, right? Let's get your foot free, shall we?"

He took a deep breath and went under again. The darkness was nearly absolute, broken only by a dim, green glow at the surface. As his eyes fought for clarity, he spied the problem: Frank's foot was wedged between the bow of the small ship and the mooring to the underground dock. He'd been too frightened to swim out into the deeper water, and must have kicked wrong. The boat rocked in the small waves coming in from the Bay, pulling him beneath the surface.

Ianto came up for air, spluttering.

"I see the problem. I'm going to shove the boat away, and you have to kick free. Can you do that?"

He waited for the small nod, and went under again. The boat was huge under here, though barely a dinghy. Ianto braced his legs against the mooring and one shoulder against the side of the boat. Lungs aching, he pushed, creating a wider gap, and waited. He couldn't see if Frank was loose. He kept his hold as long as he could, then let go and swam back up, almost catching himself again between boat and dock as he did.

He spit out water. "Frank?"

Above him, a small, squirming figure was already crawling out. Ianto took a deep breath, then hoisted himself out of the water. The torch seemed to glow very brightly now, showing the two of them to be alone. John was gone. Ianto was stranded.

He could worry about that later.

"How are you?" He brushed off Frank's hair and face. At this age and in this light, he looked very much like Ianto had always thought Jack might have as a child.
Frank nodded, shivering and looking at Ianto with wide eyes. "Do you work with my dad?"

"Let's get you back to the Hub." He couldn't let Jack see him now, but he could walk Frank to the better-travelled part of the base and vanish into one of the other corridors before he was spotted.

1932. With John gone, Ianto had no way home. He could fade into the local population, ride out the war when it came, even volunteer. He'd have to stay out of Jack's way, watch him from a distance perhaps, but best to leave him alone entirely. Ianto could write a letter and leave it for him to find in 2010: sorry, detained by time travel, love you. Hadn't Jack given him the idea himself?

Ianto kept his hand on Frank's shoulder as they walked. He wouldn't regret it.

"You're an idiot," John announced from somewhere in the darkness. "Come on." Ianto was pulled free of Frank and before he could say goodbye, he felt the familiar tug, and they were gone.

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"Now when are we?" The versions of the Hub they'd passed through flickered like some flip-motion book or a poorly-thought out movie reel. This version, currently unpopulated, had all the accoutrements he knew, but that meant nothing.

"2007. I'm calling it close enough." John found a seat in the empty Hub and lounged like he belonged there.

"Jack's Vortex Manipulator burned out. Is yours going impotent, too?"

John smirked. "I was wondering why he wouldn't play. The truth comes out at last."

The cog wheel alarm sounded. "Shit. Let's go."

Before John could reprogram his VM, Owen came into the Hub in an obvious foul temper. He stormed past Ianto, didn't see John in the shadowy spot beside Gwen's station. "Tell me you've got the fucking coffee ready, before I kill someone."

Ianto stood frozen. "I ... hadn't started it yet. Just got here myself."

"Then do something about it. I'm doing my fucking job." Against this statement, he'd already sat and opened X-Tube in his browser.

No-one else was about. "I think Jack left you something down in your bay."

"Fuck." Owen threw himself out of his chair and rattled down the stairs. The second he was out of sight, Ianto pointed to a corridor he knew would be empty.

"Go," he mouthed. "I'll catch up."

"Where the fuck did he leave it?"

"He didn't say." Ianto went to the kitchenette, his kitchenette. Everything was still organised his way, and without thinking about it, he got a pot started. He dug through the places he normally kept his sweets stash, and came up with a packet of Hobnobs to offer Owen with his coffee. Ianto would have a drink of his own to wash out the hard lump in his throat.

Owen was already stomping back up the stairs. "I didn't see it."

"Sorry." He watched Owen go back to his desk in an even worse mood. There was no way to
express how Owen would come to treasure his memory of hangovers.

The alarm sounded again. If it was himself, he'd make a dash for it. Tosh and Suzie walked in instead. Suzie walked right past him but Toshiko stopped. "Ianto, why are you all wet?"

"Dangerous encounter with a mop. I'll go change shortly." He smiled, willing himself not to pull her into a damp, inexplicable hug. "Coffee's almost ready."

"Thanks." Tosh went to her desk, and he watched her put away her handbag, fuss with her glasses, and tuck her hair behind one ear. The wave of sorrow washing through him was almost unbearable.

"Tosh, Jack mentioned something about a project for you. Looking for something in the Hub that might interfere with time travel apparatus?"

She swore. "Oh good, I'll just add that to everything else he wants me to do today. Where is Jack, anyway?"

Suzie said, "He went on the pull last night. He's probably hungover in someone's bed."

Owen said, "Sounds fine to me. Where's that damn coffee?"

"On its way." He took out their mugs, trying to remember how Suzie took hers. Fuck it, she could drink it black. Everything went on a tray, Hobnobs and Tosh's favourite chocolates, and a biscuit he found for Suzie. Only Tosh bothered with a "thank you," muttered whilst she scrutinised her data.

Ianto made an attempt not to hover and arouse suspicion. The last thing he needed was for them to realise he was a duplicate. He hoped dusting wouldn't break his cover as he stayed close to Toshiko.

They hadn't been the best of friends, not the kind of mates who'd spent hours together after work gabbing over bottles of wine and cheap takeaway. She'd been too private, and he'd been too wrapped inside his own head much of the time to be good company for anyone except Jack. But there'd been a strong sympathy between the two of them, an understanding the others lacked. He watched her now, remembering the awkward ways she'd reached out to him after Lisa, and how he'd tried the same fumbling kindness for her after Mary. She'd tried to protect him from the meat in the cannibals' freezer, and in turn he'd tried to protect her from the cannibal's filthy intentions. She was brilliant, working magic with her fingers on a keyboard, but she had made time to show him her easier tricks, and treated him like a colleague. He missed her friendship, and her intent frown as she pored over data, and her triumphant expression as she cracked a difficult problem.

"All right, Ianto?" Tosh asked, noticing his stare.

"Sorry. Wool-gathering." He made a theatrical pass over the shelf beside her with his dust cloth. Did he dare make small talk with her? Or was she about to notice the subtle changes he'd undergone in the intervening years?

He turned to straighten up Suzie's area, noting the cross look in her eyes. Drawing Suzie's attention wouldn't be good for either version of him.

"There is something," Tosh said, and he hurried back to her. "Why did Jack want to know?"

"He didn't say. He just said he wanted a report on his desk today or tomorrow." Safe enough. Jack never read reports if he could help it.

Toshiko let out a disgusted mutter at the wasted effort. She knew Jack never read their reports, too.
Ianto leaned past her to look at the monitor, but couldn't decipher the meaning. "What did you find?"

"Dampening field, very faint, two nodes. I wouldn't have picked up on it at all without looking."

"Where?"

"Right here."

The alarm sounded. Ianto slouched away from Tosh and towards the corridor. Jack came in through the cog door, a thin smile on his face. It was past time for Ianto to get out of here. The others didn't even notice his exit.

He met John deep in the bowels of the base. "There's a dampening field with two nodes. I don't know why."

"That'd explain it."

"What would cause it? Something in the archives?" He looked around at the familiar corridor. "I know a place where we won't be seen. You can figure out how to get us out of this mess."

The unused areas of Torchwood's basement had proven an interesting, exhausting study back in the day. He led John unerringly to a doorway he knew too well.

"We can't go inside, but we can sit here."

"What's in there?"

"I used to fall asleep there a lot." He sat on the cold floor. "What would dampen your Vortex Manipulator?"


He thought through everything he'd worked with down in the archives. "We don't have any of those to my knowledge."

John went back to his tinkering. Ianto pondered a life lived this way, in-between times, never finding the correct one. Perhaps John was right. 2007 was much closer than 1932. He had the option to wait around for a few years, keeping John out of trouble as necessary. He could make this work and still arrive in the nick of time to help Jack in 2010.

Or ...

Tosh was still alive. Owen was still alive. He could save them, shield Tosh from Gray's bullet, rescue Owen from Turnmill. Right now, Suzie had started stalking the streets at night with the knife and the glove, but Ianto could stop her before she killed again. The closed door beside him beckoned just as enticingly to save the beautiful princess sleeping in her chamber, even save the naïve, rabbity man he'd been.

Ianto could fix everything.

John looked up from his work, saw where Ianto's eyes had gone, and clucked his tongue. "And this is why he and I were Time Agents, and you're a shaggable bit on the side. You can't fix whatever you're thinking about fixing."

"But we're right here. I saved Frank."
"After I told you not to, and we knew he grew up. Causality. You can't change your own history, Eye Candy. Don't even think about it." He closed his strap. "I can't locate the source. We'll have to ..."

The door opened. Ianto watched himself walk out of the secret room. He scrambled back, but John surged forward and, before the other Ianto could register what had happened, clocked him on the back of the head, hard enough that Ianto winced and touched his own skull in sympathetic pain.

"Don't touch him, unless you fancy being et by a flying bugger." John grabbed the other Ianto under the arms and dragged him back through the open door. "Fuck!"

Ianto followed him fast, coming up short at the sight of John with his gun out, aimed at Lisa. He reacted rather than thought, pushing John's arm away, trying to shut down memories of the last time he was in this room, the last time someone aimed a gun at the woman he loved.

"You can't! Causality. You said."

"That's a Cyberman! Do you have any idea what they do? It'll wipe out the planet by lunch." John's whole body shook, and for the first time ever in Ianto's experience, it was from terror. His face looked deathly pale in the dim light of Lisa's lamp.

Jack had known what the Cybermen really were, aside from the ruins of Canary Wharf. Apparently, so did John.

"She doesn't. She won't. She's going to kill two people, and be put down. Jack will." It had already happened. It had to happen. Ianto looked at her face, sweet and peaceful in the drugged sleep he'd had to keep her in to help with the pain. There was so much longing wrapped up in the still moments they'd shared here, so much lost potential in the whoosh and beeps of the machines that were not keeping her alive but only prolonging her slow murder by the creature inside her.

John stared down at the unconscious form on the floor. "You brought this thing here? And he didn't execute you after?" He prodded the other Ianto with his foot. "He won't even let me have a job."

Ianto stroked the scaffolding where Lisa lay, moving his hand up the cold metal but not touching her. The emotions he'd carefully buried below years of regret and guilt bubbled up like air pockets from a deep, forbidden sea. He'd loved her so much. He still loved the vivacious, intelligent woman she'd once been, who'd taken in his cheap ties and faked cool, and who had still seen someone worthwhile underneath. Lisa, who'd brought him mints so they could sneak kisses in the supply cupboard, trading the sharp flavour back and forth. Lisa, who'd read him passages aloud from whatever psychology paper she'd delved into this time, swinging her bare legs over his. Lisa, who'd been horrified at her hair one morning after a night spent drinking too much with their mates until he'd finally convinced her she could shave her head bald and he'd still think she was the sexiest woman on the planet.

In a drawer amongst the tools he'd brought down here was a small red velvet box with a ring inside. He'd never given it to her, wanting to do the thing properly, waiting for a miracle that never manifested.

John said, "If you're going to shut her off, do it now."

"I never could." He pressed lips against her cool cheek.

"It'd be a mercy."

Lisa's eyes opened, glassy and confused. Ianto had ached seeing his friends again, knowing what
was to come. *This* was torture. She was going to die, and there was absolutely nothing he could do to prevent it except take the moment he had right now. The next time he saw Jack in his proper timeline, Ianto was going to kiss him until neither of them could breathe.

"Ianto?"

"Go back to sleep, love." He stroked her fingers, from her knuckles to the tips of her fingers and the nail polish she'd insisted on. ("If I have to look like this, I am going to coordinate, damn it." He'd endured the curious looks at the Tesco, and painting her nails became just another ritual like bathing her and pretending they were going to get out of this situation alive.)

"What's going on?" Her eyes widened when she saw John and the crumpled form on the floor.

"I've made another adjustment to your medication. Owen says this one may cause hallucinations. I'm so sorry."

She smiled. "You're here. It's a good hallucination."

"I have to go now, sweetheart. They need me."

Her smile grew teasing, even as her voice faded from the sedatives. "Be careful, or I'm going to think you've found another girlfriend."

"There is no other woman I will ever love as much as I love you. I promise." He pressed his mouth to hers once more, remembering all those stolen kisses from their early days and stealing one last kiss from a past he couldn't change.

Then before he tried anyway, he took two paces from her, and placed his hand on John's wrist, and felt the time vortex whisk them away.

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They reappeared in the empty, lonely room where Lisa used to be. The floor was scrubbed clean of blood, the conversion unit was nowhere to be seen. The only way Ianto could tell this was after Lisa rather than before was the light fixtures. He'd installed those himself.


"When in 2009?" Ianto leaned over to see. Early November. They were practically home. "We'll stay. It's a couple of months. We can set up right here."

"Playing house together?"

"No-one comes down here. It's fine." Fate had brought him back to Lisa's room, he would set the living space up again. The routines wouldn't be hard to navigate: Jack went back to the flat every night leaving the Hub unguarded.

"I'm not cooling my heels for three months in a basement to get you home."

"Then leave me here. I can do this myself."

"A deal's a deal. You're coming with me." His slithery tone reminded Ianto too much of the bargain he'd struck.

"Not until you fix your bloody manipulator. In the meantime, I'm going to find us something to eat." He made his way towards the Hub, slowing down to eavesdrop on the team. When a break
presented itself, he'd slip in, grab containers from the refrigerator, and stroll out.

If this was November, Martha would be working with them again. The other Ianto would just have got his cast off, so no worries about pretending to have a broken arm. Lois and Johnson had still been settling into life with Torchwood, and Gwen was still mothering them (more Lois than Johnson).

What else?

An unfamiliar voice echoed down to him, and Ianto's eyes widened. Jack's son Phil had only been with them a short time before returning to 1945. Jack had been so happy to have him back, Ianto remembered. His face had been full of easy smiles, and the end of old sorrows.

"Fletcher," said Phil to someone. "Your records say he went MIA the day we came through. He's supposed to stay here."

Ianto thought very quickly. His feet skidded out from under him as he ran to the morgue the long way, avoiding the others. He punched in the code and wrenched open Drawer 43.

Empty.

Perfect.

He raced back to Lisa's chamber, back to John. "Come on, we're hitching a ride. Hurry!" There was a flurry of activity from the others which they had to avoid, but Ianto knew all the secret passages, and brought them quickly to their destination, out of breath.

"It's here," said Ianto, gasping. "Or, it's not here. That's the important thing."

"I'm not climbing in there with you. You're not that pretty." John nosed around the morgue. "Oy, Crazy Boy is in here. And he's still alive." His hand moved to the life support controls on Gray's chamber. Ianto slapped him away. "If he wakes up, we're all in a world of trouble. You know that."

"He might be the reason Jack comes back here. We can't risk it."

John raised his eyebrows. Ianto dug into his pocket. He'd been carrying around this note as a good luck charm for months, a gift from the future. Reluctantly, he passed it over to John.

"Everything is going to be okay. I love you. - CJH"

"Phil goes back to 1945 today. Jack was supposed to go with him. He was planning to come back here and have Torchwood freeze him until our time. I was going to wake him up from the drawer we picked. But the only thing I found was that." The letter, addressed to Ianto, had been left in Ianto's own drawer, the one he'd chosen for ... The one he'd chosen. "The note wasn't there when I went to check just now. Jack's going to drop by with a working time machine in the next hour or two. We can ask him to take us home."

He smiled in grim triumph.

John flipped the page over, examining it closely. "Did Gorgeous ever tell you about the Time Agency?"

Ianto shrugged. The answer was "No, not really," but he'd be damned if he'd admit to John that he didn't know one of Jack's secrets.
"We did a lot of popping in and out of the time stream. Sometimes you ended up somewhere the future you had already been, and you had to leave yourself a memo."

"Wouldn't that cause a paradox?"

John glared at him. "I'd explain the maths why it's not, but you're too thick to understand."

Whatever. "Jack didn't send it to himself, he sent it to me."

John flipped the letter again. "We all had our unique little codes we used to make sure the sender really was us, and not someone fucking with time. He always used Crazy Boy's birthday."

"And?"

John brushed his thumb over the small mark in the corner, the bit Ianto had never been able to read, that looked like 'Spinach.' Ianto had thought it might be part of a grocery list repurposed as a love letter.

"This is my code."

No. That wasn't possible. "Your code word is 'spinach'?"

"No, my code is in a language you don't know and is none of your fucking business." He'd gone dangerously cold, the way Jack sometimes did, all sharp angles and bad memories and a glimpse of someone who'd tortured and murdered as part of his past profession. He examined the paper, scanning with his strap. "Hendlow fibres. You idiot, you've been carrying this with you? No wonder we were off course."

Ianto snatched the note back. "We travelled fine to get Alice and Frank."

"We did." John scanned the area. "There's another source. Probably the same paper in its original timeline. Have them both together, carry one around in your pocket," he said with venom, "and you may as well shove your thumb up the time machine's arse and call it Sally."

"What happens when there's three? Jack will be here soon."

"Jack won't be here, Eye Candy. He didn't send it. Get it through your skull."

The note had kept Ianto going. When they'd gone on dangerous missions, when he'd fought with Jack, when he'd been shot, he had always been able to pull out this letter, reread the words, and take comfort in the promise. The ink hadn't faded in the water when he'd gone in after Frank. The paper hadn't stained when he'd been shot and nearly bled out. (And that had been a mad scramble, getting the UNIT hospital porters to give him his ruined clothing back before they incinerated it. They hadn't even removed his car keys. Idiots.)

"He had to have sent it. It's how I knew everything would work out. He promised," Ianto added, with a rising note of desperation.

"Nobody gets that kind of promise, and nobody who's ever been a professional time traveller would offer it. And you know this because it's my damn code."

"I don't care if it's your code. It's his handwriting." Ianto read it again, noting the particular loops and swirls: slightly ostentatious, slightly anachronistic. He'd made a study of Jack's writing, especially after he'd gone missing with the Doctor, when Ianto needed to sign for him. Analysis showed a strong personality with undercurrents of masked inferiority, the writing of a man who wanted the
world to believe he was bigger than life when he himself didn't buy it. Ianto was practically an expert at Jack's handwriting.

Fuck.

"I sent the note."

"So send it again so we can get out of here." He scanned the area. "Find the second piece of paper, chuck this one, and we'll go."

Ianto looked harder at the paper. It would have to be something that had been in Torchwood for years, a slightly yellowed paper left amongst hundreds, thousands of other artefacts. "We don't have the time."

"Give me that." John scanned the note again. "Now that we know what we're looking for, I can find it."

The Archives were empty right now; the other Ianto was in Jack's bunker and wouldn't be out for a while, and no-one else came down here. John led them to a filing cabinet. The blank paper was filed with documents from the turn of the last century. Even before he brought it close, Ianto could tell the papers were identical, save for the inscription.

They returned to the morgue. Ianto grumbled as he found a pen then carefully forged Jack's writing. "He is in so much trouble when we get back."

"Why?"

"For not sending the note!" He handed it to John for the Time Agent mark. Then he wrote his own name on the front of the letter and stuffed it into Drawer 43 with bad grace.

Hart laughed. "You're angry at him for something you did to yourself? Now we know who the wife is."

"Fuck you." He still had his own note. "What about this? We know it doesn't get destroyed. We bounced into the future, too."

"Shove it someplace safe." John's head tilted towards Gray's drawer. "Someplace no-one will be looking for a long, long time. Then we get some distance between us and both nodes, the younger you comes looking, gets all dreamy-eyed with hearts and flowers, and we can go."

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Chapter 8

Gwen woke to the smell of bacon. She opened her eyes, confused in the bright room at a bed she didn't recognise and voices coming from the next room. She sat up, groggy. Then she saw Martha open the door from the en suite. "Oh good, you're up. The bacon's ready. Don't mention coffee."

She nodded slowly, blinking, and the events of the last day filtered into her brain. "Why do we have bacon?"

"Jack went out whilst the rest of us were sleeping. He got food and supplies, and I think he must've stolen a laptop. Come on, then." Martha sounded better this morning. Perhaps sleep and the promise of food were helping.

Rhys was dishing up the bacon and toast as they came out. "Ah, there's the missus, always shows up in time for meals. More or less."

She pressed a kiss into his stubbled cheek. "Often less." Gwen grabbed a piece of bacon, burning her fingers on the grease, and blowing before she took a bite. Crispy, greasy goodness warmed her mouth.

Jack had gone again, she noticed. Turning himself into the authorities? Gathering more supplies? Brooding out on some rooftop like a low-rent Batman? "Did Jack say where he went?"

Perry said around his breakfast, "He's gone to see if the off-site facilities have been compromised yet. Storage lockers, he said?"

Oh God, he was raiding the tombs. The bacon curdled in her stomach at the thought. Jack knew where the last possessions of dead Torchwood agents had been locked away, and now he was going through them, one by one, looking for anything to help. It was a good resource, she knew, but she couldn't imagine being surrounded by reminders of all the others he'd lost over the years, not with the newest loss fresh on his mind.

"He'll be all right," Martha said to her quietly, guessing her train of thought. "It's context, that's all." Martha believed Jack needed to remind himself that he'd survived losses before, and he would come out, if not stronger, at least still sane.

Gwen was less sure. Reminded of his long string of dead friends, Jack might finally decide he'd had enough.

Mickey had set up the laptop (stolen? well, Gwen had stolen a car just last night, she couldn't judge) on the formica table. "There's good news," he said to the room at large as Rhys set down a paper towel of food next to him. "Alice and Steven Carter escaped when we did. They're not sure how."

Gwen said, "That's got to be Johnson." She had mixed feelings about this; she'd been certain Johnson was involved in the betrayal, but the woman also been involved in rescuing Jack's family. Gwen would normally encourage someone operating on their own moral compass, but she found the prospect of not knowing whose side Johnson was on unnerving, and potentially disastrous.

"Is there a manhunt out for them?" asked Perry.

"Nope. They were held unofficially, like the rest of us." Mickey smiled grimly. "I intercepted an email, someone wants to call them IRA, but the bosses say no for now."
"Where's Tish?" Martha asked, coming up behind him. She had a piece of toast in one hand.

"Dunno yet. I'll keep looking."

Gwen took a seat on the sofa next to Rhys, and let herself enjoy the simple morning. Their situation was awful, but for the moment, the danger was remote. If she avoided thinking about things, like how much she would love some coffee with her breakfast, she'd almost be all right. Sure enough, as the thought crossed her mind, a small cloud scud?? across the sun, sending shadows through the room.

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Lois managed three hours of sleep when she finally dragged herself home to her flat, none of it good. Nightmares she couldn't define plagued her, and at last, she took a shower, dressed, and drove the SUV back into work.

In one day, so much had changed. Yesterday morning, she had come to this place, and her friends had been here. Even if she had been working against them, she'd liked them despite herself. After the mutiny, she'd been placed in charge and had taken three calls out with her so-called team, and each situation had been brutal, moreso than she'd noticed under Jack's watch. Like the Rift knew something was wrong, she thought, a dog pining for its master.

As daybreak came to Cardiff, Lois was in charge of a mess she had no prayer of understanding, her friends were gone, and one was dead. Another man was also dead. And this was all her doing, and she knew why she'd had to do it, but the morning sunlight was cold and biting and saw everything.

Lois parked four streets away, and she closed her eyes, resting her head. She had to find her own centre, find some measure of controlling her rising terror at the task handed to her, or this city would be devastated. Cardiff had survived only with the protection of those who watched the Rift. Torchwood was the most recent, and the best-funded, but she'd read through their files on the others who'd also watched: Rift-sensitives, like the old witches Jack knew; certain aficionados of the supernatural, many of themselves not entirely human, like Jack; even Bilis Manger, who'd earned his own folder despite Torchwood's uncertainty on what he was.

Now it was Lois's job to watch the Rift and to care for this oblivious, odd city, and she was well out of her depth. But this was the job in front of her. She would do her best.

Once she felt better, she drove to the car park, let herself inside, and began the morning routine. Mr. Gloucester was already in, sitting in front of the Rift Manipulator and ignoring her offers of breakfast. She sighed. If he was going to leave her in charge, Lois would need a PA of her own.

She carried breakfast down to the cells. Janet took her morning offal in bad grace, but Lois was as used to her as she was to the snippy pterodactyl. She took more care with Letitia's meal.

"Good morning," she said crisply. "It's porridge. I brought honey if you want some, and juice. If you'd like coffee, you'll have to wait until the pot finishes brewing like the rest of us."

"Thanks." The woman in the cell took the food and stirred in a dollop of honey. "I'm surprised I'm still alive, honestly."

"No-one is going to harm you, not under my watch. I swear." The words sounded hollow and forced after yesterday. She'd said the same to Jack before she'd heard the news.

"Sure," said Letitia, with as little belief. She ate her porridge and handed the tray back to Lois without arguing or trying to escape. Lois took everything, made a last check of the cells, and headed
"Why are you working for him?"

Something in the other woman's voice pulled her back. Letitia sounded frightened, but more than that, she sounded angry.

"This is my job. Mr. Gloucester is my supervisor."

"Really?" Tish let out a soft laugh. "Would you like to hear about some of the monsters I've had as my supervisors? One of them was a giant scorpion. Another murdered millions of people, and that bastard you work for helped him do it."

Lois shook her head. "There is no record anywhere of Harold Saxon murdering millions of people, or anyone at all except President Winters." But the Captain was still terrified of mentions of Saxon's name, and Martha had risked her life and career to help Saxon's widow because of their shared history. Time loops. It all sounded mad until she'd worked here, and then suddenly, learning that her new boss had rewritten a year of time had made perfect sense.

Tish said, "I was there. I never knew his name. He was one of the few who worked for the Master willingly, like one of the Toclafane. The soldiers all had families. The Master threatened them, even killed their kids and their grannies if they didn't do as they were told. But your Mr. Gloucester worked out how to starve people in the camps more efficiently, whilst working them to death building the Master's rockets. And he enjoyed it. The Master was bad, but he had the excuse that he wasn't human."

Lois could too easily picture this. She'd known men like that in her various assignments, little men drunk on the power they'd snagged. Warlords and gang leaders always had their smart, dapper little sycophants who were just a bit smarter than the other thugs. There was always someone happy to use their particular gifts to secure their leaders' positions in exchange for prominence and compensation. On an assignment three years ago, she'd infiltrated a drugs gang, and discovered barely in time that the ringleader's main toady had been promised the "use" of Lois herself as a reward for his service. The thought still made her skin crawl.

"Did he ever hurt you?" The question was morbid curiosity more than actual inquiry. She didn't elaborate.

Tish seemed to understand the question. "No. The Master threatened me, verbally and worse, but Lucy was his punching bag and pillow. He just liked seeing me scared." She could be lying. She could be making everything up to confuse Lois.

"Were you?"

"All the time. All of us were. My Mum and Dad, Jack too. The Doctor never reacted. I always thought he must be scared, but he never said." She leaned back. "The Weasel. Gloucester. He helped bring in Jack's people. He didn't have a hand in the torture. Didn't want to get his hands dirty. But he helped bring them up to the Valiant and they all died there."

"Mr. Gloucester would never have collaborated with that. He has been working to bring Torchwood to justice."

"For what? Doing their jobs?"

"I don't think you know what goes on here. Did your friends tell you how many times they themselves have endangered the planet?"
Tish was quiet, and Lois thought perhaps she'd won. Then Tish said, "I saw what happened the day they weren't ready. The world was destroyed by an insane alien. I don't think you know what's going on. Do me a favour, as one woman with a slimeball for a boss to another. Find out what's really happening. If this was revenge, the Weasel could have shot Jack's family and friends long ago. He wanted inside Torchwood for a reason."

She walked away from the Perspex, and lay down on the hard bunk, and would not look at Lois again.

Fine. Lois had access to Mainframe. She could take a closer look into things, if only to ease her own conscience.

***

Perry was full of nerves and had nowhere to put them. Jack had been gone for hours, which made Gwen fretful and snappish, and Rhys was responding to her in kind because he knew why she was worried. (The dynamic between Jack and Gwen had always mystified Perry, and he was no closer to understanding it today than he had been months ago. The old Jack he'd known would have made her his lover ages ago, and Rhys as well.) Martha hovered over Mickey's shoulder, waiting for any word on her sister, and not at all pleased to discover a warrant was out for her husband's arrest. For his part, Mickey had grown short-tempered with every inquiry she made, though he was biting down on most of it out of consideration either for her understandable worry or for her condition.

Perry himself kept watch by the curtains, unable to offer better help. He could use a computer, but Mickey was an expert at navigating the layers under the Internet proper, and they only had the one laptop. Given an artefact to reverse-engineer or a piece of electronic equipment to upgrade, there Perry felt at home, but there was nothing here to use until Jack returned with whatever he could scratch up.

And there he was. Perry perked up, seeing Jack with a large shopping bag in one hand. The other hand held the arm of a pretty woman in a sparkly pink boob tube, a tight jacket, and a matching skirt too short for this weather. Not Martha's sister, he could see, but who?

Perry frowned. "He's back. And he's got company."

"What kind of company?" Gwen asked, but they were out of sight by the time she reached the window.

What to say? This was more like the old Jack, burying his sorrows in the arms of his next conquest, but was he stupid enough to bring that conquest here? Perhaps she was a tenant of the building, and she'd run into "Joshua" on his way back. It was unlikely he'd been forced to bring their pursuers to the flat, though if they claimed to have the Carters and Jack didn't yet know they were free, he might. Then again, Perry thought, Jack would move mountains to keep his people safe, and he'd never risk Martha or Gwen.

(Perry had accepted some time ago that Jack was never going to warm to him one hundred percent. There would always be a part of him who wished Perry had gone back to the war to be killed in action instead of Jack's son. Perry didn't blame him, but he kept his own counsel on how best to stay alive and prove himself useful in spite of it.)

Mickey closed the laptop. Rhys placed his hand on the heavy frypan Jack had brought this morning with the food. Martha and Gwen took positions close to the door, and Perry joined them.

The key rattled. "Hi, kids," Jack said in his false-happy voice. Gwen made a fist, ready to strike if
necessary. "Daddy's home, and I brought a friend." He handed the shopping bag to Perry. "This was all I could find. I have some ideas, but I want you to take first crack."

"I'll try." He focused on the woman, the petite dress and shoes that didn't quite go, good makeup, a wavy hairstyle that flattered her. Under other circumstances, his mouth would be going dry and he'd be wondering if she was open to a dance. Under these, he let his brain fill in details that the rest of him had been ignoring at the sight of rather shapely legs, and he came up with an unexpected result. "Hello, Johnson."

As he turned to set the bag down and go through its contents, Perry had the pleasure of watching the facial contortions as the others caught up.

"Hell of a disguise," Jack said, taking a seat at the table. "I walked by her twice without noticing."

"You noticed," Johnson said, taking another seat. "It took you until the third time to look at my face." She nodded greetings to the rest. "We've scouted the entrances to the Hub."

Jack said, "We can get in through the old warehouse. There's a camera but they haven't posted a guard."

Gwen said, "We're going into the Hub?"

"Tish is being held in the cells." He looked at Martha. "We'll get her out. We'll grab what we can while we're in there. Then we're getting out of Cardiff. Anyone who doesn't want to come on the retrieval can wait here and meet us up after."

Mickey looked at Johnson. "What if we don't trust her? Didn't she betray you once already?"

"Twice," Gwen said.

Johnson said, "I have nowhere else to be. According to my former employers, I've betrayed them too. Even if I get away now, they'll find and kill me." The same sharp tone she always used cut through the disguise better than any reveal.

"So why help us?" Gwen asked.

"I want to see the end of this. That's all."

Perry wasn't sure he believed her, but for some reason, Jack did. Perry could follow orders.

***

Mr. Gloucester worked in the main part of the Hub, using the console closest to the Rift manipulator. Lois had to say she was unsurprised, but watching him only increased her unease.

How could this have gone so wrong?

"Sir?" She aimed for perky, polite, and mildly subservient, her usual covert identity. "I had some questions."

"They can wait."

"I don't think they can."

He ignored her. She made her way around him, staying clear of his work. Notes covered the workstation. Dr. Sato's notes, she thought, given the neat handwriting, and more. He had the
blueprints of the machine spread out, the Post-Its Jack liked to use when jotting down important working specifications such as "Never turn this upside-down," and even a pamphlet some long-ago employee had written ("Our Friend, The Cardiff Rift, and YOU!").

"Sir, I've been looking into the files on Torchwood." Behind her, she heard the rush of the water from the fountain. Above them, the pteranodon grumbled to herself. These noises and his fingers on the keys were the only sounds. They were alone. "I believe we made a mistake."

He grunted, pulling up a calculations program in one window and typing in a string of numbers almost as fast as she could.

She said, "I found the arrest warrants for the members of Torchwood in the system. They're being accused of setting the bombs in Cardiff last year, even though Whitehall was apprised of the situation. Captain Harkness's brother and his former partner set the bombs. Torchwood helped with the cleanup afterwards, and their intervention saved the city from a nuclear catastrophe. At no time during my tenure here have I found any evidence to the contrary."

Mr. Gloucester looked up from his station, rolling his eyes heavenward as though Lois pained him with minor details. "The warrants were created in order to bring them into custody. With the nature of Torchwood's activities, we couldn't very well arrest them for conspiring with aliens, could we?"

He said the last in a tone that implied, 'Run along, little girl.'

Lois continued, "Yes, sir, but they haven't been charged with anything else. And I can see why. When you briefed me for the mission, you told me they were responsible for the near-destruction of the planet on numerous occasions."

"They were."

"Yes, sir, but you failed to tell me they were investigated and exonerated in each case. For example, in the wake of the Abaddon incident, which led to the loss of hundreds of lives, Torchwood took full responsibility." She knew enough about the time frame -- and about how reports got written around here -- to understand Gwen and Ianto must have written it up together and signed Jack's name where needed. "Although Her Majesty's advisors weren't pleased with what had happened, they determined the team had been acting under outside influences which had been eliminated at the same time as the threat." They'd even received a small commendation for their unique solution to the problem, tucked away in the middle of the reprimand.

With free rein in her searches, she'd also uncovered more details of the otherwise incredibly sparse report about the Cyberwoman incident. Thing the first, Ianto's girlfriend, possibly fiancée, had been a half-converted robot named Lisa. (Lois had filed this tidbit away to examine later, when she was less raw.) Thing the second, Captain Harkness had personally vouched for him after, claiming severe emotional exhaustion as a result of post-traumatic stress from Canary Wharf. His recommendation that Ianto be allowed to stay and work through his issues rather than be cashiered was approved. Torchwood was not considered at fault.

"In none of the incidents I researched was Torchwood found to be liable. Sir? They can't be legally held. According to the very oversight groups you told me they needed to be brought to heel under, they haven't committed any crimes."

He kept typing. She could see from where she stood that he'd opened the command program. "You yourself helped them release a murderer from prison."

"No, sir. The prisoner they released was named Alison Frye. However, there is no-one named Alison Frye who has been convicted of any crime in the United Kingdom. She doesn't exist."
Now, finally, he turned his attention from the system to Lois. "I told you Alison Frye was a pseudonym for Mrs. Lucy Saxon." A fine bead of sweat covered his lip. "Her husband loved her, and she murdered him in cold blood."

"Sir, Lucy Saxon is officially dead. She committed suicide in prison. If she was being held under another name, her captivity was illegal." Lois attempted reason. "I have spent months working here, and there is no evidence against Torchwood or their associates that has not already been examined by the highest authority. We need to contact UNIT and tell them we were wrong. We must stop the manhunt before anyone else is hurt." And God, she needed to find a way to apologise, but some things could not be apologised for.

She'd thought she was helping. She'd thought justice needed to be served. Instead, she'd imprisoned her colleagues, and she'd got two people killed.

"Sir?"

He turned back to the console. "Your concerns are noted. Rest assured, everything will become clear very soon."

The last man who'd said that to her subsequently tried to poison a schoolyard with mustard gas. What was it about evil little men thinking they were clever?

Lois raised the gun she'd been keeping behind her. "Please step away from the console, sir."

His hand moved to a button on the keyboard. A shimmering light appeared, and solidified between them. "I don't believe I will."

"I'm giving you to the count of three." She breathed, counted, and fired at the console itself. She was less than fully surprised when the bullet bounced off, ricocheting close to her head.

"A brilliant woman, Dr. Sato. I watched her die once. Truly a remarkable experience." He was mad. Perhaps he'd always been mad.

"I can get through the forcefield," she said, with less hope than she conveyed.

"None of Torchwood's weapons can penetrate it, according to her notes. You may entertain yourself trying, if you'd like."

"I'm calling Whitehall and Downing Street."

"In ten minutes, it won't matter." He returned to his work. "If you'd prefer to be useful and alive in the coming era, you might be helpful now and fetch Letitia for me. I'm offering her as an appetiser to my Master." He smiled at Lois. "Shoo."

Fear, cold and clarifying, hammered her steps. She hurried to the lower level, where Rupesh worked in part of the Archive, combing through possible medical apparatus. "I need your help."

"On what?"

"Mr. Gloucester has lost his mind. He needs to be relieved of duty, and the problem with that is the forcefield he's put up surrounding himself and the Rift manipulator. He keeps talking about the Master."

"Who?"
"I think he means Harold Saxon. There's a lot going on, and I don't have time to sort it all. I need you to go to the cells and keep a close watch on Letitia Jones. I think he's going to kill her."

Rupesh finally set aside the artefact in his hands. "What for?"

"From the little I've got, Harold Saxon secretly established a cult, and called himself the Master." There was more: Jack's offhand remarks, Martha's strange relationship with him, the fear and anger on Letitia's face, and Gwen's offhand mention how Jack rewrote a whole year. It was madness, but this was Torchwood. "I think Mr. Gloucester must be trying to bring him back with the Rift manipulator. I wouldn't put a blood sacrifice past him."

"I think you're overreacting."

"Just do it," she snapped. "If I'm wrong, all you'll have done is spend a few hours in a room talking to a lovely woman."

At last, she'd found the means to convince him. "I'll be in the cells. I am not mucking out the Weevils, so don't ask."

After he'd sauntered out, Lois went back to the box he'd been digging through. If Mr. Gloucester was correct, none of their weapons could reach him, so what she needed to find was something that wasn't a weapon.

***

Gwen hadn't tried breaking into the Hub since her very first visit, and all that had taken was two overpriced pizzas. She'd felt embarrassed later, knowing the team had laughed at her ham-fisted attempt at subtlety. Later still, she'd found the whole situation just as funny: tracking her way to the down-at-heel Tourist Information Centre via Owen's habit of ordering dinner on the company tab; trepidation as a mysterious stranger waved her through a concealed door; her terrified steps through the dank corridor down to the Hub. Looking back, it was like being afraid of her own basement.

This part of the basement? She could see being afraid of.

"Watch your feet," Jack said, but that was easy for him holding the only torch. Thank God for that one asset, found amongst Suzie's possessions. "This passage doesn't get used much."

When had it last been used? Gwen had never been down this long, twisty passage hewed into the rock, and she was grateful. Wetness seeped in around them, reminding her they were never far from the Bay. One good tremor, and this whole passage would flood.

Martha wasn't any happier than Gwen. "How many secret entrances does this place have? And are any of them drier?"

"You could have stayed back in the warehouse with Rhys."

Mickey and Johnson had gone to the TIC entrance, and were waiting to make a diversion. Martha and Jack planned to go directly to the cells, free Martha's sister, and escape down these same tunnels. Perry came with them to disengage any changes they found to the system, and to see if they could wrest control back themselves. Gwen's task was to look for an opportunity to break into the armoury. Their only useable gun was in Johnson's possession.

As they walked, Gwen noticed signs of upkeep. They were entering the Archive levels. Suddenly she knew how Jack had found out about this entrance. From the warehouse to the basement room where Ianto had stored his poor girlfriend, it was practically a straight shot. Gwen kept her mouth
closed. Jack wasn't talking yet, not about grief, not about anything but the mission in front of him. She remembered her own aching rage when Rhys had been killed, remembered her willingness to do anything, hurt anyone, just to have him back. Instead of rage, Jack was cold, quiet, and drawn so deeply inside himself that she worried far more than if he'd started to scream.

They passed into a lit corridor, and the Archives proper.

Yellow light poured out of one storage room, spilling on the floor. Rustling noises came from within. The four of them backed against the wall, waiting. The light clicked off. Lois stepped out of the room, holding something in her hand.

She walked away from them, then paused and turned around. Gwen tensed, expecting a fight, but relief passed over Lois's face. "Thank God you're here. He's gone mad. We need to ..."

Jack was already halfway across the corridor, and as Lois said, "... stop him," he reached out with both hands and lifted her off the ground by her neck.

He was going to kill her.

"You poisoned and murdered him." All the rage Gwen had been expecting bubbled over like a cauldron left to boil.

With all the effort she could, Lois forced out, "It ... was ... a ... sedative."

"Jack," said Gwen, horror and sorrow mixed on her face. "Don't."

"No more lying," he said. He kept squeezing.

Gwen looked at Perry and Martha for help, but Martha was frozen, and Perry stared between the two of them. He inched forward. "Jack?"

"Don't do this," Martha said.

Gwen touched his shoulder, felt the strain of his whole body in one place. Lois's eyes were closing. No more deaths, he'd said. Gwen couldn't play fair right now. "Would Ianto have wanted you to be a murderer for his sake? He loved you more than that."

Jack let go. Lois dropped to the floor ungracefully, rubbing at her throat and taking great gulps of air as Jack walked away from her to the other side of the corridor, and wouldn't look at anyone.

"No-one was supposed to be hurt," she said, when she could talk. "I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Gwen said, "It's too late for sorry. Where's Tish Jones?"

"She's safe. In the cells. Rupesh is guarding her for me." Her breathing continued to come in gasps. "My supervisor has lost his mind. He wants to use the Rift to bring back someone he's calling the Master."

Jack trembled as though an electric wire had pulsed through him. Martha closed her eyes.

"That's what this was all about from the beginning," said Lois. "They told me you'd been breaking the law, and I was to collect evidence. But you didn't, not outside of your charter. He wanted you out of the way so he could use the Rift manipulator. I tried to stop him but there's a forcefield in place. I can't get through. None of the weapons can."

She looked at Jack again. "This is my fault. I was misled, but I am trying to help now."
Jack wouldn't look at her. "Okay, new plan. Martha, Perry, get Tish out of here. Martha, I want the two of you far away. If he comes through, he's going to go after you."

"He's not happy with you, either."

"But I'm like a walking headache for him. The worst he can do to me, he already did over and over. I want the two of you safe."

"If he comes through, he's going to go after you."

"He's not happy with you, either."

"But I'm like a walking headache for him. The worst he can do to me, he already did over and over. I want the two of you safe." Gwen shivered. She didn't like the echo at all. "Perry, as soon as they're off, get down to the lower level. See if you can cut the power supply to the forcefield or the Rift manipulator or both. Cutting the main power won't do it. They're both on backups."

Martha gave Jack's arm a quick squeeze, and the two of them were off.

Gwen said, "I take it you and I will be paying Mr. Gloucester a visit?"

Lois reached down and picked up the item she'd dropped. "I thought the bracelet might work to get through the forcefield. It can go through walls, it made us all hear ghosts. It was the only thing I could think of." Clever, Gwen thought.

"Leave it," said Jack. "I don't want to be dealing with ghosts, not when we're trying to stop one from coming back."

***

Numbers skittered over the screens, under his fingers.

Mr. Gloucester had always liked numbers. Numbers lined up in an orderly fashion, multiplied and dividing one another ruthlessly. Humans -- he rarely considered himself among their number -- did the same, but with incessant whining. A back this strong on a man this tall can carry this much steel to build the Master's rockets, and it was simply a matter of fine-tuning how few calories he needed to be fed per day to work and not die until after the task was finished. Simple maths.

Humans were so very messy yet so predictable. When the Master's pet Freak had stirred together his amnesia formula at the end of things, the next logical step was obviously rounding up everyone aboard the Valiant and feeding the concoction to them, will they or nil they. He'd simply paid attention, and he'd hidden elsewhere until the human sweep had passed him by. Then he'd walked off the ship with the rest, his own memories intact. Ridiculously easy.

He'd kept up his Master's work, and scoured for help. The soldiers from the ship had been wiped, all save dear immune Sgt. Trent, but Harold Saxon had followers before the missing year. Gloucester had time, and he had patience, and he'd collected allies, keeping his enemies in his sights because as worthy as he had proven himself, he knew he himself did not deserve the honour of slitting the slender throat of Martha Jones. Trent, on the other hand, had proven to be an untrustworthy gnat, easily swatted.

Everything was levers, numbers.

Sort the numbers in this direction, and suddenly Mr. Weeds took an even dimmer view of a particular covert organisation. Push this lever, and orders to question and capture were written and followed. Scratch one number off, and the instruction to rescind Harold Saxon's original watch on Torchwood was never delivered. Move the pieces across the board, changing black to red as he acquired, turned, or lied to the stupid pawns, and this whole great game was his to play, to win, to set its spoils before his Master's feet as proof of his loyalty.

The forcefield hummed around him, a model of simple mathematical brilliance. He sighed.
Dr. Sato had screamed as she'd died the first time, and that was a waste, both of her breath and of her potential. Had the Master used her great mind instead, who knows how far his grasp could have reached? His Master's numbers had not always added up quite right.

This time, Mr. Gloucester would see to it that things were more organised. A place for everything and everyone, and everyone in their place.

The program beeped. The last set of equations appeared, with smoothly calculated curves elegantly defining the shape of the Cardiff Rift, and expressing how to dip one end into the Void between worlds. Where the hungry dead waited.

***

"You ought to let me out, you know." Tish watched the young doctor through the Perspex. She didn't think it would work.

"I've been ordered to watch you, and I'm watching you."

"He's evil. You don't know what he's done."

The doctor settled himself in his folding chair, not finding a comfortable position. "We've all done things. Hell, yesterday I shot my boss."

She frowned at him. "Don't you care?"

"I'm here to serve my country." He got up from his chair and came closer. "You know, you should try to convince me to let you out." He smiled at her. "Be nice to me. You and I could ..."

Tish had kept her eyes locked on his, and hadn't moved a muscle as Martha walked up behind him and plunged a needle into his neck. The doctor jerked, and was caught by Perry as he fell. Rupesh's eyes rolled, looking at Martha, who said, "Good night, Doctor."

"Creep," Tish said. "We have to get out of here. The man upstairs worked for the Master."

"I know," said Martha, as Perry unlocked the cell. They dragged the doctor's sleeping form inside and left him on the floor. Tish relocked the door behind them. "He's trying to bring him back from the dead." Every nightmare she'd tried to forget in the morning came back to her.

"You two need to leave," said Perry.

Tish looked at her sister, whose face got that line, the one Mum did right before she tore into someone. Martha said, "Perry, you get the forcefield down. We're stopping this now."

***

The lights flickered. If he thought himself a lucky man, Jack would assume that was Perry, taking down the power. Luck hadn't been on his side for a long time, and Jack was sure the power drain originated from the Rift manipulator.

"How many guards are there?"

"Three on duty now, more coming in soon." Lois's voice was clipped. She'd given Jack her gun.

"Location?"

"I don't know."
Gwen kept her own lookout. "We'll go to the armoury first, like we planned. Even if we meet with them, we should be able to ... "

They turned the corner at a cross-corridor.

Jack's instincts were good: he had the gun up and ready as the two guards drew their weapons. Three against two, but both of the two were armed, and as ready as he was to deal out pain to someone, this pair didn't necessarily deserve to die.

"Wait," Lois said, coming forward, her hands raised. "It's not what you think."

"Mr. Gloucester says you've turned traitor again, Miss."

Gwen said, "Help us. We need to stop him before he destroys the world."

"Put the gun down, Captain. We'll see about your claims."

"'Fraid we don't have the time, boys. Come with us, or get out of the way."

The hairs on the back of his neck registered the cool tip of a gun barrel against his head. The third guard said, "Put it down. You may get up again if I shoot you, but Ms. Cooper won't."

He could shoot two of them before he was taken out. If he gave Gwen the word, she'd fight, and she'd get herself killed.

Jack flipped his hold on the gun, holding it up to be taken. He could wait until Gwen was out of range, out of sight, fight back then. "You're making a big mistake." He felt the gun pulled from his hand.

"It is written," said the first soldier, "in the Secret Books of Saxon, that the unbelievers will try to forestall His return."

Jack sighed. Cultists. He could deal with cultists. They should've started in with the chanting two minutes ago. He tried to ignore his own tremor at Saxon's name.

The first soldier said, "Fisher, go retrieve the Jones woman." The second soldier nodded and left in the direction of the cells. Jack closed his eyes. He had to think, but despair was winning.

The third soldier, the one with the gun nudging Jack's neck, bent in to Jack's ear, speaking loud enough for the rest to hear: "It's time to return you to your rightful owner. The Master is coming back tonight, and you are his, Freak."

"Actually," said Ianto's voice, concurrent with the sound of a safety release, "I believe you'll find that one's mine."

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Chapter 9

The bracelet, Jack's mind told him sensibly. Lois had brought the ghost bracelet, a bit of alien jewellery which had caused them all to hallucinate loved ones until they'd found the source. She must have activated the clasp to distract the guards and if Jack merely ignored Ianto's faked voice, pushed through, he could take advantage when they began grasping with their own shadows.

The first soldier turned, and Gwen kicked him in the arm, dislodging his grip on his gun, which Lois grabbed and trained on him. Jack's hands reached behind him and grabbed the guard, flinging him over his head. When he thudded to the floor, John Hart of all people stepped on his throat, drew a gun of his own on the man, and grinned like the Devil himself.

The fight was finished in less than ten seconds.

Jack blinked. He turned slowly, allowing himself one good look, one more moment. There was no time left, not to say what mattered, so he stared, trying to remember every detail. "Lois, turn off the bracelet."

"I didn't bring it."

Ianto lowered the gun he carried. "Is everyone all right?" An answering groan came from the man under John's boot, but Gwen kicked him and he shut up.

Jack tried speaking, but for the first time ever, he couldn't. He blinked again. Ianto came over, placing a hand on his head as if checking for damage. "Jack, are you okay? Do you have a concussion?"

The hand felt real. His face, with a day's growth of beard, looked very real. Jack grabbed him by the collar and pulled their mouths together.

Definitely real.

"Hi," said Jack.

"Hi."

"You're not dead."

"No."

"John?"

"Yeah."

Jack spared a moment to look over his shoulder to John. "I owe you one."

"You owe me several."

Gwen cleared her throat. "As much as I want to do hugs all around, we have to deal with Gloucester first."

"Right," said Jack, taking Ianto's hand. "We have to get to the Hub, and we have to stop him from bringing the Master back. John, can you deal with these two?" Thinking for another moment, he added, "Don't kill them, just lock them up."
"Whatever."

"Come on." Jack led them back towards their destination, now armed with the rifles from the guards. If Lois had been correct, they wouldn't help much, but he felt better with a weapon. He kept hold of Ianto's hand.

Lois said, "Alice Carter and her son vanished from custody. Was that you?"

Ianto said, "We had to get them out of play before they were used against Jack. They're safe at the Glasgow site. Frank too."

"You did all that?"

"Oh. Well." Ianto looked at Jack. "You've been so busy with work lately. Your ex and I buried the hatchet, and took the children for a bit of a holiday in the country. I hoped you wouldn't mind." John rolled his eyes.

Ianto had nearly died, and his first thought had been to protect Jack's family.

Jack squeezed, almost hard enough to bruise, almost hard enough to break bone. He wanted to tell Ianto how much he loved him, but the words wouldn't come.

Ianto squeezed back. "I know."

"Good."

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The labyrinthine corridors of the lower levels had confused her during the short time Martha had worked here. Some parts of the Archives had been carved into the bedrock, other areas were retro-industrial standard, and none of it came with signs. Many areas even lacked electric lights. She and Tish made one wrong turn, ending up in a level filled with junk that looked like spare parts for automobiles long sent to the scrapyard, old skeletons of dead cars.

They doubled back, Martha remembering the trick Ianto had taught her of counting the odds until the turn. They ended up at the firing range. "Do you know how to use one of these?" Martha asked, gathering pistols.

"I'm sure I can figure it out."

"In that case, no. I've had training. It's more than just point and squeeze." She settled on a Glock. The Hub was only a short flight of stairs from here. "You ought to stay down here. I'll come for you when we've settled this."

Tish shook her head. "This is my fight, too. Besides, Mum and Dad would skin me alive if I let you go after the Weasel alone." She smiled, but Martha wasn't fooled. She set down the Glock and took Tish's hand.

"It may be your fight, but it's not your job. You got caught up in everything because of me." And I got caught up because of him, she thought, and we only found the Master because of Jack. But Martha hated assigning blame because that cycle never ended.

An alarm went off. Tish jumped, and Martha grinned. "That's our cue. Mickey and Johnson are causing a commotion at the front door."
The stairs winded her as much as the long walk had. Tish followed at her heels, her own stiff anger propping her up despite her anxiety. Martha could picture Tom at her side now, knew for a fact he could lead a revolution, but Tish was the one with her, and that's what mattered.

They came up at the mouth of one corridor. Across the way, she saw Jack and Gwen. Then she blinked, trying to clear her eyes, but when she looked again, Ianto still stood there with them. Lois was nowhere to be seen. Jack noticed her absence at the same time Martha did, glancing behind himself and then quiet clearly mouthing a bad word. Perhaps she'd fled. Perhaps she'd turned on them yet again.

Tish held up her hand, attracting Gwen's attention. Gwen nodded to them.

The cog wheel door rolled open. Mickey and Johnson burst in. Jack tipped his head to Martha; they began walking forward at the same time. The three groups converged around the Rift manipulator with a remarkable cacophony of cocked weapons.

"That doesn't belong to you," Jack said.

The man who stood at the console wasn't familiar to Martha at all. She'd never seen him on any of the Master's broadcasts, never gone to a refugee camp in the midst of one of his inspections. Gloucester was very plain, perhaps five cm taller than she was, thinning brown hair going to a dull, mousey grey, a forgettable face. He didn't look like the casual torturer of millions that Tish had described to her over a bottle of cheap wine one night when neither could sleep.

When he turned his head to Jack, he could have been the man behind the counter at the grocer's, could have been someone sitting next to her on the train. But his eyes gave the game away. "I'm so glad you could join us, Captain. I believe the Master only managed to complete a quarter of the list of ways to die he had envisioned for testing on you."

Gloucester turned his attention to Martha and Tish. As those pale eyes touched her, Martha felt unclean. "And you've brought Doctor Jones to me. How kind. Where is Mrs. Saxon? On such an auspicious day, we should have everyone together."

"You won't find her," Martha said.

"Won't I? Do you honestly believe anywhere on this world will be safe from my Master's reach?" A faint, odd smile played on his face as his eyes went to her belly. "He told me once how deeply he regretted that he could not make his wife catch with a child. How happy he'll be when I give her back, and present him with the perfect infant to adopt and raise."

Johnson fired.

The bullet hit the forcefield and ricocheted off towards Jack's group. Everyone ducked.

"Put that away!" Tish said, and Mickey's hand dropped on the gun.

Gwen said, "It's a forcefield."

"We're taking it down," said Jack.

"That won't matter," said Gloucester with every evidence of delight. He pressed a sequence of keys on his console, a beatific expression on his face. The Rift manipulator began to hum loudly, the mechanism coming to life. "A brilliant woman," Gloucester mumbled. "Such a waste."

A small light appeared in front of the Rift manipulator, luminously blue and growing. Ianto was
already at one of the workstations, opening up a speaker. Jack opened one of his own and yelled: "Perry! We need that shut down now!"

"I think I have it! Step back!"

The shimmer around Gloucester and the Rift manipulator glowed a bright amber and then faded. The blue light continued to glow, and the manipulator went faster.

The guns came up again. Gloucester fell to his knees, hands raised above his head, still smiling. Martha came up, holding her weapon steady on him. Jack flew to the controls. "He's locked them."

"Pull the power cables?" said Gwen, coming up beside him.

"It's hardwired into its backup source." He slammed his hand on the speaker on this station. "Perry?"

"I can't reach the other box."

Ianto's speaker crackled to life. Alice's voice said, "Go ahead."

"Alice, are you in the control room?"

"Yes."

"Lock onto the Hub's coordinates."

"With what?" Jack asked.

"Remember the giant laser Torchwood London used on the Sycorax? It's in storage at the Glasgow site. I powered it up and gave Alice the firing codes."

"You did what?"

"Alice," Ianto said into the speaker, "wait for our signal. We may need you."

"That was designed to hit objects outside of Earth."

Ianto didn't look at him. "We have satellites in orbit to bounce the beam anywhere we aim on the planet or off. It will obliterate everything at this location." Except Jack, he didn't need to say.

The light grew stronger. Martha watched Tish join Mickey and Johnson. "Give me your gun," Tish said, voice tight. "When he appears, I'll do it."

Gloucester said, "You think he will be so easy to kill this time? He will be a god." Martha fought the urge to smack him with the butt of her Glock.

She heard the clatter of short heels. Lois emerged from the tunnel mouth closest to the armoury, something in her arms. She stopped, glanced around, saw Gloucester in Martha's custody, and went straight to Jack, offering the parcel she carried.

He looked down as she handed it over. Her eyes were scared. His were tired.

"This is a bad idea," he said.

"Do you have another?"

"Right," he said, glancing at the far speaker where his daughter waited for orders to blow the entire
facility sky-high. "When all else fails, use grenades. Everybody get behind something!" Martha jerked Gloucester to his feet. Gwen and Ianto grabbed each arm to drag him away behind a table.

Jack touched the near speaker one more time. "Perry, last chance. Any joy?"

"No. Sorry."

The blue light was nearly human-sized. Martha swore she heard a laugh from an impossible distance.

Jack pulled the pin, shoved the (probably alien) explosive into the guts of the Rift manipulator, and dodged behind a desk. Martha covered her head.

The echoing BANG blew the air from her ears, and sent shrapnel whizzing by. The second she felt able, she poked her head over the side of the table. Blue light still glowed and fizzled. She saw the others watching, worry on the faces of those who had no memories of that year, deep-seated horror on those who did.

Ianto's hand touched the far speaker's toggle.

The light winked out.

"I found another stooge and popped him in the cells," said a voice Martha didn't know, a lazy drawl attached to a man in a red jacket, who had come out of the passageway to the cells. "Oh, and I found this one waking up." He bumped a very sleepy Rupesh ahead of him with a vicious-looking little gun. "Says he knows you, I could shoot him now if you'd like."

He looked at the mess. "Did I miss something?"

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The Rift manipulator's twisted and shattered form covered the floor, melted pieces cooling and settling with a soft 'plink.'

Gwen turned to Jack. "How bad is this?"

"No power-mad megalomaniac aliens regenerating and seizing control of the Earth." He was still shaking, Ianto could see, but now was not the time to sit Jack down with a shot of whisky and a listening ear. Not yet. "It's not good."

Martha asked, "Are we sure it's sealed?"

"Sealed enough. He's not coming back, not through here." He bent down to the heart of the machine. "Problem is, Cult Guy here has been revving everything up. We built this thing to help stabilise the worst of the Rift fluctuations, but he's been ramping the energy passing through here to build power. With the manipulator trashed," he picked up and discarded a bent piece of metal, "I can't say what is going to come through. Or fall in."

Alice said from her speaker, "What's going on?"

Ianto told her, "Crisis averted. Power down. We'll contact you later." Then he turned off the communicator. Alice had the laser, and the cache of more conventional weapons kept on the grounds. Ianto could go back to worrying about the problems here.

Perry joined them from his work in the lower level, but came up short as he saw the destruction. His eyes went wide. "Oh my God."
Ianto turned to Hart, pointed to Gloucester, and said, "Keep an eye on him." He went to the nearest station. The monitor programmes had backups off-site, and detectors all around the city. He called up what information he could.

"Jack?"

Jack and Gwen approached, Martha behind them. Already the detectors were picking up waves radiating out from their location, like small pebbles thrown into a still pond. Even as they watched, the waves grew. The unseen hand would be splashing in rocks next, and then boulders.

"He'll tear this city to the ground," said Gloucester, glee in his voice. "His boot tread will shake the world."

"He's not coming," said Jack. But the last time they'd messed with the Rift manipulator, something else had crawled out of the ground, something huge and dark and hungry, and hundreds of people had died.

Picking up on the thread of thought, Gwen said, "Abaddon's dead. You said Saxon's not able to regenerate now. What's coming?"

"I don't want to know. We have to calm the Rift down." Jack's face went pale in the light from the monitor, as the first shockwaves rattled the Hub.

If it was bad here, it'd be worse up top. Ianto stood. "I'll contact the Assembly to put out the emergency alert.

Gwen said, "I'll call the police to let them know what's happening. We can coordinate."

"Wait." Jack's voice trembled. He took another look at the broken machine. "Gwen, I need you to close the Rift."

"The manipulator's broken. Do you have a backup?"

"Yeah, I do." He took her hand, weirdly intimate in the shaking room. A sigh escaped him, like the surrendering of a long-held moment. "Do you know why I stayed in Cardiff all this time?"

Gwen said, "You were waiting for the Doctor. You said he refuels here."

"He does." Jack took another long look at the mess. "And when he did, we ended up shot into the future, and the Master came back because of it, so this is all my fault, and I can't even start saying I'm sorry."

"It wasn't just you," Martha said.

"The Doctor comes here because of what the Rift is, what it does. The Cardiff Rift is special."

Hart made a choking noise. "Hold on. Rift. Cardiff. This is that Cardiff?"

Jack scowled. "How could you not have noticed? You came in through the Rift."

"Please, three hundred cities are named Cardiff, with little space-time irregularities. What's another backwater?"

"Yeah, the others are all named after this one. You never paid attention in class."

"'That Cardiff'?" Gwen said, interrupting their bickering as another tremor shook the base.
He turned her hand so he was holding it between both of his. "Cardiff is well-known, because of the Rift, and ... " He took another breath, made a little laugh. "I'm really not supposed to tell you. This is one of the points where human evolution gets a boost. The radiation from the Rift affects the people who live here. The Rift has been here for ages, extending from the past into the future. It changes people, especially those who work directly with it.

"When I recruited you, it wasn't just because you were nice. I wanted you where I could watch you. You survived an encounter with a cold-blooded serial killer who couldn't make herself shoot you. You walked past a Weevil who killed a man in front of you, but who never attacked you. I can name half a dozen times you ought to have died, Gwen Cooper. The laws of probability don't apply to you, and never have. You've been using the Rift's power, without meaning to, for years."

She broke away from his hold. "That's ridiculous."

"It's not. You always get what you want. Things conspire to give you what you ask for, to keep you alive. Think back!"

Martha was drawing away now, looking between them. Ianto couldn't move.

"I was never going to tell you. The big change doesn't happen for another fifty years. But you've got so much potential. I've been trying to shape it. You need to use your gift now."

Tears formed in her eyes. A hundred off-hand comments, that Gwen was special somehow. Hearing Jack finally say it out loud, she knew.

He guided her into a chair. "Think about the Rift. Think about calm things, like blue skies, the birds over the Bay, the smell of baking bread." His voice went low. "Tell the Rift you want it to sleep."

Her eyes closed, then snapped open again. "I can't. Jack, I can't control the Rift."

"You can. Remember the witches? Estelle's friends." If Gwen didn't, Ianto did. Jack had waxed poetic once about the power and potential of some of the old Cardiff witches. "I told you it wasn't magic. It's a science you people haven't figured out yet." Jack said without turning, "Perry, get me the leads."

Hart said, "So have I. Do it wrong and you know it'll fry her brain." He smiled flatly.

Gwen pushed her way out of the chair. "I'm not a Rift manipulator. This isn't going to work."

"There was that kid you found, " said Johnson. "That little girl. The Rift doesn't spit out people still healthy."

"Sometimes it does," said Gwen, her eyes getting bigger as Perry brought over the wires. They dragged like snakes behind him. The shaking became constant. "This is mad."

"It's not mad," Jack said, rigging something Ianto couldn't see. "It's the next step in human evolution. It happens here."

"You two are evolved humans," Rupesh said.

"Not like this," said Hart. "We kept evolving." He turned his head. "It's a good racket you set up
here. Find one of the brain cases, bind her to you with loyalty, make her work for you. Wish I'd thought of it."

Gwen looked to Ianto for support, but he had none for her. This was the end of a day that had started yesterday morning and had taken over a century. Right now, he'd believe Jack if Jack said Gwen was a hamster. He shook his head and began checking on the structural soundness of the Hub. Jack could convince Gwen her brain was hyper-evolved, and Ianto could worry if the ceiling would collapse on them.

"It's going to be fine," Jack said, coaxing her back to the chair. "You can do this. You have more potential than anyone I've ever met." Delicately, as if she was his own child, he affixed the two leads to her hands. "Martha, can you please keep an eye on her?"

"Yeah." She knelt down beside Gwen.

"I don't think this will work," said Gwen to Martha.

"I once saw a giant head in a jar power an entire city. It might work."

Jack and Perry were at the ruins of the manipulator, rewiring the system in a manner Ianto didn't recognise. Jack spoke quietly, pointing, and looking every so often to Hart for a confirmation. Perry nodded in the absent fashion he had when his brain raced. Whatever Jack was describing, he understood, and his fingers flew over the broken machine. The resonator was shot, every capacitor had blown, but from his perch on the catwalk, Ianto could see the harmonic modulator was only charred, not destroyed. It was to this the other ends of the leads were being affixed as Gwen shut her eyes and breathed deeply.

No-one had suggested getting Rhys, and Ianto was miserably certain why. He'd put a stop to this, prioritising her safety. She could die. Hart seemed sure she would.

The Hub rocked with a sudden lurch. Ianto grabbed onto the scaffolding, which broke as he held it.

"It's getting worse," Gloucester said, and Hart cuffed him with his arm. But he started playing with his own VM, and could flee at a moment's notice.

A little scream broke in Gwen's throat. "I can't. I can see how it works, God, but I can't move it!"

"Try harder!" The steel-hard words didn't sound like Jack, they were cold and frightening. But the city itself needed Gwen now.

"It's not me. I can't do this."

"It is you," said Jack, striding back to her. "It's in your veins. Remember? You said your family had a history of ESP. That's how I know the bloodlines to watch. They have the Second Sight. People used to call it the Devil working in them."

Johnson said, "Now they call it schizophrenia."

Jack said, "Gwen, you can do this. I've always known you were special. The few who have the potential, I can spot them a mile away. They defy the laws of probability, they get what they need when they need it most." He smiled distantly, remembering a conversation on the TARDIS as he said, "They come from old Cardiff families."

Lois hadn't said anything since the explosion, too drawn inside herself. But now her head came up from where she'd rested it on her knees, and she fixed Ianto with a long stare.
"How old?"

Jack followed her eyes, and turned away. "No."

But Ianto remembered. Mam and her voices. The screams surrounding him yet somehow he'd come away from the carnage of his friends and colleagues with barely a scratch. Desperate to attract Jack's attention, and a living, breathing dinosaur came through the Rift right where and when he could use it.

"Jack?"

"No," Jack said, more loudly this time, and he turned his attention back to Gwen. Her eyes were closed, and she was shaking in counterpoint to the rest of the room. "Gwen, I need you to focus."

Jack did thorough background checks, or tried. He knew what to look for, how many times someone could walk out alive from events that had killed too many others. Jack had denied Gwen access to Torchwood Three until she stood her ground against Suzie, had denied Ianto until the Rift spat out something he couldn't ignore. He knew. Just like with Gwen, he'd always known. Bind them to you, Hart said, and Jack had, had bound them both with loyalty and more. Two experiments ran side-by-side: one control, encouraged to keep growing naturally in her own habitat as much as she could to reach her full potential, and one intentionally broken into pieces and rebuilt to mirror Jack's desires. Unconscious aspirations and idle wishes drove the force beneath their feet, and all Jack had to do was aim the paired set of weapons at his whim.

"Bastard."

He walked down the stairway. Why wouldn't he? Ianto was as incapable of walking away from Jack's needs as he was of changing the colour of his own eyes, and Gwen was the same. Jack had bound her to himself by the simple trick of pushing her away, making her think it was her idea to flutter closer each time. He'd bound Ianto with every trick he could muster. Jack had pushed him in subtler ways, telling Ianto he'd be safer, better off, happier, and every time he did, Ianto had lashed himself tighter to him in defiance.


Hart said it would fry her brain. Ianto could see the tears brimming the edges of Gwen's eyes again. He knelt in front of her chair, placing his hands over where the leads touched her skin.

It burned, she was burning and he was burning, and he couldn't see anything, then Gwen was there with him, and she was pushing against a giant boulder. The boulder about to land in the pond, he thought, and she agreed. Here he could see her as she was, a bright and powerful flame, and he'd never known. She pushed and she nearly could, someday she would, but she couldn't move it away to safety herself. He was merely a spark and couldn't move it either, but had they shoulders they could press them against the rock that wasn't there. This was what they wanted more than anything, wanted to stop the earthquakes, stop the Rift. Fire burned through every limb. Gwen shrieked inside his head as they pushed together and begged the Rift for silence.

Blue skies and baking bread and the cries of birds over the Bay, and all the good things they'd ever wanted. Cool water to douse the flames, and an end to the giant splash.

The rock rolled away.

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Chapter 10

The Hub stopped shaking.

The two bodies slumped over together, heads lolling. Martha was already there, but so was Jack, and he caught Ianto's slumped form while Martha removed the leads and checked Gwen's vital signs. Pulse, good. Respiration, good. Martha prodded Gwen's shoulder, then flicked open an eyelid to check for light response.

"I think she's just unconscious." She moved to check Ianto, and found the same. "Help me get them down to Medical. I can monitor them better." Martha tilted her head at Patanjali, and said to Jack, "I could use his help."

Jack only hesitated a second. "Fine. Rupesh, get your arse to Medical. If you do anything I don't like, I will shoot you myself. Don't think I won't."

As Perry and Mickey came to help move the patients, Martha mentally catalogued Owen's old inventory. She'd have to keep their vital signs under observation. She would have to check for brain damage. The maniac in the red uniform had said something about frying their brains, and Jack had clearly believed him.

Halfway down the stairs, Alice's voice came over the speaker again: "Hello, anyone there?"

Tish was closest to the intercom at Gwen's station. A few seconds of fiddling with the switch, and she said, "Torchwood here. Captain Harkness is back in command."

"Good. Dad, you need to get up here now."

Jack laid Ianto carefully on the slab, mindful of not bumping his head. With a brush to his cheek, so fast Martha almost didn't see it, he ran back up the stairs. Martha turned on the main monitor.

Jack said, "Alice, this isn't the best time."

"Is the world still in danger?"

Jack shot a look to Medical. "No. I think we're safe now."

"Then you have to come. It's Frank."

There was a pause, full of calculation. "I'll see what I can do."

The readings on her display promised good things. Blood oxygen levels were normal. No abnormalities in heart rhythms. Electrolyte levels in both Gwen and Ianto were skewed but not highly out of range. She nudged Patanjali. "Start IVs. We'll get some potassium into both of them."

Jack said, where she couldn't see him, "I need you to take me to Glasgow."

"I am not your bloody taxi service."

Martha wished she had an instruction manual for the equipment. All they had were Owen's notes. "Doctor, have you ever figured out the setting to perform a CT scan with this?"

"Not that I'd want to experiment with right now."
From above them, Jack was wheedling with his old partner. "Just let me borrow it, then. I'll be right back."

"Oh, did you tell that to the bird you stole that Chula ship from?"

She could transport them to a proper hospital, bluff their way into A&E. Better, she could dial up UNIT and get her hands on equipment she was familiar with. Or not, she amended. They were all still fugitives from the law.

"Mickey, could you dig out some blankets from the cabinet?" Something Owen had shown her once tickled at her memory. When he'd died, they'd run every scan they could on him, including checking his brainwaves, which he should by all rights not have had. He'd designed parts of the interface himself, he'd said.

Martha called up the control panel screen on the interface and selected the 'mindflayer' option.

"Brilliant." Two scans showed up in high-resolution on her screen. Everything was completely normal.

From above she heard, "Fine. If you don't come back, I get your office."

Jack said, "Perry, you're in charge until they wake up or I get back. Do whatever Martha and Mickey say."

Mickey shouted up, "Wait, does that mean we're in charge?"

"No."

"Jack?" Martha called. He came over to the railing. A wrist strap was held in one hand. "They're going to be okay."

A relieved smile blossomed on his face. Then he looked down at the strap, and with a flash, he vanished.

***

Jack materialised in the courtyard outside of Torchwood House and gave himself a moment to catch his breath. Cold air snapped into his lungs. But he felt steadied. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept.

John's wrist strap was warm in his fingers, the leather band a different texture than the one Jack wore. He could take it and go, like John had insinuated, like Jack himself had told Martha he might.

With a sigh, he trudged through the snow to the swept front walk. The door was unlocked, which worried him. "Alice?"

"We're in here!" piped Steven's voice from a bedroom on the first floor. Jack hadn't been here in years, but his feet remembered the way. Frank lay on one of the fine, old beds. Steven sat on top of the covers with him. Frank was patting his hand.

"Hey, old man," Jack said, and with a great deal of relief, he hugged Steven. "Where's Alice?"

"She's taken the caretaker's car," Frank said in a reedy voice. "She's gone to fetch Bonnie. Her house isn't far from here. It's too far for Phil Jr. or Sarah to come now." The speech wore him out, and he closed his eyes.
"Hey," Jack said, coming to a knee beside the bed. He nodded to Steven. "Can you go play and keep an eye out for your mother? Don't touch anything."

"Okay." He scooted off the bed and waved to Frank before going into the hallway.

"He's a good lad," said Frank. "Alice is a good girl. You ought to be proud of them."

"I am. I'm proud of all of you." A hard knot was in his throat. Frank's skin was ricepaper thin over the bones of his hands, showing each delicate vein and each dark spot. He'd grown smaller since December, shrinking into himself, and looked as though he weighed as little as the baby he'd been. If Jack breathed too hard on him, Frank would blow away. "When Alice gets back, we'll take you to hospital together, and you two can keep complaining about me in the car."

"I'm not going anywhere, not when I'm able to complain." He coughed, and Jack helped hold his back. In the hallway, he heard Steven playing with something he hoped wasn't dangerous or expensive.

"We'll get you to the doctor."

"Which one of us do you think you're lying to, old man?" He was tired, but his blue eyes were as clear as when he'd been a boy.

Jack opened his mouth to protest, but the protest died under that tired, loving glare. "I'm going to miss you."

***

Alice hoped this was the right address. The middle-aged woman who opened the door looked at her suspiciously. Alice didn't think she saw a resemblance at all, but who could say? "Bonnie Harrison?"

"Bonnie!" shouted the woman over her shoulder, without taking her eyes off Alice. "What do you want with her?"

"We've found her father, but he's very ill, and she needs to come with me right now."

Another woman appeared, in her sixties perhaps, with a false blonde dye job that nevertheless made her look like someone's stylish grandma. She could have been Jack's mother. "Who are you? Where's my father?"

"My name is Alice. Please, hurry."

She turned, and placed a kiss on the other woman's cheek. "Call my brother and sister, let them know he's been found. I'll call them directly." She took a bag from behind the door. "Let's go."

When they were in the car and driving back to the site, Bonnie said, "I know who you are, you know."

"You do?"

"Yes. My brother Rob met you once."

Alice thought back, confused. "I don't think he did."

"It would have been 1976 or '77. He said a man met up with our father to introduce him to his wee girl. Dad tried to pass him off as Uncle Phil's son, but Rob said he looked so much like Dad. And Uncle Phil was gay." Alice had been told her long-deceased brother was just as equal-opportunity as
Jack, but that didn't matter now.

Bonnie said, "There's been a younger man visiting Dad. I met him, just before Christmas, but Dad wouldn't introduce us. And you were the one who took Dad from the home." Her voice remained calm and steady, which was impressive as she'd just got into a car with someone whom she believed had kidnapped her elderly father.

"I was," Alice admitted. "Frank wanted to go on one last holiday. My brother and I arranged it."

"And now?"

"He's dying. He asked to see you."

"There isn't much of an inheritance, you know."

"What?"

"Rob said the man he met would be the right age to have been born during the war, before Dad and Mum met. Dad's always had secrets. It's all right," she said, finally looking at Alice. "I wish he'd told us he had another son. Is he still alive, your dad?"

How to answer that? How to answer any of it? "It's just Jack and me now. And my son, Steven. You'll meet him."

Bonnie nodded. "That will be fine. As I said, there's not much of an inheritance. We were always comfortable, but Dad never had extra to his name. Maybe when this is all settled, you and your brother could come round to dinner. Rob's gone, but everyone would be pleased to meet you."

Alice had grown up far away from any family. With her mother in hiding, she'd only been allowed to know one aunt from the Moretti side. Jack's life had been a closed book to her. She hadn't met Phil, had barely formed a relationship with Frank. But here was a whole new set of family members welcoming her.

"I think I'd like that. Thank you."

***

"Those drop scones Mum tried to make," Frank said, and they both laughed. Meg never had been much of a cook, but she'd got it in her head that she ought to fix all the meals even during the times Jack had been there and could have prevented catastrophe.

He could see Meg in Frank, in the shape of his frown, in the quirk and sparkle of his eyes, though she'd sworn until her death the stubbornness wasn't hers at all.

"I have so much to tell her," said Frank. He'd spoken of his wife, his son, his brother, how he looked forward to seeing them again. Jack held his tongue because they'd discussed this a long, long time ago. If Frank was comforted by the thought of rejoining his loved ones, so be it. Jack was there to comfort.

He heard the large front door open. "That'll be Alice and Bonnie." Jack leaned over the bed to kiss Frank on the cheek. He refused to acknowledge the tears forming in his own eyes.

Bonnie came into the bedroom, followed by Alice, followed by the blonde woman from the prison. She had a gun aimed at Alice.
Jack was on his feet in an instant, standing between the gun and Frank.

The woman smiled thinly. "Even better. We weren't expecting you, Captain. Trefusis!" she called over her shoulder. "In here!"

"Sorry, I never did catch your name," Jack said. He made eye contact with Alice, who made a simple, 'I don't know, either' expression, layered with distinct overtones of, 'This is clearly your fault and let me assure you we will talk about it in great detail once you get us out of this mess.'

"You think you've destroyed our plans for bringing back the Master, but as before you have only delayed them. We can use the materials at this site to recreate the conditions we require."

Oh. Another one of the Master's loonies. He didn't know the white-haired, stout woman who came in holding Steven roughly by one arm. "Found this one playing in the kitchens, Governor."

The Governor (of what? Jack tried placing her, but nothing came) said, "Isn't this convenient? The whole family in one place. We know who the pensioner is, and here's your daughter, your granddaughter, and the little lad as well. We'll be taking all the command codes now, or I will start shooting. You have ten seconds." She turned her arm and aimed at Steven's head.

Everything slowed to a crawl.

Bonnie turned to her. "My father doesn't have command codes, you ignorant cow. He's an old man." Her wrath turned to 'Ignite' in a flash, and that was Meg through and through as Bonnie advanced against all good judgement. "How dare you barge into a sick room like this!"

The Governor startled, bringing her gun back, but she'd taken her attention away from Alice, which was a fatal mistake. Alice's elbow was in her stomach in an instant, driven by rage at the threat she'd just made to Steven. Another arm swung out, knocking the gun away towards Jack, who grabbed it as Alice punched the Governor in the jaw.

A shot rang out, and Jack's eyes dropped to the gun in his own hand, but he hadn't fired.

Frank sat up in his bed, his pistol in a trembling hand, lowering it as the woman called Trefusis fell to the ground, her hand covering a growing wound on her shoulder, shock on her face.

"What terribly unpleasant people," Frank said, settling against his pillows, and breathing very hard.

"Dad," said Bonnie, rushing to him.

Alice shook her hand, rubbing life back into it as Jack stowed the gun and went to Steven's side. He nodded to Alice. "We'll have to do something about them." He was sure there was a cache of Retcon somewhere on the grounds. About ten years each ought to do the trick.

Alice dropped her sore hand. "I'll help you get them out of here. Give Bonnie a few minutes alone with Granddad Frank."

"Huh?"

"I'll tell you later."

***

The phone rang. Hart stared at Tish pointedly.

"I'm not the bloody PA around here."
"No, but one's under house arrest and the other's under observation."

Tish picked up the receiver. "This is bloody Torchwood, no-one's available to take your damn call."

"Right. Not hiring you to answer the phones," said Jack. "You do know the Prime Minister calls sometimes, right? And the Queen?"

"You so owe me."

"I do, beautiful." She heard the smile across the line, and was momentarily appeased.

***

Ianto was sitting up. Martha wouldn't let him out of Medical yet. She was too busy prodding at his completely-healed gunshot wound and examining the perfectly-rejoined break in his arm, as well as the various scars and old injuries he'd barely remembered anymore but had been part of his record. John had given him a quick patch-job to flush out the sedative when he'd rescued him. Apparently, the patches were even better than expected.

"You're sure you're you?"

"I'm sure!"

"I'm going to check your genetic code. If you're a clone, there'll be some drift."

"I'm not a clone, Martha." He'd be cross but she looked so stern there in Owen's old lab coat poking out over her pregnant belly that he was finding it hard not to laugh. It was less hard when she had Rupesh take a cheek swab.

Gwen covered her mouth with her hands, losing the battle much faster. Someone had fetched Rhys, and he sat beside her now, face stiff in suppressed amusement.

"It's for you," said Tish out of nowhere, thrusting the phone at Ianto.

Jack said, "Tish says Rupesh is sticking something into your mouth? I want pictures."

"Where the hell are you?"

"At the Glasgow site. Are you all right? Are you both all right?"

"We're fine. How's Frank?"

"It won't be long. A few hours, maybe." And Jack would be there with him at the end. "I'll bring Alice and Steven home after. I can come back in a couple of days." Amongst everything else they needed to do, Ianto would take Jack's good suit in to the dry cleaner's.

"Let me know what you need." His eyes caught John Hart's glance, and he tensed. He'd made promises, and John wouldn't let him forget. He might not have days left here. But Ianto would do what he could for Jack with the time he had.

"Ask Mickey to see Martha and Tish back to the flat. We're still wanted, and the three of them will be safest there in case of a counterstrike at the Hub." Ianto hadn't even considered that possibility. The bad guys might have been defeated, but it wasn't over yet. They were all wanted criminals, and their enemies knew exactly where they'd gone to ground.

"All right."
There was a pause between them, where two normal people would have said their "I love yous" but that wasn't who they were. "Be safe. I'll be home soon. And call your sister."

"To tell her what?"

"Just the important part. You're alive."

Unable to say anything meaningful in response to that, or to the mixed emotions in Jack's voice -- joy that Ianto was out of harm's way, misery that his child had at most a few hours left to live -- Ianto cleared his throat and replied, "I'll do that."

As he gave the phone back to Tish, there was a raucous noise from the cog wheel door. He tensed, sore but ready. Jack had warned them. Ianto hadn't thought their foes would regroup and attack so soon. He jumped off the examination table and hurried up the stairs, cursing that he hadn't gone to the armoury.

"Let her go now! I'm warning you!"

Ianto came up short at the sight of a dishevelled man wielding what looked like the fake sword from the wall of the TIC. (Lois thought it added character, Ianto thought it was twee.) He waved his sword threateningly at Mickey.

"Hold on, mate," Mickey said, arms raised.

Even as Ianto's brain clicked into place, recognising the intruder, Tish shouted over the railing to Medical: "The wet blanket's here."

Tom lowered his sword arm. "Tish? Are you all right? Have they hurt you?"

"Hello," said Ianto, waving. "We're fine, everything's fine."

Martha came up the stairs, huffing. When she caught sight of her husband, and his attempt to rescue her with an aluminium replica, she burst into giggles. Tom looked hurt, and she straightened her face, contrite.

"Why are you here?" she asked, a chortle escaping as she reached him and definitively pushed his arm down.

"Your mother told me you'd been arrested, and that Jack was involved. I came to find you."

"I told you to go hide," said Tish, but no-one paid her any attention.

Martha said, "Here? You came to rescue me from a top-secret, super-technological alien fighting base with a toy sword?"

Now he did frown. "Look. I ..."

Martha kissed him. "That's the bravest thing you've done in this whole timeline for me. Thank you."

Tom's look of surprise and pleasure at his wife's smile said more than enough. A tiny, mean part of Ianto thought she was playing him. Another part, that spoke in Jack's voice and reminded him of an old conversation they'd had, said everyone's relationship looked a bit weird from the outside.

For random example, some people might look at a couple of blokes, one of whom hid from the other a few major fucking details -- say, he's immortal and hundreds of years old, or that he's got adult children, or that he's been surreptitiously guiding his lover into becoming a walking Rift manipulator
-- and those people would think, "This is not a healthy relationship." They might examine certain facts, like how Estelle Cole and Gwen Cooper were both only children, while Ianto had a sister with a family. They might wonder cynically if preserving bloodlines had been the deciding factor in the matter.

Ianto watched Martha with her husband. Perhaps she'd been attracted to him for the man she'd known he could be, but she'd married the man he was here and now, so did it matter to her or to him why she'd first noticed him? Didn't it matter more that when he'd been told she was in danger, he had done everything in his power to come to her rescue, to protect her?

"Let the world hang, I want this one person to be safe," was a terrible way to run a secret organisation dedicated to saving the planet. But not everything was about secret organisations or saving the planet.

Tom handed Ianto the aluminium sword with a sheepish expression and followed Martha down to the med bay. Ianto left it by the door, to take the thing back to the TIC later. He'd give the sword a quick buff and polish before hanging it back on the wall, though. Stupidly grand gestures made for the sake of love ought to have something nice to recollect them by.

***

Alice fixed Steven a late supper and put him to bed in one of the upstairs rooms. The manor was posh, elegant. She idly imagined living here, amongst the dark wood panels and the stored alien technology. It'd be a place to start over, far away from her usual secrets, away from Jack. Steven could make new friends here. Alice could meet new people.

It was a nice fantasy.

When Steven was sleeping, she went back to the lavish kitchen and fixed tea. She took three mugs on a tray to the hallway outside Frank's room, and sat down. A few minutes later, Bonnie walked out, eyes red. Without speaking, Alice handed her some tea.

They waited together. Down the hallway, a grandfather clock ticked sombrely to itself, counting down the seconds for those who didn't have eternity.

Jack walked out of the room. Alice held up his tea, but he set the mug aside gently and instead took her into his arms and held her for a long, long time.

***
"It's sorted," Jack said, emerging from his office, his hair askew in a fashion suggesting he'd been worrying at it. He didn't have many nervous habits, and this one only showed when he was exhausted. He'd returned very late last night, practically this morning. Ianto, Gwen, and Perry had switched off taking watches in case of a retaliatory attack which hadn't come, while John kept watch over their prisoners and their not-exactly-prisoners. Ianto was awake to see Jack's return, but they hadn't had time alone in the midst of getting Alice and Steven settled, and then Jack had shut himself in his office to make call after call until he reached a particular contact.

"Alien," Jack had told Ianto privately and after much prodding. "Can pass for human, but super-intelligent. The family got stranded on Earth in the early seventies. I got them set up, and they did the rest. Heart-warming immigration success story, really: the older son went into government service for his adopted Queen and Country." He'd left bits out, Ianto could tell, but the "Don't tell Gwen" was clear in the message.

"How sorted?" Gwen's face was closed.

"Enough. My contact is still embarrassed about letting the Saxon thing go as far as it did the first time, and he's horrified what Gloucester managed to slide through. He's very interested in ensuring this round is dead and buried. We won't see any more trouble from their side. He's also agreed to see to it Mr. Weeds doesn't bother us again, in exchange for our permanently mothballing the giant space death laser."

"What about Gloucester?" Ianto asked.

"They're sending a car. My friend will be in the car so we know it's legit. Mr. Gloucester and his followers are no longer our concern." The people he'd drawn to him would have their memories altered. Gloucester would disappear, be disappeared. Just like Lucy had been.

Jack's alien friend in the government had fixed things for them because he owed Jack. Favours begat favours instead of rules and oversight; it was no wonder why some factions elsewhere in power looked on Torchwood as more sinister than supportive. Even if Gloucester had been mad, he wasn't wrong. Torchwood had almost destroyed the world, and the only line of defence they had against doing so again depended on how good a man Captain Jack Harkness was.

Gwen wasn't appeased. "So that's it? Everything's sorted. We all nearly died because one part of the government couldn't pay attention to what another part was doing. Trent did die."

"His family will be taken care of. Everything's being arranged now." A word pinged in that sentence, but Ianto would let Gwen go through the fuss with Jack looking for timing on the other shoe.

Gwen asked, "What about Lois, Johnson, and Rupesh?"

"That was part of the arrangement. They're Torchwood. We deal with them ourselves."

Just like before. *You execute her or I'll execute you both.* Who watched the watchmen, other than each other? Who could?

Ianto had already collected a familiar folder. It hadn't even had time to get dusty. "So we're back to square one in finding a new medic."
"Maybe not," said Jack, hands in his pockets.

"Spill," Gwen said.

"I'm doing my contact a favour in return. A doctor he knows, looking to get back into practise. Veteran from Afghanistan, he says."

"Oh good, more soldiers in the Hub."

"Since I'm not allowed to train him to use a gun, I'd think you'd be pleased."

Gwen and Ianto caught each other's eye. Ianto made a note to check the Retcon supply.

Jack said, "Call Mickey and let him know it's safe for everyone to go back to London. Then, we need to have a conversation."

***

Tom had a car, which was much easier than dealing with the series of stolen vehicles they'd taken. Jack said it was dealt with, and the cars would be returned to their proper owners. Torchwood stuff technically did make it Mickey's problem, but not right now. Tom gave Tish the keys, and he and Martha settled into the back together as Mickey rode shotgun.

Tish looked exhausted. Mickey asked, "Are you sure you don't want me to drive?"

"I'm fine. How can it only be Wednesday? It feels like three weeks at least."

Mickey shrugged. He could bullshit his way through an explanation of Rift-related time dilation effects, but he had the feeling Tish wouldn't be half as impressed as he was picturing.

"What time is it?" Martha asked suddenly, leaning forward.

"Almost eleven," Mickey said, reading the dash. "The ultrasound is at one-thirty. I wonder if they cancelled it."

Back in the other universe, Jackie had framed her monochrome images of the alien head creature that had popped out as little Tony. Creepy.

The car accelerated. Mickey grabbed the door handle, glancing at Tish's foot hard on the pedal. "We can make that," she said.

Surprisingly, they did, and weren't arrested along the way. Tom helped Martha inside for her appointment; Mickey and Tish stayed with the car.

"I should call Mum." Tish sighed. "After, I guess."

"After's better. You can tell her it'll be triplets, and they all look like Jack."

Tish laughed. "Better not be. Martha's mad enough as it is." But she smiled, and despite having been on the run, not taking a shower in days, and spending a night in a damp prison cell, she was still very pretty, Mickey could not help but note. He'd noticed some time ago that she was brave, and clever. And she even already knew what he did for a living. It occurred to him that Tish herself probably would enjoy a long chat with someone who understood her own unique history.

Mickey had begun stranger friendships on less.
"They'll be busy for a while. Want to get some lunch?"

Her smile stayed. "Sure."

***

It was, Perry thought later, like a game show. He was addicted to the blasted things, stuck to the edge of his chair, heart pounding, shouting (if he was alone) for the contestants to give the proper answer, choose the right doorway. Jack was kind about that, and told Perry about his own television addiction after the boxes with their grainy black and white images first appeared. That didn't mean Perry could beg off work to watch "The Weakest Link," but it did make him feel better, and he liked having something in common with Jack that didn't hurt.

This? This was something else, and the burning in his stomach had nothing to do with any hopes the people coming through the door would walk out with a new kitchen set.

Three doors, three choices, three items on the desk, as Rupesh and Johnson and Lois would be brought in one by one. A pill and a gun, these were what Torchwood always offered as their severance package. Traitors, mutineers, and those who just didn't work out, they were handed one or the other, and the argument over which was kinder had yet to be resolved. Gwen had her opinions on the subject. Perry wasn't allowed any.

"I'm part of the team," he said, seeing Jack's two favourite shadows in his office. "Why don't I get a voice?"

Jack closed his eyes. "Perry, did you kill anyone in the war?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Ever kill anyone who wasn't shooting back?"

"Of course not."

"We have." He tilted his head to his friends. "Right now, I need to decide if three people you know and care about are going to die, and if I choose wrong, a lot more people might die. I'm willing to make the call. Gwen and Ianto are, too. The million-pound question is, could you live with yourself after?"

Perry dropped his eyes. But he stayed in the room to listen as they debated, and he didn't object as Hart led in each one.

Rupesh was handed a pill.

Johnson was handed a gun.

Now Lois sat in the chair, hands folded quietly in her lap. Perry wanted to watch her, and he wanted to look away. He didn't know what to do with his own hands. Gwen and Ianto stood to either side of Jack's desk, where Jack himself sat like a king. Perry envied the two of them, a little, for knowing where they belonged. He stood to one side, wondering how the rest of his life was going to unfold after this.

Three items on the desk. Three choices.

Jack said, "We had a long chat about you."
Lois nodded.

"You know the rules. More, you know us. We let you in, we showed you our secrets. That was my fault. We're supposed to monitor new people, and not trust them, and I knew that and I let you in anyway. It's not the first time I've made this mistake." He glanced to one side. "And I've been reminded I handled the aftermath outside of the strictest protocols." He indicated the desk. "You get to choose where you go from here."

Lois looked at the three items. "I recognise the first two."

"Yeah." He brushed the pill. "We would remove about a year of memories. Not just of your time here, but also of your work leading up to us." He indicated the gun. "You know what that is."

She nodded again. "And the envelope?"

Perry's stomach burned again. The argument had gone on a long time, the three of them talking loudly over each other. He'd stayed silent whilst they'd discussed their options until Jack, face clouded with anger, had said, "Just following orders is never an excuse."

Perry had piped up, "When my commanding officer told me to fire, I never once believed he wasn't pointing at an enemy who wanted me dead."

Jack, rounding on him bitterly, had said, "You don't obey illegal orders."

"No, you don't, not after you find out they're illegal. Mr. Gloucester didn't put up his forcefield because of us. He put it up because she tried to stop him."

There'd been more after, much more. But the mood had changed, and Jack's hand had rested on the coral he kept on his desk. Perry noticed Jack touching the coral again now.

"Employment papers. You stay. You work for us, and we have your complete, unwavering loyalty."

"I betrayed you."

"It's not unprecedented. I seem to have a knack for bringing on people who eventually try to kill me."

"You didn't want to kill anyone," Gwen said. "That's in your favour."

Jack added, "If you stay, you'll have to be around us every day, knowing we don't trust you anymore, wondering if we're going to believe anything you say ever again."

"This isn't the soft option," Ianto said. His expression was kind.

"Your choice," Jack said, and he sat back watching her, the game show host in charge of the universe.

***

Numbness guided Lois's every motion as she went through her tasks. They needed assistance cleaning up the huge mess that had been made of the Rift manipulator, and she was on suspension as soon as the big debris was cleared.

She glanced at Jack's office again. The door was open, and she could hear him talking to Rupesh.

No, his name was Nirankar now. She'd watched the files print out for his new identity.
"And thank you once again for volunteering," Jack was saying, in his jolly-the-troops voice. "The hospital is always in need of new doctors such as yourself."

"Thank you for the opportunity," said Rupesh. "Not many places would be so understanding."

"Memory loss is nothing to be ashamed of. You've recovered from your accident otherwise, you say you still remember your medical training."

If she tilted her head just so, she could see him nod, befuddled. With the amount of Retcon he'd taken, he was going to be out of sorts for a while, and not remember much even of this planted conversation. But he was a warm body with a pair of hands and Jack hadn't obliterated all his schooling. Dr. Milligan knew distant clinics in need of help, including where they'd set Mrs. Saxon to work out her penance for her past sins.

It wasn't exactly just, and it wasn't exactly fair, but it beat dying.

"I almost forgot," said Jack, who hadn't. "Let me introduce you. Violet?" Johnson came into Jack's office, and stood by Rupesh. "This is Violet Richardson. You're going into dangerous territory. Violet's going with you to help with security."

"Nice to meet you," Rupesh said, without a trace of recognition. And yes, Lois really was staring now instead of doing her work. They'd known Rupesh for months, but he was just ... gone. And someone new was walking around wearing his face and about to live a whole new life. It was gruesome.

As for 'Violet' ... 

"A pleasure," she said stiffly, shaking his hand. "Are we ready?"

"Yes. My assistant Mr. Jones will drive you to the airport and ensure you get onto the plane safely." Jack stood and shook their hands. "Good luck."

"Thank you," said Rupesh, still muddy. He left the office with Johnson beside him. She had a gun at her hip.

As Johnson walked by, she winked at Lois.

***

Three hours later, Ianto drove back from the airport alone, all the while thinking they should have Retconned Johnson, whatever Jack said. But the pair were gone now, and he'd have to hope they'd seen the backs of them, aside from the tabs Torchwood would continue to keep to ensure his Retcon and her good behaviour both held.

Ianto parked in the underground car park, and came into the oddly quiet Hub.

"Is it wrapped up?" Hart detached himself from the wall. He'd made himself at home here in the last day, a skulking shadow that nevertheless filled spaces otherwise empty. But his face was set, ready to travel again.

The last of the catastrophic curve Ianto had been riding dissipated behind him. "Yes. It's done."

"Good. No notes in your pocket this time?"

Ianto felt into his pockets and turned them out for Hart to see. Only his keys, his wallet, things he
wouldn't need where they were going. He set them atop Johnson's abandoned workstation. Jack and Gwen were talking in Jack's office. Perry was in the basement, digging up parts for the rebuild of the Rift manipulator. Lois was out on suspension for the next two weeks.

No goodbyes, he decided.

"I should leave Jack a letter. If he doesn't think I went with you willingly, he'll come looking." He cast his eyes to the desk. A slip of paper would be enough. He found the back of an expense report Johnson would never file. With a shaking hand, Ianto found a biro and wrote, "Dear Jack."

But how to finish? Have gone off with John. Don't follow. That'd never work. Leaving you, sod off. Bit more likely to work, but harder to face. This is for the best, and I love you. Please don't follow us.

"Haven't you over Stayed your welcome?" Jack stood outside his office, watching Hart carefully.

"A fine thank you for everything I've done." Hart rolled his eyes. "If you're in that much of a hurry, Eye Candy and I will be leaving. Come along, you."

The pen fell from his hand to the desk. Ianto turned, not looking at Jack.

"What's going on?" Jack came closer. Ianto took a step away. If Jack came too close, Ianto would be pulled into him, like a pin snapping onto a magnet, and extricating himself would be even more painful.

"We had a deal," said Hart in a delighted, insinuating tone. "And it's time to pay up. Full agreement, isn't that right, Ianto?"

Jack's attention turned fully onto Ianto. "Care to explain?"

"John and I are going. It's for the best. I'll need you to explain things to Rhi." He intended to say the words as atonally as possible, aimed for brisk, heard them come out of his mouth in a mumbled blur.

"Huh?" Jack's confused face would have been more adorable, but it was the last expression Ianto would ever see from him. He'd been selfishly hoping for more than mere bewilderment.

"See you around, lover," Hart said, and began manipulating his wrist strap.

Jack stalked up, slowly, catlike, inserting himself between the two of them, focusing on Hart. "I've had a lot of long days. It's taking me a minute to catch up. Are you stealing my boyfriend?"

"I gave him a few rides. He promised me money, and," Hart laughed breathily, "a few rides of his own. Nothing to do with you. Well, I say nothing. Apparently the hundred thousand pounds he owes me is your hundred thousand?"

Ianto said, "I was going to tell you. Sorry."

"We need to talk about you spending all the money," said Jack. He said to John, "Two hundred thousand pounds, and you leave him here. Deal?"

"No."

"I can give you three hundred thousand," Jack said. "It'll take me a few days to get my hands on it. Investments."

"Not interested." He was still working his wrist strap. It dawned on Ianto that Hart was stalling. He was turning down money?
"Then what is it? I can't let you have your pick of the Archives, but we can strike a deal."

"I've done you enough favours. You still haven't paid me back properly for the last one."

"Be more specific?" Puzzlement was back on Jack's face, though he tried to hide it.

"'Help me, John,'" said Hart in a mocking voice with Jack's accent. "'Just one favour. One little planet.' Some drug-dealing aliens you wanted leaned on. You sent me back fifty years to do it. Sound familiar?"

Jack shook his head.

Hart growled. "You begged me. Got on your knees, and I do mean, on your knees, Gorgeous. Asked me to turn them in to the rhino-heads for trying a protection scam on Earth." Ianto scratched through his memories, came up with nothing. He'd read most of the back reports. Jack looked equally lost.

Hart examined Jack's face. "But you don't remember, do you?" He threw up his hands in disgust, then began slapping Jack's arm to punctuate his rant. "You idiot, you're not supposed to rewrite your own timeline! Fucking amateurs. I don't know why I put up with you."

Jack jumped on the opening. "Because I keep you entertained and I'm prettier than your normal haul."

"I'm doing well right now." Hart's gaze drifted back to Ianto, who suddenly felt naked. "I've got what I want." He'd stopped even pretending to punch in coordinates. Hart went toe to toe with Jack, evil little face grinning up at Jack's growing desperation.

"No, you don't. Oh, Ianto's cute, and I have no doubt you'd have a great time with him. But you don't want him. You want me." Jack took his hand. "So trade. Ianto stays. I go with you."

Horror and revulsion, never far from his feelings on John Hart, boiled back up. "Jack, you can't."

Hart grinned widely. "Agreed." Of course he hadn't wanted Ianto, he'd wanted a bargaining chip to negotiate for Jack's favour. Saving Ianto, threatening him, every step had been made with Hart's real goal in the forefront of his mind, and he had succeeded. Ianto could be discarded. Hart had Jack, exactly as planned.

"I'll need time to tidy things up here," Jack said lightly, breaking contact and walking off.

"I've heard that before. Two days? Three?"

"One hundred years."

Hart's laugh echoed. "You're kidding me."

Jack pointed to John's wrist strap. "What does it matter how long? You and I aren't subject to time. One hundred years for me, ten seconds for you. And then you've got me, for whatever you want, for however long you want." The corners of Jack's mouth tilted into a lascivious smile.

Hart yanked his wrist away. "Five years."

"Ninety-nine."

They haggled as though Ianto wasn't even in the room. Jack fought for every year, and won sixty. "To the day," said Hart.
"On the Plass. I'll meet you there with your money and my bags packed."

"See you soon." With an obscene little wave to Ianto, he vanished in a flash.

Sixty years. Ianto was sure he'd be dead in two or three. Didn't he joke with Gwen about retiring together on his thirtieth birthday -- he to his unicorn farm and she next door to her straw spinning -- precisely because neither expected to survive that long? But Jack had just bought time of his own. If Ianto lived to see the end of Jack's days on Earth, he'd be eighty-six.

Jack stood where Hart had disappeared, watching Ianto. "You heard him. Sixty years from today. Better make a note in my diary, shouldn't I?"

"You can't go with him."

"I can, but not for a long time." He came closer, slowly, as if Ianto were some wild creature he didn't want to spook. "And when I do, I can handle him."

"He'll hurt you."

"He might. Or he might get bored first."

"What was he talking about? Drug-dealing aliens?" Somewhere in the back of Ianto's mind, the scenario felt familiar, like a nightmare he'd forgotten upon waking, a dark vision he'd shivered through until, burrowed safely within Jack's arms and Jack's heat and Jack's scent, he'd fallen back asleep to far more pleasant dreams.

"No idea. Knowing him, he probably made the whole thing up." Jack dismissed the thought with a wave, and the last vestiges of nightmare faded as if they'd never been. "Not important." He let out a deep breath, a lifetime or more of weight slowly releasing from his lungs. Jack was mourning Frank, Ianto could see in the way his eyes dropped from time to time, or looked faraway into another era until he was pulled back here. But Jack had been mourning his son for years, as his life had slipped away. This grief was thoughtful, and old. The wound of his loss would heal cleanly, and with no scars.

Jack said, "This has been the longest week of my life, and it's not over yet. What do you say we leave Gwen and Perry to mind the store, and go home?" He'd finally reached Ianto, placed his hands on each of Ianto's elbows, and brought their legs together. This was far outside their boundaries for the workplace, but Ianto decided this time, they could let it slide.

"Home sounds good." Since they were ignoring the rules for now, Ianto refused to feel bad about nuzzling in for a kiss. Nothing more than a kiss, because Gwen could walk in on them at any moment and they'd been through that enough, thank you.

"I'll let Gwen know we're heading out. Call ahead for dinner. Something we can take home." Jack kissed him again before disengaging to walk back towards his office.

"All right." Ianto headed for the kitchenette, where he stored the takeaway menus. As Jack reached the stairstep to his office, Ianto said, "Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"About ... about what we were talking about, the other day." Or a hundred years ago, as the Vortex Manipulator flew. "Um."

Jack paused, eyebrow raised in an encouraging, 'Will you hurry up?' fashion.
Ianto said, "Yes."

"'Yes' what?"

Ianto waited, but Jack's expression didn't change. Either he didn't remember, or he wanted Ianto to say the words, and this was not a fight they were having at work. "Give Gwen my love. I'll meet you at the car park."

Jack whirled on one foot and headed to his office. Ianto tapped his ear. "Perry, we're headed home for the day."

"Acknowledged. I'll be here a bit. I've got some notions about improving the next go-round of the Rift manipulator, and I want to reread Dr. Sato's notes."

Ianto had the oddest mental picture of Toshiko narrating information to a man she'd never met. Instead of hurting, like so many memories of Tosh had ached over the past year, this image pleased him. She would have loved explaining her ideas to someone as bright as Perry, who would take her work and build on it. He could almost see the pride in her smile.

"Don't stay too late."

"No fear." There was a long pause as Ianto shut down his system and double-checked everything in the butler's pantry was turned off. Perry said, "Hypothetical question. Call it wondering about etiquette in the twenty-first century."

Half a dozen memories flickered like fireworks through Ianto's mind: empty nights that lasted years; Tosh and Owen scanning his bedroom for alien technology, unable to meet his eyes; Gwen dropping by once to check on him, and fleeing as soon as she could; the heavy knock on his door that turned out to be Jack with takeaway, and a dimmed smile, and his unsure, "Can we talk?"

Ianto told Perry now, "You should definitely go by her flat to check on her. Take a pizza. She likes veggie, God knows why."

"Thanks. I'll do that. Good night."

Ianto finished up what he was doing, placed their order, and was almost to the cog wheel door when he heard Jack say from his office, very distinctly, "Oh!" Gwen's question in response was lost as Jack flew out of his office, nearly tripping as he ran across to where Ianto waited, trying not to laugh at him.

"That conversation!" His eyes were alight, and the glee on his face lit up the room.

Ianto, enjoying the moment, pointed out, "You forgot your coat."

"Ignore the coat."

"I can't. I love that coat. You bask in the secondary glow of my admiration for your couture." He turned, activating the door. Jack reached his side and took his arm, preventing Ianto from walking away.

"I love your suits, but I'm even happier when you're naked." His forefinger stroked Ianto's sleeve. "The suits definitely come in second."

"So it's agreed, we love each other's tailoring." The smile was far too difficult to keep off his face. Ianto stopped trying.
"You said yes."

"Let's go home and talk about it."

They left the coat. They went home.

***
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gwen, Ianto, and Perry held the fort when Jack and Alice drove to attend Frank's funeral. Alice didn't speak much to him, too upset with the most recent upheaval of her life, as well as the loss of the woman Jack wasn't happy to consider she'd likely been sleeping with.

When they arrived, Bonnie introduced them to the rest of the family. Jack recognised faces from photographs and surveillance. Alice took the opportunity to be friendly, coaxing smiles even as the rest mourned Frank and celebrated his long life. Bonnie made her promise to bring Steven up to meet his relations, clucking to the rest about how sweet a lad he was, spitting image of his cousin Graeme. Jack hung back, watching his grandchildren and their families, seeing a familiar feature here, a reminder of his own mother and father there. Phil Jr. looked very little like his namesake, but a great deal like Gray would, if Gray grew old. And Alice was perfectly placed among them, making small talk and strongly considering one more upheaval.

"It'd be doing a favour for the other side of the family," she lied when they asked. "That estate in Glasgow we visited. They're recruiting a new manager, and I do love the area."

Funerals were supposed to hurt. Jack had attended enough of them to know.

He lingered the longest at the old photos artfully arranged for the service: Frank with his wife Livvie; Frank, Livvie and their children; and a single black and white photograph Jack remembered Meg snapping on a warm spring day in 1929, Frank and Phil arm in arm and grinning as only brothers with no care in the world could do.

***

The flat had been tossed. Books and DVDs had been opened and dropped carelessly to break on the floor, all the kitchen was upturned, the wardrobe was a huge mess, and they'd even hacked roughly into the fabric of the sofa and the bed, looking for God knows what. Dirt from their one plant had been ground under boots into the floor, and the poor little cutting lay wilted amidst the broken shards of its pot.

The other day, Ianto and Jack had taken one look at the mess, and turned heel, and gone to a hotel.

Alone, for Jack was still in Scotland, Ianto sat on the one unbroken chair, had a stiff shot of whisky, then got his broom from the cupboard. Hours later, sore and tired, the rooms looked a bit better, and he promised himself he'd have the rest sorted before Jack came back. A new bed and sofa had been ordered and would be delivered tomorrow. He would replace the broken door and mend the frame. He would put the snaps of their loved ones back on the wall, replacing the glass. The music box he'd given to Jack months ago needed repairs but was intact. When he had time, he'd look into finding an expert in fixing delicate mechanisms. For now, he set it on the table and listened to the damaged tune.


"Are you ready to talk?" Rhiannon asked him.

Damn. He looked around at the mess he had yet to clean. He ought to drop the phone back into the cradle.
Instead, he sat on the ruined sofa. "Yeah."

"Tourist offices don't get targeted by government manhunts."

She would know if he lied, just like Mam. "I can't tell you everything."

There was a sigh from the other end. "Tell me what you can."

***

The house was a tip, courtesy of the UNIT troops acting under Gloucester's faked command, but they took a page from one of the magazines Gwen had read, and they made a game of it. Rhys would impersonate someone famous, and then Gwen did the same, and they played at cleaning up the mess as Jamie Oliver and Miss Moneypenny, laughing so hard at times they almost made it worse.

The thing Gwen occasionally had to remind herself of was that, while she loved spending time with Jack and Ianto both, her best friend in the world lived with her, and he could do a mean impersonation of Tony Blair.

When they were too tired to lift a single broken picture frame more, they collapsed on the sofa together, Gwen resting her head on Rhys's soft stomach. "I was thinking," he said. "We have the spare room, we could just shove the rubbish in there for now, and deal with it when you've got more time." Not that they ever had more time.

To be fair, although Cardiff's normal assortment of alien troublemakers weren't taking a holiday, the Rift had been quiet. Whatever they'd done, and Gwen still wasn't sure, couldn't say, and wouldn't guess, it had worked wonders. Jack had said there were plenty of other folks in Cardiff with burgeoning gifts. The Rift wouldn't stay quiet forever, not with thousands of cranky people above it every single day. For the moment, Gwen thought about blue skies and calm seas, and that seemed to help.

Funny, thinking of the Rift as more than a pain in the arse, as something positive. Everything you've ever wanted, Gwen thought, if only you know how to ask.

Rhys's stomach gurgled. She smiled quietly and patted his belly. And the best day of your life was the one you found out everything you really wanted overlapped precisely with everything you already had.

Almost.

"No, Rhys Williams, we are not hiding the rubbish in the spare room. We will take it all out to the skip tomorrow." She settled her head more comfortably. "We decided the spare room is going to be the nursery."

"We don't need a nursery right now." He stopped. "Do we?"

She never had told him about her pregnancy scare some months back. Perhaps it was time to tell him, but more likely, it was time to stop being scared.

"Not yet. But we could make a need for it." She sat up, and she pressed her lips against his, until he finally wised up.

And wouldn't you know, they had a little more energy after all.
Jack's depression had returned with him from Aberdeen, and there was nothing to be done. He'd recover, he had to, this was his life. Ianto could be there for him because that was his life, too. They broke in the new bed two hours after Jack's return, and the new sofa the following morning. Not bad, Ianto considered, but sorrow had never put a damper on Jack's libido.

As they showered, enjoying the late start to the day, Gwen phoned. "The Rift's being a bastard again," she said apologetically into Ianto's wet ear. "Perry's collecting data now."

"Right," said Jack, taking the phone. Gwen would love to know he was stark naked and dripping wet, but Ianto wasn't going to share. He got a towel as Jack talked to Gwen. "Call Lois, tell her to get her butt in to the Hub. She can monitor." There was a pause, but Ianto couldn't hear what Gwen was saying as he ran the towel over his own hair.

Jack said, "And I'm saying, never mind. Bring her in. I can suspend her again tomorrow. You and Perry get to the site. We'll be there soon."

Ten minutes later, they were in the car, their lazy morning sacrificed to Torchwood. Typical, really. Jack turned the radio to a station he liked and began singing under his breath, something light and catchy and innocently romantic from another time.

Ianto said, "I put together a guest list. I can show you tonight."

"Any special surprise guests I should know about?"

Ianto had a very brief, very terrifying mental image of the Doctor showing up in the middle of the ceremony. "Not if we're keeping things small, no. I told Rhi. She'll be there. I've got Alice and Gwen, and I put down Martha and her family. Mickey has already said he's sending a gift instead. I didn't know who you wanted to ask to cover the Hub that day, but we can finish the invitations when you decide."

"Let me think about it."

Everything you've ever wanted, thought Ianto, if you only know how to ask. And the best day of all was the one when what you wanted more than anything stood in front of you, smiling and wanting you right back.

Jack took his hand, keeping his eyes on the road.

Gwen's voice came staticky over the comm: "We've reached the site." A moment passed. Then she made a strange noise.

"Gwen? What's wrong?"

The sound changed, and then resolved into laughter.

"Gwen?"

In the background, there was a low, rumbling noise, like nearby thunder.

"We'll be there in ten minutes."

"Five," said Jack, gunning the engine.

"Don't," Gwen said, gasping for breath. "Oh, but get here soon. It's wonderful." Her voice filled
with awe and tenderness. "The things that came through the rift. Oh, Ianto. They're unicorns."

***
The End
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Chapter End Notes

Final Note: I'd like to extend a tip of the hat to the late, great Dwayne McDuffie, as well as Rich Fogel and Bruce Timm, whose work on "Justice League: Starcrossed" heavily influenced this story series. (Probably obvious to anyone familiar with JL, credit where it's due for everyone else.)

And as always, my three favourite words are, "I liked this."

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