**Doomsday**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/962621).

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**Doomsday**

by RoadrunnerGER

**Summary**

Torchwood Three and Ianto Jones’ point of view of the Battle of Canary Wharf... with a twist. Starting with Army of Ghosts and Doomsday and going on

**Notes**

Cybermen in every house? Lisa caught up in battle? Yet when it burned, two members of your team scavenged the ruins? Those glimpses always made me wonder what Ianto or Torchwood Cardiff went through during the Battle of Canary Wharf. So I picked up on what little information we got and started to write. At first I wanted to do it in canon, but the characters had other ideas. LOL I liked it even more, though, and I hope you’ll enjoy reading as much as I enjoyed writing.
Mysterious appearances

Cardiff

Seeing their boss and captain leave his office Suzie Costello asked, “Jack? Do you have anything new?”

“Yeah, I do,” he said, coming to a halt between the workstations. “I finally got in touch with the headquarters in London. My contact confirmed my suspicion that the management is testing a new power source and that the ghosts are a side effect.”

“How close was the contact?” Dr. Owen Harper snarled in his usual dry and sarcastic fashion.

Despite the implied insult he made Jack smirk.

“I only know him from the phone,” Jack told him, knowing full well that he offered his medic a golden opportunity.

Chuckling mischievously Owen rose to the bait and teased, “Telephone sex isn’t beyond you.”

“I must admit that his voice really does sound sexy,” Jack replied with a small leer. “Maybe I’ll get an opportunity to meet him when I’m in London the next time…” Remembering that they had more important things to do he trailed off and started anew, “Toshiko. Are you finished with the new adjustments you wanted to do? I want scans of those ghosts the next shift.”

“It should work now,” their computer expert Toshiko Sato told him, typing on her keyboard rather furiously to get it done in time for the next time the ghosts would come. “Knowing that the headquarters is experimenting with producing power I just recalibrated the…”

“Whatever, Tosh,” he interrupted her. “Will it work?”

“Yes, Jack. We should get more detailed scans now.”

“Good.” Thoughtfully the captain rubbed his chin. “I don’t know… there’s something about them that bothers me… and I certainly don’t want to rely on London’s…” in he thought wryly, “competence. Not after Hartman brushed me off that rudely.”

“You’re not the only one worrying about the appearances,” Suzie murmured. “I’m not comfortable with ghosts wandering through my flat either.”

“Your flat’s one thing,” Jack grunted. “Our Hub’s another.”

“Why thanks, Jack!” Suzie huffed. “It’s just my apartment we’re talking about, though, in my opinion, ghosts are a rather weird side effect of producing power, no matter where they show up.”

“Others seem to like it,” Toshiko said distractedly, glancing at Owen.

And really, the young doctor had succumbed to the world wide hysteria about the ghosts and wore a sweat-shirt with print, two ghosts spoofing Casablanca reading Humphrey Bogart’s famous quote ‘Here's looking at you’.

“He doesn’t count,” Suzie chuckled. “He’s always been weird.”
“Look who’s talking,” Owen shot back. “Doing this job you have to be.”

“Then you’re overqualified.”

“It’s almost time,” Jack interrupted their banter by picking up a plush ghost from Owen’s desk and tossing it at the medic. “Tosh, are you ready?”

“Yes, Jack,” she confirmed, pushing a few buttons. Then she turned in her chair to look at the posts and cables she had rigged up over the walkway crossing the tidal basin. The first ghost usually appeared there, so that was where she should get her best readings.

Now Jack stepped up beside her, hovering over her to have a better look at the monitor.

“Jack!” she scolded.

Staring at the screen with full concentration he ignored her protest, “Scan along all frequencies.”

“Yeah, Jack, I will. We already discussed that.”

“Just want to be sure.”

“It will work. You’ll see.”

“Yeah.”

Still he leaned over her, making Toshiko feel trapped.

“Jaaack… Stop. Breathing. Down. My. Neck! You can see from behind my chair as well as pushing your nose against the screen.”

The captain made two steps back, crossing his arms over his chest, pouting.

Before anyone could say anything more the first ghost appeared and they all concentrated on the task at hand.

xXx

London

Ianto’s gaze was fixed on his computer monitor, browsing the internet for information about an artefact. His job was to make sure that no second specimen showed up on eBay. So far he had not found anything. So he tended to believe that no other alien toy would be auctioned. Ianto had found the offer a few days ago during a routine check and Torchwood bought the item.

Now Ianto was about to complete the file and take both the folder and the artefact to the archive. A second after he hit print a window popped up on his screen, startling Ianto as he assumed that it was an error prompt. Instead it was an instant message sent on the intranet.

‘Meet me at the staff restaurant?’ it read.
Canteen coffee? Ianto hesitated. But then again, it’s a small price to pay for spending time with my fiancé. Her ruddy shifts. We hardly get to see each other. When I get home she’s still working. Later she slips into bed not long before I have to get up. Smiling to himself he typed his answer, ‘Sure.’

‘Did you already hear?’

‘Hear what?’ he sent back.

‘Tell you when we meet.’

Ianto smirked. That was typical Lisa, making him curious first only to let him wait. Well, waiting was something he was good at.

‘See you in ten.’

Getting up from his chair Ianto switched off his monitor. Then he left his cubicle to go to the printer and fetch his form.

“Secret date?” Larry from the workplace right across of his own teased.

“What makes you think I have a date?” Ianto replied calmly which was easier said than done as Larry was one of few colleagues Ianto rather liked to avoid. In his opinion Larry did not have all of his marbles.

“Your dopey grin, Romeo,” his colleague chuckled.

Scowling Ianto contemplated if he really looked somewhat stupid. “I don’t have a date.”

“Sure…” Larry shrugged and twisted in his chair to pick something up that he threw at Ianto. “You should give her that,” he smirked. “All the girls are crazy about the ghosts.”

Reflexively Ianto had caught the item. Frowning he looked at the plush ghost holding a red plush heart with love stitched on.

“Thank you,” he muttered.

“No problem,” Larry grinned and returned his attention back to work.

Rolling his eyes Ianto marched to the printer.

Larry really is nuts, he thought. His whole desk is adorned with that rubbish.

Ianto dropped the plush ghost into the bin and sorted through the papers until he found his own, and went back to his cubicle. There he put the form into the manila folder and the folder into a box, together with the artefact. Tucking the box under his arm Ianto strode to the exit to the hallway.

“Ianto,” Dr. Markham called out urgently as he passed his office so he stopped. Information Retrieval’s supervisor got up from behind his desk and came to the door, asking, “Where are you going?”

“To the archives, sir. Then I’ll head to the canteen for a cup of coffee. Shall I get one for you, too, sir?”

“May I have a look?” Markham indicated the box.

“Of course, sir,” Ianto replied and held the box out at him.
“This is the artefact you found on eBay, right?” Markham said as he picked up the file. “Well, let’s see…”

Ianto waited not quite patiently while his boss skimmed through the file.

“Canteen coffee?” Markham murmured without looking up from the documents. “Should I be worried?”

“Pardon?”

“Ianto, you make by far the best coffee of the whole Torchwood Institute,” Dr. Markham said with a small smirk. “Why do you want to drink the washing water they call coffee up there?”

Ianto shrugged, hoping Dr. Markham would get finished. Finally his boss nodded and put the file back into the box.

“This is good work, Ianto,” he said. “You’re our best junior researcher. Keep at it. It’ll pay off.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ianto all but stammered. Usually flattery did not belong to Markham’s vocabulary.

“Now go get your coffee,” Markham said with an amused wink. “Don’t keep her waiting.”

“No, sir,” Ianto rushed to say, grabbed the box tighter and hurried off to the elevator.

After a stop at the archives Ianto rode up to the forty-eighth floor where the staff restaurant was located. When he entered he spotted Lisa at a table near the windows.

“Right in time, Welsh Man” she smirked as he approached her. “Here. I got some coffee for you.”

Accepting the offered mug, Ianto dropped in a chair across from her and took a sip from the hot and strong drink.

*Washing water, indeed.*

“So, what’s the news?”


“Won’t believe what, cariad?”

“They say that the Doctor is here. He’s in her office I’ve heard.”

Ianto knew exactly who Lisa was referring to. Her, that was Yvonne Hartman, Torchwood’s current director. Ianto did not know who he should feel sorry for, the Doctor or Hartman, and that was only because of his lack of knowledge about the Doctor. In general anybody who was on Hartman’s bad side had to be felt sorry for. She was both respected and feared.

Ianto had met her only once. It was just a brief encounter and he was not especially crazy about meeting her again any time soon.

“Tracey told me about him,” Lisa chattered on excitedly. “She said Gordon saw him when the Director showed him the spaceship. He also said that the Doctor called it a Jathar sunglider. Isn’t it strange that the Institute has had that thing for so long and didn’t even know where it came from?”
“Yes, it is,” Ianto agreed, though he did not think that it was strange. By now he knew that Torchwood was pretty advanced in many respects… and awfully ignorant, naïve, and pretentious in others.

Back when he, the simple Welsh boy from Newport, had first joined the Torchwood Institute he had been thrilled. After drifting from job to job the employment at the top secret organization appeared to be the position he had always dreamed of.

Actually it had been Lisa’s idea that he applied for a job at the Institute.

On a Friday afternoon the rain had washed her into the café Ianto had been working at. For Ianto it had been love at first sight. So he used the first opportunity he got to ask her out on a date and was surprised when she agreed to meet him for lunch on Saturday. After a few dates she suddenly asked him if he wanted to keep working at the café or would like to find something permanent. Her firm searched for new employees, she said. So Ianto filled in the form she brought for him and a week later he was invited to his first interview.

Canary Wharf.

Ianto stood on the plaza, tilting his head back as he looked up at One Canada Square that housed the Institute’s offices. As long as he could remember back he had wanted to work in London, in Canary Wharf to be exact. The skyscrapers made him feel as if he was in New York City instead of London. The prospect of working there felt like a quantum leap.

Before he even got to talk to anyone Ianto had to sign the Official Secrets Act which showed him just how secretive the organization was. Of course Ianto’s job would mostly be administrative work, but he did not mind at all. With fresh enthusiasm he started into his new job.

“Ianto?” he heard Lisa call out for him. “Ianto!”

“Huh?”

“Where have you been? Woolgathering?”

“I’m sorry, Lisa. I’ve been distracted.”

“You weren’t distracted,” she chuckled. “You were on another planet.”

“That comes with the job,” he replied earnestly before he offered her a broad smile. “Now I’m all yours. What did you want to tell me, cariad?”

His use of the Welsh term of endearment appeased her, but she was too wound up to be mad at him for long anyway.

“Oh, all those rumours. Everyone’s so excited. First the mysterious sphere… you know that the tower was built to reach the breach where it came through? Well, first the sphere came and then the ghosts. Some say that finding a new power source wasn’t the primary mission, but tampering with the breach to attract the Doctor was. Brenda heard from Darcy that Gareth was one of the operatives who apprehended the Doctor and that he said that the Director applauded when she welcomed him to Torchwood. I’m so curious to hear more about him. He must be an interesting individual. Though I wonder how he’ll be doing here. After all of his travels it must hit him hard to be confined to the tower from now on.”

Actually Ianto rather wondered about when and how the good Doctor would make his first attempt at escape and if it would immediately be successful or if he would have to try a second time.
He’s declared an enemy to the British Empire, an Empire that doesn’t exist yet, as the Director likes to describe it. But why should we fight him if he doesn’t do anything but defend us? Ianto was a little confused about that. What he had read did not necessarily fit with the capture and secure attitude the Institute assumed towards the Doctor. Of course they want to study and exploit his ship, but if the stories about the Doctor are true I can’t see how they want to do that. How likely is it that the man, person, alien… that he is here just to save us again?

“You did it again,” Lisa chided him playfully, slapping his shoulder. “I must be boring you.”

“No!” he rushed to say, but the truth was that he was still thinking too hard, barely able to listen to her words. “No, I just… we get a lot of work, you know. Everything you hear about the sphere and the ghosts may be exciting for you, but we have to file it all away. It’s boring and takes a lot of time.”

“So you could probably be better informed than I am!” Lisa suspected. “What do you know about the sphere?”

“Nothing, really. We’re filing and categorizing all the stuff. I’m not reading the reports.”

She looked at him sceptically. “Maybe you should read them the next time, Ianto. It must be exciting. Oh, I’d love to see it just once. Are there pictures in the file?”

“I have no idea.”

Suddenly Ianto wondered who the woman on the other side of the table was. She looked like his fiancé but with all that babbling about the sphere and the ghosts - like she was discussing the latest celebrities news - it was hard to see the woman he fell in love with anymore. She had changed since she was assigned to the project. Ianto could not help but wonder since when she was so shallow.

“Oh, bummer. I have to hurry. The next ghost shift starts in four minutes,” Lisa exclaimed.

Ianto sighed. Lately he did not really feel like he was living with his fiancé. They lived in the same apartment, but due to their shifts he had hardly seen her during the last two months. While this was his early afternoon break it rather was morning coffee for her. When he got home later he would enter an empty flat because she was going to work until the wee small hours.

“I’m sorry, Ianto,” she apologized, seeing his disappointment. “Will we have lunch tomorrow? At one, here?”

“Yeah, Lisa. I’ll meet you here.”

“Great. Bye, Ianto.”

She breathed a kiss on his cheek and off she went back to her assignment, leaving a brooding Ianto behind.

tbc...
Cardiff

Exactly a quarter to six was the time when the ghosts appeared each day for their second shift. Each time the shift lasted for exactly two minutes. But there was one thing that changed with each appearance.

The intensity increased.

From the start Jack had watched the development with growing anxiety. He was not the only one who worried. His whole team picked up on his unease. At first the ghosts came on a late January morning. In February their appearances became more regular, once a day at ten past two, then twice a day at ten past two and a quarter to six. Later a night shift established, too.

That was when Jack decided that he was fed up with being stalled by Hartman’s secretary and drove to London to confront the Director personally. Upon his return he said nothing about the meeting or if he even spoke to Yvonne Hartman, but his occasional fits of temper became more frequent and unpredictable until he was acting like a weevil with a sore head most of the time.

So they began with their own tests in order to find out what headquarters had botched up this time. After the first disappointments Toshiko had worked feverishly on refining her scans. She did not make the two o’clock shift, but now she was looking forward to getting the best results so far.

It was time.

Toshiko had everything ready and was only waiting for the ghost to appear.

But it did not come.

“Now that’s strange,” Jack said, creasing his forehead. “Tosh?”

“I can hardly get any readings,” she told him. “I believe it was about to appear and then it changed its mind. Do you think it noticed that we tried to scan it?”

“Why am I supposed to know?”

“Maybe because you always claim to know the answer?” Owen teased with a wry smile.

“Not always,” Jack mused aloud and went down the stairs to the walkway where Toshiko had set up her equipment for the scan. He checked on his wrist strap, but it told him nothing new.

“For two months these ghosts appeared everywhere on earth, even in our Hub, and now we can’t get any data about them because they smelled the rat and retreated before they could give anything
away.” They all could hear the frustration in their captain’s words. “Tosh! Bring up the news. Let’s see if it was only our ghost or…”

“If they didn’t appear at all. There we go.”

Bringing the latest news up to the biggest flat-screen of her workstation was one of her easiest tasks. The news presenter of the Ghost Watch appeared to be confused though he tried to maintain a professional attitude.

“After two months of increasing ghost activity all over the planet it is quite a surprise that the ghosts did not appear at their usual time at a quarter to six this evening. Now the whole world is wondering: Is that a bad sign? Did we do something that has driven them away? Do we have to worry…”

Toshiko shut him down. They knew what they needed to know.

“So it wasn’t only our ghost,” Owen mused. “But why would they stop coming so suddenly?”

“Actually that’s a very good question, Owen,” Jack said. “And I know who I’ll ask.”

Turning on his heels he strode back to his office and grabbed the phone before he even sat behind his desk. As usual Director Hartman did not consider it necessary to answer her phone, so Jack dialled another number. After a few rings his contact answered him.

“Hello! It’s sooo nice to hear your beautiful voice again,” Jack flirted reflexively, despite his growing annoyance. If the man on the other end recognized his false cheer, Jack did not know, but he heard the icy sound in his partner’s voice when he interrupted.

“What do I want? Okay, I’ll tell you what I want. First, I want to know what the heck is going on… and spare me the nonsense about the project being top secret. You already violated the Official Secrets Act when you told me that the ghosts showed up when Torchwood London started testing a new power source. Now I want to know what kind of source you are testing and why there was no…” Once more he was cut off.

“The tests were cancelled. I see. Do you know why?”

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Toshiko stop right under the doorframe, watching him attentively.

“What??”

Jack forgot about his computer expert. Jumping up from his chair he leaned on the tabletop with his left hand as he clutched the phone with his right. His stomach muscles fluttered and he felt his breath catch in his throat. The fluttering spread through his whole body, making him shudder with excitement.

No! No, that can’t be… it… I have to get to London… I can’t…

Even his thoughts stumbled over each other.

“Tell me what’s going on in London,” he finally gasped, surprising himself with being able to speak a whole sentence without stuttering. He listened hard not to miss a word and asked just occasional, short questions.

Then he smashed the ear piece down on the cradle.
“What’s wrong, Jack?” Toshiko asked anxiously. Seeing her boss in such an agitated state could not be a good sign.

Jack still needed a moment to compose himself. “Whatever they are testing in London, it’s been stalled. Maybe something went wrong and they stopped it to find out what they were doing.”

Toshiko was not surprised to hear sarcasm bleed into Jack’s final words. As well as the other two team members she knew that Jack often was cross with the Institute’s management. What they did not know was what had led to Jack taking over the leadership of Torchwood Cardiff. Something bad had happened and Jack had severed the branch’s links to the mothership in London.

“So what?” Toshiko wanted to know. “You don’t think that there will be more ghosts tonight?”

“Actually I have no idea, Tosh.” Jack dropped back down in his chair, suddenly feeling very tired. Hartman was pushing all his buttons and he was sick of it. “London’s unpredictable. Even if they do have problems they might continue… just to see if they can’t make it worse.”

“Jack?”

“That’s the way Torchwood One operates: If it’s alien, it’s ours. If it could kill us, let’s get it so that we can kill ourselves with it.”

Toshiko suppressed her chuckles. Jack looked way too serious for banter with his furrowed brows, rubbing his chin with the knuckles of his left hand thoughtfully.

Suddenly he jumped up. With long strides he reached the office door and went past Toshiko out on the walkway.

“Suzie! Owen!” With a beckoning gesture he ordered them to come over. When he was sure that he had their attention he told them, “I don’t know what London did, but it means trouble. Whatever those ghosts are, they are dangerous. If they appear again… keep your distance. Get your weapons. I want you to be prepared and ready to defend yourselves.”

“Jack, aren’t you overreacting?” Suzie asked, sounding a little confused.

“I don’t think I am. Hartman’s not answering my calls and my contact told me that there’s a visitor in London. His presence tells me that we should be cautious with those things.”

“I still don’t get it,” Owen grumbled.

“You don’t have to get it, Owen, as long as you follow my orders,” Jack snarled, his darkening features more frightening than the ghosts had been.

“Which would make more sense if you’d tell us more about that visitor you’re talking about,” Owen challenged him. “Why do you think he’s trouble?”

“He’s not the cause of the trouble,” Jack told him brusquely. “But I know for sure that he only shows up when the shit hits the fan. So would you now please go and get your weapons from the armoury?”

A wide sweeping gesture across the Hub accompanied his heated words. They better went and did as he told them before he got really angry. Toshiko, however, hesitated.

“What is it, Tosh?”
“I managed to get some readings before we realized that the ghosts weren’t coming,” she said. “The scanners didn’t pick up much and I can’t be sure it’s not related to the Rift, but I believe that it was the same kind of energy.”

“Could it have been a rift spike?”

Shaking her head Toshiko said, “No, the radiation was slightly different.” She paused, thoughtfully. “Jack? Is there a rift in London, too?”

For a moment that, second by second, made the team’s anxiety more and more palpable, Jack remained silent.

“It’s not exactly a Rift like ours,” he finally said.

“Great!” Owen huffed. “When did you plan to tell us? When it started spewing out aliens intent on world domination or when it swallowed Canary Wharf and left a smoking hole in its place?”

“It was classified,” Jack spat.

“To hell with classified, Jack!” Owen argued. “Since when do you care?”

“Owen!” Suzie cut in. “There’s a time and a place!”

“Right, Suzie. And it wasn’t the right time to talk yet,” Jack snarled.

“Hope it is now, because it might be helpful,” Owen taunted.

Jack scowled at him deeply. “You know that I went to London when they started to build Torchwood Tower?” His team nodded. “That was when I first was informed about the existence of the breach they have there. It appeared in the sky over London and they started to build the tower to reach it.”

“To do what with it?” Owen wanted to know.

“To monitor it,” Jack snorted with wry amusement. “At least that’s what Yvonne Hartman told me. She said she wanted my expertise because I had been working with and around the Cardiff Rift for years. She demanded all information about our Rift in order to apply the same rules to their breach.” His features darkened considerably as he spat, “I should’ve known better. You can’t trust Hartman any further than you can throw a weevil. They were bound to do something stupid!”

The others looked at him as if he lost his mind.

“What was I supposed to do?” Jack snapped. “When I suspected that something went wrong I asked Tosh to run the first tests! Now all we can do is make sure we’re safe first, find out what they’re messing with, and then go and stop them. One step after the other. Now get your guns. Tosh, can you bring the news back up?”

“Sure.”

Jack was about to make his way down the stairs and across the tidal basin to reach the armoury when beeps coming from Toshiko’s workstation alerted the team of renewed activity.

A moment later a dark shadow appeared where they had expected the ghost to enter the Hub.

Instead of the beeps now the voice of the Ghost Watch presenter echoed out of the speakers, ‘It’s extraordinary, there are more ghosts than we’ve ever seen before! And it’s happening all over the
world.’

And down in the Torchwood Hub one of them was assuming a more solid shape by the second.

‘As far as we know, the increase in ghost activity is harmless.’

Metallic thumps echoed through the Hub.

And then the foggy shape became a humanoid figure in a metal suit of armour.

xXx

London

When he returned to his workplace, Ianto found a cart with five crates filled with manila folders and a whole stack of files in his inbox. Stifling a sigh, he sat back down and took the first files to have a look at them but could not quite concentrate. All he could think about was the mysterious Doctor.

Forcing himself to actually look at the documents he held in hands, he dismissed the first file as irrelevant.

He started.

Irrelevant?

Irrelevant in relation to what?

Irrelevant to my musings about the Doctor? Irrelevant to the ghost activity?

Shaking his head he pushed the thought aside and started to sort out the files, catalogue them, and put them back into the boxes for transport to the archives. While most people would be bored by such a task Ianto loved it. He found satisfaction in bringing order into the chaos and sense into the unclear system.

Having the feeling that still something was strange, Ianto looked at his watch. It was twenty to seven now.

It’s late. I totally forgot time over those files. Well, I can compensate for it when I need to leave early another day. One of the advantages of working flexible times.

Then it hit him.

No ghost shift! There was no ghost shift at a quarter to six! Now that is strange.

He heard some colleagues talk about the ghosts and noticed that they seemed to be excited and anxious at the sudden lack of ghosts.

When did we become so fixated on those ghosts?

That he had zoned out Ianto only realized when Dr. Markham nudged his shoulder.
“Mr. Jones. Torchwood doesn’t pay you to stare holes into space.”

“Of course not, Dr. Markham, sir,” Ianto replied and got up quickly, grabbing the files and stuffing them into the last box. “I’ll just bring these to the archives.”

“Yes, do that, Mr. Jones.”

As Ianto hurried off with the cart he could not see the amused smile quirking Dr. Markham’s mouth. Waiting for the elevator, Ianto had time to think about the missing ghost shift again.

_So why didn’t we go into ghost shift? I guess I should go to talk to Parry. See if he can’t get news out of Matt over a couple of drinks._

Matt was one of the group working for the Director on the ghost shifts. He would know what had happened, the question was if he would tell anyone about it. Whatever they were testing upstairs, it was top secret. Only a handful of Torchwood employees knew what it was all about, and while Parry and Matt were friends, it was a collegial relationship, not a close personal friendship. The odds of Matt sharing anything with him were slim. People who breached Torchwood security often found themselves in places they did not want to be, often without any memory of how they got there. Ianto did not expect to learn anything more than what he could get from the rumour mill or the gossip grapevine but it was worth a try anyway.

Ianto wondered if Dr. Markham knew more. As the head of InfRet he had an A5 clearance level. So for all Ianto knew he might be informed. But even if he was that did not mean anything. Markham probably knew the gist of it, just not enough to be able to explain what effect the experiments had on the ghosts, or the ghosts on the experiments. Being his boss, Markham was not likely to confide anything in Ianto. Ianto could probably ask a few clever questions if the appropriate moment presented itself, but it would be a risk. Getting too curious about highly classified Torchwood activities often met with the same results as breaching Torchwood security.

_I can’t understand why everyone is so excited about the ghosts. People were scared to death when they first appeared and now the whole world is mad about them. People would miss them. They did miss them when they didn’t come tonight._

His gaze fell on the tie of the colleague who was with him in the elevator. Instead of a classic pattern it sported rows of tiny ghosts that could be mistaken for white dots from further away. Inwardly Ianto rolled his eyes.

_They were declared harmless, a side effect. So why don’t I feel reassured?_

Brooding he stepped off the carriage and almost walked past the entrance to the archives, but he noticed it in time and shoved the cart through the automatically opening doors. Walking along the rows of shelves he found the section he was looking for and pushed the handcart between them. Ianto found the right shelf and began to sort the files in.

He was completely engrossed in his task so that he did not notice that something was wrong until he heard a woman scream. His head shot up and out of widening eyes he stared down the narrow space between the shelves. As much as he could see nothing justified that furore.

“What the bloody hell…” he murmured, hearing more screams and thunderous stomps.

His heart jumped up into his throat and his stomach dropped into his shoes when he saw a big metallic figure appear in the main aisle.

“We are the Cybermen,” an impersonal, synthesized voice called out. “You will be upgraded.”
More stomps thundered.

More silver bodies lined up in the archive’s centre.

More people screamed.

Ianto ducked behind his cart and prayed that they would not notice him.

*Where are those things coming from? They came out of nowhere! They just appeared, like the…*

Ianto could hardly finish that thought. His heart beat so hard that he feared the metal humanoids would hear it. Desperately he tried to control his breathing. Loud gasps would be a dead give-away, too.

*The ghosts… these were the ghosts. They didn’t come through at first. They just appeared like ghosts because they… they… they what? Because they couldn’t reach our dimension yet? Or whatever?*

Ianto felt paralyzed.

Not a single muscle seemed to work anymore. His body shut down with fear.

*Lisa!*

That name was enough to bring his fighting spirit back. Remembering Lisa he forgot about his own precarious situation.

He had to reach Lisa.

He had to rescue Lisa.

He had to bring them both out of here.

Alive!

Fear almost paralyzed him again, but then he pulled himself together and, using the shelves as cover, he sneaked to the door.

tbc…
Incursion

Cardiff

“Bloody hell!” Owen exclaimed.

The two women shrieked.

Jack felt his heart jump into his throat before it continued beating in its usual place again.

The armoured metal man looked around and stomped down the walkway.

“Oh, my God!” Toshiko yelled. “What’s that?”

Seeking help they stared at their leader, but Jack was at a loss, too.

“Run! Get your weapons!” was all he could come up with. “I’ll distract it!”

“What?!” Toshiko burst out, grabbing for his arm to hold him back. “But you can’t!”

“Do as I said!” Jack screamed, pushing her off him.

“Um, Jack…” Owen tried to get the captain’s attention.

Toshiko’s mouth opened in wordless terror as she looked in the direction Owen indicated and saw that more shadows appeared in the breach and materialized as metal men. Now there were four of them.

“Good God,” Suzie breathed. She was closest to the armoury and managed to get there without stumbling over her own feet with horror. With shaking hands she punched the code in and opened the door. She slipped in and grabbed the first weapon she could reach.

Then she realized that it was a common gun with metal rounds. It would be of no use against the armours of the intruders.

“An energy weapon!” Toshiko gasped as she rushed in, too, darting for the far end of the armoury. “We need something to short out its electronics!”

“Like what?!” Suzie shouted, panic evident in her voice.

“Something big and mean,” Toshiko replied, glancing over all the weapons they had collected over the years. Some of them never got used because they could not tell for sure what they would do when they were fired. Now they would probably find out.

At the same time Owen backed into the autopsy bay, sliding under the railing and grabbing the first thing that came to hand, which happened to be a Stryker saw.

“Great!”
Frantically he searched for a long cable and plugged the saw in.

“Let’s see if that helps,” he muttered to himself. He got up just in time to be confronted with one of the metal men. Switching the saw on he lunged forward, screaming. He swung the saw and hit the chest.

Sparks flew, but it hardly left a dent.

“Bloody hell!” Owen cried out with pain when the intruder grabbed his left upper arm and squeezed it hard. Then power charged through the doctor.

Owen screamed.

Desperately he hit with the saw and felt it get stuck, but the power was interrupted.

Yanking on the saw Owen got it lose. The metal arm hung limp on the attacker’s side.

“Yes!” Owen shouted, realizing that he accidentally hit the seam of the arm’s joint. “Take that!”

Once more he hit the armour with the saw, aiming for the neck. This time without success.

Instead the robot thing grabbed him with its still functioning arm and threw him aside. Owen crashed into one of the workstations.

*Stomp! Stomp!*

Silver legs appeared in front of Owen and he swung the saw at them. Too late he noticed that it did not run anymore. He tried to switch it on, but it had no power.

“Fuck!”

Owen let himself drop on his side and rolled through under the desk. On the other side the doctor jumped to his feet and ran.

*Stomp! Stomp!*

It followed him.

Giving in to a sudden impulse Owen ran down the stairs to the vaults.

On his way he ran past Jack who did his best to keep the intruders’ attention on him.

“Oh, really! You can’t come uninvited and think that we’d welcome you to our party!” he shouted at the metal man approaching him. “Who are you anyway?”

“We are the Cybermen. You will be upgraded!”

“Upgraded?” Jack laughed out loud, backing up a little. “What do you mean with upgraded?”

“We will remove human imperfection. You will be like us!”

“Bad news, guys,” Jack snarled and began to climb the stairs to the kitchen area. “None of us will take you up on that offer. We happen to like the way we are. We don’t strive for your idea of perfection!”

“Then you are not compatible!” the Cyberman shouted in its impersonal synthesized voice. “You will be deleted!”
“Come and try!” Jack challenged, spinning around and running up the staircase. “I’m not that easily deleted!” Behind him he could hear the thumps of the heavy metal boots. The whole stairway was shuddering.

All of a sudden he heard a swishing sound. Red light shot past him and burst a dustbin.

“Oh ho hooo!” Jack shouted. “There’ve been others who tried to kill me. They were no more successful than you are!”

Swish!

Another laser blast flew past him and into the wall.

So one is after me, one after Owen… and the other two? Jack looked around frantically as he ran down the walkway around the Hub. He rushed into the boardroom and out again, always making sure that he was a bit ahead of the Cyberman but not too far away for it to lose its interest in him.

There are the other two, he thought and clattered down the other stairwell, running right toward them.

“Hey! I’m here!”

He saw them raise their right arms, ready to fire. So he jumped to the side, rolling on his shoulder and rising to his feet again… just in time to see the Cyberman on the stairs start when it was hit.

Behind the Cybermen Toshiko and Suzie came out of the armoury. Both brought up weapons and fired.

One Cyberman shuddered and fell forward, hitting the floor with a thud, to keep lying prone.

“Yes!” Jack shouted.

Too distracted by the two women Jack noticed too late that the intruder that had chased him came up behind him. When the hand mercilessly took hold of his shoulder it was too late. Jack screamed when energy shot through his body.

“You are… wrong,” the Cyberman said and sent another charge through Jack, making the captain squirm and scream and break down on his knees. “You are not from here and now.”

When the attacker let go of Jack he slumped on the ground where he lay in a motionless lump of flesh.

“Jack!” Toshiko shrieked.

“Come!” Suzie shouted, pulling on her arm. “Which weapon brought it down?”

“No idea!” Toshiko gasped, running after her. “Let’s shoot again!”

“Always a good idea!”

Suzie was right in front of Toshiko when she abruptly stopped, swivelled around and brought her weapon up again. Toshiko could not stop her momentum and barrelled into her team mate. Both crashed to the floor and Suzie lost her gun. It slid down into the tidal basin.

“Shit!”
“Come up!” Toshiko alarmed her and both scrambled to their feet.

Down in the vaults Owen ran down the corridor between the cells to get away from his attacker. To his right side were the heavy steel doors and he granted himself the luxury to stop at two of them to unlock them. Then he opened the door to the last cell in the row and slipped in, closing the door behind himself. On the other side he let himself out through the security glass door. Sprinting down the hall he darted out through the entrance and over to the massive steel door securing the vaults’ corridor there. From inside he heard the screams of a Weevil and the thumping steps of the Cyberman right before he smashed the door in its frame and locked it. Now the Cyberman was trapped in there with a Weevil and a Hoix.

“Have fun upgrading,” Owen smirked and ran back up the stairs.

Toshiko felt the force of the punch Suzie received and had to let go of her co-worker’s arm. Suzie turned and tried to intercept the arm that came down on her shoulder.

“You are not compatible! You will be deleted!”

Power shot through her system and she collapsed at the Cyberman’s feet.

Owen just came out of the tunnel when he saw her fall. Realizing the trouble Toshiko was in he jumped over a railing and down into the tidal basin to retrieve her weapon. He raised it and pulled the trigger, but it did not work. A crackle of energy was all it emitted before it hissed and was rendered completely useless.

“Shit!”

Toshiko fired, too, but obviously the Cyberman was immune to the kind of energy her weapon erupted.

“Now we know which gun it was,” she groaned and let it fall. It was heavy and she definitely would be faster without it, especially as it was completely useless now.

“Tosh!” Owen yelled, beckoning her to follow him.

As he waded out of the basin she ran around it on the walkway to join him at the entrance to the autopsy bay.

Toshiko stumbled down the stairs after Owen.

“Shit! Owen, what are we doing here? There’s no other exit, is there?”

“No.”

“So we’re trapped, right? Owen!”

Wide eyed she stared at her colleague who just now pulled open the door to one of the freezing chambers.

“Get in!” he ordered her.

“No way!”

“You want to stay out here and be upgraded?”

Toshiko glowered at him.
“C’mon,” the medic encouraged her. “Lie on top of me and it’ll take us both.”

“I’m not…!” Toshiko gasped. That was unbelievable. “…lying on top of you,” she finished her sentence. How could he expect her to do something so outrageous? One more look at Owen made her body tingle. Actually outrageous might be good.

“I’m not saying it’s a brilliant idea,” Owen defended himself, “but it’s the only one we’ve got!”

Before she could argue further he climbed into the chamber, holding out his hand to her encouragingly. Clunks on the walkway upstairs and, so far, outside of the morgue convinced her. So Toshiko climbed in on top of her co-worker and he closed the door behind them.

Both of them shuddered when the stomps thundered right above them.

Out in the central Hub Jack gasped painfully as he revived from being electrocuted. Just for a second he could not tell where he was and what was going on, but then he saw the Cybermen lying motionless… as motionless as Suzie.

“No!”

Jack did not worry about getting to his feet. On all fours he hurried over to her limp form and cradled his second in command in his arms.

“No! Suzie!”

Looking around frantically he counted two Cybermen. So there had to be two more somewhere. Clunks and whirring alerted him to the fact that one was on its way to the autopsy bay.

Inwardly Jack cursed, torn. Following right away was impossible, though, as he just had to try and help his second in command. Holding his own breath he searched for her pulse. After four attempts he felt it, barely perceptible, beat against his fingertip.

“Suzie,” he murmured and pressed his lips to hers in a life-giving kiss.

The whirring of the metal man’s gear and the clunks of its boots made the whole autopsy area vibrate. Toshiko could sense it where her right hand was trapped between Owen’s shoulder and the chamber’s wall. Beneath her she felt Owen breathe and, what surprised her more than anything, tremble.

“Owen?” she whispered.

“Yeah?”

“What do we do?”

Good question, Owen thought. Despite his fear he could not help but notice the smoothness of Toshiko’s skin, the quivering of her muscles and her female scent. Oh, dear.

He sensed her shock and that she was about to yelp with fear when the stomps of the monster came closer.

Grasping her hair he pulled her down and sealed her opening mouth with his own, kissing her into oblivion to prevent her from alerting the enemy to their hideaway.
London

Ianto made it to the archive’s entrance unnoticed. Around the shelf he was hiding behind he looked down the main aisle where the Cybermen rounded up the employees. Sobs and whines reached his ears. Desperately he wanted to help them, but he knew that there was nothing he could do.

*Lisa! I have to find Lisa!*

Waiting for the right moment he squatted behind the shelf. When he was as sure as he could be that no Cyberman was watching he rushed to the door and slipped out into the corridor.

Just to realize that he was on show there.

*Crap!*

Sprinting down the long hall he searched for a way out. He turned into another corridor and back pedaled when he saw Cybermen come from the front. Through a door he came into a staircase and stopped.

*Up? Down?*

Ianto’s instinct told him to go down, but if he wanted to find Lisa he needed to go up.

*Ten storeys,* he thought, as he ran up the stairs. Three storeys further up his run slowed down and while he forced himself to jog up the stairs his lungs began to burn. He was breathing hard and gasping for air when he reached the landing of the twenty-eighth floor. So he took a few seconds of rest before he carefully opened the door just a gap and peeked into the corridor. Jumping back he pressed himself against the wall just before the door slammed inwards and a group of people stormed through, panicked, running down the stairs.

As he stood in the small space in the corner behind the door Ianto’s stomach muscles fluttered as he heard the people rush by. His anxiety doubled and redoubled when the clunks of metal boots followed the group. Peeping into the stairwell Ianto counted at least twenty Cybermen following the scared office workers.

Once they had passed Ianto carefully slid out of his hiding place and entered the hall, finding his way to Lisa’s office automatically. His heart was beating rapidly. A feeling of being ultimately exposed spread through him, making his every move an effort as his body wanted to shut down with fear.

“*Ianto?*” he heard a suppressed yelp and before he knew it Lisa flung her arms around him. “*Ianto! Oh, God! I hid in the closet! Those creatures…!*”

Ianto’s heart leaped in his chest with joy, but he grabbed her upper arms and silenced her frantic rambling with a fierce kiss.

“*Shhh! Let’s get out of here,*” he hissed when he released one arm and dragged her with him by the other, on to the next staircase heading back on his original course.
“But how?”

“By foot?” Ianto remarked wryly, unable to hide his annoyance and fear. “Unless R and D has developed a Star Trek transporter, then we could beam out of here.”

“Don’t be silly!” she hissed.

“Bond’s Little Nellie?” he suggested with little hope.

“Ianto!”

“C’mon!” he urged, pushing through the door. Pulling on her hand he hurried down the stairs.

“Look out!”

Lisa’s shout alerted Ianto to what he had almost overlooked… four Cybermen standing on the landing right below.

Pivoting right on the step he just had hit he ran back upstairs, forcing Lisa to come along with him. Behind them they heard the stomps of the Cybermen following them and then a red beam shot past them and hit the wall.

Lisa screamed.

Ianto ran as fast as he could. He felt how Lisa’s hand threatened to slide out of his grip and he squeezed it harder.

“Ianto!”

This time they made it into another corridor unseen, but it was only a matter of time until they would be spotted.

Suddenly Ianto was yanked sideways, something gripping tight at his upper arm, and he gasped with surprise. Still holding onto Lisa they both found themselves in a dark room and were pushed against the wall. Someone made a shushing noise. A television set provided a minimum of light, throwing flickering, surreal shadows in the dark.

“Ianto! What the hell are you doing here?”

“Dr. Markham?” Ianto yelped. “What…?”

“Quick! You have to hide,” his supervisor hissed and stepped aside, squatting down. “Here…” Gripping the grill over the ventilation shaft he pulled it out. “Get in there.”

“In there?” Lisa panted. “We can’t…!”

“Either you hide,” Markham grunted, taking her arm and shoving her toward the shaft, “or you won’t survive this. Now get in there.”

“But, sir,” Ianto cut in. “We really can’t just hide. We’ve got to do something!”

“You can’t fight them!” his boss shushed. “They are Cybermen! All you can do now is survive!”

“Who’s supposed to fight if not Torchwood?” Ianto argued.

Even in the dim light Ianto could see his supervisor’s shoulders sag.
“Torchwood brought this down on us. The fight is already lost. Now… it’s too late for me,” Markham sighed. “Too late for my generation… and for Torchwood’s mind-set.” With every word he spoke his passion grew. “But you, Ianto, you’re young, and strong, and smart. You’re what Earth needs. You need to survive this. You have to tell them about the mistakes we made.”

“But I know nothing!” Ianto frayed.

Markham snorted derisively. “No kidding, Mr. Jones. Unless I’m very much mistaken it was you who sent me those mysterious messages. Am I mistaken?”

Ianto felt his cheeks glow and in more light his blush would have been a dead giveaway.

“That’s what I thought,” Markham interpreted his silence. “You’re curious. Maybe too curious for your own good. You wanted to dig deeper where nobody else wanted to see, but you didn’t have the clearance. So you egged me on. Am I right?”

Ianto nodded.

“Ianto?” Lisa gasped. “What’s he talking about?”

But both men ignored her.

“I realized too late that Hartman’s experiments had the potential to be fatal for all of us. Nobody thought it could be Cybermen, though. I realized it only when the ghosts transformed.” Looking at the Welshman intently he sighed with resignation. “I wish I’d have your courage. Wish I’d have told him earlier…”

“Told who?”

“Captain Harkness.”

“Torchwood Three,” Ianto murmured, more to himself. His skin tingled. The renegade branch. “When did you talk to him about it?”

“Today.”

Ianto’s eyes widened. “A little too late.”

“Oh, I sent him information before, but… well, I was too reluctant. We should have tried and stopped ruddy Hartman. Now we all have to pay the price for my cowardice.”

“You call breaking your oath cowardice?” Lisa cut in incredulously. “You broke the Official Secrets Act! How could you become a traitor?”

“A traitor, my dear?” Markham snarled. “Captain Harkness may be unconventional, he may have his own way of dealing with things, but he still is Torchwood. He’s sitting on a Rift through time and space in Cardiff, for God’s sake! In my opinion he should have been involved right from the start.”

“He was the one who severed the link to London,” Lisa pointed out.

“With good cause,” Markham huffed. Then he turned back to Ianto. “This will sound the death knell for Torchwood. If anyone can rebuild it then it is Jack Harkness. He needs to know…”

Grasping Ianto’s lapels he pulled the younger man closer so he could whisper in his ear.

Ianto shuddered as he listened.
“Remember,” Markham insisted as he let go of him. Pulling some papers out of his jacket he pushed them in Ianto’s hand. “Here. And don’t tell anyone but Captain Harkness. Promise.”

“But, sir…”

“Promise!”

Ianto choked. “I promise.”

“Good boy,” Markham sighed. From out in the hall came loud stomps. “Get in there now. Keep hidden. Survive. Make me proud.” He ushered them into the ventilation shaft and pressed the grid back on the opening. “Good luck.”

Then he turned to run for the door that burst open before he could escape.

“We are the Cybermen! You will join us.”

“Over my dead body,” Markham spat.

In the shaft Ianto reacted quick and hugged Lisa tight, slapping his hand over her mouth to keep her from screaming. She quivered in his embrace and he could not resent her that. Those creatures scared the shit out of him.

Right then he saw the Cybermen freeze for a few seconds, then one of them said, “Emergency upgrade protocol activated. Bring him to the conversion chambers.”

“No!” Markham shouted. “I won’t just let you upgrade me! Go to hell!” And pulling a gun out of his waistband he attacked the Cyberman closest to him.

Uselessly the bullet ricocheted through the room. Markham could fire a second time before another Cyberman took hold of his shoulder and sent a jolt of power through his body. Markham screamed until he slumped lifelessly down on the floor.

In Ianto’s arms Lisa was struggling against his hold with terror. Ianto himself was also close to panicking, but he was alert enough not to give any sound. With horror he watched Markham die.

*He saved us,* Ianto thought. *He saved us, he saved us…*

“Find and detain all personnel,” the Cyberman who had killed the doctor said. “Emergency upgrades effective.”

It turned abruptly and marched out, the others following right on its metal heels.

“Oh, my God!” Lisa gasped. “Oh, my God! They killed him!”

“Shhh,” Ianto tried to soothe her. Actually he yearned for someone who would comfort him, but right now he had no other choice. Now he had to be the strong one for both of them.

His gaze was drawn by the television where the pictures flickered before they were replaced by the image of a Cyberman.

“This broadcast is for human kind. Cybermen now occupy every land mass on this planet. But you need not fear. Cybermen will remove fear. Cybermen will remove sex and class and colour and creed. You will become identical. You will become like us.”

*Thanks, but no thanks,* Ianto thought.
Lisa clung to his arm, shaking like a leaf.

“Ianto, we should go,” Lisa whispered.

“Where should we go,” Ianto replied. “He said we’ve got to stay hidden.”

“Here?” she gasped. “For how long?”

“Until it’s safe.”

“Oh, right,” Lisa remarked wryly. “And you also still believe in Santa Claus, yes?”

Ianto scowled at her accusation. Well, she’s scared. She’s venting her fear.

“They killed him,” Lisa said again. “They’ll kill us, too. Ianto, if we stay here we’re gonna die for sure.”

“We’ll die if they find us.”

“Or we’ll be killed when UNIT or the army destroy the tower in order to defeat the Cybermen,” she told him, her voice wavering on the brink of hysteria.

Chills chased down Ianto’s spine as he had to concede that she made a point.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll use the shafts.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

Lisa behind him Ianto started to crawl down the shaft, hoping that they would be able to stay hidden until they reached the ground floor.

tbc…

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Ianto asking for “Little Nellie” is a reference to the James Bond movie "You Only Live Twice" that featured the Wallis WA-116 Agile, a British autogyro (mini helicopter) developed in the early 1960s by former Royal Air Force Wing Commander Ken Wallis.
Cardiff

Suzie Costello woke up with a start, gasping for breath wildly. Out of widened eyes she looked around frantically. She was cold. Her legs and lower body were freezing. Thrashing she tried to get up and heard water splash. So she was lying in the tidal basin.

“Ugh!”

She felt something touch her lips.

“Shh!”

That was Jack’s voice. She focused on him. He looked like he had put his hand into a power socket.

“Stay here and warn me if another one shows up,” he told her, scrambling to his feet and out of the water basin. Then he ran to the armoury, vanishing inside. When he emerged a moment later he carried two big guns.

“Let’s see how it likes these,” he said as he stormed past Suzie and to the autopsy bay. He could hear the stomps thunder up from downstairs and when he stopped by the railing he had the Cyberman right in front of him.

And from below his feet Toshiko and Owen’s screams reverberated through the tiled room. The Cyberman had opened the door to the drawer where Jack’s team members were hiding.

What to do first?

The Cyberman answered his thought with firing its laser at him. Jack jumped to his right and rather rolled down the steps to the bay where he jumped for a pair of controls. Pressing the down button he activated the freight elevator.

As a result the medic and the computer expert screamed again, this time with shock at the sudden movement of the lift that carried them down to the morgue.

The Cyberman stood by the open door and would have looked confused if its metal features would have allowed that.

That gave Jack enough time to get up and level his guns.

“Upgrade that!” he shouted and fired both weapons. The Cyberman spasmed and keeled over, crashing on the floor and making the whole autopsy bay shudder.

“Glad that worked,” Jack murmured to himself and stepped over the fallen enemy to look down into the elevator. “Tosh! Owen! Are you okay?”

“Yeah!” Owen shouted back. “We’ll come back up!”

“Okay. Meet you in the central Hub!”
“What the hell was that?” Toshiko yelled as they climbed out of the freight elevator.

“What?”

“You snogged me!”

“Last kiss for the condemned man!” Owen replied unabashedly. “Little embarrassing given we haven’t been killed.”

If looks could kill Owen would have dropped dead.

“What! It’s not like I fancy you or anything!”

If possible Toshiko looked even more annoyed.

“I was on top of you,” Toshiko snarled. “I could feel your hard-on!”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t exactly struggle, did you?”

*Oh, dear! Men can be so stupid, especially when their name is Owen!*

Before the doctor could do as much as flinch she had grabbed his head with both hands and claimed his mouth with her own in a crushing kiss.

Owen moaned, too stunned to react otherwise. He felt Toshiko’s tongue slip out and push against his lips. Unable to withstand her urging he opened up to her and gave in to the deep exploring kiss. His arms wrapped around her slender form and pulled her close. One of her hands stayed on his head, ruffling his hair while the other slid down his back. Owen was totally taken aback, way too surprised to resist.

Then Toshiko let go of him and slapped him hard in the face. “Fancy that!”

“Ouch!”

“The kiss was for saving us!” Toshiko growled. “And the slap for getting fresh with me.”

“That hurt!” he whined and was slapped on the other cheek. “Ouch!” he cried out indignantly.

“And that was for complaining!”

Toshiko pivoted on her heels and started her way back up to the Hub. Owen followed right in her wake.

“Let’s see if the Weevil could eliminate the Cyberman,” he suggested.

“What? What did you do?”

“Released the Weevil and the Hoix and trapped them with the Cyberman. Down in the cells.”

Rolling her eyes Toshiko ran after her team mate who already darted down the tunnel to the cells. There he went into the corridor where he had come out of just to slide to a stop when he spotted the Cyberman in the cell the Hoix had inhabited before. It banged on the security glass with its left arm as Owen had incapacitated its right with the saw.

“Where’s the Weevil?” Toshiko shouted. She stepped back when she saw the Cyberman. Owen on the other hand tried to look past it for a sign of the captured creatures.
“It’s lying in the other corridor, bleeding,” he told Toshiko. “Guess it’s dead… and so is the Hoix.”

“Oh, crap!”

“Let’s run!”

Both left the tunnel in time because they heard the glass shatter behind them. When they stormed up the stairs they ran right into Jack’s arms.

“Three are dead!” he said. “Did you see the fourth?”

“Right behind us,” Owen replied and hid behind Jack readily.

Toshiko joined Suzie by the workstations.

*Thump! Thump!*

The Cyberman had climbed the stairs and advanced on Jack who screamed with rage and fired his weapons. Like its counterpart in the autopsy bay the metal man shuddered and fell.

“Is it dead?” Owen asked anxiously.

“Well, I hope so,” Jack said.

“No energy emitting from it,” Toshiko let them know. She was typing furiously, getting her scans together. “No life signs of any kind except ours. I think they’re dead.”

“Okay. That was four,” Jack stated dryly. “And it was hard enough to kill just the four of them. Let’s see what’s going on outside.”

“Already working on it,” Toshiko said and brought up CCTV images and the news channel. On the Plass right above the Hub and all over Cardiff people tried to flee the Cybermen that were everywhere.

Then the picture of the news reporter vanished to be replaced by a Cyberman. Seeing and recognizing the background Jack choked.

“That’s at Hartman’s office.”

“This broadcast is for human kind. Cybermen now occupy every land mass on this planet. But you need not fear. Cybermen will remove fear. Cybermen will remove sex and class and colour and creed. You will become identical. You will become like us.”

“Oh, shit,” Owen exclaimed, expressing exactly what they all felt.

xXx

London

Crawling and climbing through the ventilation system was difficult. Ianto and Lisa did not have
much space to manoeuvre. So they made little progress and time was ticking.

“Ianto?” Lisa queried. “Where are we going?”

“We need to find a way down if we want to get out of the tower, right?” he replied in a whisper. “So we should get as close as possible to a staircase or the elevators.”

“We still have to cross a hall,” she murmured thoughtfully.

“Yeah, well, either that or staying where we are.”


They continued crawling, always careful not to make treacherous sounds. That Lisa fell silent was fine with Ianto. It meant that they were less likely to be discovered and that he could let his own mind wander.

Unexpectedly Lisa touched his calf and asked, “What did Markham tell you?”

“Is it important right now?”

“Well, I think it is,” she told him. “How could Dr. Markham dare to reveal the Institute’s secrets to Captain Harkness? Besides, what did he mean when he said you sent him mysterious messages?”

Stopping crawling Ianto rolled his eyes and let out an exasperated breath.

“Rumours, Lisa. Torchwood is full of them. I wanted to know more about what was going on instead of following the management blindly into doom.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m aware that working for Torchwood is dangerous, but I fail to see why I should lay down my life for the Institute if it’s not necessary.”

“You mean to say that you don’t trust them.”

“Exactly.”

She seemed to mull over that for a moment before she said, “So you’re no better than Markham.”

Ianto bristled and gasped incredulously, “You’re calling me a traitor?”

“Yes.”

It was all Ianto could do not to round at her. They both were getting louder with every word. They could not risk detection. So Ianto angrily hissed through his teeth, “I should have done more than that. Maybe we could have prevented this invasion.”

“Ianto, really. You’re doing a desk job. How could you prevent an alien invasion?”

*Wham!*

“Well, now… it’s enlightening and motivating to hear what you really think of me,” he said dryly, barely able to keep his temper in check. *On top of everything else, she’s going to start bitching at me? Where did that come from? Just the uncertainty of our situation?* Ianto could not help but prod, “Any other words of wisdom you want to share with me?”
“Nope.”

Feeling irritated by her brusque reply he commanded, “Then shut up!”

“Ianto!”

“Shut up!” he hissed through gritted teeth. “Or do you want them to hear us?”

“No,” she sobbed softly. “Ianto, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to have a go. I’m just scared!”

“So am I,” he grunted, “but I’m not taking it out on you with insults.”

“Insults?” she queried. “I just found out that my fiancé has been sneaking around and possibly betraying the Institute we’re working for whilst we’re running from aliens that are trying to kill us. I’d say it’s the perfect moment to be pissed off.”

“Pissed off?” Ianto sadly asked. “Why? Because I want to keep us safe? Because I want to protect you? So we can have a family?”

“Family?” she echoed. “Ianto. We can’t have both. You know that.”

“Both?” Ianto felt rushes of heat and cold wash over him.

“That’s why I said that we’d have to talk about having kids again,” she told him soberly. “I wouldn’t want to risk them possibly having to grow up without their parents because we were killed in action.”

“Yeah, but…”

“But choosing children meant to leave Torchwood, Ianto,” she argued, though she kept her tone neutral now. “It meant facing being retconned. That’s something earnest we had to talk about.”

“Just when would we have done that talking?” Ianto hissed back, surprising himself with the venom in his voice. Where did that come from? “You hardly were home recently. That ruddy project consumed most of your time and it estranged you from me!”

“Ianto?” She sounded perplexed.

“You could try summing up how much time we’ve spent together during the last two weeks and get no more than probably ten hours,” he explained tiredly. “I wanted to know what you’re dealing with. I wanted to make sure that you’re safe.” He paused. “I missed you.”

“Oh, Ianto,” she sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize… I love you.”

Hearing her confession made his heart ache. How long had he waited to hear those three words from her again, knowing she really meant it and not just dropping it like a line when she was on her way out of the flat?

“I love you, too,” he murmured and heard a soft sob. He squirmed around in the small space to touch her hand reassuringly. “It’s okay. Now hush. Let’s get out.”

Continuing crawling Ianto searched for a way to get out of the ventilation shafts unnoticed. As the shafts did not have ladders they had no choice but to get out. They could not just climb into a vertical shaft and drop. From here on the twenty-eighth floor that would be suicide.

In the hall they heard the frightening thumps of the invaders.
“Daleks! You will be deleted!” one of the Cybermen shouted.

“Exterminate!” an even higher synthesized voice shrieked. “Exterminate!”

Laser fire erupted.

Ianto could see the flashes through an opening further ahead. Scared to death but unable to keep his curiosity in check he crept closer to the grill. There was a whole group of Cybermen, certainly fifteen to twenty of them, and one after the other, they dropped to the floor. Once they were out of the picture another metallic figure came down the floor.

It was unlike anything Ianto had ever seen, of cylindrical form with a part on top that could turn separately, like the head and body of an organic creature. It had two arms, one of which could be used to fire an energy beam, as Ianto had seen before. The other seemed to be the thing’s single eye.

Suddenly the top turned to the left and the eye lifted up to focus on the grill of the ventilation shaft.

Shocked Ianto scooted back.

*Did it see me? Does it have sensors? Some kind of scanner?*

His heart beat in his throat.

*What is that thing?*

Then the oversized saltshaker twisted around and glided down the hall, past the fallen Cybermen and around a corner out of Ianto’s sight.

“What happened?” Lisa whispered.

“There was… a… thing,” Ianto murmured back. “It killed at least fifteen Cybermen.”

“On its own?”

“Yes. C’mon.”

Reluctantly she followed him. Ianto was not sure where he should lead her. They could not hide in the shafts forever. Just which way out should he choose?

They followed a bend to the right and were over the hall now. They crawled further and found a flap to a small office.

*If I’m not mistaken the next stairway is only a few yards away from here,* Ianto thought and tried to remove the grill. It creaked when he pressed it out of its frame, but he did not think that it was loud enough to be heard outside the room. Then Ianto climbed out of the shaft and helped Lisa to follow him.

Once she stood safely on her feet again Ianto looked around in search for something to write.

“Where are we?”

“I think we’re on the south side, not far from the stairs,” he replied, walking around a desk to go through the drawers. “We should be able to make it down and out if we can reach the stairwell unnoticed.”

“All right.”
“Once we’re out we’ll need to stay hidden as long as possible.”

“I want to go home,” Lisa stated, her voice taking on a plaintive edge.

“Lisa, I don’t think that is a good idea.”

“Just where else are we supposed to go?”

“Somewhere without Cybermen…” Ianto hissed, looking up from his search. “That is, if there is any place safe from them.”

“Ianto! What are you trying to say?” she gasped.

To Ianto she sounded like she realized for the first time how bleak their situation really was. Surprisingly that scared him. They were a team. They were partners. Why should he do this if not for her?

“Didn’t you see that transmission?” he said. “They are all over the world! Millions of them! Bent on upgrading every human being that they find.” Now Ianto’s tone could not betray his fear anymore. “I’ll do everything I can to get us out of here, Lisa, but I’m afraid that our chances are pretty small.”

Tears formed in her eyes and spilled over.

“Ianto? I’m scared…”

For loss of words he reached out for her and pulled her in for an one-armed hug. With his free hand he opened the next drawer and found a notepad. He put it on the tabletop and grabbed one of the pens to scribble something down.

“Ianto, what are you doing anyway?” she asked, wriggling out of his hold. “We shouldn’t waste time.”

“This is important,” he told her brusquely, throwing just another line on the paper.

“As important as getting us out of here?” Lisa queried.

“I don’t want to forget it,” Ianto told her insistently. Now that he had written it down he only needed to read it once to commit the information to his long-term memory. He also unfolded the papers Markham had given him to read. Taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly he had a last look at the notes before he put the sheets in the document shredder beside the desk.

Lisa looked at him with confusion.

“Let’s go,” Ianto simply said without further explanation.

Nodding she followed him to the door, leaning against his back when he peeked out through a gap. When he moved forward she stayed close behind him. They stalked down the hall toward the exit to the staircase.

No sign of Cybermen so far.

They made it out and hurried down the flights. Ianto looked over the railing down at the next landings as far as he could see. Their way seemed to be clear.

For a brief moment Ianto thought that they could actually make it.
That was when another entry opened and Cybermen stepped through, right into the couple’s way.

“Stop!” one of them said. “Emergency upgrade effective. You will be useful.” It turned to the metal man to its left. “Take them to the upgrade chambers.”


Ianto was too shocked to react. They had been so close. Damnit!

A whole group of Cybermen surrounded them and marched them up the stairs.

“Ianto! What can we do?” Lisa asked with breaking voice.

“I don’t know,” he choked, reaching out for her hand to hold it tight. Right now it was the only thing that kept him upright.

“We’ll get out of here, right?”

No, I don’t think so. Ianto choked on his own breath. His insides churned. He knew they were about to die, he just did not know how. How exactly would they upgrade them? Ianto decided that he did not want to know.

Repeatedly he looked at Lisa and noticed that she seemed to be deep in thought. What was she racking her mind about now?

“I’m sorry,” she said tonelessly. “I… appreciate what you were trying to do. I had no right to judge you.” She sighed. “You’re so brave… Welsh-Man.”

Despite their bleak situation Ianto had to smile. The way she called him Welshman always made him feel like she was referring to a super hero.

“I love you,” she murmured. “That’s why you have to go.”

“Huh?”

“Go to Harkness.”

“But…”

The Cybermen marching them up the stairs did not seem to notice their low conversation or they ignored it.

“Don’t argue,” Lisa commanded. “Just go.”

“Lisa, I can’t…”

“You have to. For Dr. Markham.”

“No.”

“For humanity.”

“No.”

At that she shot an exasperated look at him. “For me.”

“But, Lisa…”
They were almost on the top level when the first Cyberman opened the door to the forty-ninth floor and stepped through. The others followed.

Lisa squeezed Ianto’s hand.

Tonelessly she said, “Don’t look back. Go.”

Before he could say anything else she pushed him away and grabbed the arm of the Cyberman next to her. Twisting into its embrace she brought around its arm with the laser gun, so when it shot it hit one of the other metal men and then another.

“Go!” Lisa screamed. “You have the information, not me! Now go!”

The last thing he saw of her was how she fought the armed Cybermen with her bare hands, doing her best to keep them from stopping him. Then he turned around and ran down the stairs.

It was a desperate flight. He could not let Lisa down.

_It’s my duty to fulfil her last wish and get away. I’m sure they’re deleting her now._

Unfortunately his run was over faster than expected when Cybermen stepped through a door onto the landing below. In a cruel repetition of events Ianto was recaptured.

“No!” he howled when he was grabbed by metal hands.

“That one’s resisting,” one of the Cybermen said. “He should be deleted.”

“Emergency upgrade effective. No deletion. Everyone will be upgraded!”

Ianto felt sick to his stomach. If he thought about it he rather wanted to be deleted. As painful as it had appeared to be when he was seeing Markham die, electrocution seemed to be preferable over upgrading.

“No! Noooo! Nooooooo!”

It was his own screams that he heard on their way back up the stairs. It did not take long and he was back by Lisa’s side. Upon spotting him she sobbed.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “They’re everywhere. I didn’t have a chance.” _Markham died for us, Ianto_ reminded himself. _And now we’ll die for bloody Hartman!_

“Oh, my God! What’s happening in there?” Lisa asked tearfully.

Actually Ianto did not pay attention to their whereabouts. When he now looked around he saw the curtained area he had passed a few times when he was collecting files from the offices on this floor. Screams of people, the whining of machines, flying sparks, and the coppery smell of blood filled the hot air.

Hearing a somewhat familiar voice among the uproar Ianto turned his head.

“…sorry, um… I think they remove the brain and they…”

Ianto squinted to see better in the twilight and spotted a blond woman clad in blue jeans and matching jacket waiting in front of another cubicle.

“…put it in a suit of armour.”
And behind her was Yvonne Hartman. He choked when he heard her next words.

“That’s what these things are. They’re us.”

“This is your fault!” the blond woman screamed with rage. “You and your Torchwood. You’ve killed us all!”

Both Lisa and Ianto choked.

“Guess that answers your question,” Ianto gasped. He reached out for Lisa’s hand.

“I did my duty for Queen and Country,” they heard Hartman shout tearfully and looked to where a Cyberman was about to drag her away. She wrenched her arm free and steeled herself, muttering as she walked in, “I did my duty. I did my duty. Oh, God. I did my duty.”

The Torchwood agents saw the blond woman wince at the sounds of Yvonne’s screams and the sparks flying from behind the curtain and winced as well.

Holding her hand tighter Ianto rasped, “I love you, Lisa!” Tears spilled out of his eyes. “Don’t forget that, okay? I love you!”

“I love you, Ianto!” she replied as a Cyberman began to drag him away from her.

Her hand slid out of his grasp.

“Take me first!” Lisa demanded, stepping in the Cyberman’s way. “Release him! I’m more important. Upgrade me!”

“Lisa!” Ianto shouted in protest.

She looked at him with a mixture of love and grief, whispering, “Goodbye, Ianto.”

“Lisa!” Helplessly Ianto had to watch how she was herded through the plastic curtains into the cubicle. Ianto yelled at the top of his voice, “Lisa! I love you!”

“Iantoooooo…!”

Her shout changed to an endless scream of pain and faded under the nail-biting sounds of the machine doing its work.

“Lisa,” Ianto said tonelessly.

He felt his knees give out and he slumped in the grip of the Cyberman behind him. Now he really felt sick. His throat was corded up with fear and his heart beating as if he ran a marathon.

“Oh, my God! No, please! I don’t want to die… well, they said we wouldn’t, we’d be like them! Oh God! What is worse?”

As he could not look at the entrance to the conversion chamber Ianto looked down the hallway and watched how two Cybermen stepped together. They were so busy with what they were doing that they did not notice the blond woman sneaking away. Ianto wished he could go with her, but the Cyberman still held him firmly.

How much time passed Ianto could not tell. It could be minutes but for him it felt like forever. He was shaken out of his trance when the Cyberman began to shove him forward. Ianto tried to plant his feet, but the pull on his arms was so strong that he had really no chance to resist.
What sense does it make, anyway? Lisa is one of them now. The woman I loved… is gone. I could as well be dead.

Numbly by the realization that Lisa was lost he let himself be herded behind the plastic curtains. From other cubicles he heard the sounds of upgrading. The place was full of screaming, the whining of drills, and flying sparks.

Ianto saw the conversion unit he was guided to, but the sight did not really register in his mind.

The Cyberman leading Ianto in turned him around by the shoulders, grabbed his neck, and shoved him against the almost vertical metal construction. Ianto hardly noticed that a set of clamps snapped shut around his ankles, but he was startled back to awareness when the same happened to his wrists. Unfortunately he was immobilized by then.

“Oh, God,” he gasped. “No!”

The frame he was strapped to now dipped backwards, the sudden movement causing a sickening sensation in Ianto.

“No!” Ianto muttered to himself. “No, no, no! Let go of me! Please! No!”

He sank further down until the frame locked in a horizontal position. Then another set of clamps pressed against both sides of his head, rendering him completely immobile.

“Nooo!”

Right above him Ianto stared at a mounted part of the conversion unit. In its middle was a round catch, divided into lunate parts like the shutter of a camera. He could feel a quiet hum of energy when the machine powered up. The shutter whirred open and he saw the glint of steel and a whirl of blades that he knew were going to end his life as he knew it.

Ianto screamed.

tbc…
“Now, if that’s not bad news,” Jack growled. He still held his weapons, ready to defend them in case that more Cybermen should appear.

“Yeah, right,” Owen snapped. “What do we do now?”

“What do you mean, what do we do?”

“Well, we’re professionals who deal with alien threats. I guess I mean what do we do now to stop this invasion?”

Smirking rather incredulously Jack stared at the young doctor and challenged with wry amusement, “What? Those four weren’t enough for you?”

“You want to abandon the other people to their fate?” the doctor was shocked, thinking Jack was serious. “We can’t do that! We’ve got to help them!”

“Owen’s right!” Toshiko said. “Look at that chaos, Jack! Cybermen everywhere. The people don’t know what to do, where to go! They need us more than ever!”

“And what should we do?” Jack chuckled wryly. “We were lucky to take out those four. How are we supposed to beat millions of them?”

“So what? We just give up?”

“That’s not what I said, Owen,” Jack told him, his voice softening again. “We have no chance to fight them hand to hand, though. Whatever we’re going to do we can’t just walk out of here and attack them. We need to make a plan… and then we can act.”

Owen stood beside him, stunned. Toshiko stared at him for a moment before she started to type on her keyboard again.

“Tosh, can you get CCTV from London, too?”

“Sure, I can,” she growled and a few keystrokes later her screens showed different places in London. “I bet you want to see Canary Wharf.”

“Yes, Tosh. Please.” As he leaned on her desk the gun clattered against the tabletop.

“Can’t you put that thing down?”
“For now,” Jack murmured and sat it down on the floor beside him. “Where’s Suzie?”

“In the vaults,” Toshiko told him after another look at her computer. “There you go.”

On the big screen in the centre of the set she brought up a picture of Torchwood Tower in London. The city and the tower were burning.

“Oh, my God,” Owen breathed. “It’s worse than here.”

“It’s the centre of the storm so to speak,” Jack said. “We need to find out how the Cybermen came here.”

“You said that Torchwood London is responsible for the ghost shifts,” Toshiko murmured absently, still typing something. “So I’d say that they brought them here.”

“Yeah, their harmless side effect,” Jack snarled.

“Also known as alien invasion,” Owen muttered.

Jack sighed at the realization that they might be fighting a lost cause.

“So far I have no idea how we could possibly defeat them. Unless… but we’d need to know what exactly they did with their breach in order to figure anything out.”

“Figure what out?”

“I wonder if it’s possible to use our Rift manipulator to reverse the process.”

Toshiko stared at him with unmasked shock. “Jack! Calculating that risk is impossible. We can’t do that!”

“You prefer Cybermen stomping the streets?”

Swallowing dryly Toshiko shook her head.

“Didn’t think so.” His expression was determined. If it was their best option, he would not hesitate to follow this plan through and order Toshiko to open the Rift.

Over his shoulder Jack looked to the entrance to the vaults. “What’s taking Suzie so long? What’s she doing down there?”

“I made sure that Owen’s assumption is correct,” his second in command answered as she climbed the stairs to join them. “He was right with his telediagnosis. The Weevil and the Hoix are dead.” She gave the doctor a sour smirk. “You can thank me later that they don’t attack us unexpectedly.”

Owen glowered at her, but remained silent. Together with his team mates he watched the footage on Toshiko’s screens. It really did not look good and for a fleeting moment he was glad that he was safe in the Hub.

“Tosh!” Jack suddenly called out, pointing at Torchwood Tower. “Can you get closer?”

Wordlessly she worked on meeting his request. When she brought up a closer shot of the building they could see that something hovered outside in the air. Steam was streaming out its bottom and then it opened. More metal figures shot out of the thing.

“Oh, shit!”
Astonished they all turned to their leader. He seldom swore, so they were surprised to hear it now. All over the bloody planet Cybermen were killing people but the sight of that big hovering cone caused him to swear?

“What? What’s that thing, Jack?” Toshiko finally asked as she saw Jack pale.

“Something that shouldn’t be here.”

“Like the Cybermen, huh?” Owen taunted.

“That’s not possible! They were destroyed!” With both hands Jack brushed through his hair before he bit his right fist. “It’s not possible!”

“What?”

“What’s not possible, Jack?”

“I bet that’s why he’s here…” Jack murmured. “Bloody hell, how many of them are in that thing?”

“Captain Harkness!” Owen yelled. “What are those things?”

“Our end.”

Thunderstruck all three of them stared at him.

“I don’t think that’s funny, Jack,” Toshiko said. “And who were you talking about? Who is in London?”

“The Doctor.”

“The Doctor?” Suzie gasped. “You mean The Doctor who was the reason for Torchwood’s foundation?”

“Yeah.”

“You mean he’s responsible for all this?”

“What?” Confused he turned to look at her. “No! If anything he’s here to put it right! My informant told me that he arrived right after the last ghost shift, the one at ten past two.”

“The same guy who told you the ghosts were a side effect of the mysterious power source tests?”

“Yeah.”

“Jack, what can they have done to their breach that it cracks open all over the world?” Toshiko cut in. “Cybermen coming through everywhere. What caused that?”

Jack looked crestfallen. He knew he should have acted sooner, but at the time when he became suspicious matters did not seem to be so urgent. That was why he did not exactly wrack his mind over it when he was distracted by everyday business, chasing what came through their own Rift which seemed to be more and more over the last weeks. Only when the ghost activity increased as well and Yvonne showed her claws when he confronted her, Jack realized that he had been played. Now he feared that it was too late to intervene.

“I can only guess that they built some sort of Rift manipulator,” Jack told her. “In order to gain power from the breach they need to open it…”
“Open it?” Toshiko cut in with open incredulity. “But, Jack! That’s not just careless! That’s sheer stupidity! How could they do that?”

“Harnessing that kind of power might result in making Britain independent,” Jack explained. “I can just see them abandoning all doubts for the alleged greater good and exposing the world to a fatal threat.”

“I still can’t believe they built the tower to reach the breach,” Owen grunted. “How much money do they have that they can waste it on stuff like that?”

“Enough,” Jack spat.

“All right,” Suzie said. “As I understand it the breach is somewhere inside the top of Torchwood Tower, right?”

“Right.”

“Then how did the ghosts get everywhere else?”

“How do the aliens pop up all over Cardiff?” Jack shrugged. “The Rift’s not confined to a single spot. Tampering with the breach could have caused it to crack or splinter, the ghosts bleeding through.”

“Like the cracks spreading across a windshield from a bullet hole?” Toshiko suggested.

Jack nodded.

“Tell us again why we’re learning about all this only now,” Owen challenged.

Inwardly Jack cringed. Hiding his guilt he said as firmly as he could manage, “I was sure that I would be informed if things really went downhill.”

Owen snorted. “Sometimes I have the feeling as if you’re relying too much on your carnal attraction.”

The look Jack shot at him now would have put the Medusa to shame.

“Jack?” Toshiko piped up before the men could start butting heads. “You said we could use our Rift manipulator to repair the damage London’s done.”

“I don’t know for sure, Tosh,” Jack admitted. “But it’s the only thing I can think of right now.”

“Well, the readings I got from the ghosts are different in many respects, but similar in others.”

Thoughtfully Jack bit his bottom lip.

“I honestly don’t know,” he admitted. “And you may be right that the risk is much higher than the chance of getting the desired effect. Let’s find out more about it. Maybe we find a way to send those Cybermen to hell. Owen, you can start with a thorough examination of the one that already lies in the autopsy bay. Tosh, please…”

“Find out as much as possible about the breach in London. I know,” she nodded and typed away.

“Suzie, you’ll help me in the armoury,” Jack said, picked up his gun and headed for the weapon chamber. “And then we should clean up in here, at least put those bodies out of the way.”
No sooner said than done. Toshiko already worked on her computer, Owen vanished down the stairs to the autopsy bay and Suzie beat Jack to the armoury. They put the guns that were scattered all over the room back on their mounts.

“Jack?” Toshiko called out for their captain.

“Yeah, Tosh?”

“I have a theory. I would say that whatever Torchwood London did opened the passage for the Cybermen not from another time but from another place into our world.”

“From another planet?”

“I don’t know…” Toshiko mused. “Then they probably would all have come through the breach in London, but… taking into consideration the theory with the splinters… I mean that’s where they’re slipping through…” She trailed off, uncertain about how to explain herself.

“Maybe a parallel world,” Jack suggested.

“Parallel world…” she thoughtfully muttered to herself.

“I’ll be right back. I just want to check something down in the vaults,” Jack told her and started down the stairs. He did not get far when he cried out.

“What the heck…?”

Jack felt like he ran into a wall. And not just that. Without his own doing he moved backwards. The suction on his body was strong enough to sweep him off his feet. Jack gasped when he lost touch with the ground. For a moment he was totally disorientated.

He was tumbling through the air.

Flailing his arms.

Desperately trying to get a hold on anything.

Clong!

He hit Toshiko’s workstation with his elbow. It hurt, but he worried more about her precious monitors.

Bang!

Jack collided with the railing. Twisting his body he turned in time to grab it before he was swept up in the air.

“Jack!” Toshiko yelled.

His left leg caught behind the railing, too. He now hung on to it with both hands and the crook of his leg.

“Jack! What’s going on?” Owen shouted, coming up from the autopsy bay.

“Don’t know!” Jack groaned. The pull on him almost winded him.

“There’s a massive energy spike!” Toshiko called out, checking on her computer. “No Rift activity,
“Where?” Owen demanded to know as he ran over to Jack to try and hold him. “Damn! What’s it doing to you?”

“To me?!” Jack gasped breathlessly. “Look!”

Swishing past them came the Cyberman Owen had been working on, neither twisting nor tumbling, shooting right up to the Hub’s ceiling and breaking head-first through the concrete.

“Bloody hell!” Owen yelled, holding on to Jack as hard as he could.

The clatter of Toshiko’s furious typing sounded like a timer counting down Jack’s last moments.

“Oooohhhhh!” First hints of panic mingled into Jack’s voice. “That’s not good!”

“Origin of the energy spike is in London!” Toshiko told them. Wide eyed she stared first at her monitors then at Jack. “And our Cybermen here are not the only ones that have sprouted wings! They are being pulled in the air all over the world!”

“Fantastic!” Jack groaned with obvious sarcasm. “What’s that got to do with me?”

More clatter. Time was ticking.

Awkwardly hanging on to the railing Jack squirmed to get a better grip. Unfortunately his leg lost its hold and his feet were pulled up. Now he hung from the railing as if he would do a handstand, with the difference that he had to muster all his strength not to let go. That proved to be more and more difficult as the suction on him never decreased.

“Ooooooohhhhh! Oooooowen!”

“Hold on, Jack!” Owen frantically pleaded, grabbing at his captain’s belt and braces, using his own weight to hold him down. “Tosh! Help us!”

Desperately clinging to the railing Jack tried to summon his reserves to counter the suck on him. His back and shoulders hurt from the constant strain and Jack felt his muscles tire, his grip loosening, fingers stretching, millimetre by millimetre slipping.

“Nooooooo!”

Despite his best efforts Owen lost his grip when Jack could not hold on any longer. The captain was jerked up which resulted in belt and braces being wrestled out of Owen’s hands. Helplessly the medic and Toshiko had to watch how Jack flew toward the hole in the roof.

Jack screamed.

xXx

London
Ianto screamed.

He could not stop himself screaming.

The knives stopped.

Ianto, caught up in his own terror, could not fathom that fact. They were still spinning, still scraping against each other as he watched them descend closer to his head. As the sounds of the metal clashing on metal died away, Ianto could still hear them in his mind. Unsure if he could trust himself Ianto blinked, came back to himself, realized that the machine had in fact stopped.

He squinted around in search of the Cyberman that had brought him in. It was nowhere to be seen.

Stomps could be heard, though.

Agonized screams coming from other cubicles tore on Ianto’s nerves. Now that he had had a moment to collect himself he realized that it had not been the Cyberman that stopped the machine. It did not have power anymore.

Power.

Ianto had been able to hear a hum of energy when the unit powered up and he was still hurting from tensing in response. His muscles still were hard, subconsciously straining against his bonds.

Bonds!

The loss of power shut the machine down, but it didn’t release the clamps. Too bad.

He tried to open them anyway, but no matter how hard he tried his wrists and ankles were still stuck.

Oh, no!

Loud clanks alerted Ianto to the presence of another Cyberman. It came in through the plastic curtains somewhere behind the unit and appeared in his field of vision on his right side. At once Ianto noticed that something was different about that Cyberman.

Then his eyes widened with terror.

He gaped at the creature beside the conversion unit.

It was so different from the other Cybermen, only partially converted, bare flesh being visible on limbs and torso. The face also was clearly visible, though it wore the strange helmet of a Cyberman.

And seeing that face gave Ianto the creeps.

“Lisa!” he croaked barely audible as his voice gave out.

For a moment she, it, stared down at him before it turned and walked away, out of the cubicle on the other side.

“Lisa!” he sobbed.

Ianto’s heart broke. When the Cybermen had led her into the chamber he knew that he would never see her again. He knew that she would be upgraded and that none of them would be the same as before. Ianto understood that, but still it remained something abstract in his mind.
Seeing her like that, neither a complete Cyberman nor a human being anymore tore his soul into pieces.

Ianto cried. Tears ran down his cheeks and tickled in his sideburns.

*I've gotta stop that!* Ianto thought. *Crying will block my nose!*

Still it was hard to fight against relieving his grief and fear. His heart ached for his lost love and what little of his life was left. There was no doubt that the Cybermen would be back as soon as the power was restored. Then they would upgrade him, too.

“Delete!”

*Zoom!*

*Zoom! Zoom!*

“Exterminate!” *Zap!*

*Clonk!*

*Zap!*

*Clonk!*

*Zoom! Zap! Clonk!*

Ianto’s mouth opened to a soundless scream. Terrified did not really do justice to how he felt right now. After what he had seen earlier from out of the ventilation shaft he deduced that the Cybermen were fighting against the oversized pepper casters again.

He listened hard. The short thumps following each zapping sound led Ianto to the conclusion that the pepper caster once more decimated the Cybermen.

*Zap!*

*Clonk!*

*Zoom, zoom!*

*Oh, crap!* One of the red beams tore through the curtains and shot right over him. Ianto struggled against his restraints, but they did not give way a millimetre. *Stay calm, Ianto,* he ordered himself. *They’re not fighting you. I bet you’re pretty irrelevant to them, actually.*

*Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump!*

*Thump, thump, thump!*

*Thump, thump, thump, thump!*

*Thump, thump!*

Thunderous steps sent vibrations through the concrete floor. Ianto could even feel them through the frame of the conversion unit. He did not need a lot of fantasy to imagine the Cybermen sending big groups out against the other strange species. Their impersonal, shrieking voices threatened each other and then more clonks indicated that the hall was filled with dead Cybermen.
“Exterminate!” the unknown attacker screamed. “Exterminate!”

*I may be mistaken, but I’d say that it’s only one of them against a battalion of Cybermen. I don’t want to find out what it’s capable of doing.*

Another energy beam shot through his cubicle, followed by two others, and he caught his breath. His features contorted to a mask of terror as he desperately tried not to scream, scared that if they heard him, either one might kill him.

*Wouldn’t that be ironic? Saved by power loss and killed as an incidental casualty of a war between two alien races fighting to take over the earth.*

Listening to the fight he lay in the machine’s frame, rigid with tension, his stomach muscles fluttering, and everything else hurting with the strain put on him by his efforts not to panic. His breaths came in short, ragged gasps, and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from screaming.

A low groan escaped him.

Ianto held his breath.

*Did they hear me? Oh, Lord, don’t let them hear me!*

It was not for the first time in his life that Ianto was scared, but now he was truly scared shitless. Trapped in the damned machine he could do nothing to defend himself.

*I won’t even be able to die fighting. I’ll die helpless and alone, a quivering mess that isn’t even remotely dignified.*

A few more zaps and clonks could be heard, then everything turned silent.

Almost silent.

Whirring sounds faded away. Once they were out of earshot someone was screaming again. It was a clearly pained cry that already had the synthetic qualities of a Cyberman’s voice.

It gave Ianto the creeps.

The screaming continued, seemingly forever. It burrowed into Ianto’s soul and touched him even deeper than the fear. His eyes started to sting, and he closed them tightly against the tears. He wished there was a way he could cover his ears, but he was helpless. Finally, he could bear it no more.

“I’m sorry,” he shouted. “God, I’m so sorry! I can’t help you! I’m trapped in here, too.”

“Who’s there?” the strangely tinny voice of another man, or what was left of him, called out for Ianto. “I’m David Myles. What… what’s happening?”

Ianto swallowed hard. He was not sure if he would find his voice now. When he tried it was rather a croak, “Ianto Jones. I… I was… working in Information Retrieval.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!” David cried out. “Huuuuuurts! So much… pain!”

Ianto’s heart broke for him. There was nothing he could do to help himself, least of all David. Another voice mingled in, sounding even more artificial and choppy.

“Emergency upgrade. All forces have to gather… on the top floor. Defend the Rift Chamber!”
Metallic clanks echoed through the curtained area. None of them could see the others. All they could rely on was their hearing.

Right then Ianto would have preferred to be deaf.

David was screaming again, unable to concentrate on a conversation. The other victim seemed to struggle with the conversion unit it was trapped in. The construction creaked and moaned as the incomplete Cyberman strained against its restraints.

*I couldn’t even muster enough strength to make it creak. When I struggle against it nothing happens.*

All the time David screamed louder and louder, his voice becoming ever more high-pitched.

*God forgive me, but would you just die?*

Ianto’s cheeks blushed with that thought. It was born of sheer desperation.

Something snapped and bumped on the floor.

*Thump!*

*Thump, thump!*

A Cyberman was moving between the curtains.

“Whooooaaa! Whatcha doing?” David shrieked.

“Completing emergency upgrade!”

Ianto froze with fear. That voice belonged to the other caught man. He had freed himself… and was starting David’s conversion unit.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

David’s scream of death echoed in Ianto’s ears.

*Oh, my God. I’ll be next! Please, Lord, don’t do that to me! Let me die of a heart attack or something first! Just don’t do that to me!*

The thumps drew nearer and Ianto was sure that he had only seconds left. Now the vibrations carried forward in the metal frame so that he could even feel it coming. Then it appeared beside him.

“Emergency upgrade not complete. Restart cyber-unit.”

*Nooooo!*

Ianto saw it reach out for something, presumably the controls. The unit would wake and mutilate him any second. His heart skipped a beat and then another…

“Exterminate!”

*Zap!*

*Clunk!*

The Cyberman fell.
Ianto gasped in a deep breath, steeling himself for the inevitable. He had no reason to believe that that the odd pepper shaker would leave him alive. Squinting he could see its top as it swooped closer.

“Exterminate,” it said and directed its gun on the helpless man.

Ianto closed his eyes and waited for the beam that would kill him.

tbc…
London

Still keeping his eyes closed, Ianto held his breath until his lungs ached for want of air. Gritting his teeth, he fought against the urge to breathe, pressing his eyes shut even more desperately. Anything to avoid having to face the metal creature shooting him. Overcome by self preservation Ianto took a huge gasp and air exploded back into his lungs. Something tickled his throat and he painfully panted with the resulting coughing fit, making his head hurt as it jerked in the steel grip of the conversion unit’s clamps.

*Why am I still alive?*

It was a miracle to him. Given his situation, hardly a pleasure at the moment, but still a miracle and reason to rejoice.

Why the alien did not fire Ianto could not determine. Opening his eyes the first he saw were the tools that hovered over him threateningly. Peeking around he discovered that the oversized pepper shaker had vanished. Being restrained there was only so much that he could actually see, but he still dared to believe that the alien was gone.

As he squinted to the side to figure out if there was any trace left of the thing, Ianto was startled by another of the metal cones, or maybe the same, they all looked alike, whirling through the conversion chamber. It shrieked in its tinny voice and shot random energy beams at undetectable opponents.

Ianto choked back another yelp of terror.

*Have they all suddenly gone mad?* he wondered. *Actually, I don’t care, as long as they go away.*

What made the aliens fly Ianto could not tell, as his position did not allow him to see anything more. Metallic screams from the conic creatures echoed down the hall as the plastic sheets rustled and blew about like trees brush in the wake of a passing high speed train. Ianto could just imagine them tumbling through the hall, helplessly, probably flailing, being swept to wherever the journey might lead them.

*Hopefully to hell! If there is something like hell for cyborgs and huge pepper shakers.*

And then it was over.

Silence followed the uproar.

Compared to the rush and wails before it was overwhelming.

*Why is this even worse?*

Clenching and unclenching his hands, Ianto desperately tried to hold on to something, but there was nothing he could cling to. Instead the unit still held him captive with a relentless grip, cold steel preventing any attempt of escape.
In his current state of terror Ianto was unable to welcome the sudden silence. His efforts to collect himself were just marginally successful. As he strained to hear even the faintest sound every electric crackle, flutter of the curtains, or imagined thump of metal boots drove him closer to a renewed panic.

*Will it come back? Will it return to exterminate me?*

Quivering with the effort of listening, Ianto could just lie and wait. Tears stung his eyes and he ordered himself not to cry.

Not that it helped.

Ianto felt the salty drops run over his face. They burnt in his eyes, so he pressed them shut to relieve the pain. Being incapable of reaching up to wipe the tears away was torture. With increasing worry he noticed that his nose became blocked and he sniffled, trying to clear it. Instead he just made it worse.

*Great!*

Further attempts caused him more discomfort. Realizing that he could not turn his head to spit the offending matter out, he went with the only alternative.

As he swallowed he grimaced.

Suddenly he held his breath and pricked up his ears. There were faint sounds coming from the hall.

*Oh, my God! I'm not mistaken! Footsteps!*

Those were no thumps of steel Cybermen boots. Those steps were rather light and a little slapping, shoes with leather soles perhaps.

Ianto’s heartbeat accelerated.

*I have to risk it. It's still possible that survivors are in the tower.*

Gathering all the courage he had left, he tentatively called out for whoever was outside the conversion chamber.

“Hello?”

At first Ianto could not hear anything and wondered if he had not been mistaken when he perceived the sound of footsteps again, approaching slowly.

“Hello!”

Someone was at the enclosure. There was a soft, sliding sound of a sheet being lifted. Ianto’s chest tightened painfully when he heard the hard breathing of a scared human.

“Hello? Who’s there?” Ianto said tearfully. “Please, I’m stuck in this thing. Please help me out!”

He heard another resolute step, and the plastic rustled.

“Don’t!”

*Oh, noooo!* Ianto’s astonishment mingled with a rush of panic.
“We’ve gotta help him!”

“There’s a Cyberman in there.” Now that she spoke a little louder Ianto could hear that it was a woman.

*There is?* As Ianto’s vision was limited due to his trapped position he had no idea one of them was left. *Must be the one killed by the pepper shaker. Why didn’t it go with the others?*

“It’s dead!” Ianto rushed to say, hoping to assure them. “One of those other things killed it. Please!”

“No,” she squeaked.

“Oh, c’mon. It hasn’t moved.”

*Yes, convince her!* Ianto inwardly cheered for the guy as he believed him to be more willingly.

Her frantic arguing discouraged the Welshman, though, “We should get out of here! I don’t think that we can help anyway.”

“But he needs us,” her companion told her in an exasperated whisper. “We probably are the last people up here except him. So we’re the only ones who can help.”

“Then let’s call the fire department when we get out.”

Ianto thought he heard her fingernails scrape over the other’s jacket. Even though he rationally understood her worries, he was close to a renewed panic. His lungs burned with suppressed wails. He did not want to appear that pathetic, but that was what he actually was right now and a sob escaped him, “Please don’t go away!”

“It could be dangerous!” she hissed.

“But it really looks dead.”

Ianto heard his tentative steps, either forward or in place, shifting his weight uncomfortably.

“And that thing? It trapped him! You want to get stuck, too?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Ianto cried out, feeling his voice breaking. “It’s built for one person. It’s only dangerous for *me*!” He loathed to beg, but all he wanted was to get out of this thing. “Help me! Please! Pleeease!”

“I don’t like this!” she squealed. “Tony!”

“We can’t just leave him here, Carol!” he insisted. It sounded as if they struggled with each other. “I’m gonna help him.”

“Don’t you go!” she snapped with so much venom that it made Ianto’s hair stand on end. “If you go now…”

“Carol! He could die if we abandon him!”

“We could die if we stay here!” she retorted. “We’ll call the fire department! Now come!”

“Nooo!” Ianto called out, sudden panic pitching his voice. Desperately he rolled his eyes. “Please don’t go! Pleeease!”
“To-nyyy!” she cried.

Hearing fingernails scratch over fabric and soles patter on the floor, Ianto could vividly imagine them struggle. “Tony, cooome!”

“Nooo,” Ianto sobbed. “Help me!”

“I’m sorry,” Tony whispered.

The sounds of the plastic sheet falling in place and their retreating footsteps broke Ianto’s heart.

“Nooo!” he railed. “Come back! Help me! You cowards! Come baaaaaack!”

Fighting the tears proved to be impossible. They spilled out of the corners of his eyes which were burning painfully by now.

His desperate attempts to stop crying only resulted in more sobs that built to downright howls of despair. Painfully hitching gasps drew insufficient air into his lungs. Through his blocked nose Ianto could hardly breathe anymore.

“Nooooooooo! Help meee!”

He sobbed and shouted for help until he had to stop in order to breathe. Now that he did not concentrate on the couple’s voices anymore Ianto could hear other disconcerting sounds like the hisses of hydraulics or pained moans. Otherwise the storey lay silent, though, whoever might still have been there being gone by now.

*And I’m still stuck.*

The realization of his hopeless situation made Ianto’s insides constrict painfully and his tears started to flow all over again. Despite Carol’s declaration that they would alarm the fire department the idea of rescue squads coming for him remained something abstract in his mind, and his sobs filled the conversion chamber. Ianto Jones felt desperately alone, his forcefully immobilized body aching with every breath.

Torn by his grief he started to cry again.

xXx

**Cardiff**

“Jaaaack!”

Owen’s terrified shout followed Jack when he was hurled into the air and towards the ceiling. Another Cyberman shot past him and through the hole the first one had punched into the roof. Tumbling the same way, Jack still had only a vague idea of what was happening to him.

Abruptly his flight was caught.

*What the…?*
Ropes cut into his flesh as Jack found himself floundering in a net. With an effort he managed to grab one of the lines and twisting his body, he caught a look down. Still the mysterious suction on his body increased, making purposeful motions next to impossible.

“Jack! Hold on!” Suzie yelled. Thankfully she had wound the rope that was connected with the net around the railing of the walkway she was standing on as she would not have been able to hold him anymore.

*I might just pull her with me,* Jack thought ruefully.

Fear stood in Suzie’s dark eyes. With both hands she clung to the rope, trying to pull Jack in.

“Owen!”

“I’m coming!” the young doctor shouted as he ran up the stairs.

“They’re flying into Torchwood Tower!” Toshiko yelled up to them when she left her workstation to follow the medic.

“Into the breach!” Jack replied with sudden realization. *Damn! It’s so logical!*

“What?” Bounding against the railing Owen came to a halt beside Suzie and grabbed for the rope.

“Into the breach!” Jack gasped. “Back to where they came from!”

“Ahhh, logical!” Suzie groaned and tried to take hold of another part of the rope to get Jack closer to the walkway.

Even though he pressed into the web of ropes now, Jack was far from relieved. The strong suction on him did not lessen a bit and he feared that he would lose his fragile hold. Perversely, he wondered if the ropes of the net would be strong enough to hold while his body was sucked through in chunks like a potato forced through a slicer to make chips.

“We have to get him back on solid ground!” Owen groaned.

Toshiko appeared next to the doctor and reached out for the line, having to stretch far to even touch it.

“Easier said than done!”

Suzie was right. Jack was a tall and muscular man. His own weight plus the power of the maelstrom presented a challenge to his team.

“Don’t let go!” Toshiko squealed with her efforts of reaching the rope.

“I don’t plan to!” Owen growled.

Jack did his best to help, but all his attempts to drag himself closer were fruitless. Fear tightened his stomach. He had no idea where the journey would lead if he should lose his hold. Into the breach, but where would the breach spit him out again? And would he be able to come back?

Despite his terror he felt pride well up inside of him when he saw Suzie, Toshiko, and Owen fight for him.

*Oh, shit!*

Spotting what Jack had seen, Toshiko tried even more desperately to finally get a hold of the rope.
She caught it and felt it scrape her palms as it slid through her hands. Her frantic struggles alerted the others.

“Bloody hell!” Owen shouted, ignoring the pain in his arms and straining as best as he could. “Pull him in! Jack!”

“Jack! You’ve gotta help us!”

“Jaaaaack!”

Hanging halfway over the railing they tried to reach him, but Jack was way too far away to get hold of one of their hands or even grasp the balustrade.

*Pop!*

The snapping sound of the rope breaking cut off their combined shouts.

_No_, Jack thought bitterly as he felt himself being swept further up.

“Jaaaaaaaaaaack!”

“Noooooo!”

“Jack!”

“Ouch!” Jack hit the roof with his shin as he was sucked through the hole. High he rose into the air. Below him he saw the water tower and the Oval Basin. Roald Dahl Plass was deserted, neither people nor Cybermen to be seen. The roof of the Millenium Centre shimmered golden in the evening sun. He tumbled toward the Pierhead Building, seeing its pinnacles from above for once, when suddenly he heard a shriek and something hit him, hard.

There was a blinding flash of light, and for just a heartbeat, Jack tumbled toward the earth. Then the suction caught him again, and he was once more flying toward London. Another shriek, another blow, this one jarring his bones, and another flash of light, and he was tumbling again, just for a moment.

*Whoa! What's going on? A rift storm right over the bay?*

At the same time he sensed a strange tickling in the back of his head. His intuition was telling him that something very bad was about to happen. Jack had not experienced the sensation in ages and was horrified to be overwhelmed by it now. Something terrible, worse than the Cybermen, worse, even, than the Daleks, was about to happen, and the thought of what it could be filled him with terror.

Something dark brown and scaly with too many arms and a tail like a scythe flitted past him. This time Jack took a blow to his side and yelped when the creature struck the nerve at his elbow and sent jolts of pain all the way down to his fingertips. Light flashed, bright like a hundred cameras, but with no heat, and he was tumbling again.

_Reapers!_ Jack realized, recognizing them from Rose’s descriptions. He had never seen one himself, just had been told about them by the Agency and the Doctor. *How did they get here?*

That thought sparked new horror. He knew that the indestructible creatures showed up only when time was wounded, feeding off it, sort of disinfecting the tear by consuming what was around the disturbance, probably being lethal for the human race.
Maybe that's what happened, the Cybermen and Daleks disturbing Earth’s timeline. They were never supposed to be here, so that must be…

It. Even the single word was driven from his mind when a Cyberman impacted into him and changed Jack’s direction before it shot further up. It spun directly into the embrace of one of the Reapers and was devoured in a blinding flash.

The Cyberman’s thump had knocked the wind out of Jack as he was now tumbling toward one of the spires of the Pierhead Building.


It was then that the suction jerked him up and catapulted him right into a burst of light. Jack screamed when he bounded into a Reaper’s chest. He felt the wings close around him and he knew that this was most certainly the end of his seemingly permanent state of life. Every fibre in his body burnt with the Reaper’s attempt to feed on him. His bones ground in the tight wrap and the air was pressed out of his lungs.

Deafened by an otherworldly shriek and blinded by a white flash of light Jack believed he was dissolving, but instead he felt himself being swept up again.

*It was about to devour me, but it couldn’t. Why?*

Jack was confused. Two of the Reapers pursued him, one from each side, but the suction was too strong. He was going too fast and they could not catch him. Just a metre from Jack’s feet, they crashed into each other like characters in some physical comedy gag and started to tumble toward earth.

Which was when Jack felt a strange surge of relief flood him that was short lived as he was still caught in the suction.

One of the Reapers appeared out of thin air above Jack and reached for him. In shock Jack screamed as the Reaper’s bladelike claws sliced across his arms and legs, his chest and around his ribs as it tried in vain to grab him.

Craning his neck, Jack tried to catch a last look down at the city that had been home to him for so many years, and saw how the Reapers winked out of existence.

“This is getting ridiculous!” Jack railed at the universe. “Can’t you just cut me a break here?”

The suction vanished.

“Oh.”

Jack just looked at the top of the roundabout when he realized that the pull was gone. He was flying by his own momentum…

…and dropped.

“Oh, no, not again,” he groaned as he saw the ground rush toward him.

Then he crashed through the awning of a street vendor’s booth into an assortment of bowls filled with colourful petunias.
Down in the Hub the three Torchwood officers stared helplessly up at the hole in their headquarters’ ceiling, stunned and unable to react.

“Good God. No,” Toshiko whispered.

“He’s gone.” Suzie was shocked into tonelessness.

Owen still leaned over the railing. Slowly his gaze wandered down to his hands and along the end of rope that dangled from his grip.

“We lost him. Why couldn’t we hold him? I should’ve held him.”

As if he had burned himself Owen dropped the rope.

“Owen…” Suzie murmured worriedly.

The medic shook his head, waving off the argument.

“Are you okay, Tosh?” he asked brusquely. Seeing her nod he took a step back to face Suzie.

“The Cyberman grabbed her, Owen,” Toshiko told him. “It tried to kill her.”

“How?” Owen asked, switching into doctor mode. With professional care he took Suzie’s head with both hands to look in her eyes. “Did it hit you?”

“In the back,” Suzie grunted. The way she rolled her eyes told Owen that he was trying her patience. “Then it… took my shoulder…”

“It electrocuted her,” Toshiko cut in anxiously. “I thought it killed her.”

Both women exchanged a peculiar look. Owen broke it by saying, “Well, I should have a closer look at you. Come down to the medical bay with me.”

“Excuse me, Owen,” Suzie said wryly. “Who’s in charge?”

“As I am the Chief Medical Officer and you were just injured in action, I would say I am, at least until I can clear you for duty,” Owen replied smugly. “I’d tell Jack, too, that I’d have to check him over first…” He trailed off, choking on his words. Too fresh was the loss, and even though the young medic used to argue and fight with his boss this loss hit him hard.

“Toshiko,” Suzie smoothly took over, “check out CCTV, see if you can find a trace of Jack. Then double check the energy readings from the breach in London and look for Rift activity here.”

“Sure,” Toshiko complied and walked down the spiral staircase voluntarily while Owen had to usher Suzie along. Their second in command could be as stubborn as the proverbial mule.

“We need to find out what happened,” Suzie declared when they reached the train platform.

“I’ll bring up the news, too,” Toshiko declared. “If anyone is still broadcasting that is.”

“All right.”
As Toshiko dropped into her office chair and rolled into position in front of her workstation, Suzie went down to the autopsy bay with Owen. On her monitors the computer expert still found CCTV images from London. Being anxious to learn more about the situation than she could get from the soundless pictures, she brought up the news channel as well as readings on the Rift and breach’s energy emissions. The levels in London were so low that they were hardly detectable, which suggested that the breach had closed. When Toshiko activated Cardiff security footage, too, she let out a loud gasp of surprise.

xXx

Jack revived on a bed of ceramic shards and flowers. Groaning he reached up to massage the back of his neck and his shoulders. To say that he was sore was a massive understatement. Jack could not decide if there was a spot left that did not hurt, but the worst was his back. Right before the crash Jack had managed to twist in the air so that he smashed on his back rather than on his front. Now he wished that he had not turned.

Guess my spine was broken, Jack thought and tensed his muscles to see if he could move, which made the pain increase. As soon as he tried to get up more agony flared through his back and limbs. He also found that his arms and legs were trapped, entangled in the net Suzie had used to catch him, but that was not what hurt. Landing on the booth he had not just ruined the awning but the terracotta pots as well, pottery shards stabbing and slicing his flesh.

Despite his dreadful situation Jack chuckled.

“I’m still here,” he laughed softly. “Thanks to the Reapers, of all things.”

Ignoring the pain, he started to disentangle himself from the net and when he unsteadily got up, he brushed soil and flowers off his shirt and trousers. Aside from the soreness caused by the attacks and his recent death, Jack’s soul hurt with the lack of answers. The conversation he had with his team about the possible origin of the invaders came to his mind.

No Reapers appeared when the Cybermen came. They also did not show up when the Daleks attacked. They attacked when I was sucked out of the Hub.

“Why?” he moaned.

This still confused him. Vividly he recalled how the creatures had attacked him. His body still hurt and throbbed from their attempts at devouring him.

Which they couldn’t. But if the Reapers can’t devour me, maybe I belong here just as much as the Daleks and Cybermen don’t.

If anything that confused him even more.

Maybe it has something to do with why I can’t die? He winced at that. But if it’s my immortality, does that mean that time could’ve been ruptured if I got sucked into the breach? Is that why they were here? Already starting to sanitize the wound?

Carefully Jack removed two of the shards that he could reach before he staggered out of the remains of the booth. He was a little unsteady on his feet when he walked toward the Plass. Passing the roundabout, he approached the bridge leading to the other side of the Oval Basin. Feeling slightly
lightheaded, Jack grabbed for the handrail and paused for a moment before he continued close to the balustrade. Carefully he climbed down the stairs to the wooden walkway. A vacated water bus gently bobbed up and down beside the quay. Jack let himself into the tourist information office and took the secret passageway down to the Hub.

The proximity alarm gave his return away and so he stared into two gun barrels when he stepped through the cog door. They were lowered quickly as the ladies’ expressions turned from suspicion to recognition and shock at his battered appearance.

“Jack!” Toshiko cried out when she saw that it really was him and threw her arms around him, hugging him tight. “Oh, God. I’m so glad you were not pulled into the breach!”

“So am I,” he replied.

Suzie was not as enthusiastic as Toshiko, but she embraced Jack, too. Then, a bottle in one hand and some tissue in the other, Owen came up from the autopsy bay.

“Jack!” he said, astonished. Then he took the tissue together with the bottle and the two men shared a firm handshake that made Jack wince. “Whoa, glad that you made it. You look like a flower bed.”

Frowning deeply, Jack let Owen pluck a petunia blossom out of his hair.

“Fortunately it let go of me before I was over the bay.”

“Fortunately, huh?” Owen prodded who had noticed how Jack winced and gritted his teeth earlier. “That must’ve been an ugly fall.”

_I didn’t want to drown in addition_, Jack thought miserably. His back still hurt like hell.

“What do you think happened?” Toshiko asked excitedly, saving him from answering to Owen.

“The breach…” Jack mused aloud. “For some reason it sucked the Cybermen back in. I bet it was the Doctor.”

“The mysterious Doctor,” Owen grumbled. “But if he made the breach pull them back in, why did it suck you in, too?”

“Remember that we said that they probably came from another planet? Or the theory that they are from a parallel world? I was on other planets and I once was on a parallel world. Maybe I have something in common with the Cybermen that originates from travelling space and time, like I did when I got in the Rift storm.”

“That’s a good theory,” Toshiko told them. “Especially as I get similar readings from you and the Cybermen.”

“Then I don’t understand why he’s still here,” Owen remarked wryly.

Both women glowered at him.

“Are they gone everywhere?” Jack queried to prevent an argument. Maybe some day he would tell his team about the Reapers, but he needed time to figure out just how much he wanted to tell them about himself to explain why they could not devour him as they meant to do. That was if he ever could catch up with the Doctor and find out what had happened to him in the first place. Right now the only thing that mattered, though, was that he was there and could help. His attempt to refocus them seemed to work as Toshiko told him, “Yes, looks like they’re all gone.”
“Okay…” Thoughtfully Jack followed Toshiko back to her workstation, Owen and Suzie close behind. While Suzie dropped onto the sofa in the rec area, the computer expert sat down in her office chair, but Owen squeezed between her and the desk, perched himself on the tabletop and began to fuss over Toshiko. Irritated she pulled back her hand from him as he tried to treat her rope-torn palm with ointment. As he insisted, though, she thought better of it and actually enjoyed the treatment… for having Owen so close, touching her.

Once the medic let go of her, Toshiko quickly shook off her secret thoughts and showed the team what she got on her big screens. Torchwood Tower did not look good…

But it’s still standing, Jack thought. Thanks to the Doctor. Inwardly he sighed, the expanding of his lungs still hurting from his recent death. I won’t make it there in time to catch him anyway, so I can just stay and see what happened here during the invasion.

“I want to know exactly what was going on in London,” Jack said. “We also need to make sure that no equipment gets into the wrong hands. Suzie, Owen. I want you to go to London and see if you can’t help the authorities there. Toshiko and I will do the same here.”

“Not before I pluck those pot shards out of your back,” Owen declared.

Jack shot him a death glare.

“You think I didn’t notice, Captain?” Owen snarled at him. “C’mon! Down to the med bay with you! Go.”

Muttering under his breath, Jack complied.

tbc…
A comrade in predicament

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your responses. @ weeping4eva - yes, I will finish it. 7/49, you know... ;)

Cardiff

Even though Owen worked at record speed, Jack sat quite impatiently through the treatment of his back. Of course he knew that the pottery shards had to come out, but none of the wounds was serious which made Jack testy while he waited for Owen to patch them up. Once they were done, Jack trusted Toshiko to get things organized from the Hub while he quickly got into fresh clothes before he went to see for himself what was happening in his city and whether there were any more incidents that called for Torchwood’s involvement. Suzie and Owen dropped him off at the Cardiff Central Police Station and continued their drive to London.

Entering the building, Jack stepped into an ant hill. Police officers were running around, seemingly headless. As a couple of constables came in they jostled Jack on their way past. He heard an inspector yell orders.

Unimpressed Jack directly strode to the staircase to find his way up to the chief’s office. Taking two steps at a time, Jack breezed up the stairs and bumped into an officer who was on his way down.

“Hey! Look out! Where are you headed anyway?”

“I’m on my way to see Chief Superintendent Cadwallader,” Jack said, grinning as he looked the handsome young man up and down, “but I can tell you, if it weren’t a matter of some urgency, I just might make time to ask you out for a drink first.” He turned and was about to resume climbing the stairs when a hand on his arm stopped him.

“No without an appointment, you don’t,” the handsome young man, whose badge declared he was Constable A. Davidson, told him.

“Oh, I don’t need an appointment, Constable,” Jack chirped, “but I appreciate your sense of duty.” He was about to go on when he stopped himself and asked, “What’s the A standing for?”

“Huh?”


“I don’t know,” Jack shrugged. “So what is it?”

“Andrew,” the young man said. Then, noticing the intensity of Jack’s gaze, he shifted uncomfortably and coloured slightly. “Uh, actually, most people call me Andy. Only my Mam uses my Christian name.”
“Well, that’s a shame,” Jack told him. “Andrew is a lovely name and suits the man who bears it.” When the young constable scowled and reddened even more, Jack hurriedly agreed, “But if you prefer Andy, then that’s what I’ll call you.” Offering his hand to shake, Jack said, “I’m…”

“Captain Jack Harkness,” Andy interrupted, trying to regain his footing.

“I’m pretty sure we haven’t met before…” Jack mused aloud.

“Oh, you’re living up to the stories, Captain.”

“Oh, really?” Jack raised an eyebrow sceptically. “A legend in my own time, am I?”

“More like a horror story, from what I’ve heard, Captain,” Andy grunted. “Still, I know you’re with Torchwood. Not sure what that means, but you still need an appointment to see the Chief Superintendent.”

“Actually, I don’t,” Jack insisted with a mischievous grin, “and if you want to know more about Torchwood, why don’t you just… escort me to his office?”

“All right…” The constable still did not seem too impressed by the Torchwood captain, but he gestured Jack to follow him and led him up the stairs and through the beehive that was the Heddlu headquarters. Andy walked ahead of the captain to the commanding officer’s sanctuary. The secretary wanted to announce the visitor and jumped up from her chair but dropped back down when she recognized the captain who walked straight to her chief’s oaken door while Andy slowed his steps instead of barging in with the Torchwood agent.

Jack came right in time to hear Cadwallader chuckling about, “…the arrogant bastard. Thanks for the warning sergeant.” Hanging up the phone, the head of the Cardiff Police grinned at Jack and said, “Speak of the devil and he shall appear! Bloody hell, Harkness, am I glad to see you!” the Chief Superintendent greeted Jack with an eager handshake as soon as he was through the door. “What in the world were those things and where did they go?”

“First of all, they’re not from this world,” Jack said, giving the gaping PC Andy a wink as he flopped casually into one of the chairs in front of the desk, “and secondly, they’re not in it any longer. They’ve been sent back to wherever they came from, I think for good.” With a grateful smile he accepted a mug full of strong black coffee that Cadwallader poured him from a thermos.

“You look like you need it,” Cadwallader shrugged it off. Rather than circling round behind his desk again, the Chief Superintendent pointed Andy to a small, straight-backed chair in an unobtrusive corner of the room, took the chair beside Jack’s for himself, and said, “You sure about that?”

“We tracked them,” Jack assured him. “All the way to London. They’re gone. I’ve sent a couple of my people there to help with the cleanup. I was intending to round up any stragglers that might still be in Cardiff and neutralize them, but with half my team gone, I am low on manpower and lacking transportation. I was hoping you could lend me some personnel and a vehicle.”

“I can give you that,” Cadwallader agreed. “Anything else?”

“No, thank you. I think that will be sufficient.”

“Good. And I suppose you’d like PC Davidson here for your driver?”

“I suppose that would be safer than the other way around,” Jack admitted with a devilish grin. “I think I might find it a bit difficult to keep my eyes on the road with him riding beside me.” When the
young man gaped and then flushed beet red, Jack gave a smirk.

“You really are incorrigible, aren’t you?” Cadwallader grumbled as he got up to start for the door. Leading Jack to his outer office, Cadwallader turned to the constable who had escorted the Torchwood Commander up from downstairs. “Constable, I am assigning you to be Captain Harkness’s driver and assistant until such time as he releases you from those duties. I would strongly advise you to obey his orders without question.” Grinning and shaking hands, Cadwallader said, “Jack, do try to bring this one back in one piece.”

The constable’s deep scowl gave away clearly what he thought: This one? In one piece?

“I’ll do my very best, Sir!” Captain Jack replied and saluted with a broad smirk cracking his features.

“I know, Jack,” Cadwallader could not help but smirk, too. “Constable. Take your partner with you, too.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good luck, Captain.”

“Thank you, Chief Superintendent.”

Then Jack turned on his heels and walked away, not bothering to check if the constable followed him. He smiled to himself when he heard the slaps of his shoes behind him. Out in the hall he abruptly stopped and turned to the unsuspecting police officer.

“Captain Jack Harkness,” Jack introduced himself with a broad, winning smile. “Nice to meet you, Constable Andy Davidson.”

“Didn’t we just do this on the stairs?” Andy asked in a mildly confused tone as if he really was not sure.

“Well, I tried to, but you interrupted me,” Jack replied, “so we weren’t properly introduced…” The Torchwood commander beamed at the young man, letting his gaze slowly travel from the top of his head to his shiny black shoes and up again to linger on his blue eyes just as he had done on the stairs a few minutes before. “Just call me Jack.”

With that he made the constable frown even deeper.

“Now let’s pick up your partner and we’re ready to go,” Jack said cheerfully, slapping the young man’s shoulder. “Where is he?”

The he turned out to be a she. They found her downstairs at her desk where she typed up their paperwork.

“Hey, partner!” Andy greeted cheerfully, “We have a special assignment. Come.”

“I’ve got to finish our report,” she replied without looking up. “I’ll be done in a few minutes.”

She seemed to be oblivious of his cheer being faked. Actually Andy was already becoming irritated by the delay as he was anything but happy with playing Captain Harkness’ chauffeur. “Sorry, it’ll have to wait,” he said and switched off her monitor.

“Andy!” she complained. “Sergeant Fuller will pace up the wall if he doesn’t get that report until
the end of our shift.”

“As if we’d have an end of shift today,” Andy grumbled and nudged her upper arm. “C’mon!”

“What special assignment is it anyway?” she wanted to know as she grabbed her uniform jacket.

“Babysitting,” he told her. “Let’s go.”

From under the doorway Jack had watched the display with amusement. When the two officers approached him now he offered Andy’s partner a dazzling smile.

“Captain Jack Harkness… and who are you?”

Protectively Andy stepped between Jack and his partner. Jack saw it with mild amusement but never took his attention off the female constable.

“Police Constable Gwen Cooper,” she told him, returning his firm handshake. When she smiled she showed a gap between her front teeth, and her brown eyes sparkled under the shade of her policeman’s cap on her black hair. “You can release my hand now, Sir. I’ll still be needing it.”

If possible Jack’s smirk grew even wider. He liked both officers. Toshiko chose right this moment to call him over his ear comm.

“Gotcha,” he confirmed her message and turning to the constables again he said, “Okay, quick! Grab your stuff from your lockers and then let’s go.”

Trailing behind Gwen on their way to their patrol car, Jack could not see how Andy rolled his eyes at him.

xXx

London

Usually Ianto had a good sense of time, but now it deserted him. In vain he waited for the firemen Carol and Tony had promised to call and time passed agonizingly slowly. Ianto could not tell for how long the couple had been gone, but he believed that help should have arrived by now if they had really called in the emergency.

_They’ve abandoned me!_ Ianto’s chest tightened painfully as he tried to suppress more sobs. He did not want to cry. He would only block his nose again. Still his throat corded up with anxiety at his desperate situation.

_How am I supposed to get out of here? Lord save me, if you saved me before surely you have a purpose? Why can’t you just get me out of this thing, too? I’ll be good, I promise! No swearing, no smoking, no sex… well, maybe the sex would not be on the list…_

Ianto took a deep breath, held it and exhaled slowly.

_Already bargaining?_ he asked himself and laughed inwardly. _Oh, Ianto, do you hear yourself? Next thing you know you’re talking to yourself…_
Now he really laughed.

Ianto, you’re pathetic!

Colourful spots danced before his eyes. Their flickering lights made him dizzy and so he opened his eyes. Seeing did not make it any better. Right above him he saw the arm that had come out of the shutter. It carried five limbs, two with circular saws on their ends, one with six knives, another with a laser, and the last one held an injector, an oversized syringe that was filled with a light blue liquid.

Ianto shuddered.

His shaking body pushed against his restraints and all of a sudden the desperation of his condition hit him full force.

I won’t get out of this thing!

Ianto cried out with anxiety. His lungs were burning as were his eyes and he was unable to keep his tears at bay. Irregular sobs filled the silence around him until he was too exhausted to cry.

Obviously he fell asleep for a while because he was clearly waking up now, feeling surprisingly rested. For a fleeting moment he thought he was home in his bed, coming to after having a good night’s rest, which was a rather odd feeling.

When Ianto opened his eyes he groaned.

There were the instruments again which were supposed to turn him into a Cyberman. His natural curiosity turning against him, Ianto studied the appliances closer. At first the syringe caught his attention. The liquid inside was of a light blue. Strange enough, Ianto wondered what exact colour it was. He would not call it an ice blue, but it sure was not turquoise either as it did not have a touch of green.

It’s hard to tell in the twilight anyway, Ianto concluded, forcing himself to take his mind off this question. Instead he focused on the other tools. The one that appeared to be a laser also looked like a drill with its spiral head, but it seemed to be too big to be meant for drilling. Aside from that there was the arm holding several scissor shaped blades. They glinted ominously in the low light. Finally Ianto looked at the circular saw, about six inches in diameter, and counted the teeth.

Sixty-two.

“Mr. Jones?”

Ianto’s heart skipped a beat.

Bloody hell! A female voice! Slightly distorted, though.

“Hello? Who’s there?”

“I’m Virginia Logan!” she answered him. “I was in the accounts department.”

Seemingly from out of empty space her voice waved over to Ianto. It was kind of surreal to suddenly hear from her. She sounded tired and a little artificial.

“I heard that you worked here, too,” she said. “When you were talking with David.”

“Yes, I did,” Ianto replied, still pretty perplexed by her sudden attempt at communication. Actually she seemed to shout to reach him. Probably she was several conversion chambers away. “I worked
in Information Retrieval!"

“With Dr. Markham, right?”

“Yes!” Ianto could not keep his surprise out of his voice.

“I know because I worked the payrolls,” Virginia said. “I…” She groaned.

“Are you okay?” he asked only to berate himself a second later, Stupid question, Ianto!

“No… n-not really.”

“Where are you, Virginia?”

“I’m stuck in this machine, Mr. Jones,”

Ianto chuckled.

“Don’t you think we should just call each other by our first names in this situation?” he suggested. “I would feel bloody awkward if I’d call you Mrs. Logan.”

His question died away on its way through the storey. For quite a while Ianto did not hear anything from Virginia. When she finally spoke he had to strain to understand her.

“Hurt… I… hurt.”

“Where?” Ianto queried worriedly. That her voice did not sound quite clear already was a bad sign. That she seemed to be injured certainly meant that the machine had already started the upgrade process when it was interrupted.

“My… leg,” Virginia moaned. “It’s… that thing, it… I don’t know… it’s cold… and… hurts.”

Suddenly Ianto was reminded of Lisa. She had looked so different from the other Cybermen. The upgrade did not convert her into a full metal man but had grafted bionic parts directly on her body. Ianto suspected that the same happened to Virginia. His wild imagination provided him with a clear picture of her leg being augmented with armour and wires.

That thought made him sick. Seeing himself upgraded like Lisa upset him further.

Coughing he tried to fight his nausea.

Don’t throw up! Whatever comes, don’t throw up!

“Ianto…?” she called out, her voice vibrating with anxiety.

Ianto felt compelled to answer, “I’m so sorry, Virginia,” he wept. “I wish I could help you!”

“I… it’s okay. I know you’re caught up at the moment.”

Her bitter laugh sent chills down Ianto’s spine. The truth of her words sank in and corded up his throat.

“Um… Virginia,” Ianto asked tentatively. “Why didn’t you talk earlier? Were you scared?”

“I… must’ve been… unconscious.” There was a pause. “I… was woken up by screams…”

I believe that at once, Ianto thought. They were loud enough.
“After that, I… must’ve lost consciousness….”

“Your accent is not from here,” Ianto said, intending to distract her. “Where are you from, Virginia?”

“Originally I’m from Edinburgh, but I grew up in the United States.” She moaned.

Ianto sensed that she was struggling to maintain her composure and so, if he was honest, was he. So he prodded her a little, “Tell me more about yourself.”

“We… lived all over the United States, Florida, North Carolina… New Jersey…”

_Talking must be difficult for her_, Ianto thought.

“Came back here for… a guy… big mistake. Then I joined Torchwood. Where are you from?”

“I’m from Wales myself,” Ianto told her. “From Newport.”

“I see. I’ve… never been in Wales. Did you… always live there?”

Ianto could not help but smile as he heard honest interest in her question. “Yeah. I grew up there. Didn’t get far out of Wales, though. London’s the farthest.”

“Oh, really?”

She seemed surprised.

“Yeah…” For a moment Ianto thought about that. “Well, I was on a short trip to Brittany once… with my girl… friend.”

He trailed off. The mention of Lisa hit him like a fist in the stomach and he gasped for breath. His insides constricted with grief as memories surfaced that he was not prepared for. Forcefully he pushed them back and hoped to distract her as he croaked, “What’s the farthest you were away from here?”

“Hmmm… Australia and New Zealand. I was there on a six-month trip… with my former… fiancé.” She rather spat the last word. “Uuuuuugh!”

Hearing her groan like that tightened the knot in Ianto’s stomach and he asked, “The pain?”

“Yeah… Thought it would lessen, but… oooooh.”

“I’m sorry…”

His words seemed so inadequate. Being sorry did not help one bit. Neither of them, but especially not her. While Ianto still racked his mind over whether he should apologize for apologizing she spoke again.

“Don’t… don’t get me wrong, but… you’re just stuck, right?”

Ianto grimaced. She was right, he was tempted to get her wrong. The word _just_ rankled him, even though he knew quite well what she meant.

“I’m not injured,” he said in the end. “I’m sorry that you are.”

“It’s getting… a little better now… So… you have a girlfriend?”
At that a sob escaped Ianto.

Clearly startled Virginia called out, “What did I say?”

Even though he did not want to talk about it Ianto sensed that it had to get out. Otherwise it would slowly suffocate him. It already corded up his throat painfully and it would get worse. Still he did not quite know how to start.

“Lisa…” he choked. “She… was caught up in battle with me. She…” Tears spilled out again. “She was… led in… right before me.”

“Oh, my God!” Virginia wheezed. “I’m sorry.”

She fell silent, probably with regret for asking.

Ianto was glad. He was not in the mood to talk anymore. In vain he tried to chase away the terrifying pictures of Cyber-Lisa. He had to sort his own mind and emotions before he could take on distracting Virginia from her pain. For now Ianto appreciated the settling silence. It fell over the storey like a shroud.

tbc…
Discoveries and memories

Chapter Notes

No reaction at Gwen and Andy joining in? Hmmm... LOL Sorry for the wait. We were away for the weekend. Enjoy!

Cardiff

“So, Captain, you’re with what again? Torchwood?” PC Cooper queried from the backseat while Andy was driving down North Road. Actually he had just hit the brakes as the traffic lights ahead changed to red, right at the corner of Cardiff Castle. Gwen would not be distracted, though, “What’s Torchwood?”

“We are Torchwood,” Jack gave his standard answer. He appeared to be distracted. Obviously the glove compartment was much more interesting and he reached out to open it.

“Okay, and what do you do? Are you part of the police?”

Jack laughed.

“Nope.”

Snooping through the glove box, Jack pulled out a ticket book and started to leaf through it.

“So who do you answer to?” Gwen prodded.

His only comment was a winning smirk.

“No, no. No. Tell me. Who’s in charge of you?”

Instead of answering Jack returned his attention to the ticket book and… “You ticketed my SUV!” he gasped indignantly. “Thrice!” he yelped after turning another few pages.

“Why does that surprise you?” Andy teased. “Didn’t you get them?”

“I’m sure I did, and probably threw them away,” Jack shot back. “I just didn’t expect a sweet guy like you to be one of those jerks scribbling away in his ticket book trying to meet a quota.”

“Oh, bother,” Andy sighed as Jack’s flirtation made him blush again. “It’s nothing to do with quotas,” he said sullenly. “It’s just the law. Parking regulations are in effect for everyone’s benefit. I’ve seen that black monstrosity you drive in handicapped spaces more than once. I should have had a wheel clamp put on it. You’re obviously fit enough. Why don’t you park where it’s legal and walk?”

When Andy finished talking, the car was silent, but he could feel Jack’s gaze on him. Glancing sideways, he could see the captain’s enormous, 1,000-watt grin.
Knowing he would regret it he asked, “What?”

“You think I’m fit, do you?” Jack queried in a tone that promised worlds of pleasure if he gave the right answer.

In the back, Gwen brayed a laugh at Andy’s discomfort.

“Shut up, all right?” Andy mumbled. Glancing at his partner in the rearview mirror, he repeated, “Shut up, both of you. Just… shut it.”

“It’s green,” Jack quipped and swayed in his seat when Andy rapidly accelerated and turned into Heol Y Castell. He reached for the glove box again. This time he unearthed a stale pack of gum and a plastic bag containing something green and hairy which might have been a sandwich in a previous life. “You know, I always wondered what you guys carried in here. Got any deep, dark secrets in the boot?”

“No,” Gwen piped up this time. “But we’ll have to assume that you do if you don’t tell us who you answer to.”

Jack looked out the window at the tourists queuing in front of the castle. Everything seemed to have returned to normal already. Still the question was left unresolved. Stifling a sigh he decided that he would have to tell them anyway, so he answered, “We’re separate from the government. Outside the police. Beyond the United Nations.”

His admission spread through the car and faded away, leaving both constables thinking, while Andy turned left into Womanby Street from where he would get to Heol Y Porth.

“And who pays you?”

Now Jack laughed out loud, throwing his head back.

“Seriously, Captain Harkness, if you answer to no one… who do you work for?”

“The Crown,” Jack told her, knowing that he had neither the time nor the patience to try and explain how Torchwood really worked. As he did not know where else he should put the things he removed from the glove box he threw them all back in and snapped it shut.

“And they give you so much authority over your own actions?”

Looking back over his shoulder Jack said, “She trusts us!”

“She?” Gwen puzzled.

“She,” Jack confirmed.

Gwen thought a moment more and then her eyes and mouth popped open. “Oh!”

“Yeah.” The captain smirked so complacently that Gwen scowled at him suspiciously.

“You still haven’t told us what you do, how we’re supposed to help you. We’re in a crisis. The whole city is in uproar because of those Cybermen things and Chief Superintendent Cadwallader sent us with you, playing taxi driver.”

“You’ll see soon enough,” Jack said mysteriously. “Why should I worry you in advance?”

“See!” Andy exclaimed, slowing the car down to follow Jack’s gesture and turn right into Wood
Street. “Now you’re worrying me!”

Gwen nodded.

Once more Jack laughed. Then he tapped his odd looking earpiece.

“Yes, Tosh, I got it. Where exactly? Yeah.” Once more he gestured Andy, “Past the railway station… and stop at the Millennium Stadium if you can.”

“I thought you’d want to help us calming down the people,” Gwen stated with confusion.

“Sorry, nothing to do with me.”

“But then, why are you here?”

“Mostly to keep them alive so they can continue to panic,” Jack quipped. “Now if you don’t mind, I am getting a call from my Director of Operations.”

“Director of Operations,” Toshiko chuckled in his ear. “Is that a promotion, Jack?”

“Hardly, but it’s something she’ll understand.”

“Oh, the officious type, is she? Reliant on bureaucracy and bound by rules?”

“Only when it suits her, I think,” Jack replied, which earned him a most curious scowl from Gwen. “Now what have you got for me, Tosh?”

“It’s alarming. The appearance of the Cybermen seems to have startled the Rift. It’s more active than ever before… at least as far as I can tell. Whatever it spit out, it’s big.”

Jack prodded her, “Can you identify it?”

“No, but it’s really big. No Weevils.”

“Thanks, Tosh, that’s reassuring.”

“You’re welcome, Jack.”

“Can who identify what, Captain?” Andy asked sourly. “Now tell… us…”

His words trailed off as he jammed the brakes.

“Oh!” Gwen gasped from the backseat. “Bloody hell! What’s that?”

“Bugger!” Andy’s jaw dropped.

And Jack was frozen in his seat for a couple of seconds as he watched the huge animal retreat over the River Walk by the Taff on the western side of the stadium. Shaking off his astonishment the captain jumped out and strode toward the bunch of people that was gathering at the bridge now, watching the creature that fled the open street. Behind him he heard a shout and then a car door open and close. When he looked around he saw Gwen standing beside the patrol car as it started to roll backwards.

“What is that?”

“Trouble,” Jack growled, wishing for something more effective than his Webley as he squeezed
through the gathering of people.

“Should’ve brought my insect spray,” Gwen retorted, trying to follow him.

When they came out on the other side of the group and stumbled onto the plaza in front of the stadium’s gate the giant insect was gone.

“Where is it?” Jack panted.

Gwen just shrugged while Toshiko said over comm. link, “It’s on the western side of the stadium.”

So Jack advanced onto the River Walk.

“Over there!” someone shouted.

Jack looked around and spotted someone on the bridge who pointed at the stadium. Even when the captain turned in that direction he could not find the animal. From behind he heard Gwen arguing, trying to convince the people to keep their distance. Suddenly Andy was by his side.

“Now that’s one oversized praying mantis,” the constable said.

“Thought you’d stay with the car,” Jack teased.

“Noooo,” Andy drawled. “Just thought it would be safer further away.”

“That’s what I meant,” Jack chuckled. “Now, where do you see the mantis?”

“Right there,” Andy nodded in its direction. “It’s on the cross beam of the pillar.”

Only now when Jack looked again did he find the creature. It sat on the lower part of the supporting structure of the stadium. Even though Jack could have sworn that it had been green-purple before it now was white and hardly stood out among the metal structures. It tilted its head to the side, its mandibles opening and closing slowly, almost thoughtfully, when seagulls circled it. The creature probably did not know what to make of the strange place it had come to.

“What are we gonna do?” Gwen panted as she stopped beside the men.

*Good question,* Jack thought.

“Yeah, well, not trying to be funny, but actually I could really use a giant can of bug repellent right now. You should’ve brought it, Gwen.” Jack tapped his ear piece. “Tosh? Tell me more about the readings you get for my current position.”

“There was a Rift spike fifteen minutes ago. Alien life form right ahead of you. No identification possible.”

“Try giant mantis,” he replied. “Chameloid. Basically it probably was greenish-purple, with a yellow ridge on its back.”

“No kidding!”

“I don’t kid about things like that, sweetheart,” Jack purred. “It’s white now, blending in with the stadium.”

Both constables exchanged a confused look at how excited, if not cheerful, Harkness seemed to be about the situation. Rolling his eyes at Gwen, Andy made a circling gesture with his forefinger
beside his head.

“Thanks, Tosh,” Jack just said. “Okay. We don’t know what it is except that it looks like the biggest and meanest bug I’ve ever seen. And isn’t it nice of it to stay sitting there, waiting for us, instead of chasing any pedestrians? Any idea how to capture it?”

“You’re asking us?” Andy blurted out.

“Do you see anyone else who I could ask?”

“What about your Director of Operations?” Gwen suggested.

“Tosh could not find it in our database.”

“Database?” both constables said at the same time, exchanging an incredulous look.

“Well, if those spiked forelegs are any indication I’d say it’s a predatory creature. I don’t want to find out if its diet includes any pedestrian strolling down the River Walk. As it tries to blend in I’d say it’s an ambush predator, but I don’t want to rely on it to keep sitting there either. So… let’s find out if it’s communicative,” Jack told the constables and started toward the giant insect.

“I’m curious if he’ll try flirting with it, too,” Andy whispered to Gwen.

“I heard that!” Jack shouted with obvious amusement. As he never looked back he could not see the constable turn crimson.

The mantis did not react at all to Jack’s approach.

Wracking his mind about how to get the insect down from its perch Jack got out his Webley. Even though he had no idea if it would be of any use it was reassuring to hold the weapon in his hand.

_I probably should’ve brought something bigger_, he mused and advanced on the beast. For lack of a better option he shouted, “Hey, you! Come down from there!”

From behind he heard suppressed chuckles coming from the constables.

_You think that’s amusing? How about this…_

“Try all you want to blend in!” he called seductively to the massive bug. “With raptorial legs as sexy as yours, it will never work!”

Almost as if it had heard him, the insect turned its triangular head nearly upside down…

…and snatched a shrieking sea gull right out of the sky.

The laugh Jack had heard from behind died with a gasp.

_Well, that didn’t work. Guess he’s not as easy as Xix’trian._

Even after all these years, Jack’s body could still react to the thought of his former lover. Like a giant dragonfly, Xix’trian had large transparent wings that created the most sensual stir of air around Jack as he hovered over him and caressed him with his six delicate legs. The memory alone was enough to raise goosebumps and…

_Oh, now you’re interested_, Jack thought as he noticed the mantis turning to scrutinize him.
Deliberately Jack remembered wrapping his legs around Xix’trian’s slender, segmented abdomen, rubbing against him, the little bumps between the segments being the only friction, subtle enough to make their lovemaking last all night long if that was what they wanted.

Jack kept watching the creature and was just about to convince himself that it did not work when the mantis suddenly became fiery red and yellow and twisted on its perch. It dropped and landed on the walkway, only a few yards from the captain. The insect bristled and straightened up, making itself look bigger as its prothorax rose. It opened its mandibles wide and spread its spiked forelegs.

“Whoa! Head over heels in love, are we?”

Backing off he realized that he had achieved what he wanted by the mantis coming down, but that he had no plan at all for what to do next.

The mantis gave a rattling shriek and opened its raptorial legs, reaching for Jack who suddenly had the dreadful feeling that, far from seducing the creature, he just might have challenged it as a rival. Reflexively he shot at it, but three bullets ricocheted off the exoskeleton before a fourth hit its neck. If nothing else, this made the mantis angry. Screaming it grasped for Jack who avoided the spiked leg by a hair’s breadth.

“Hey!” Andy shouted, throwing something at the angry insect.

Sure enough it twisted around to him and the young police officer threw himself flat on the ground when the arm shot right at him. Andy howled when he felt the spikes get stuck in his thick vest. He was rolled around when the insect tried to pull him closer, but could not grab him. To Andy’s horror he rolled right toward the creature. Terrified he stared up at his attacker. From this perspective it was an impressive sight.

Something else impressed him, and that was Captain Harkness who ran right between the legs supporting the main thoracic segment, grabbed the carapace and tried to climb the beast. Andy saw the arm come down again to grab him and rolled aside.

And Jack lost his grip on the exoskeleton, sliding down. Before he could try to climb it again the insect backed off far enough to reach him. The arm came down way too fast for him to react and Jack cried out when it snapped shut around him and the spikes dug into his flesh. He felt himself being lifted up. From below he heard screams. Glancing down he saw the spectators run.

How do I get out of this mess?

Piercing pain made him nauseous. Shaking his head he tried to clear it, but his senses were dwindling. Thankfully his arms were not stuck in the iron grip, but what good did that do him? With terror he saw the mandibles come closer.

Once more the creature bellowed, almost deafening Jack. How he managed to bring up his gun he did not know and he was just in time to avoid having his head and shoulders bitten off. He did not know if that was an injury from which he could recover and he preferred not to find out. The bullets went straight through the mantis’s mouth and into its brain. The big bug shrieked and reared back. Its claws clenched impossibly tight and then relaxed and suddenly Jack felt himself falling.
Ianto awoke to deceptive silence. No sounds of battle or wails of pain echoed through the storey, but that did not mean that there were no sounds at all. Every now and then the plastic sheets separating the cubicles rustled. From somewhere very far away, almost inaudible, Ianto heard an alarm and he wondered if it was inside the building as he thought that he was too far away up in the tower to be able to hear the traffic or sirens from outside. Among all the occasional sounds was a persistent bell that did not want to stop, followed by a low clonk. It took Ianto a while to realize that it was an elevator that had been blocked open. After the carnage he had seen, he could not help wondering if it was a body that prevented the door from closing.

“Ianto?” Virginia startled him out of his trancelike state.

For a moment Ianto thought about ignoring her, but then he realized that he simply could not stay silent. It would drive him mad.

“Yeah?”

This time he was the one who had to wait. When she spoke again he could judge by her panting just how much effort it cost her.

“How… did you come to… join Torchwood?”

“I…”

This had to do with Lisa again. Every thought of her was painful, so the words caught in his throat like a bite of toast swallowed too quickly.

“Ianto?”

“Yeah. I…” Ianto took a steadying breath. “When I was finished with school, I left home to go to university. I... have a degree in literature. But after studying I didn’t know what to do with myself. In my teens I already got in trouble and then…”

“What trouble?”

He chuckled wryly when he remembered that time.

“I was convicted for shoplifting,” he groaned. “I was stupid, but kinda lucky. I got off with some community service.”

“I see.”

“Yeah… Anyway, after studying I was mainly drifting from job to job, unable to decide where to stay, where to go, what to do…”

“I know that feeling,” Virginia said. “I felt that way before I went on the trip to Australia. When I came back I wanted to study, but then I met Collin and before I knew what happened I was in London.”

Ianto could not suppress a chuckle. The vibration coursing through his body made him aware of his head hurting. As it was stuck in the clamps he could not move it, his neck was stiff and it throbbed in his temples.
And I kind of found myself recruited into Torchwood one day,” Ianto laughed wryly. “I was working as a waiter and once more thinking about a new job when this woman came in. She caught my interest at first sight but it took a while to get us from orders for coffee to a real conversation…” Ianto paused as the images became alive before his inner eye and he swallowed a sob. “It was raining that day. At first I saw only her umbrella, but when she lowered and closed it I was lost. She wore a business suit, blue with pinstripes, and a yellow blouse. Both contrasted perfectly with her skin. She chose just the right colours for her type. Most captivating were her eyes, dark… and sparkling…”

When he trailed off Virginia said, “You seem… to have a good sense for fashion.”

“Runs in the family,” Ianto brusquely rejected the compliment. The thought woke other memories that he did not want to welcome. “Anyway… after a few dates Lisa suggested applying for a job at the institute she worked for as they were searching for new employees. I didn’t really come to London to work as a waiter so I followed her suggestion and that was it. After three interviews, some tests, and initial training I started to work in the archives.”

“Were you together by then?”

Ianto smiled dreamily to himself. “Not quite. To me she still seemed to be out of my league. I didn’t know then what I know now.”

“Oh?” With delight Ianto heard her chuckle softly before she asked, “What do you mean?”

“Our first dates were… awkward,” Ianto replied. “It took me ages to realize that I didn’t need to try and impress her.”

“I have a feeling… as if she’s older than you.”

“Only two years.”

“Still you were scared of her, weren’t you?”

“Intimidated, I think,” he mused. “She was so… urbane. Skilled at what she did and secure in her proficiency. I admired that.”

Ianto paused when he heard Virginia choke and cough. It sounded like she tried to suppress the coughs to avoid more pain and it made Ianto feel bad because his position was not as dreadful as hers. Fearfully he called out, “Virginia?”

“Hurts,” she groaned. “Ianto?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell me… about the trip?”

“The trip?”

“You mentioned… earlier. Brittany?”

Oh no. That hurts. He groaned.

“Are you okay?” Virginia asked anxiously.

“Yeah,” Ianto countered quickly. His limbs were stiff and ached as did his back and his neck. Still he felt like he should not express his pain. Compared to her he had no reason to complain and he
wanted to keep talking for both their sakes, to keep themselves distracted from their predicament. “It’s… The memory hurts.”

“Because… she was killed by… the Cybermen…”

“Yeah.”

For a moment he fell silent before he finally started to talk.

“It was our first proper vacation,” he began. “Lisa wanted to go abroad, but we couldn’t really afford it. So she talked me into making it a camping trip.” Now that reminiscence made him chuckle. “She was always good at talking me into things.”

“Like joining Torchwood?”

“Yeah. Back then I saw nothing wrong in that. Actually I was pretty happy with my new job. It was interesting and well paid.”

“Back then…” Virginia mused. “Now you think… it was a… mistake to join Torchwood?”

“Hmmm, well… all those rumours, you know. They made me suspicious,” Ianto explained. “With the recent experiments came the ghosts and that really creeped me out.”

She did not reply, so he continued, “Seeing what Hartman brought down on us, Cybermen, through that breach… Yeah, you can say there’s something wrong with Torchwood.”

Hysterically Virginia laughed out loud, startling Ianto. For a terrifying moment he thought she would go mad, but then he heard her cough, trying to regain her composure.

“Yeah,” she finally chuckled bitterly. “There was something wrong… Oh, Ianto, you have an extraordinary knack for understatement.”

For a few minutes awkward silence hung between them. It was a hard subject to talk about and not ideal for distracting them from their situation.

“So, Brittany?” Virginia finally reinitiated their conversation.

“Oh, yeah. We went to France by car, the boot stuffed with our tent, camping equipment, food, and clothes. Travelling along the coast we visited a few towns, but mostly we enjoyed the landscape. Lisa preferred to be outside, with me.” He sighed. “It was the Friday before we had to travel back when we met a group of other young people at a campsite. We had quite a party and the next day we were hungover.”

Ianto chuckled with the memory.

“I made cheese toasties for breakfast. I just couldn’t stand anything sweet that morning. I desperately wanted some tea, but Lisa forgot to descale the kettle again. So I had to go and try and clean it before I could make tea. Then we drove along the coast toward St. Malo to take the ferry back. We still had one night we could spend there and we found a wonderful spot for the night. We camped on a beach. It was wonderful. Lisa and I, we… well, I guess you know… Then it became cold. It got so freezing that we wore our coats and shared one sleeping bag. And then, when we woke up the next morning, a dog was pissing on our tent.”

Now Virginia could not help but laugh. Still Ianto could hear the pained undertone in her voice. She had to be suffering.
“So, how was Australia?” he asked to get her focused on something other than her own agony.

“Hot,” Virginia chuckled involuntarily. “We spent the first three days exploring the Kakadu National Park.” She drew in a shuddering breath. “It was… spectacular.”

“Where is that?”

“In the Northern Territory. We saw the Jim Jim Falls, a herd of brumbies… freshwater crocodiles, and… lots of birds. I especially liked the black-necked stork.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes,” she said and her voice took on an admiring note. “Its neck is completely black… as is its beak. The feathers shimmered in the sunlight. And the legs were a bright red. A beautiful bird.

“From there we went to Melbourne. My… pen friend lives there… and she… showed us around. We went to Victoria Market with rows and rows and rows of market stalls with just about anything you could imagine for sale. We attended the Ghost Tour at the Old Melbourne Gaol, that was creepy… and we spent a whole day at Ocean Grove’s Adventure Park, splashing about in the water rides. That was really cool.”

Over her enthusiasm she totally forgot about her pain. Ianto thought that she probably should not talk so much and overexert herself, but he did not have the heart to stop her. She was happy talking to him about her trip… he just could not take that away from her. Besides, he suspected that she knew how straining talking was for her. It was not his decision to make. Before he could ask anything she continued on her own.

“Then we flew to New Zealand. I have a pen friend there, too, and we travelled with her. Oh dear, we saw so much that it’s hard to remember everything.”

“Take it slowly. We have time,” Ianto replied dryly.

“Ouch, Ianto!” she burst out with a pained laugh. “There’s your understatement again!”

“Why? Were you planning on going somewhere?”

“No. You?”

“Not at the moment…”

Once more she chuckled bitterly before she went on with her tale.

“Even before we flew down there my pen friend told me that she found it very insulting that many tourists do New Zealand in a week. I guess… that she didn’t take into consideration that most people either can’t afford a longer stay or simply don’t have enough vacation days… Anyway, we had three months to explore her home country and most of the time she spent with us.”

“What’s her name?” Ianto interrupted her. Virginia used the break to take a few deep breaths and collect herself.

“Julia. She’s a bit older than I am, but we’re on the same wavelength.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah. We met in Auckland, she grew up there, and from there she accompanied us to where she lives now. She showed us some really gorgeous beaches, we went fishing and I caught two really
big fishes… don’t remember what kind. We went to Rotorua next. There’s a lot of geothermal activity there, and we saw geysers and boiling mud pools and the best was that we could really see them as Julia took us to an even more spectacular area that is less known and a little out of the way, so there were no tourists standing in the way when we were taking pictures. It was…” Heavy coughs shook her. “It was awesome!”

“I believe that.”

“The whole coastline is amazing. Maybe… I should’ve stayed there…”

Another fit of coughs stopped her. Ianto heard it with worry. He desperately wished he could help her.

Finally she fell silent and when he could not bear it anymore he called out tentatively, “Virginia?”

“Yes?”

For a moment he hesitated. He did not want to ask if she was okay, he knew that she was not. So he went with, “Tell me more?”

“Wh-whale watching. We saw a couple… of them.”

It became increasingly difficult for her to talk. Ianto feared that she would fall unconscious. With horror he noticed that he hoped for her to stay awake and keep talking, not for her sake, but his own. He was scared to death of the silence.

After some time that felt like eternity Virginia spoke again.

“We… were in Hanmer Springs, a mountain resort with thermal pools. That was… incredible! It’s an alpine mountain range and the pools are outdoor, water temperature over thirty degrees Celsius, with waterslides and picnic area. We… had a… marvellous day there.”

When Virginia trailed off this time she did not try to speak again. Ianto’s prodding fell on deaf ears. Certainly she was unconscious.

Tormented by the sudden silence Ianto felt his anxiety increase, complete with quickening heartbeat and breaths shortening to hard gasps. All of a sudden he noticed that occasionally there were other groans and moans. They sounded metallic, a sign that the voices’ owners were further converted than Virginia was.

That realization was worse than the silence.

Desperately Ianto wished to lose consciousness and a while later his body granted him that wish.

xXx

Cardiff

Gasping back to life Jack inhaled water. He flailed and his throat closed against the liquid. It was dark and Jack realized that he was near the muddy bottom of the river. Desperately he struggled to
reach the surface, his soaked coat making every move difficult, but he had to get himself out of the water. If he kept dying down there until they dredged the bottom and found him, not only would he probably go mad, but he would also have some pretty fancy explaining to do when he revived. When he broke the surface he gasped for air painfully. He still was in deep shadows. Treading water, Jack looked up and realized that he was under the River Walk.

“Jack!”

From above he heard Constable Davidson call out for him. Andy. The mantis almost grabbed him!

Splashing about, Jack paddled out from under the walkway.

“Captain Harkness!” Gwen yelled when she spotted him. “Hold on!”

What they were doing Jack did not know. What he did know was that his heavy coat threatened to pull him down again and that the opposite waterside was too far away for him to reach. Still flailing he tried to keep afloat. His eyes caught movement and something hit him in the face and splashed the water.

“Put the rope around your waist!” Gwen shouted. “We’ll pull you up!”

A towing rope, Jack recognized as he did his best to tie the rope around himself without sinking again. It did not work, so he wrapped it around his right arm a few times and held on to the rope.

“Pull!” he wanted to call out but it came out like a croak. Still the constables began to haul him up. Jack was sure that it was quite an effort and when he was far enough up to grab the railing he helped by climbing the balustrade. Groaning he collapsed on the walkway and the constables sat down beside him. For a moment they just sat and breathed.

“You Torchwood guys… do this kind of thing a lot?” Andy panted.

Jack responded with an almost challenging grin, “Every day.”

Gwen looked around at the fallen insect, asking, “Is it dead?”

“Well… at least it looks dead,” Jack replied, taking in the mess that was the shattered head of the mantis. “Good work, kids. Both of you.”

Both constables frowned at being called kids. Shaking her head Gwen said, “Well, I think that I now have an idea of what you Torchwood people do.”

Jack smirked and patted her back as he got up. Water still ran out of his hair and clothes, especially the coat. “Let’s clean up the mess quickly,” he said cheerfully, “before Tosh announces the next emergency.”

“You expect more incidents like this to happen?” Gwen queried.

All Jack could do was shrug.

“You must be kidding! This thing almost killed you!” Andy gasped. “How did you get it down from there in the first place?”

“I’m not sure. Must’ve been the pheromones.”

“Pheromones?”
Jack nodded. “I’ve always said mosquitoes eat me alive in summer, but it was really only a figure of speech!”

He started for the dead creature and the constables followed him.

tbc…
Despite his soaked clothes, Jack helped the constables to clean up at the scene. Another pair of constables had arrived and helped to keep the bystanders in check after Andy had explained the situation. Once they had stuffed the insect’s remains into the boot, Jack ushered Gwen and Andy into the car and even though Andy argued that Jack should not drive, he did just that and headed to Mermaid Quay. There he dropped the protesting constables off, ordering them to go to Eddie’s Diner and get coffee and something to eat, and continued to the underground parking to get rid of the creature at the Hub. With Toshiko’s help he was finished in about twenty minutes, quickly changed his clothes, and met the constables at the diner thirty minutes after leaving them stunned at the curb.

When Jack came in, the jukebox right next to the front door started to play *Chantilly Lace*, adding to the American atmosphere created by the design of the counter and furniture, the neon lights and pictures of US cars and actors on the wall. On the far end of the counter Marilyn Monroe stood over a ventilation shaft, her white dress swinging in the air.

The captain let his gaze drift over the booths on the right wall until he saw Constable Cooper jump up from her place on the red padded bench in the back of the guest room. Andy just looked around from where he slouched in his chair.

“Jack!” Gwen shouted enthusiastically, waving at him. “Come! We’ve got you a burger and a hotdog!”

Smirking Jack stopped beside Andy and leaned on the separation to the next booth.

“Thanks, Gwen,” Jack said. “We don’t have time, though. I got the next alert already. Did you eat something?”

“Yes, but…”

“No buts, Gwen,” Jack cut her short. “We’ve got to go. C’mon.” Gesturing them to follow him Jack pivoted and strode to the door.

“What kind of alert?” Gwen shouted, grabbing burger and hotdog and hurrying after him.

“I’ll tell you on the way,” Jack replied, holding the door for them. As Gwen bustled through he grabbed the burger from her with a smirk and a shake of his head. “I parked underground. Let’s get the car.”

On the way to their vehicle Jack ate the burger, knowing he would need the energy. Judging by the latest readings Toshiko got, the Rift was reacting erratically to the events in London. It was quite active and Jack suspected that he did not want to know what else would be washed through it other than a giant mantis.

The second creature the constables met that evening was a Hoix. As soon as Jack spotted it he was glad that he had brought a bigger weapon than his Webley along. Knowing what Hoixes were like, he ordered the constables to stay with the car until he was back and ventured into the building where it had last been spotted. The hotdog he took from Gwen could not calm it down, though, so Jack was forced to make short work of it. Even the dead creature that Jack brought out scared the shit out of
the police officers.

Two weevils that Toshiko located before they could wreak havoc at a supermarket were the next challenge to the mixed team before they followed another alert to the discovery of a creature that was still unknown to the Torchwood archives. As it proved to be hostile they had no other choice than to kill it.

“Owen will have a blast examining it once he’s back from London,” Jack had said as they loaded it into the patrol car’s boot. He was not as enthusiastic about it as he might have sounded. Whenever he could Jack tried to preserve life rather than end it, because he knew that that was what the Doctor would want him to do.

As it was they now were on their way to Bute Park where Toshiko had picked up another alien life-sign. Andy parked the car close to the entrance on Castle Street and the three of them got out to check on the life form. They strode to the gate that was closed due to the late hour.

“It’s in the park, isn’t it?” Gwen asked Jack who was staring at the device that he wore on his left wrist.

“Looks like it,” the captain murmured thoughtfully, never taking his eyes off the small display.

“Though… no, not anymore. Well, there’s more than…”

Excited shouts from behind made the three look around just in time to see a dark shadow sweep low across the street and rise again to vanish in the dark.

“What was that?” Gwen gasped.

“Not sure,” Jack murmured, looking at his readings again. “But there’s more than one of them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.” He looked up at the dark sky, trying to find a trace of the creature. All he could see were clouds instead. No movement caught his eye. Beside him the constables followed his example.

“See anything?” Andy asked.

“No.”

“Look out!” Gwen yelled right when she let her gaze drift in the other direction.

All three of them could feel the breeze caused by the creature swooping past them. It flew low along the old wall with the animal statues on top toward the castle. People shouted excitedly, pointing at the animal and waving at others to catch their attention.

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

The creature slowed, rising a few yards and hovering. Now the team could see its distinctive body shape that made it perfect for soaring. It appeared undecided, the wide triangular pectoral wings flapping. As it swept up into the air and plunged back down two paddle-like lobes extending in front of its mouth showed.

*Flash.*

It swooped at the origin of the last light, its tail whipping down. A man cried out when he was hit
by the flattened, heart-shaped end of the tail and thrown to the ground, hitting the pavement hard.

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

The creature swiftly changed its direction, drifting further up again only to roll and move back down. Its attack made the people in its way duck low.

“Some people just don’t like to be photographed,” Jack quipped.

“We should help,” Gwen gasped. “What can we do?”

“Tell the people to stop taking pictures,” Jack shrugged. “They’re scaring it with the flashes.”

“You know what that thing is?”

“It’s an Aerillon,” Jack answered Andy. “Usually they’re harmless. It must be…”

“You sure about that?” Andy interrupted. “Cause that Australian animal guy was killed by a stingray not long ago, wasn’t he?”

“Thrown into a strange new world so suddenly, you’d be scared, too,” Jack defended the creature. “And it’s not a stingray!” He had found the creatures enchanting since the first time he ever saw one and really resented this time’s propensity to see everything alien as a threat.

“If it’s hurting people, it doesn’t matter if it’s scared,” Andy argued. “We have to stop it.”

“Well, if people would just leave it alone…”

“Should we catch it?” Gwen asked, trying to cut off the argument before someone really did get hurt, and she was not sure if she was more worried about the onlookers or her partner.


“No, but… maybe we can bait it with something,” she mused aloud, “and… take it somewhere else for its own protection.”

“Wouldn’t know where,” Jack told her. Fascinated he watched the creature fly up again and sail toward the castle. “I’ve never seen one this close before…” he murmured. Then it was out of sight and Jack seemed to return to the present. Checking on his wrist device he said, “We should check, though, if all of the creatures are Aerillons or if something else is in the park. C’mon.”

“It’s closed,” Andy remarked.

“Oh, really?” Jack smirked and went the few remaining steps to the gate. He got out a simple looking tool and a moment later he had picked the lock and swung the gate open. “After you,” he said with an inviting gesture.

“Do you know what it eats?” Gwen asked as she walked down the path toward the first open field.

“The Aerillons aren’t dangerous for us,” Jack told her. “I think they catch smaller animals out of the air. Might be birds or insects here. Not sure what they eat on their home planet.”

“You think we can even find a trace of them?” Andy queried. “They’re dark as the night.”
“Doesn’t matter,” Jack said. “We don’t need to catch them. All I want to do is make sure that nothing dangerous came through with them.” Tapping at his earpiece he asked, “Tosh?”

“I’m here, Jack.”

“What can you tell me?”

“I have seven signals in and near Bute Park,” Toshiko reported. “Six are moving, the other is stationary right now.”

“Where?” Jack asked, reckoning that the moving six were Aerillons and focussing on the potential threat.

“East of your position, about a hundred meters away.”

“Wait!” Jack called out as he saw the constables fan out. “We don’t know what it is. Let me go first.”

“Where?”

“Over there,” Jack nodded in the direction and pulled his Webley and a torch out. “Stand back.”

Carefully he strode in the direction Toshiko had suggested and stepped between the outer menhirs of the Gorsedd Stone Circle. By night they appeared more mystical than by day. Not that Jack would believe that they held special powers, but it did not hurt to be cautious.

“Jack, something’s closing in fast,” Toshiko alerted him.

Before he could look around for what it might be an Aerillon swooped down. Jack just saw a big shadow that flitted past him and felt the light breeze it caused.

Wow.

“They’re big,” he heard Gwen from behind.

“Stay where you are,” Jack growled.

“Aren’t we here to support you?” she prodded.

“Shut up,” Jack hissed. “Now stay there.”

He heard her grumble to herself and shook his head. So far the constables had turned out to be useful, but he already noticed as well that Gwen, in particular, could be quite stubborn.

“Hey! What are you doing here? The park’s closed!” a male voice demanded to know. To his left Jack saw a flashlight dance in the darkness, coming down the path they had taken only minutes ago.

“Now would be the time for support,” Jack groaned.

Both Gwen and Andy turned to the newcomer.

“Constable Davidson,” Andy identified himself. “Please stay out of the danger area.”

“Danger area? What’s going on here? Who let you in?”

“This is a police investigation,” Gwen told him. “Please stand back, sir.”
Jack stopped listening to them, concentrating on the task at hand. Hearing the flapping of wings he directed his torch at the sky and saw another Aerillon approach. It slowed its flight and hovered in an updraft for a moment before it shot toward Jack with a strong wing beat.

“Whoa!” Jack called out as he dropped on the grass to avoid it. “Looks like it doesn’t like me!” As quickly as he dove for cover he got up again. “I’m offended. Everyone likes me.”

All of a sudden Jack was swept off his feet, losing touch with the ground. As he tried to make out where the Aerillon was he did not notice that another creature dove at him until it was too late.

“Whoaaaaa!” Jack cried out as he was lifted higher and higher. Struggling wildly in the hold of several legs he did his best to wriggle free, but to no avail. A sudden impact made him gasp and he dropped. The big shadow below him rushed toward him and then Jack crashed into the crown of a tree, hitting every branch on his way down. Dazed he lay at the tree’s roots, gasping for breath as he was winded from the impact.

“Jack?” Gwen shouted. Her partner stayed with the other man beneath the trees.

“I’m okay!” Jack groaned once he got some air back into his lungs.

“Thank God you didn’t fall onto the stone slab,” Gwen gasped. “That might have killed you.”

“Probably. What was that?”

“No idea. It was too fast and dark.”

Right at that moment a huge shape, bigger than the Aerillons, glided toward Jack barely at face level. It shot in his direction and swooped up to grab at him with its six legs. The captain threw himself down on the grass, taking Gwen with him, and rolling over his shoulder. Out of that roll he jumped to his feet and ran back to the trees.

“Gwen!”

Thankfully she was right behind him.

Warbling the creature hovered beside the row of trees, unable to follow its prey. It could not reach them and fluttered around erratically, bouncing up and down with frustration. It issued clicking noises in quick succession.

“Guess it’s searching for us,” Andy said. “Maybe it has echolocation.”

“You mean like bats?” Jack wanted to know.

“Yeah.”

“What the hell is that thing?” the park caretaker queried anxiously.

The team took another look.

“It’s beautiful,” Gwen stated.

Jack snorted. “It almost killed me.”

“Yeah, well, that, too,” she stammered.

“Still think it’s beautiful?”
She shrugged. “Most dangerous species are beautiful to look at, though.”

Jack was delighted that she did not let herself be intimidated by the creature. *She would be a nice fit for Torchwood*, he thought. Then he sighed. *I can’t keep everyone who appears to be capable, though.*

“It looks like a moth,” he mused aloud.

“Yeah. And this one seems to be aggressive,” Andy remarked.

“So, what do we do?”

“Well, too bad we don’t have a giant bug zapper,” Andy remarked.

For a moment, Jack just gave him a narrow-eyed look. Feeling self-conscious, Andy began apologizing. “Sorry, just idle talk. It’s just, this is our second giant insect and I was only thinking…” When the narrow-eyed look didn’t go away, Andy quickly concluded, “I’ll shut up now.”

Then Jack broke into an enormous grin. “PC Andy, you’re positively brilliant,” Jack said. “Do you have jumper cables in the boot?”

“Standard equipment, yes,” the constable told him.

Delighted Jack beamed at him and held his open hand out at him. Andy just stared at him, confused.

“Keys,” Jack said, rolling his eyes.

“Can’t give you the car keys,” Andy said. “You’re not allowed to drive it.”

“I can do whatever I want to do, sweet cheeks,” Jack smirked, shrugging his eyebrows. “Now give me the keys.”

When Andy still hesitated Jack was fed up, resorting to his best weapon, “There’s a giant moth out there big enough to carry a man away and eat him alive,” Jack smirked, lacing his voice with smut. “And you’re worried about letting me drive your police car? Seriously?”

Blushing deeply at the double entendre, Andy was about to hand over the keys when a screech made them look around. The moth was under attack. Swarmed by the Aerillon it fluttered frantically, trying to rise.

“Wow!” Gwen called out and ran out of the cover to see better.

“Gwen! No!” Andy shouted.

The moth still tried to escape. To no avail. Its pursuers tore at its wings with their tails, destroying them. The giant insect dropped and smashed onto the stone slab that Jack had narrowly missed earlier. Its carapace broke and before she could even try to duck Gwen was splattered with ichor.

“Ewwww!”

“Gwen!” Andy yelled and started toward her.

Irritated by the other strange life forms that had joined the moth and screamed at them the Aerillon now swooped at Gwen who was too stunned to react. Before Andy could reach her two of the flying
rays narrowly missed her, but the third thumped her with its tail, and knocked her headlong into the moth’s carcass.

“Gwen!”

Andy arrived beside the stone table and grabbed for Gwen who was flailing, trying to free herself and squeaking with shock and disgust.

Watching the scene unfold Jack could not help but laugh.

“Phew! What an exciting night!” he cheered. “Gotta love this job!”

“This… is… disgusting!” Andy exclaimed, his face screwing up in an appalled grimace at the slick matter covering Gwen as he pulled her up. Gwen just stood beside him, her arms raised, eyes wide, her mouth opening and closing like a fish’s on dry land.

“You okay?” Jack had the decency to ask once he managed to choke down his laughter. Seeing them both nod assured him that he did not need to worry.

“Need another member for your team?” Gwen asked as she found her voice again.

“Why? Wanna join?”

“It sure is an interesting job.”

“Try and convince me!”

“You do the hiring?” Gwen asked, slightly suspiciously.

“Well, I’m the boss,” he smirked, winking at her. “Who else do you think would do the hiring?”

“I don’t know,” Gwen shrugged. “Some government officials? Military?”

Jack laughed out loud. “And they would know if you’re qualified how?”

For a second she grimaced at him, annoyed. Then she smirked and stuck out her tongue.

Jack could not help but keep laughing. He really liked her even if she could be more trouble than she was worth. Then, remembering that they had a job to do, Jack checked on his wrist strap and looked around. The constables still stood beside the centre stone of the circle, but the park caretaker was gone. Inwardly Jack cursed. He would have to track him down. First he needed to find the alien that still hid somewhere in the park, though.

“Jack?” Toshiko called out for him over his ear piece. “Five signals are moving north fast. The other has split and is moving toward you.”

“We can’t follow the Aerillons,” Jack told her. “But they’re harmless. Do you have information about the remaining creature?”

“None whatsoever.”

“I’ll check it out.”

“Um… guys? What’s that?” Gwen asked, pointing at something moving between the standing stones. “Oi!”
And really, when Jack turned around and raised his torch and gun he saw an animal the size of an average German shepherd dog and more or less the same shape. Its head was more elegant and the fur brighter, a light yellow-brown coat with cream coloured belly as far as he could make out, dark stripes crossing its back.

“Oh, my God!” Andy gasped. “It’s a Thylacine!”

“A what?”

“It’s a Tasmanian tiger! I can’t believe it!”

“Never heard of them,” Gwen mused.

“Because they’re extinct.”

“And you know this how?” Gwen demanded suspiciously.

“Watching TV…” Andy mocked. “Some show about animals that humans have caused to go extinct.”

“But if they’re extinct,” Gwen said, incredulous, “how did it wind up here?”

“You didn’t listen when I told you earlier, did you?” Jack said. “There’s a rift through space and time running through Cardiff.”

“And you mean that’s where it comes from? It slipped through from somewhere in Tasmania?”

“Probably.”

“But that’s brilliant!” Andy cheered. “We can catch it and send it to where it belongs. Maybe there’ll come more! We could save the whole species!”

“Andy! Stop it!” Gwen held her partner back. “It doesn’t look like its hell bent on saving its species.”

None of them doubted her words as the thylacine opened its mouth in a wide sort of yawn. And opened it, and opened it, showing two narrow, long jaws with strong teeth. It growled and hissed agitatedly.

“My God! Is it growing?” Gwen gasped as the creature’s mouth opened wider than she ever would have thought possible from the pointed canine shape of its snout.

“It’s like that movie when Jim Carrey’s dog puts on the magical mask,” Andy remarked.

“Sh, it’s okay,” Jack tried to soothe the animal, but it reacted with more hisses and attempted to bite him.

“I bet it’s more scared than we are,” Gwen said, squatting down beside Jack. “Step back a bit. It may feel threatened.”

“Okay.” Reluctantly Jack followed her suggestion and backed off. She’s compassionate and courageous. Maybe I should rethink retconning her.


When they looked in the direction she indicated they saw a couple of smaller shapes. They came
closer to the thylacine and now Jack and Andy recognized them as its young.

“Saved,” Andy whispered. “They’re saved.”

“Okay, kids,” Jack caved. “Let’s catch them and send them back to Tasmania.”

Gwen beamed at him and then she smacked a wet kiss on his cheek, smearing him with ichor from the dead giant moth.

xXx

London

How much time had passed he did not know. All Ianto Jones did know was that his whole body was hurting. The table he was lying on had been designed to the proportions of those robot things and he was just a little taller than they were. So his limbs were slightly bent, strapped immobile in an unnatural position. His muscles strained against the tension and there was nothing he could do about it.

Ianto moaned.

His eyes were about the only part he could move. Okay, he could wiggle his fingers and toes, but that could not really be counted as movement. Movement. That would be lifting or stretching his limbs or turning his head, but that was something he could not do.

The forced rigidity tore on his nerves.

Don’t cry, he ordered himself.

Actually he had given up on crying. It did nothing for him but block his nose which he wanted to avoid at all costs.

In his left calf he felt a cramp start and winced with the realization. Slowly the pain crept up in his leg until the cramp hit him full force.

Ianto groaned, grinding his teeth as he fought the pain. Tears of pain lurked in his eyes and he pressed them shut in a vain attempt to suppress them. Grimacing with agony he did his best to relax his muscles again.

A futile attempt.

All he really could do was to wait until it subsided.

Trembling hard Ianto lay in his bonds and gasped for every shuddering breath.

He wanted to scream.

Would it make sense? Nobody’s here to hear me… and even when there was someone they did not come, too scared of the machines.
Was it already morning? Ianto had no way to tell except his internal clock. He was not sure if it was still working. No daylight came through the enclosure of the upgrade chambers. They lay in the same surreal twilight they had since before the Cybermen vanished.

All Ianto could clearly see were the instruments that had come out of the top of the machine before the power loss. The blades had stopped, but he still had to face them each time he opened his eyes.

So he closed them again.

The sight was burnt into his memory anyway.

*I suppose it would be too much to ask for a malfunction to set me free,* he thought. *Of course, to malfunction, the machine would have to be functioning first, and the last thing I want is for those blades to start moving again.*

*So, I’m stuck.*

Around him was silence. Ever since the voices of the dying victims in the other conversion units had faded the storey lay silent.

*Waiting.*

*Wish I knew if anyone was out there trying to rescue me.*

*What if Carol and Tony were the only other survivors?*

“Oh, Virginia!” Ianto said when he could not bear to contemplate the possibility. “Oh, Virginia!”

Long minutes passed. Ianto already feared that she had died on him, too, when he heard her voice.

“Ianto,”

She sounded weak. At once Ianto was scared again. He had no idea of how badly his comrade was injured. For all he knew she slowly bled to death.

*Why is no one coming?* Ianto thought miserably. Suppressed sobs caught painfully in his chest.

*There should be firemen or police or anyone else searching the building. There must be more survivors from Torchwood. Why is no one looking for survivors? Are they too scared to go into the tower? Terrified of going to the point of origin…*

*If they even know that the point of origin was here.*

“I… wanted to go visit her again,” Virginia said.

Relieved Ianto let out a breath he did not know he was holding.

“Visit who?”

“Julia. My pen friend in New Zealand.” A sob escaped her. “I won’t ever see her again… and… I won’t… I won’t…”

As she trailed off Ianto could not help but prod her, “You won’t what?”

“I-I won’t… see my family either.”

“Oh, Virginia! Don’t say that! You will see them again, I’m sure of that.”
Her bitter chuckles changed to coughs. “I… my mind… feels like… mush. I… don’t think that I’ll see anyone… again.”

Ianto’s throat was corded up with grief when he heard her talk like that.

“I won’t ever… see you.”

“There’s not much to see,” Ianto remarked before he could even think about it. For a moment it was so silent that you could have heard the proverbial pin drop before Virginia’s suppressed giggles reached his ear. “Really. I never found out why Lisa would want to be with me.”

“Ianto, you shouldn’t talk like that about yourself. You sound so… insecure.”

“Lisa and I… we were so different… and yet the same. She…” He trailed off because he realized that he was about to say was. He choked. “She was… not so much older, but she was more mature than I was… still am. I think. We also looked so much different from each other. I always told her that I wouldn’t love her for what she looked like and she would laugh and tell me… that she only was together with me because I… looked so good.”

Virginia laughed and then coughed again.

“Why… do you say… you looked so different?”

“She had the darkest skin I’ve ever seen and the most beautiful brown eyes imaginable. Black hair, dark and shimmering like ebony, and pearly white teeth. And I don’t use that as cliché. She really looked like that.”

“And you?”

“I’m pale and pasty,” he chuckled. “Really. I’m about six feet tall and of average weight, though my mam always says that I am too thin, and I have dark brown hair and blue eyes.”

“I see… I’m sure… you were… a lovely couple,” she said. Once more coughs shook her body. “What… did your… family say?”

“They liked her a lot,” Ianto told her, feeling a pang of guilt at lying to her as he was really proud of Lisa. What he did not want to say was that he had not had any contact with his family since he moved to London. He could well imagine what they would have told him, though, “My sister, Rhiannon, she always teased me that I didn’t deserve her.”

“That’s mean.”

“Just her way to tell me how lucky she thought I was,” Ianto told her, remembering how his older sister used to make fun of him. He had to find a way to change the subject.

“You… loved… her.”

Ianto could not answer at once. After a few minutes he said, “Yes, I love her.”

More minutes ticked by.

It took quite some time until Virginia spoke again.

“I’m grateful that you’re here… that… we can talk.”

“I’m glad not to be alone, too.”
There was another pause, once more broken by Virginia.

“So, are you… really that… good… looking?”

Despite everything he had to chuckle. “I don’t know. As I see myself each morning in the mirror I don’t find anything special about me. I guess some girls are more attracted by my suits.”

“Ianto, you’re certainly understating again.”

“If you think so. How would you describe yourself?”

“I’m rather petite, five foot five… and have blue eyes and blonde hair.” Another coughing fit interrupted her. “There’s… a cat… on my left ankle.”

“A tattoo?”

“Yeah….. my hair is curly now, but… when it was… straight… some people said, I looked like…” Coughs again. “Like that… TV cop, in the US show… Eames.”

Ianto chuckled.

“Isn’t it nice to be compared with a TV star?”

“Sometimes… sometimes not.”

“Were you ever asked to give an autograph?” Ianto teased.

“Yes.”

Ianto could have sworn that he could hear her blush in this single word.

“I-Iant-to?” Now she sounded scared.

“Yes, Virginia?”

“M-my legs… I… can’t feel…”

*Oh, crap! If they're numb… that's not a good sign.*

“Sh, Virginia. It’s okay. Are you in pain?”

“N-no.”

*Shit!*

“L-legs… arms… m-my mind’s… foggy.” She sobbed. “Got… injected.”

Staring up at the instruments hovering over him Ianto shuddered. There was the syringe among the saws and blades. He did not want to know what was in it.

“Ianto? I’m scared.”

Swallowing hard Ianto put all the confidence he could muster in his words, “Don’t be scared. Soon search and rescue men will come and help us.”

“I don’t think so.”
“They will come. They have to come! You’ll get out of here!”

“Ianto…”

“No! Don’t say it! You’ll get out together with me!” Ianto definitely refused to accept the possibility that she would die.

“Ianto…”

“Just keep talking with me, okay, Virginia?” Ianto said, doing his best not to let his desperation show. He did not want to beg. He should encourage her instead. “You need to focus. Then you’ll get through this!”

“Ianto, please hear me out!”

Her coughs became worse with each attack.

“What is it?” Ianto gently asked.

“My mother… she… lives in New York, in Brooklyn. Eve Logan. Please… tell her the truth… about how I died. I don’t want Torchwood to… cover it up.”

“Virginia…”

“No, Ianto… no… time.”

Panic gripped for Ianto’s heart with an icy cold hand when he heard her cough again. His stomach muscles fluttered.

“I… wanna be… cremated… my…” She coughed. “My ashes… scattered… Highlands.”

Ianto choked, tears burning in his eyes. When she did not talk again he asked fearfully, “Virginia?”

“P-prom’se?”

“I’ll find your mother and tell her…” Once more he choked. “You want your ashes be scattered in the Highlands?”

His voice trembled with grief.

“Virginia! Please don’t give up!

“Virginia!”

“Mum…?” Her voice faded away.

“It’s me, Ianto. I promise, Virginia! Just don’t give up!” the plea now easily came over his lips. “Please! I need you! Please fight!”

Did she answer? Ianto thought he heard her, but could not tell for sure.

“It’s not too late! You can still make it! They’ll come soon to get us out! Please hold out! Fight!”

He cried heartbreakingly.

“I don’t want you to go!” he whined between sobs. “I need you!”
Shedding hot tears he tried to avoid the unavoidable. He knew he had no choice, but he refused to believe it. She had to be in terrible pain, had to be suffering. Certainly it was a hard fight for every word she spoke. He desperately wanted her to hold out.

*But for what? To be rescued? Will anyone come at all? What is she agonizing herself for? For another minute of excruciating pain? And why? Just to not let me alone?*

“I’ll miss you terribly, Virginia!” he wailed.

Ianto had no idea if she could still hear him. Still he talked, just because the silence was too hard to bear.

“Virginia?”

Ianto could only sob.

Ianto cried, shouted, willing her to hold out. Willing the firemen to arrive. Willing anyone to come and help.

“Virginia?”

There was no answer.

“Virginia!”

*Ian-to…*

His name died on her lips, at least that was what he thought he heard, but it was merely an echo of her voice produced by his desperation not to be alone.

“Virginia?!?” Renewed panic threatened to take hold of Ianto. “Virginia! Virginia!”

No reply.

And finally he could not deny it anymore. She’d been gone long before his senseless rambling began.

“Noooooooooooooooooo!”

His screams shattered the calm, but he gave up on screaming soon.

Actually he had to give up as his throat was sore and his voice hoarse by the time he could stop himself screaming. He was not sure if he could still make any sound loud enough to alert possible search and rescue teams of his presence.

In case there were any search and rescue teams.

Since the last survivor had left the tower he had not heard anyone.

*Wait! I am the last survivor.*

He could not be sure if he was the last, but the realization still stung. Would anyone find him here? Or would he die in this thing? Not fast by the blades but slowly by thirst?

Thinking about thirst…
There was that urge he could no longer ignore. It became more and more pressing until he had no other choice. There was no other way than just to do it.

*Great... just what I needed in addition. Humiliation.*

Even as he knew that he could not avoid wetting himself in his predicament his cheeks blushed a bright red as he let his stream flow. Ianto felt it wet his crotch and backside and could have died with shame. From then on he himself added to the awful mixture of smells of destruction and death.

tbc...
“Phew!” Andy puffed when he shut the door behind the sedated weevil with a dark clank. “That part of the job I could easily do without, something I would just delegate.”

“Which would be extremely unfair,” Jack replied. For a moment he leaned against the wall before he pushed himself off it and went to the entrance to the corridor. “Come!”

“Later,” Gwen chirped, still squatting in front of the security glass that separated her from the thylacines. “I’ll get you something nice to eat and as soon as we can take care of transport you’ll be home in Australia.”

“Gwen?” Jack prodded. “Are you coming, too?”

“Yes,” she nodded, and got up.

“Where are we going?” Andy grunted, trailing behind the captain. He was dirty and tired and the prospect of more fights on behalf of the citizens of Cardiff did not excite him.

Gwen looked equally exhausted. There was dried goo all over her, taking on a turquoise shade and Andy suspected that he was similarly splattered. He wanted to get out of his uniform and get rid of the sticky stuff.

“Up to the Hub,” Jack told them. “We all need a shower.”

“I’m glad that you told us to take our spare clothes with us.” Gwen tried to suppress a yawn. Now that the adrenalin had worn off she felt the extent of their shift and the stress of their temporary assignment.

“Well, he knows his job a little longer than we do,” Andy said, moving a little awkwardly due to his sore muscles. He wholeheartedly agreed with needing a shower, preferably a long, hot shower.

At his remark Jack chuckled. “PC Andy… you have no idea.”

Trudging along Gwen groaned, “You must know how draining your job is too, right? That burger I had is already used up.”

“Yeah… Surprise!” Jack replied with mock cheer. “That’s the busiest, though, that we’ve been since the Sycorax invasion last Christmas.”

Exchanging bemused expressions, the constables followed him up a pretty steep stairwell and wondered why they couldn’t use the lift they had taken on their way down. It led into another
corridor that then opened into a huge hall with brick walls and stuffed with all kinds of technical equipment.

“Wow!”

Both police officers gaped at the interior of the Hub. They totally forgot about their splashed attire as they took in the walkways, the silvery column in the centre, and the towering machine right next to it.

“Is this the water tower from Roald Dahl Plass?” Gwen blurted out.

“Yes, it is,” Jack confirmed.

Wide-eyed she moved toward the Rift manipulator. “So we’re under the Plass now?”

The captain nodded and took her by the shoulder to keep her from tripping and tumbling into the water basin.

“That’s not the way to the showers. Wet as well, but the showers are down that hallway,” Jack laughed, steering her around and indicating the direction with a jerk of his head. “As well as some staff quarters.”

“Oh, great! A shower!” Gwen exclaimed and stormed down the hall.

Jack watched Andy following her a bit slower. He had to admit that they both did a good job. They had definitely earned the break.

Once they were on their own Jack went to Toshiko’s workstation where the computer expert was busy tracking the Rift manipulator’s data.

“Are you just keeping them off my back or did they really not call yet?” Jack asked as he leaned against the workstation.

“Who do you mean?” Toshiko purred innocently.

Jack chuckled and chose a similar tone when he elaborated, “Our dear Prime Minister and the Ministry of Defense.”

Offering him a quick glance and a smirk Toshiko said, “I told them that you’re out there fighting the threats against the United Kingdom so that they can sit safely on their expansive backsides and bother us with calls.”

“You didn’t really say expensive backsides, did you?” Jack laughed out loud.

“No,” Toshiko shrugged, focusing on her screens again and typing rapidly, “actually I said expansive, but I would’ve loved to call them worse.”

Even though some banter was just what he needed after the day’s events Jack’s amusement faded fast. He feared that it was not over yet. Unenthusiastically he suggested, “Maybe I should call them back.”

“I think you should do that,” Toshiko agreed and held out a small stack of post-its for him.

“Thanks,” he groaned, taking the papers. “I’ll be in my office.”

“I also think you might want to call Colonel Mace, first.”
Rolling his eyes Jack pushed himself off the edge of the table.

“Oh, Jack!” Toshiko shouted as he left her workstation, stopping him in mid-stride. “You’ll have to go out again. The Rift is unusually active.”

“Oh, Jack!” Toshiko shouted as he left her workstation, stopping him in mid-stride. “You’ll have to go out again. The Rift is unusually active.”

“Okay.” Jack sighed. As if he did not know it already.

“How are the constables doing?”

For just a second there Jack was confused, the question not really registering in his mind. When he realized what Toshiko had asked he told her, “Fine… for two rookies. But promising, really promising.”

“You want to keep them?”

For a moment he just stood there, unmoving, letting the question roll through his mind.

“I don’t know yet… Oh, and, Tosh? Could you get us some late dinner, please?”

Finally turning, he vanished into his office.

xXx

London

“I wouldn’t have thought that we’d need that long to get here,” Owen sighed as he finally steered their SUV down the motorway’s exit ramp.

“How fast did you think we’d make it?” Suzie wanted to know. She sat in the backseat where she could use the car’s computer system. Now she logged herself into the London traffic system in order to determine the best route.

“I usually don’t need longer than two and a half hours.”

His statement elicited a chuckle from her and she teased, “Ever got caught for speeding?”

“Nope.”

The young doctor could hear her typing away behind him but he did not think twice of it because he had to concentrate on driving. Driving the motorways had been annoying, but navigating was already threatening to drive him up the wall. They had left the M4 in Hounslow and drove through Kensington now, entering London. From there driving became harder with every block. Even though most parts of the city looked like nothing had happened cars crunched into each other or other debris made navigating difficult. When Owen turned right he felt like he had gone through a timerift and come out in 1941 at the height of the Blitz. He had to drive around car wrecks and waste containers. Some had obviously burnt. The medic spotted burn marks where laser fire had hit and bent over street lights. Once he crossed the river and had to redirect due to more crashed cars and other remains scattering the streets. Cursing under his breath Owen manoeuvred the SUV through what looked like a war zone. Thankfully the next street was clear except regular traffic.
“Liar,” Suzie suddenly said.

“What?”

“You were stopped for speeding twice, Owen.”

“Suzie!” the medic frayed.

“No need to deny it,” she chirped. “I can clearly see the entry in the traffic register.”

“And what are you doing in the traffic register when you should be giving us free access to the tower? I see a red traffic light ahead!”

“I’m working on it, Owen,” she huffed. “You don’t have to shout at me.” Once more her fingers flew over the keyboard. “Besides, I thought you would be street-smart here.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Owen grumbled, “Instead of lecturing me you could delete the entry.”

“I guess I could…” Suzie drawled.

Instead of replying Owen had to jam the brakes because he had counted on Suzie to change the traffic lights and had not much space left when he realized that they stayed red.

“Hey! Careful!”

“Well, if you’d been clearing the lights instead of snooping into my driving record...”

“So you’d rather I leave the ticket on the books?”

“Didn’t say that, but...”

“Light’s green,” Suzie smirked.

Owen stifled a curse and floored the accelerator, making the tires squeal as the SUV shot across the intersection.

“Owen!” Suzie complained when she was pressed into her seat as Owen accelerated again. “You’re driving to the Tower Bridge?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Guess you still know your way around after all,” Suzie stated, further browsing the traffic system before she grumbled, “Right choice by the way. Rotherhithe Tunnel’s blocked.”

“Oh?”

“Car accidents,” Suzie explained. “Several police cars and ambulances were ordered to go to the tunnel. I doubt that we could pass it anytime soon.”

“Does your computer tell you anything about the Tower Bridge?” Owen queried.

“No. Why?”

“Dead end...”

Approaching the bridge he was stopped by wooden barriers and rolls of razor wire that blocked the street.
“Bloody hell…!” Suzie exclaimed when Owen made the SUV skid to a halt. “The poor tyres!”

“Quiet in the cheap seats!” Owen stared straight ahead at a couple of soldiers, armed to the teeth, who came forward to defend their position. For a moment they stood and stared at the black SUV, the blue lights flashing on the sides of the windshield, and trying to look through the tinted glass at the driver. One of them stepped up to the car, gesturing to open the window.

“The bridge is closed, sir,” he declared when Owen followed his order.

“We’re Torchwood,” Owen said, pushing his ID under the soldier’s nose.

“So what?”

“So we need to get into the city centre. We need to go to Canary Wharf. Now let us pass!”

But the soldier was not willing to back down.

“Authorized personnel only! Please get out of the car, sir.”

“Excuse me? I don’t plan to bloody walk to One Canada Square.”

“Get out of the car, sir.”

“The hell I will!” Owen snarled before he tried to pull himself together, “You have no right to close the street now that the threat is over. We are Torchwood and are authorized to go wherever we fancy.”

“Owen,” Suzie murmured calmly on the backseat.

“I have to insist, sir,” the soldier said. “Get out of the car.” And to emphasize his words he raised his C7 assault rifle and levelled it at Owen’s face. Another soldier followed his example.

Owen did not worry about the second man as their SUV was bullet proof, but he would never be able to close the side window before the first one shot.

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with, lieutenant. Get in touch with your commanding officer, hell, get in touch with the bloody Prime Minister, but get out of our way.”

Too furious with soldiers keeping him from doing his job to concern himself with his partner, Owen did not notice that Suzie had activated her phone.

“Get out, now, or there won’t be any need for questions later,” the soldier growled.

Seeing the soldier’s finger curl lightly around the C7’s trigger was enough for Owen to know it was time to obey.

xXx

Cardiff
Before Jack began to get back to the people on Toshiko’s post-its he first called, on the spur of the moment, the head of Torchwood Two in Glasgow in order to see what had happened there during the brief invasion. Repeatedly hearing the dial tone Jack began to worry. Archie had been a field agent before he was transferred to Glasgow where he took care of the historical archives ever since. The weird little man probably was out of practice when it came to fighting aliens.

“Aye?” a tired voice finally groaned.

“Archie?” Jack excitedly called out.

After a short moment of rustling sheets and Gaelic cursing Jack heard an annoyed, “Bluidy hell. Who’s there?”

“Jack Harkness,” Jack told him, confused. “Archie, are you all right?”

“Aye,” the Torchwood agent grunted. “Ye woke me up. What do ye want?”

Scowling with growing irritation Jack asked, “Archie, did anything unusual happen in Glasgow today?”

“Hmmm…” He paused. “Ye mean what come o th’ ghosts?”

“Yes, Archie. That’s what I meant.”

“I saw it on th’ news.”

Thunderstruck Jack scooted forward in his chair. “What do you mean, you saw it on the news?” he prodded. “Cybermen everywhere? How could you not notice that?”

“I wis wirkin’ on an auld chronicle,” Archie replied. “Thay’re brickle those chronicles, an’ need tae have a constant climate. I dinna notice ocht.”

Incredulously Jack shook his head. Archibald McCrimmon really was a weird man. “What about now? Do you have any sign of alien incursion in Glasgow?”

“Nae. I wis doun tae th’ pub where I heard a lot ay stories. Other than ‘at… nothing.”

Jack still could not believe it. By a hair’s breadth the Doctor prevented an invasion of Cybermen and Daleks and Archie totally missed it.

On the periphery of his vision Jack noticed movement and looked out of the window of his office to see Toshiko roll back with her office chair so that she could try and catch his attention by waving at him.

“All right, Archie,” he said. “I need to get back to work. I just wanted to see if everything’s okay.”

“Aye, it is,” Archie told him. “Is ‘at Rift ay yoors keepin’ ye busy?”


Without waiting for an answer Jack ended the call and turned to Toshiko.

“Suzie’s on the phone!” she called out for her captain. “I’ll put her through.”

“Okay!”
Patiently Jack listened to what Suzie had to tell him even though rage began to boil inside of him. Why, just why, would the military make trouble for them now, of all times? He rolled his eyes.

“It’s okay, Suzie. I’ll take care of it,” he finally said. “I’ll call you back.”

Slowly he put the receiver down, propped his elbows up on the tabletop and buried his face in his hands.

*That’s typical military. Isn’t it enough that we have TORCHWOOD emblazoned on the SUV? Mentioning that they’re Torchwood agents should have gotten Suzie and Owen access to wherever they wanted, but no, the stupid soldiers just don’t let them pass.*

Knowing that he should not just sit there and brood, Jack picked up his phone again. Usually he relished throwing his weight around, but after a barely prevented invasion and too many Rift alerts in one night for his liking, Jack did not really feel like tackling a discussion about authority and protocol with a politician.

“Security visa 45895. Harkness.” Even though the code gave him the necessary authority he had to wait a few minutes until the right person answered the call. “Prime Minister, I need you to deal with a complication for me, and I need you to do it now, Sir.”

“Captain Harkness,” the Prime Minister bristled immediately. “I am sure you can appreciate how busy I must be in the midst of this crisis. Where do you get off demanding favours of me now?”

“Trust me, Sir, I do know how busy you are,” Jack assured him. “I’ve spent most of my day with a couple of police constables hunting and killing aliens that slipped through that rupture they opened at Canary Wharf while two of my team members who should have been helping me were headed to London to clean up the mess left behind at Torchwood One.”

The Prime Minister tried to grumble something about Jack’s worries not being his problem, but Jack just continued talking. “Now, I would like to get those two people back here as soon as possible because those bumbling idiots at Canary Wharf have made the Rift here start acting up like a two year old who’s just gorged himself on sweets, and I am going to need their help to round up the aliens that continue to slip through.”

*“Then why did you send them to London?” the Prime Minister demanded.*

“Because I assumed, apparently correctly, that no one else would have the presence of mind to secure the alien tech they were storing there!” Jack said snidely, having lost all patience with the bombastic politician. “Now, if you like, I can call them back and let local vagrants, drug addicts, and foreign operatives scavenge what they will from the remains of Canary Wharf, or you can get on the phone to the Minister of Defence and have him call whoever he needs to call to get my people through that bloody checkpoint on the Tower Bridge NOW!”

The Prime Minister gibbered and gabbled at him for a moment, but finally managed to convey that he would cooperate immediately.

Having won a point, Jack decided to press for two and said, “And while you’re at it, have someone assign them a military escort so neither one of us has to waste time having this conversation again.”

Jack hung up before the Prime Minister could reply and gave Toshiko, who now stood in the door to his office, a devilish smirk at seeing her gaping at him.

“Sometimes, it helps to bluster a bit as if you own the place,” Jack told her. “Learned that from a Doctor friend of mine. Did you order us something to eat?”
“Yes,” Toshiko confirmed. “Chinese.”

“Good.” He studied something before him on the desk. “Could you do me a favour and take care of our guests? They’ll want to contact family or friends. Will you organize that, please?”

“So they’ll stay?”

“Yes, Tosh. You said yourself that I’ll have to go out again. They’re as good as untrained personnel can be. I appreciate their help.”

*I bet that’s not all you’re appreciating,* Toshiko thought mischievously. *It’s just hard to tell which one you ‘appreciate’ more, the male or the female constable.

“I have their background checks ready and printed for you.”

“You managed that between monitoring the Rift activity and keeping the politicians off my back? You’re a genius, Tosh. Though I don’t think that you found anything suspicious.”

*Or maybe both of them? “Right.”*

“Okay. I have other calls to make. Let me know when dinner arrives, okay?”

“Sure,” Toshiko said and returned to her work.

Heaving a sigh Jack picked up his phone again, dialling another number on his contact list. Alan Mace answered after the second ring.

“Hello, Alan,” Jack greeted casually. “I just want to ask you if you already took actions concerning Canary Wharf.”

“I wanted to ask you the same, Jack,” the UNIT director answered coldly, putting an insulting emphasis on the captain’s name. “After all, it was your institute that brought this invasion down on us.”

“It was Torchwood London that didn’t handle its research with the necessary care. We didn’t even know about what Hartman was doing until it was too late.”

For a moment both leaders remained silent. Then Jack spoke again.

“Do you have any information about the casualties?”

“Our London office lost twenty-eight members, sixteen are still missing,” Mace answered him darkly. “We sent the remaining personnel to Canary Wharf to secure the tower.”

“Two of my officers also are on their way to Torchwood Tower.”

“Are you trying to stash away what your institute collected?”

Jack laughed. “With only two people?” he chuckled. “Don’t be ridiculous. They’re coming to help. One of them is a doctor.”

“The more the better.”

“Agent Costello is our technical expert. She should be able to identify and deal with what you’ll find in the tower,” Jack further explained. “So, what will be your cover story?”
“The most likely one,” Mace replied.

Jack could just imagine Alan shrug.

“Terrorists. They attacked with car bombs after spiking the water supply with psychotropic drugs. They used faked news to make the people believe that aliens were responsible, using that as diversion.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jack mused.

“Yeah. Why? Do you have a better idea?”

“No,” Jack simply said. “Go with it.”

*Mace snorted and said snidely, “As if UNIT would need Captain Harkness’s permission.”*

“No, you only need us to figure out what you can’t solve yourselves,” Jack replied wryly and could not help but add, “You only call when you’re clueless or the shit hits the fan.”

“In that case we have no reason to continue this talk,” Mace snapped and disconnected the line.

Jack held off the receiver, staring at it with surprise, before he put it down. His hand still resting on the phone he wondered if he should call the Prime Minister again or wait for him to call. Before he could make up his mind the phone rang again. He got the answer he was hoping for and called Suzie next.

xXx

London

Having had no other choice but to follow the lieutenant’s order Owen got out of the SUV. Another soldier bent him over the hood of the car and took his gun. They checked his ID and were about to bind him with flex cuffs when Suzie stepped in and tried to defuse the situation. Due to her intervention they were allowed to wait outside the SUV while they waited for answers from their respective commanding officers.

“Bloody hell!” Owen complained, “This is taking hours! What’s so difficult about a phone call? I can understand that they’d stop civilians, but we’re Torchwood. They’re keeping us from doing our job. They should just let us go!”

“They’re not used to making decisions, they’re only used to following orders.”

“They probably even ask permission to take a piss.”

“Owen,” Suzie scolded him.

“Seriously. What’s taking so long? They’re useless! I’d bet they wouldn’t even lift a finger to save the Queen from a weevil without an order, signed in triplicate, sent in, sent back, queried, lost, found, subjected to public enquiry, lost again, and finally buried in a heap of administrative trots and recycled as standard forms.”
For a second Suzie stared at him incredulously, her mouth opening as if she wanted to say something, then closing again. When she finally found words she said, “I can’t believe you actually read a book.”

“I didn’t,” Owen smirked. “But I did watch the BBC series on DVD about two dozen times.”

Suzie laughed. That was when her mobile rang.

“Jack! Thank God,” his second in command said. “I was beginning to worry that Owen might shoot the lieutenant… if he doesn’t get shot first.”

*Despite the gravity of the situation Jack had to laugh. “You should be escorted to Canary Wharf any minute,” he told her. “As soon as they get their orders.”*

“Thanks, Jack.” She waited for more, but their captain remained silent. “Jack?” Still she got no reply. “Jack?”

“Um, Suzie? I’ve gotta go,” he said hastily. “Talk to you later…”

And with that he was gone.

“What’s up?” Owen asked.

“We’re as good as clear to go,” Suzie told him, “but something must be going on in Cardiff. First he went quiet and then he was rather short and hung up on me.”

“Guess he and Tosh are pretty busy,” Owen mused.

Suzie nodded thoughtfully.

They did not have to wait for long now. Only a minute later the lieutenant approached them again, his face red with either embarrassment or rage, Suzie could not tell. Owen saw it with satisfaction. Reading the soldier’s name tag he asked rather casually, “Anything new, Lieutenant Myles?”

With a sour expression the soldier held out Owen’s credentials and gun for him.

“We will escort you to Canary Wharf, Sir,” he said. “Follow us.”

“Thank you very much, Lieutenant,” Owen smirked, accepting his belongings. With verve he swung the front door open to climb in behind the steering wheel, while lieutenant Myles walked to one of their military cars, telling the other soldiers to clear the road. Hurriedly they removed the wooden barrier.

Then Owen followed the jeep over the Tower Bridge.

xXx

**Cardiff**

When they emerged from the staff quarters, showered and dressed in fresh casual clothes, Gwen
and her partner were chattering animatedly.

“Oh, you haven’t!” she prodded, but only got a smirk in return. Laughing she followed him to where they had seen Jack vanish before.

“Don’t go in,” they were stopped by a female voice. “Jack’s on the phone.”

Surprised the constables looked around in search for the speaker. They only noticed Toshiko when she rolled her chair away from behind the battery of monitors and other strange equipment that normally surrounded her.

“Toshiko Sato,” the slender Japanese woman introduced herself. “I hope you like Chinese.”

“Chinese?” Andy said.

“For dinner,” she replied. “Jack asked me to let you send messages to your family or friends if you so wish…”

Toshiko let her sentence trail off, looking at the constables expectantly. While Andy became suspiciously silent Gwen appeared to be surprised.

“I thought we’d go home now.”

Shrugging Toshiko asked, “So you don’t want to send a message?”

“No. I want to go!” Gwen argued. “Our shift is over. I’m expected back at home.”

“In that case you might want to let Mr. Williams know that you won’t be back tonight,” Toshiko told her calmly, totally unimpressed by the constable’s confusion and obvious astonishment.

Beside Gwen, Andy awkwardly shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“Constable Davidson?” Gwen queried.

Knowing his partner for as long as he did Andy knew that she was pretty angry with him when she called him by his last name, so he took another few seconds to think about what to say before he told her, “Chief Cadwallader’s words were, I’m assigning you to be Captain Harkness’s assistant until such time as he releases you from those duties.”

“And you didn’t think you should have told me that?”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Yeah… but now we’re stuck here,” she pouted, putting her fists on her hips.

Beeping sounds rose Toshiko’s interest and she rolled in place at her workstation, pulling up CCTV images.

“The messages will have to wait,” she declared, getting up. “I have to go and pick up our food. I’ll be right back.” She was about to vanish down a corridor when she turned back around and warned, “Look around if you like, but don’t touch anything.”

Both constables watched her go. Gwen’s gaze drifted to the office door behind her and from there to the round windows of Jack’s office. She could see him at his desk, still on the phone.

“This place is incredible,” Andy said and walked down the stairs to get to the tidal basin while
Gwen had a second look at the workstations. From that floor she got to an archway, opening to a big round room with a walkway running on both sides of the entrance along the wall, ending in two stairs. Gwen leaned on the railing and looked down. There was an autopsy slab and several metal drawers, big lights mounted on an arm coming from the ceiling. There were handles on the metal flaps right below the catwalk.

*Drawers for the bodies?*

Gwen decided not to explore this area further and left the autopsy bay.

“Hey, Andy!” she called out for her partner. “They must have a doctor in their team. They have an autopsy room!”

“Cool!” He grinned up to her. “Guess they want to get to know the aliens inside and out.”

Andy approached the heavily barred gateway with the cog door behind, but was then drawn to the table beside it. With morbid fascination he looked over the collection of things there over.

“Gwen! Look! They have a Thing T. Thing!” Andy shouted excitedly.

“A what?” Curiously she hurried down the stairs.

“You know the Addams family?” he asked, gesturing at one of the metal and glass jars where a disembodied hand floated in a gently bubbling preservative liquid.

“Ewww.”

“I think it’s cool.”

“What are you, twelve? That’s just gross.”

Smirking at her he strolled off, along the wall, towards the armoury. Through the bullet-proof glass he looked at the weapon collection.

“Wow.”

Gwen also pressed her nose against the glass and shielded her eyes with her hand to have a better look inside. Some of the weapons looked like common guns, others did obviously not fire lead bullets but lasers or something. Then there were things she would not even recognize as a weapon.

“I’m not sure if *wow* is the word to describe this arsenal.”

“Whatever…” Andy roamed off to another workplace with table and shelf and lots of foreign looking things on them. “Look at all this stuff! Wonder what these things are for.”

“I’m sure that you can ask them later.”

“What could this one be?” he mused, holding up an odd looking piece of metal. It seemed to be forged to its form, but what was it supposed to be? Andy turned it around and around in his hands but could not come up with any idea of its purpose.

“Andy,” Gwen scolded. “You shouldn’t play around with those things.”

“Don’t you find this exciting?” he cheered with obvious delight as he put the piece of metal down.

“I think it’s ominous.”
Andy laughed. “Well, these people fight aliens! Everything they do is kind of ominous!”

On the shelf he found another item that raised his interest. Reaching up for it he took it down. It looked very like a helmet with a face mask from a medieval suit of armour. The metal was cold in his hands. Intricate patterns were engraved over the top of it and on the lower half of the face mask, making it look like the thing had a beard. Before Gwen knew it he had put it on his head…

Faking the heavy wheezing sounds of breathing through a Scuba set and lowering his voice Andy rasped, “I’m… hisss… your father.”

Despite her irritation Gwen had to chuckle at his imitation of Darth Vader, but then he clutched his head with both hands and she needed a moment to realize that it was not part of his show.

“Andy?” she shouted, alarmed.

“It’s… it’s prickling…” Andy murmured, trying to get the helmet off. “It’s…” Then he shoved it off his head.

“Andy!” Gwen gasped. “What…?”

“Hey!” Toshiko, who appeared in the same corridor she had vanished into before, called out.

“What the hell did you do?”

“I… What’s wrong?”

“Andy!” Gwen exclaimed with shock. “You’re… bald!”

“What?!”

It was true. There was not a single hair on Andy’s head anymore. Not even on his brows or in his nose. They had no time to contemplate what had happened because Jack barged out of his office and thundered down the stairs.

“You idiot!” he barked. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? Didn’t I tell you on the drive here not to touch anything?” Jack’s blue eyes sparkled with rage and he ranted on, “I thought you were a responsible officer who could be trusted with this line of work, but now I realize that I’ve picked just another… real idiot!” he raged for lack of a better matching term. “I should’ve known! I should’ve known that you couldn’t be trusted! Too stupid to even resist your own curiosity! You were warned! And what did you do? You could’ve killed all of us!”

Jack held out his hand.

More was not necessary. His angry outburst had hit Andy hard. Looking like a whipped puppy, Andy handed the helmet over.

“Sorry,” he said softly, and even in one word, his voice betrayed the tears fighting to surface.

“I don’t need your apology!” Jack snapped gruffly as he snatched the helmet away. “I need you to keep your hands to yourself.”

Wheeling around Jack searched for Toshiko next. “You were supposed to be watching them! This isn’t a children’s museum where they can run around and play with all the exhibits!”

“I just came back down from the tourist office…” she started to defend herself until Jack cut her short, “And why did you go up there?”
Unfazed Toshiko continued, “where I picked up our food… as I was ordered to do. So you can shut up now, Jack! I'm not susceptible to your posturing!” Shooting a last dark look at him she pushed past Jack to go down another corridor.

Scowling darkly at Toshiko’s back first then at Andy, Jack pivoted on his heels and stormed off with the helmet, leaving the constables standing looking crestfallen.

tbc…
For a moment they just stood there, thunderstruck by Jack’s eruption.

Undecidedly Andy followed Toshiko with his eyes. Making up his mind he went after her. Once Gwen shook off her rigor she stomped up the stairs, marching to Jack’s office. Not bothering to stop and knock on the door she went straight in.

“What?” Jack barked before she could even open her mouth.

“You didn’t have to be so mean!” she blurted out. Her original plan, even if she had one, did not include subtle anyway.

“Nor did your partner have to be so stupid!” Jack growled. Glowering at her he straightened in his office chair and put his hands on the tabletop where the helmet sat to his left.

“He’s not stupid!” Gwen argued. “All this is new to us and…”

“And that’s why I told you not to touch anything!” the captain insisted. Then his stern features crumbled. Leaning back deeply he crossed his arms over his chest. He sighed. “What if that thing didn’t just remove all his hair?”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that he had no idea what he was tampering with. Along with his hair it could’ve taken his head.” Still Gwen looked sceptical, and ready to defend her partner. “Don’t you get it? When we find the stuff we have no idea what it is either, how it works, what it does, why it does it, or where it comes from. Most of these things were thrown at us by the Rift. Most of the time the one thing we do know is that they aren’t toys. If you forget that, if you handle them carelessly, people die!”

Now Gwen looked positively chastened.

“I didn’t realize…”

“That’s what orders are for.” Jack saw her jaw snap shut, but he also saw that it was still boiling inside of her. “I know what I’m doing, so it’s my responsibility to keep you safe, Gwen,” he said. “I appreciate your and Andy’s help, but I can’t forget to look out for you either.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t expect you to be sorry, Gwen. I expect you to respect my orders. I don’t give them without a reason.”

“Okay. I understand. And I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. But I was so angry at you for yelling at Andy. He was so shocked by losing his hair that…”

“Not shocked enough,” Jack interrupted her.

“Sorry, Jack, but isn’t that a bit drastic?
If she says sorry just one more time… Jack thought and tried to come up with something less dramatic than putting her through the same Bracosian ritualistic depilation that Andy inflicted on himself.

Slowly he shook his head.

“We all make mistakes. Make sure you learn from it.”

Gwen stood in front of his desk and stared at the tips of her trainers.

“Let’s have dinner,” Jack said, getting to his feet and coming round the desk. “We don’t know when we’ll have to leave again, so we should eat when we get the opportunity. Like now.” He swaggered out of his office and down the walkway, satisfied that the matter was closed. “This takeaway place that we use has the most fantastic spring rolls,” he said. “I’ve been trying to get their secret recipe for ages, but with no luck. I suppose I could always have my medical officer autopsy one, but that would be a gross misuse of funds, wouldn’t it?”

He was actually past Toshiko’s workstation before he realized that he hadn’t received a reply, nor did he hear another set of footsteps following along behind him. Stopping, he turned and saw that Gwen was still standing exactly where she had been when he left the office.

With a small groan, he turned around and went back to her. Standing beside her with his arms folded across his chest, he sighed and said, “Don’t tell me I’ve hurt your feelings, too.”

“Not especially,” Gwen said, still staring at her trainers. Then she turned her big, brown eyes on him and said, “But I do think you owe Andy an apology. You might have thought to give us that little safety lecture earlier instead of just saying, don’t touch anything like we were meddlesome children. The stuff was just lying about like discarded toys. In any normal setting, dangerous things would be properly put away. How was anyone who didn’t work here supposed to know any better?”

“You didn’t need to know better,” Jack told her brusquely. “You just needed to do what you were told. Now are you coming to eat or do I have to make that an order?” he growled, bending slightly forward towards her, quirking his brows, and a mischievous smirk tugging on the corners of his mouth.

Pressing her lips into a tight line, Gwen turned on her heel and preceded him out of the office, turning to the left when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

“PC Cooper!” Jack called after her and she changed her direction.

Down the corridor she entered a conference room, Jack right behind her. Toshiko and Andy already sat on opposite sides of the table and the computer expert was peeling open the plastic containers.

“Looks great,” Jack praised. “Thank you, Tosh.” He took his place at the head of the table and Toshiko passed him a set of chopsticks.

Gwen sat down beside Andy. Looking at him was kind of strange. Without any facial hair he offered a rather scary sight. Then she accepted chopsticks from Toshiko, too, and took one of the boxes.

“Looks good,” she mused as she stuck her chopsticks in the food and tried to pick something up with them. She only kind of succeeded. If she continued like that, she would still be sitting there the next morning. In the middle of the table she spotted three forks, too, but she felt too proud to use one. So she kept fighting with her chopsticks.
Andy did not have such problems. His lack of appetite had other reasons.

“You should eat, Andy,” Jack told him as he put his own chopsticks down to grab a fork. He could handle the Asian cutlery well enough, but he could not bear the sight of the struggling police woman. Still he kept his attention on Andy, saying, “You don’t know when you’ll get the next meal.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“If it’s because of me… I won’t take anything back.” Jack stuffed a forkful of meat and vegetable into his mouth. Chewing, he continued, “Look… I know I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that…” he swallowed, “but that doesn’t change the facts. I just really need you to understand that the things you see around here are dangerous. I don’t want to have to cover up the fact that your head exploded while you were playing Darth Vader with a piece of alien tech.”

“It didn’t explode,” Andy grumbled.

“No, it didn’t…” Jack paused, “but it could have. And be assured, if I have to, I promise you I will think of something even more embarrassing for the cover story. Got it?”

“Yeah.”

“Now enjoy your meal.”

Eagerly they all dug into their food.

xXx

London

Lieutenant Myles and a couple of his men escorted the Torchwood SUV to Canary Wharf. The complex was built between the two parts of the West India Millwall Docks on Isle of Dogs. Right now they drove through the traffic circle of Westferry Road and into West India Avenue. Following North Collonade they reached the plaza beside Canary Wharf Tower. When they arrived they saw jeeps, some bearing the insignia of UNIT, and people rigging up tents on the lawn. Flood lights illuminated the plaza.

“You blokes stay here and keep an eye on these people,” Owen said, nodding at the civilians gathering in front of the barriers around the plaza and relishing the opportunity to give the soldiers orders. “If any of them try to enter the building, or even the plaza, I expect you to be just as obstructive as you were with us back at the bridge, got it?”

Lieutenant Myles’s expression was rebellious, but he had caught enough hell from his captain to know he was expected to cooperate fully. “Yes, sir.”

“Right, then,” Owen said. “Don’t let anyone in without authorization from me or her.” He pointed to himself and Suzie in turn and then said, “We’ll need one of your radios to keep in contact.”

Grudgingly, Myles handed over his own radio.

“Thank you,” Owen said so politely that he knew the lieutenant wanted to slug him. Then he and
Suzie shoved one of the fences aside to slip through the gap and pushed it back into position. They let their gazes wander over the plaza before Suzie started for the biggest tent that stood beside a large sculpture.

“Should we start with that spaceship?” Owen joked wryly as he took in the shape of the sculpture. It looked indeed like a flying saucer. At least as much as UFOs were supposed to look like according to common belief.

“Go ahead,” Suzie suggested. “For all we know, you might find the elusive Grays inside.”

Owen’s sole answer was a snort.

They had reached the tent, and before they entered Suzie shot a look at Owen that reminded the doctor clearly of who was in charge. The Unified Intelligence Taskforce was a military organisation with the according structure. When they approached the officer in charge they should do it in an unmistakable way. So Suzie firmly told the sergeant who had asked them to stop and identify themselves, “We’re Torchwood. We need to see the officer in charge.”

“That would be Colonel Mace,” the sergeant said. “I’ll let him know that you’re here.”

“That won’t be necessary, sergeant,” Suzie said. “We’ll find him ourselves.”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” the sergeant said as he moved to block her way and raised his rifle to hold it across her chest, “but the colonel is busy at the moment.”

“I’m sure he is,” Suzie responded a bit sarcastically, “but as this is primarily Torchwood business, I am sure he would welcome the interruption.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but…”

“That’s Agent,” Suzie interjected.

“My orders are…”

“…not applying to us,” Suzie cut in. “We’re outside your jurisdiction. Now stand down, sergeant.”

“Yes, ma’am agent,” the sergeant saluted and pulled aside the tent flap.

Suzie smiled sweetly. “Thank you, sergeant.” Casting a glance at Owen she said, “Doctor?”

“After you,” Owen replied with mock gallantry.

Colonel Mace was easy to spot. Standing with his back to them he was talking loudly into the phone and gesticulating wildly. “But, ma’am! Bloody Torchwood created this mess, and none of them seems to be available now. How can we trust them to clean it up? … I know that, ma’am, but shouldn’t we seize this opportunity to find out just what they were about in there? … Harkness? That arrogant bastard is the worst of the lot!”

Now that was something Owen and Suzie could dispute, and from the look of him, Owen was just about to do so with his fists, when Suzie put a hand on his shoulder. “Later,” she mouthed.
As it turned out, Owen would not have to address Mace’s spiteful accusation. Before he could question Suzie’s judgement, Mace jumped and held the phone away from his ear as the now male voice on the other end began shouting quite loudly. The words were not clear, but the tone was unmistakable, and even if they had not heard it, Mace’s subdued and contrite, “Yes, sir. Understood, sir,” would have revealed the nature of the other party’s comments.

Mace had clearly waited for the other side to hang up as he threw down his cell phone with such force that it shattered and he cursed long and fervently about, “Bloody, bloody, bloody, bloody Torchwood!”

Turning he finally caught sight of the two unexpected visitors in his tent. He probably was about to bark a fierce “Who are you?” when he thought better of it and several emotions including recognition, rage, and mortification flitted across his features before he finally settled on a mask of cool, calm, professionalism.

“Agent Costello,” Colonel Mace greeted, offering his hand.

“Sir,” Suzie replied, shaking his hand firmly.

“Doctor Harper,” the dark haired man in his late forties turned to Owen.

“Colonel,” Owen greeted with a cheeky grind and a grip that was deliberately firmer than it needed to be. “We’re from bloody Torchwood, Cardiff, and I’m sure Captain Harkness will be most gratified to know you take such a keen interest in him.”

“Ah, yes,” Mace covered smoothly. “Captain Harkness already informed us of your imminent arrival. He let me know that you’ll support us.”

“Funny,” Owen replied with a bemused smile, “I would have assumed that was UNIT Central Control on the phone calling to tell you that you will be supporting us. Canary Wharf is a Torchwood facility after all and falls under our jurisdiction.”

A vein in Mace’s head throbbed. “We’ll do what we can.”

“And we’re most grateful for your assistance,” Suzie placated him while shooting Owen a death glare. They should not agitate the colonel too much. They could not deal with the clean up mission without UNIT’s support and they knew it. “Do you already have a team in the tower? Do you have information about the casualties?”

“Not yet, Agent Costello. We’re about to go in.”

Not hesitating for a second Suzie insisted, “In that case we will join them.”

“You could go with Lieutenant Spader’s team, and you, Dr. Harper, with the team of Lieutenant Anderson.”

“All right, Colonel Mace,” Suzie said. “We should start as soon as possible.”

“As I said, we’re about to go in.” With that he turned to the Sergeant by the entrance. “Sergeant Tapping, escort them to the assembly point. The teams should start with the recon as soon as they’re ready.”

“Yes, Sir,” Sergeant Tapping saluted, pivoting on his heels and leaving the tent, trusting Suzie and Owen to follow in his wake.
Eager to finally have something useful to do they went after him. Outside they met lieutenant Myles. At once he was by Owen’s side again, walking along with them toward the assembly point.

“Lieutenant,” Owen told him. “We’re going into the Tower with two of the UNIT teams. Our order stands: You won’t let anyone in without our authorization.”

“Anyone?”

“Anyone.”


Inwardly Owen smirked, content that their organization’s connections paved the way for them successfully. Now he was looking forward to getting into the building. He was tired and needed something to do. If he had to stay awake he was rather looking forward to a search and rescue mission.

xXx

Cardiff

“Actually… after all we’ve seen today… I should’ve used my brain,” Andy murmured between two bites of his spring roll. “It was really stupid to… play around with your stuff.”

Jack looked up from his meal to fixate Andy with his intense gaze.

“Well, I’m pretty sure you won’t make the same mistake twice.”

Toshiko chuckled and Jack’s gaze drifted over to her. His stern expression changed to a smile.

“No, he has only repeated one that was already made,” Toshiko giggled behind her hand.

The police constables exchanged a quick and astonished look.

“Yeah,” Jack mused, starting to chuckle, too. Then he and Toshiko looked at Andy again and both snorted with laughter at their memory.

“He looked too funny,” Jack gasped with laughter.

“He didn’t think it was that funny.”

“No, he didn’t, but it was.”

“You wouldn’t find it funny if it happened to you either.”

“Yeah, Tosh, but it didn’t happen to me,” Jack’s cheeky smirk declared that he was of the opinion that it could never happen to him.

Left in their dust Gwen and Andy just could guess what they were talking about. Just one thing was sure, the two were enjoying themselves splendidly… at someone else’s expense.
“One day something like that will happen to you and we’ll be there to witness it,” Toshiko challenged the captain.

If possible Jack’s smirk grew even wider, hiding successfully memories of similarly embarrassing situations he would never tell his team about, because they had happened a long time ago in the future.

“Who was the unlucky guy?” Andy demanded to know.

“Who tested the Bracosian depilation device?” Jack snickered. “It happened to Owen.”

“Who’s Owen?” Gwen asked.

“Our medical officer,” Jack managed to get out between renewed snorts of laughter. Gasping he tried to catch enough breath to tell them more. “He did everything right, checked for life signs, scanned for radiation, made sure that it’s not connected to a power source, searched for any controls, well, he did everything by the book…”

“Until he put the thing on his head,” Toshiko finished, still chuckling. “He didn’t want to come out of his autopsy bay for days.”

“You called it a Bracosian depilation device,” Gwen said. “So you know where it comes from and why it was made?”

“Yep,” Jack confirmed. “Toshiko has been able to translate the engraving.”

“Too bad for Owen that I only began after he lost his hair,” Toshiko chuckled. Slowly she calmed down again and she turned back to her food.

“Did it take long to grow back? His hair?” Andy asked worriedly.

“I think it grew at normal growth rate,” Toshiko mused.

The constable nodded slowly. “Just wanted to know.”

“Oh, all this reminds me of another episode,” Jack said, pushing his food aside. “It was kind of tragic, too. Some time before I was in charge. Ashleigh had a crush on our former leader, Alex. The problem was that he never really noticed her. Oh, he cherished her skills, but he never recognized her as a woman. One thing she knew for sure was that he preferred blondes, always blondes. Alex never dated women with black, brown, or red hair. Only blondes.”

“I have a suspicion where this will be going,” Gwen said.

“So do I,” Andy agreed.

“Emma wanted to help her. She knew that Ashleigh didn’t want to bleach her long hair just for the vague chance of dinner with Alex. So Emma developed something that was supposed to make her blonde for only about twelve hours, using synthetic hormonal analogues of a chameleonic species that can change their hair colour up to twenty times a minute as part of their courtship ritual.”

Jack grimaced with the memory.

“Well, Ashleigh was delighted and asked Emma to help her wash her hair. They then put…” He laughed, and ruffling his own hair he continued, “They put the newly developed shampoo and… conditioner on her hair and waited.”
Curiously Toshiko, Gwen, and Andy waited for their captain to continue his tale.

“When they first checked on Ashleigh’s hair it all looked fine…” he made an appreciative gesture, “and then she went to dinner with Alex.”


“While they ate Alex noticed that her hair seemed to darken again. He teased her with it and she fled to the restrooms… where she got a shock. Her hair became green.”

They all laughed at the incredulous look Jack produced to accompany his words.

“Ashleigh panicked. It’s not unusual for hair treatments to turn green if they’re not applied properly, and that was what she thought had happened. But it wasn’t. Her hair turned a so shockingly bright green, like the first fresh grass in spring, that she looked like a clown. So she fled home, but when she woke up the next morning she got the next shock!”

“What happened, Jack?” Toshiko asked.

“Yeah, Jack!” Gwen pushed. “Tell us! Come on!”

“Well, her hair was pink.”

“Pink?!” Gwen gasped.

“Yep.” Jack smirked mischievously. “A delicate, pale carnation pink. By noon it was blue and by evening it was orange. The next morning it was turquoise… and so she continued to come to work with a bun in all colours of the rainbow for over three weeks.”

“The poor woman.”

“The effect lessened?”

“Yes,” Jack confirmed, still chuckling.

“Thank God.”

“Unfortunately it lessened,” Jack mused. “I really liked it.”

“Jack!”

Shrill beeps interrupted their banter. Toshiko quickly started the computer and monitor in the conference room and brought up what the alert was about. Even though they had seen quite a lot that day Gwen and Andy were astonished by how fast the equipment worked. But in an organization that dealt with aliens and alien technology it certainly was natural to have gear that was way ahead of police standard.

“Weevil,” Jack stated. “Just one?”

“Looks like it.”

“Okay. I can deal with it on my own,” Jack declared. Then he turned to the constables, “You two will go down to the staff quarters and have a nap.”

“We’re supposed to sleep? Now?” Gwen asked, surprised.
“Yeah. Because it’s quite possible that we’ll have to go out there again tonight and I want you to be as rested as possible. So off you go and sleep.”

“You’re kidding,” Andy said.

Tilting his head Jack threw a lopsided grin at him.

“Okay, okay… we’ll go.”

“Tosh?” Jack turned to the computer expert. “You’ll direct me to the target.”

“Sure, Jack,” she confirmed and hurried out to her workstation, while Jack continued towards the cog door and out of the Hub.

xXx

London

The teams had entered the building about five minutes ago and Colonel Mace was following the mission over the radio. While the basement had been vacated the teams found bodies on the first storey. As the first ten floors had been a cover the employees working there were as utterly unprepared for the ghosts turning into Cybermen as mostly everyone else had been. Everyone who could not run was either killed or taken to be upgraded. That was how Mace imagined the situation inside the tower while the Cybermen had been there.

Right then Lieutenant Spader reported four dead in the hallway they were passing.

Mace sighed.

Those won’t be the last ones. Just how many more will there be? How many employees did Torchwood have? How many people worked for the cover business? Did Torchwood fight or were they overrun by the invaders? What will the teams find? What else inside the tower has the potential to be dangerous?

His attention was drawn back to the radio reports when he heard Lieutenant Spader’s voice, “I wonder if they worked here. Who were they? Did they have family?”

“Radio discipline, Lieutenant,” Mace told her.

“Yes, sir.”

“They’ll be identified,” he heard Dr. Harper grumble next, and add with surprising certainty, “We will identify them.”

“Dr. Harper. Please respect the radio discipline, too,” Colonel Mace reminded him.

Then some clatter and murmuring came out of the speakers. The UNIT leader did not follow every word that was spoken until one message raised his interest. He decided to follow up for himself. Leaving behind the safety of the mobile headquarters, he leapt out and approached the entrance, only to be confronted by an Army Lieutenant.
“You may not pass, sir,” the soldier holding it said as sternly as he could.

“You do realise that I outrank you, don’t you, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir,” Myles said nervously. “But my orders come from Major General Ramsey, and they are to follow Agent Costello and Dr. Harper’s orders, sir, and Doctor Harper has ordered me not to let anyone pass without authorization from him or Agent Costello.”

“Harper!” Colonel Mace barked addressing the Major who still hovered at his elbow. “That weasely little bastard!” I knew I shouldn’t have bought into that bollocks!”

Turning to Myles again, he said, “You get on your radio, Lieutenant, and get Dr. Harper’s authorization, now!” His tone was enough to suggest that Lieutenant Myles was taking his career into his hands at that moment. So the soldier took a few steps aside as he got on the radio to contact Owen. After a short conversation he returned to Colonel Mace.

“Dr. Harper assured me that you will be allowed in once the building has been secured and determined safe.”

Colonel Mace’s features hardened as he tried to reign in his growing agitation. “I’ve had enough of this poppycock!” he grumbled. “I am not going to stand around with my thumb up my arse waiting for some snot-nosed Torchwood medic to give me permission to do my job. Stand aside, Lieutenant!”

Myles was torn. He did not like Torchwood anymore than he cared for UNIT, and he was still pissed off about Dr. Harper’s smug sarcasm. Obeying Colonel Mace meant disobeying Major General Ramsey, but the army valued officers who could make good field decisions. On the other hand, there was nothing he could see about the present situation that required immediate action, but if he angered the colonel enough, it could mean the end of his future in the army. There was one thing he did know. He could tell from the radio chatter that Dr. Harper and Ms. Costello felt as much compassion for the dead as they felt urgency to find whatever they sought in there. While Myles felt that the Torchwood agents were genuinely interested in clearing the situation up and restoring the integrity of the tower, he suspected that Mace’s only interest was getting his hands on whatever technology his soldiers discovered.

Lieutenant Myles made a command decision.

“I’m sorry, Colonel,” he said as he turned his body to fully block the door and brought his rifle over his shoulder to hold it casually in his hands. “My orders from Major General Ramsey are to follow Dr. Harper and Ms. Costello’s orders as if they were the General’s own. If you have a problem with that, you need to take it up with him, sir. I cannot… I will not let you pass.”

And so Colonel Mace saw himself confronted with the slightly shivering yet unmoveable form of Lieutenant Myles who adjusted his rifle, ready to bring it up. He scowled deeply… and reached for his mobile phone to call the army headquarters and talk with Major General Ramsey. It would be silly to think that he might not succeed in convincing Myles’s superior to let him in.

xXx

Torchwood Tower
conversion chamber

Waking up was a shock for Ianto, as much as realizing that he had been asleep at all. One moment
he had been following a train of thought and in the next he was unconscious.

That was frightening.

Even more scaring was the sight that met him when he opened his eyes. Staring directly at the
instruments of the conversion unit made his heart beat faster at once and chills ran down his spine.
Forcing himself to take slow and deep breaths he tried to slow down his pulse. Unwilling to bear the
sight above he closed his eyes again.

There was nothing he could do but lie and wait for whatever might come anyway.

Ianto’s greatest fear was that whatever would be the power coming back online.

Right now this fear tried to overwhelm him, constricting his insides and cording up his throat, and
he was about to call out for his companion when he remembered that she was gone. Since his
promise to find and contact her mother he had not heard anything from her. Virginia was dead.
Nothing would bring her back.

His heart ached.

Literally.

To cap it off there was the oppressive silence. It left too much room for imagination. Were there
footsteps between the bings of the elevator? Was that a creak of metal or a hydraulic hiss? Did the
curtains rustle because of a breeze or because something moved between them?

Stop thinking like that! Ianto ordered himself. You’re going to send yourself into a panic attack if
this isn’t one already. Where does a scare end and a panic attack start? Does a rumbling stomach
count? Psychosomatic stomach ache? Maybe you’re just hungry. Guess a real panic attack would
be worse. Don’t want to experience one, though. So stop thinking. Just breathe!

Easier said than done.

As if that was not enough his nose was assaulted by insulting smells, urine and blood as well as
burned plastic and flesh competing to be the worst. Picturing the sources of the various stenches gave
Ianto the creeps. Surrounded by debris and corpses he lay in the battle field.

“Bloody Hartman!” he growled and was shocked by how hoarse he sounded.

As his mouth and throat were dry Ianto yearned for some water, but neither could he help himself
nor was anybody there to help him.

Then a terrifying thought hit him.

What if I’m really the only survivor? What if there are no search and rescue teams anymore? I’m
stuck in here! There’s no way for me to tell what happened during the fight! The whole city could be
destroyed! Hell, those ghosts were all over the planet, so there were Cybermen all over the planet.
They wanted to turn us into them! And then those other things… they were fighting. Everything could
be destroyed, the whole planet. Everyone could be dead.
Except me.

That was a truly horrifying idea.

Wait. There was the couple. They said they’d get help. Though, if everyone else is dead there won’t be anyone they can send to help. Hell, with all the personnel gone and the power lost Torchwood Tower is a dangerous place. Maybe they won’t even make it outside. They could die on their way downstairs.

To keep from being consumed by those terrifying thoughts Ianto tried to empty his mind. He imagined a wide pasture and clear blue sky, grass swaying in a gentle breeze that also washed over his skin. A flock of birds sailed across the sky to alight in a big tree. Deer were crossing the glade and butterflies tumbling over the flowers in the meadow.

And suddenly Cybermen were marching through the pasture, firing lasers at oversized pepper shakers.

Ianto gasped.

Stop! No! Stop it! Get back to the peaceful countryside!

Once more concentrating on his breathing he tried to collect himself. It was far from easy. In his mind’s eye Ianto saw the strange metal cone stand in front of the conversion unit.

At that moment Ianto had thought he was dead. The alien had been about to fire when it suddenly was… yeah what? Pulled backwards. Then another flew right through the room. Since then Ianto had neither seen one of those pepper shakers nor a Cyberman. He had no idea where they came from, but he had a possible explanation for their disappearance.

The Doctor.

Not long before the Cybermen came the Doctor arrived. The mysterious alien. Torchwood was founded to protect the Earth against him. The man who’s said to have special powers. Someone who could possibly find a way to fight and destroy the invaders.

The growling of his stomach interrupted Ianto’s musing.

How long has it been since I ate the last time? That was lunch…

It was morning now. Or maybe still night. Ianto could not tell. All he could tell was that he was pretty hungry.

But I won’t get anything to eat, he realized. No food, no drink, no anything. I can’t even move in this bloody thing!

He groaned.

His muscles ached as he subconsciously strained against the clamps that held him in the conversion unit.

Trying to suppress his impulse to move was hard. In vain Ianto fought against the urge. He tried to remember the relaxation techniques he had seen Lisa use. Actually he was pretty tired, but he was also very wound up, too agitated to find rest.

Even as Ianto still thought hard about how to adjust to his predicament his exhaustion made him
drift off to sleep.

tbc…
Of Men and Cybermen

Chapter Summary

Entering Torchwood Tower, Owen and the UNIT team discover a survivor.

Cardiff

Two constables, curious and high on adrenalin, simply could not obey to the order to go to bed but followed Toshiko to her workstation. With awe they watched her fingers fly over her keyboard.

“Is this the police network?” Gwen suddenly blurted out when she spotted familiar headings on one of the monitors.

“Yes,” Toshiko confirmed.

“You shouldn’t have that,” Gwen said. “And you’re in the city’s CCTV, too.”

“Yes.”

“You shouldn’t have that either,” Gwen complained.

All she earned from Toshiko was a sour side glance.

“You know, Gwen,” Andy murmured as he leaned over to her. “I don’t think we’re supposed to know about that.”

“But…” The look he threw at her made her trail off, alarming her about how much classified information they had gathered since they started to work for Jack. “They can’t do anything!” she gasped, horrified with sudden realization. “We’re police constables.”

Toshiko gave a small snort of laughter, but otherwise seemed oblivious to their conversation.

“I don’t think that would stop them,” Andy said, turning to watch the monitors again. “And now that I know what Torchwood does, I’d sooner give them all the support they need than try to block their access to anything.”

Toshiko nodded and smiled slightly as she concentrated on her task at hand. Tapping on her ear piece she activated the communication and said, “Jack, general direction still is the same. It hasn’t moved much yet.”

“Any other activity?” Jack’s voice sounded out of the speakers.

“Nope.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, Jack, I’m sure!” Toshiko insisted with just a little impatience in her voice.
“Okay.”

Throwing a dark glance at the constables this time, Toshiko tilted her head toward the corridor to the staff quarters.

“Why do you ask, Jack? Are you bored with only one Weevil?” she teased over comm.

“No,” he disavowed not really convincingly. “Are you?”

“Nope.”

“We do have activity at the Hub, though, right?” Jack chuckled.

“Yes.”

“Off to bed, you two,” Jack ordered, unable to keep his amusement out of his tone. “After what you did tonight you should be exhausted. Now go!”

Gwen and Andy just exchanged an indignant look.

“Don’t pout, kids!” Jack said. “Off you go!”

Surprised, both constables searched for a webcam but could not spot one. How did Jack know…?

“I’m counting to three,” Jack growled. “One, two…”

Even though they could not tell if they were being watched, Gwen and Andy reluctantly turned and marched off toward the hallway. At the entrance they stopped and looked back to where the Japanese computer expert was working.

Never taking her gaze off her monitors, Toshiko clicked her fingers and pointed down the corridor, making unmistakably clear what they were expected to do.

Sighing, the constables finally complied.

A moment later, Jack asked over comm., “Are they gone now?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

After a short pause, Toshiko thoughtfully asked, “Jack? Why are they still here?”

“They’re useful. Don’t you agree?”

“I agree. I just didn’t think you’d want to work with them for so long.”

“Suzie and Owen will need some time in London. Do you want to deal with the volatile Rift with just the two of us?”

Toshiko took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. She knew Jack was right. Sometimes it was hard enough to deal with what the Rift threw at them with just four people, and right now Jack was alone out there.

“I guess it doesn’t matter when they’re retconned,” she finally conceded.

“Exactly,” Jack said. “So, where’s that weevil?”
“About two hundred yards ahead, then turn right,” she explained, pulling up CCTV of the street on her screen. “It’s still alone and not very active.”

“Okay.”

Down in the corridor Andy walked back toward the central Hub.

“Gwen, come,” he said, taking his partner by the arm and pulling her away from the archway where she was eavesdropping.

“Andy?” she said, confused. “What’s retconning?”

xXx

London

Even though he was tired, adrenalin shot into Owen’s system when they finally entered Torchwood Tower. His team under the command of Lieutenant Deacon Anderson covered the north side of the floor, the squad led by Lieutenant Spader took the south side.

On his hip, Owen sensed the weight of his gun. True, he did not really know what he expected to find, but having his weapon was reassuring, even though it would not be of any use against a Cyberman if one had gotten away.

Having the other team members close by was a good feeling, too. Each of the two teams consisted of six men and women, with the addition of the Torchwood field operatives. They all carried guns, some of them machine guns and one a weapon that Owen was told was a kinelectric waveform disruptor.

In the dark building they found their way with the help of torches.

Taking the lead with raised weapons, two soldiers cleared their path up the stairwell to the first floor.

“We have bodies here,” one of the soldiers said.

“Greyhound Two to Trap One. I count four dead in this hall,” Lieutenant Spader reported.

“Greyhound One to Trap One. We have six more on the north side,” Lieutenant Anderson replied, counting the corpses in front of the team.

Slowly the group stalked forward, Owen stopping beside each body to check for life signs, but one after the other he had to declare them dead. The ray of his torch fell into a room and he went inside.

“Two in here,” he said. “They’re dead.” He paused. “Looks like they were electrocuted.”

“Greyhound One to Trap One. Dr. Harper found two more bodies. Apparently electrocuted.”

“What makes you so sure, Doctor?” Colonel Mace wanted to know.
Taking the radio that Lieutenant Anderson held out to him Owen said, “Burn marks on his neck, plus I have seen the Cybermen kill that way, grab the victim and fry the poor bastard with an electric bolt.”

Even though his words showed a certain sarcasm, there was a barely noticeable shiver in his voice that gave away that he cared despite his tough demeanour.

Sergeant Beatty also entered the room. Paling vaguely at what he spotted as he shone his torch, he said, “Bugger. I bet they’re not the last ones we’ll see.”

“Right.” Owen still squatted next to them. He knew how they died. He knew they had no chance at all. He knew how lucky he himself had been when he hit the joint of the Cyberman’s arm with the Stryker saw…

“Hope you put up a good fight,” Owen said, slightly choked up. “I’m sorry.” Too late he realized that it went over the radio.

On the Tower’s south side Suzie harboured similar thoughts. Even though she often saw bodies of all kinds in her line of work, she would never get used to it. She always felt grief. She had sworn to herself to quit the job when she did not feel it anymore.

“I wonder if they worked here,” Lieutenant Spader cut in. “Who were they? Did they have family?”

“Radio discipline, Lieutenant,” Mace’s stern voice crackled out of the radio.

For a moment the radio was silent. They all thought the same, no one felt like saying anything about it.

“They’ll be identified,” Owen grumbled back with unexpected ferocity.

“Are you sure?” Sergeant Beatty tried to force him to elaborate. “Can we really identify each and every one of them?”

“We will,” the young doctor said with surprising certainty.

“Dr. Harper. Please respect the radio discipline, too,” Colonel Mace reminded him.

“Owen,” Suzie’s voice wavered slightly when she called out for her partner, even this one word giving away her grief and momentary discouragement.

“We’ll try everything we can,” the medic assured her grimly. “We owe it to them!”

Brusquely he got up and turned to the door to rejoin the others. With fresh determination they advanced to the next staircase from where they entered the next storey. Every hall, every room they searched brought renewed disillusionment. The number of bodies was staggering. They had reached the fourth floor when sergeant Beatty turned to the medic to ask, “Dr. Harper, how many employees did Torchwood have?”

Giving himself a mental kick in the butt, Owen had to admit that he could not answer the question. In the end he settled on, “I never had much to do with administration.”

Nodding, the sergeant went on, shining into a room to their right. The light brushed over a body and Owen went to check for life signs. Unfortunately there was nothing he could do for the woman. Heaving a sigh, Owen straightened back up and left the office. A glance to his watch told him that it
was almost half past midnight. A yawn escaped him.

“Tired?” sergeant Beatty teased.

Owen snorted. “I feel like I’ve been awake for days now, but it was only about five hours ago that the Cybermen were sent to hell.”

“Yeah…” The sergeant nodded in confirmation. “How fierce was the attack in Cardiff?”

“We fought,” Owen shrugged. “Actually I don’t think we got to see much of the invaders before they took flight.”

“I see…”

Aside from them only one soldier was in the hall. Owen just wanted to ask about the others’ whereabouts when Lieutenant Anderson called out for him, “Dr. Harper! Come over here!”

Owen started in the direction of their leader’s voice and rather skidded around the next corner where he came to an abrupt halt.

Right in front of them, in the middle of the hallway, stood a Cyberman.

This one was definitely not dead.

If it was dead, why would it direct a gun on them?

And it was a big laser gun.

“What do we do now?” Lieutenant Anderson wanted to know.

“I have no idea,” Owen had to admit. “I don’t know why we’re not dead yet either.”

“Porter,” Anderson called one of the privates. When he stepped up to his commanding officer’s side and saw himself confronted with the Cyberman he raised his energy weapon.

Still something was strange about the Cyberman.

But what was it?

Then Owen realized it!

The Cyberman seemed to shake. Since when did Cybermen shake?

Then it lowered its gun.

In its characteristic synthesized voice it began to mutter all over again:

“I did my duty for Queen and Country. I did my duty for Queen and Country. I did my duty for Queen and Country…”

xXx

Cardiff
About one hour after tackling the weevil, Jack returned to the Hub where he found Toshiko on the
couch in the rec area behind the workstations. Seeing that she was fast asleep, Jack refrained from
waking her as everything appeared to be calm right now, but Toshiko seemed to sense his presence
and stirred. Blinking a few times she propped herself up on an elbow and rubbed at her eyes.
Wriggling up to a sitting position, she sank against the back rest.

When she finally looked at the captain, she exclaimed anxiously, “Jack! What happened to you?”

Judging by his battered appearance, her fear was justified. While his coat was unscathed his shirt
and jacket were torn and bloodied. Despite the lack of obvious injuries, his hair was caked with dry
blood as well.

“The weevil,” he murmured. “It got away.”

“What? How?” Toshiko gasped in surprise and her forehead creased with a frown. “You said it
was secured. You were on your way back.”

“I know, Tosh. I wouldn’t have told you to take a break if I had thought I couldn’t handle it.”

The couch shuddered when Jack slumped down beside her. Leaning back, he rested his head
against the wall. Toshiko thought that he looked exhausted. Usually, he burst with energy and seeing
him now like that made their tough captain appear more human. She was tempted to reach out for
him, but hesitated.

“It… suddenly it struggled in the trunk,” Jack said, staring at the ceiling. “They are strong those
weevils. I thought it would tear the car apart, so I stopped to sedate it again.”

“And?” Toshiko pushed when he paused.

“It was wide awake,” Jack gasped. “Actually it was hyper active. What I gave it to tranquilize it had
knocked it out in seconds, but when the lid opened it jumped out like a jack-in-the-box.”

“It should’ve been out for at least an hour!” Toshiko gaped at him. “What did it do?” she asked,
feeling guilty for not having hung around another minute or two, even though she could not have
done anything to help him.

Tiredly he turned his head to face her. His blue eyes shone with unsuccessfully concealed pain.

“It lunged at me, clawed at me.” Sighing, he looked back up at the ceiling again. “I simply didn’t
expect it, so it caught me by surprise.”

Suddenly realizing what she really was looking at, Toshiko blushed violently and sat up.

“Jack! Oh, my God, that’s your blood, isn’t it? Let me have a look at you!”

Hectically she reached for his shirt, opening the first three buttons before he could even think of
objecting. Then she jumped up, running down the stairs to the autopsy bay for a first aid kit. When
she came up again, she fell on her knees in front of Jack, throwing the kit on the couch beside him.
With shaking hands she reached up for him, but he gently but firmly took her wrists, stilling them.
Her dark eyes growing wide she looked up at him.

“I’m alright,” he said, his voice deep and calming.
“But, Jack! All this blood! Your shirt! It’s shredded to pieces! You…”

“Shhh,” he tried to soothe her, bringing her hands together and leaning forward to breathe a kiss on her clenched fists. “It’s alright. I’m not injured. It just tore the shirt apart. I hardly have a flesh wound.”

“But the blood…!”

“Is not mine,” he said gently.

With wildly beating heart she met him with disbelief, her dark eyes burning with compassion. She was mesmerized by his blue eyes which hovered just a few inches above her. A smile played around his lips, and Toshiko felt him caress the backs of her hands.

“Shhh, everything’s okay,” Jack murmured. “Calm down.”

“I am calm,” she said after a moment’s hesitation. “But… if it’s not your blood…”

“The weevil’s,” Jack said, the smile fading from his features. “I couldn’t let it get away. It was too dangerous.”

Toshiko was not astonished to see that Jack seemed to be troubled by his admission. She knew that he would have preferred to calm it down and return it to its pack, or whatever their groups were called. For a fleeting moment, sorrow clouded his face before it was gone again.

“I know you don’t like having to kill them,” she said. “But to have one take you by surprise on your own, you’re lucky to be alive.”

Jack frowned slightly, but then smiled at her. “Yes, I suppose I am.” His gaze turned inwards. “Now, are our guests in bed?” he asked, releasing his hold on her and getting up. He went to her workstation and pulled up the internal CCTV. “Hmmm, looks like that,” he mused, studying the grainy images. “I’m sorry that I disturbed you when I came back. You go, take a nap, too, Tosh.”

“But, Jack…”

“No, Tosh. You need your rest, too. I’ll come and get you if we get another rift alert.”

Sceptically, she looked him over.

“Okay,” she then conceded, still not fully convinced that he was as well as he claimed to be.

“Sleep well,” Jack said and went for his office.

“Thanks,” she replied automatically. “You, too.”

Following him with her eyes, she noticed that he walked slightly slumped. He seemed to be in pain. Just why did he not tell her the truth? Did he think that she would not understand? Working for him, she had seen the most astonishing things. So why should she not believe him whatever it was?

Not for the first time, she was under the impression that he was hiding something from them. She got it each time she saw him wander off like that, as if he was in pain, physically and emotionally. Toshiko wished she could pull him out of his depression, but whenever he was in that mood he did not tolerate anyone near him unless they had to work.

Sighing, she decided that now was not the right time to approach him. She climbed up on the couch and settled down with her head resting on her arm as a pillow. Within seconds she fell asleep.
Hovering near the entrance to his office, Jack furtively watched her. On silent soles he stalked back to her and draped a warm blanket over her slender form. For another moment, he stood beside her, taking in her peaceful expression in sleep and the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. Favouring her with a grateful smile, Jack turned on his heels and retired back to his office.

xXx

London

Unsuccessfully, Colonel Mace had tried to get Torchwood’s order overridden, but the army did not seem to loathe Torchwood as much as UNIT, probably because they were not as closely related. Boiling with rage, he stuffed his mobile phone back in his jacket pocket. He contemplated just pushing the lieutenant aside and entering on his own authority when one of the privates approached the entrance from inside. He opened the door and stepped out.

“Colonel Mace, Sir,” he addressed his commanding officer. “Lieutenant Anderson and Dr. Harper asked me to accompany you to the fourth floor, Sir.”

“Thank you, Private,” Mace replied and started for the door. Passing Lieutenant Myles, he threw a dark glance at him. Then he went in, pausing in the foyer to let the soldier take the lead.

When they reached the fourth floor, Mace frowned at the bodies they were passing. He knew what to expect, but seeing the dead was different to hearing about them. Mace noticed that the private’s steps slowed before he rounded the next corner and wondered what was going on. The private stopped in front of an office, joining his colleagues, and nodded towards the door. Mace nodded back and went inside.

“Sir, we found a survivor,” Lieutenant Anderson told his commanding officer.

Mace followed his gaze and saw a Cyberman.

It was standing in a corner, unmoving, the dark eyes empty. It did not breathe. For all Mace could tell, it could also be dead.

“It is not dead,” Owen said as if he was reading the colonel’s mind.

“It had this gun when we stopped it,” Lieutenant Anderson said, producing the energy weapon.

“Actually it looked like it stopped because it recognized us,” Owen murmured. He was watching the Cyberman for any sign of a threat, but it just stood there, still as a statue. Nothing gave away what it thought… or if it thought at all. “It gave us the weapon voluntarily.”

“One of them is still alive,” Mace stated, looking it over. “Why did you want me to come here, Lieutenant?”

“I thought that you might be interested in it, Sir,” Anderson replied. “When we found it, it repeated the same words over and over again.”

“What words?”
“I did my duty for Queen and Country,” the Cyberman answered in Anderson’s stead, the light in its mouth flickering.

Mace’s features darkened. A chill ran down his spine and he suppressed a shudder. Sceptically he eyed the alien man from helmet bars to metal boots once again.

“Colonel Alan Mace,” the synthesized voice unexpectedly said.

Colonel Mace started, his eyes growing a little wider with surprise when he heard it use his first name in addition to his rank.

“Who are… um, were you?” he asked.

“Torchwood acquires… alien technology for the… benefit of the British Empire,” the Cyberman said. “I served my country. The sphere… the breach… valuable for the British Empire.”

*Oh, my God!* Mace was stunned. *That can’t be!*

“Director Hartman?”

A black drop came out of the Cyberman’s left eye and rolled down its silver cheek. From behind, Mace heard incredulous murmurs.

“That’s…” Mace could not believe it. Could it really be Yvonne Hartman? He knew it could be her, but was it her? Suddenly rage overwhelmed him and he thundered, “I must say that if you weren’t in that pitiful condition you should be arrested! Unfortunately gross negligence and stupidity are charges that can’t correspond with your crimes!”

_Yeah, Owen thought wryly. We should retcon her beyond good and evil. Does retcon even work on Cybermen? Could it be worse than being converted but conscious of who you were?*

Obviously the Cyberman had its own idea of what was appropriate punishment as it said, “Dead.”

“What?” Mace barked.

“Me… dead…”

Mace was not the only one who thought that the mind inside the Cyberman’s shell finally lost it.

“I did my duty for Queen and Country,” it chanted. “I did my duty for Queen and Country. I did my duty for Queen and Country…”

“Bring it away,” Mace ordered, though he thought that it might be better off if they killed it here and now.

_xXx_

_Torchwood Tower_

_conversion unit_
Along with waking up came the realization that he could not move and panic threatened to overwhelm Ianto. He felt his heartbeat accelerate and his breathing become more laboured. Trying to withstand it, he let out a deep and feral groan. As his muscles tensed he unintentionally strained against his bonds and a sharp pain shot down his neck.

“Aarghhhhhhhh.”

The clamps. They’re holding my head. Ugh, that hurts.

His best attempts to relax proved to be futile. Ianto’s shoulders and neck were sore and he dreaded the potential headache from the tension in his muscles.

Well, as long as it hurts I’m still alive.

According to that he was very much alive… and very hungry. His empty stomach churned.

Don’t think of food. Food currently is a bad idea.

Opening his eyes was a fight as his eyelids felt rather heavy, like when he was badly hungover. Seeing the threatening armature right above him, Ianto wondered why he even bothered. The view was not that great after all.

Even though the sight was not new, Ianto’s heart jumped into his throat again where it beat frantically. It took a few minutes of conscious breathing to make it settle back in his chest.

So far so good. I dare not let myself be consumed by panic.

Now that his mind had regained control, he became aware of more details of his predicament and memories returned, among them the reason why he was currently in this dreadful position. And with the recognition came the rage.

“Ruddy Hartman,” Ianto spat. “Got everyone here killed the arrogant bitch!”

Somewhere deep inside of him, his sense of duty and respect rebelled against the accusatory words.

She was our director. Our leader. We owed her respect…

Ianto tripped over that word and snorted a wry laugh.

“Respect? For what?” he raged at the vacated storey. “For her hubris and arrogance bringing on Earth’s destruction? For not being the least bit intimidated by her responsibilities? For treating it all like a children’s summer camp, really? For not showing any respect for the lives she endangered?”

Ianto had not felt good with his doubts. Obedience was so ingrained in him that it took a while before he followed his gut and began to try and get to the bottom of the rumours he heard and question the wisdom of pressing ahead with a project that resulted in ghosts appearing across the world. How often did he think about what was going on behind closed laboratory doors and what the management did not tell the lower ranks?

And Ianto was of lower rank. In the barely two years he had been working for Torchwood now, he had managed to get promoted to a Junior Researcher in Information Retrieval, but that was still quite low on the food chain. Too low to gain access to top secret information.

Which was why he had tried to manipulate his superior into questioning the experiments. Ianto knew that Doctor Markham liked him. Recently his comments about Ianto’s work implied that he
intended to suggest the young Welshman for another promotion.

*He did not really show it, but I heard about him having a soft spot for me. All those rumours were embarrassing. I was no better than any of the other researchers.*

Ianto sighed.

*I trusted Dr. Markham to consider the consequences and intervene if he found any cause for alarm. He probably told Captain Harkness what he had discovered for the same reasons that I prodded him to look into things. Even Dr. Markham was in no position to stop the experiments.*

Ianto stumbled over remembering Markham. Horrified, he pressed his eyes shut, but that did not shut out the flashbacks. Pictures of his supervisor shoving him and Lisa into the ventilation shaft and of his violent death had burnt themselves into Ianto’s memories and came back to haunt him now.

“Why? What the bloody hell was Hartman doing up there exactly?”

Ianto was not dumb.

Somewhere deep inside his mind stirred the answer to his questions. That the tower was built to reach the breach that appeared in the sky above London was an open secret at Torchwood One. The Institute had been founded to defend the British Empire from aliens and gain whatever technology they could get their hands on. Subsequently Hartman had tampered with the breach, disturbing time and space, and the Cybermen came out of the cracks she created by ramming a wedge into a hole instead of closing it for good.

Instead of achieving prosperity and wealth, the whole action had backfired and brought disaster and doom.

*What it brought was the end of the bloody world!* Ianto thought.

He moaned at the unfairness of it all. He was young, had barely had a chance to live, and now he was going to die here, alone, the last man on earth, trapped in a conversion unit. He did not deserve this. He deserved a future, a life! He deserved a chance to make a home and raise a family with the woman he loved.

Grief hit Ianto like a sucker punch when he remembered the reason that he had started to question Torchwood.

*Lisa.*

He sighed.

*I’m so sorry, Lisa. I did it for you. For us. For our joint future. I failed you. I failed Markham as well. What did he say? He called me strong and smart, and told me to find Captain Harkness.*

Ianto could sense himself blush.

*Looks like my manipulations weren’t as secretive as I thought. Obviously Markham knew all along that I harboured doubts about the directorate’s experiments and collected information.*

*But I guess Markham’s trust in me was unfounded. Didn’t he say that he thought I was the same? The same like him? Like Harkness? Whatever… I don’t think that I could be true to his words and make a difference.*
He laughed bitterly.

*Now look what kind of difference I’m making! Trapped in a ruddy conversion unit! That’s pretty helpful, yeah.*

Sighing, he tried to relax his muscles. Another cramp was the last thing he needed.

Still, Ianto had no idea what had happened beyond the conversion chambers. The pepper shaker flying past him had indicated that they and the Cybermen had disappeared, but beyond that he could only speculate.

That no one came to search the building drove him to the suggestion that no one was out there who could perform such an action.

That idea sent him into a new dimension of abandonment. The imagination of possibly being alone in London, maybe in the whole world, brought fresh tears to his eyes. They burnt as did his throat. Breathing became harder again.

*No, no, no! Don’t panic, Ianto Jones! Do not. Bloody. Panic!*

For the last couple of minutes, Ianto had been too preoccupied by his musings, but when he settled down now, forcing himself to breathe consciously, he heard low sounds.

His heart skipped a beat.

Straining his ears, he tried hard to hear better and distinguish them from the regular *bing, swish* and *plomp* of the elevator.

*Finally a search and rescue team? Firemen?*

Ianto did not dare to hope and stopped himself from calling out. The sounds had not been loud enough to identify them positively.

Then his heart jumped into his throat, this time with fear…

…at hearing the high whirring sound of cyber mechanics.

tbc…
As unlikely as it might appear to be, the Rift remained calm for now.

From time to time the computer registered a Rift spike, but nothing came through. So Jack leaned back in his chair and rested, too. Sleep, though, was unlikely to come to the captain.

His mind was too busy. Over and over again he recalled last day’s events, trying to figure out what exactly had happened.

And he felt terribly guilty for not having reacted sooner.

Why? Why didn’t I insist on examining the apparitions more thoroughly? I relied too much on the reports from Torchwood One. I should’ve been more suspicious. After all I know Hartman. She’s like all the other Torchwood bitches before her, starting with Alice Guppy. They all were arrogant and blinded by ambition.

Having been oblivious to the threat was unforgivable.

But that’s Torchwood. It gets under a person’s skin and makes them forget their ideals for the sake of the greater good.

Grief tightened his chest.

I've learned my lesson a long time ago. So long ago that I forgot about it when I needed it most. Even though I remember as clearly as if it was yesterday.

It was one of the many stories he would never tell anyone about. He was the man with the many secrets, the incredible knowledge and the mysterious past. With a stolen name and past he settled into a life that was not his own and tried to make the most of it, the most money. He was out for enough money or some leverage to go and restore his own life, but on that way he lost himself and stumbled into an existence he could enjoy for the time being, but in the end it turned out to be his doom as well as humanity’s.

At least it could have been if he wouldn’t have crossed my path. Mr. Spock. Bloody hell, that was a laugh in the 1960s when Star Trek ran.

Jack smiled to himself at the memory of Rose Tyler.

It’s funny that I never wasted a thought at why she was hanging from that barrage balloon. I just saw that excellent bottom and knew that I had to get her down from there. Even the assumption that she might be a time agent came later.

He chuckled.

She was so cute. I thought it would be her cover, but once I found out that they were just a couple more freelancers as she put it so nicely, I found it even more attractive.

And her companion! Wow! He was a class of his own!
If I would’ve known how right I was with that assessment…

He never uncovered the Doctor’s secrets, but that was not really necessary. Jack sensed the tragedy, the incredible loss the Time Lord had suffered, and understood it on an emotional level.

*Just like he understood me.*

Jack shuddered.

*How easy would it have been for him to turn his back on me and my stupid mistake and walk away, but he stayed. He stayed and set it right. He stayed and saved humankind.*

*He stayed and saved me. In more than just the literal way.*

Jack was infinitely grateful to the Time Lord. By a hair’s breadth his self-cleaning-con would have accidentally wiped out human life on earth and changed the future irreparably.

*If he wouldn’t have found out how to reverse the effect of the Chula-nanogenes… I don’t want to imagine what would have happened. I do know that that bomb would’ve killed me, though.*

A breath caught in his chest.

*Being with Rose and the Doctor was the happiest time I can remember.*

*I considered them family! Why did they leave me behind? I refuse to believe that it happened accidentally. But what was the reason? What turned me into this… abomination? What happened to me?*

His desperate attempt to intercept his friends resulted in him being stranded in Victorian times where destiny made him cross paths with Torchwood. Ever since his life had been interwoven with the Institute, for better or worse. He only became a full agent when former Cardiff leader Alex Hopkins, mired in depression and a dread of the future brought on by an alien locket, killed his team in a so-called act of mercy, passing the leadership of Torchwood Three on to Jack.

*I never wanted that responsibility, Jack thought ruefully. I didn’t know what to make of it. I had no idea how to give the place a purpose as Alex had asked me to do.*

He sighed.

*All I really knew was that I wouldn’t be able to make a difference as long as Cardiff depended on London. Severing the links was the only logical conclusion.*

*But now that’s backfired. Being cut off from internal information I had no chance to warn Hartman that she was tampering with earth’s existence as she just wouldn’t listen.*

He snorted a bitter laugh.

*She just didn’t listen. She knew she was playing with fire and I didn’t realize that it was way too late already to waste time doing our own researches.*

Rubbing the bridge of his nose Jack tried to focus again.

*Toshiko’s brilliant, but she can’t do the work of a whole team of scientists who needed months if not years to get to the point where they could manipulate the breach. My beloved Toshiko, finding you was like digging up the largest and finest diamond in the rough imaginable. You’re precious. So is Suzie… and Owen’s a challenge.*
Why don’t they call again? Must be because they’re busy. Maybe I should call. But then they might assume I don’t trust them with this mission.

It was hard. Sometimes, Jack still was not sure he was cut out to be a leader.

He spent the next couple of minutes shoving those thoughts around in his head. Finally he made up his mind and dialled Owen’s mobile but he only reached the mailbox. Refraining from leaving a message he tried to get contact to Suzie’s phone, but she did not answer either.

*Guess that answers my question.* Jack frowned. *I'll give them hell for deactivating both their phones. They could’ve let me know that they wouldn’t be available for a while.*

Jack snorted.

*If it wouldn’t have been for the Doctor none of us would be available, ever again. Once more he saved our planet and nobody will ever know about it.*

Jack did not have any doubt about the Doctor having interfered with Yvonne Hartman’s plans. The moment he had heard about the Time Lord’s arrival he knew that whatever was going on would hopefully turn out all right.

*Once more ironing out my mistakes. He snorted. He’s right to stay away from me. I can’t get anything right… as long as I’m not with him. I miss him.*

For a moment he had been tempted to simply jump into the next car available and go to London.

*Answers! This might have been my only chance to ask my questions…but he’s not one known for sticking around and he would have been long gone well before I could have got there. Violently Jack shook his head to chase away his thoughts. I miss the TARDIS. There was a time for daydreaming, but it was not now.*

*We were incredibly lucky to have survived the Cybermen. It could’ve turned out much worse. We were totally unprepared. I can’t let that happen again!*

In the end he knew that berating himself did not change what had happened.

*Let’s hope it’ll make me more alert the next time.*

Right now he was far from being vigilant.

*Let’s hope there won’t be a next time.*

His physical as well as emotional exhaustion finally showed and leaning deep in his chair he drifted off to sleep.

xXx

**London**

Asking for its death was the last coherent thing the Cyberman uttered. After that all it said was *I did*
my duty for Queen and Country over and over again.

Owen had watched how it was led away by two soldiers and wondered if it might not be better to grant it its wish. On the other hand he realized that it probably had important information. The question was if they could get it out of the damaged brain inside the metal hull.

As a doctor he knew how hard it was to approach trauma patients. It was more than likely that Hartman’s brain simply shut down. Endlessly repeating the phrase with which she had identified herself for her whole professional life was a clear sign for how far she had withdrawn.

“We should proceed to the next floor,” Lieutenant Anderson declared. “Dr. Harper, Sergeant Beatty.”

“Can I ask you something, Lieutenant?” Owen said.

“Sure, Dr. Harper.”

Something was odd about how the lieutenant addressed him by his academic title, but as Owen could not decide if Anderson mocked him or not he asked, “Why didn’t we check the basement first?”

For a moment Anderson looked thoughtful, then he glanced at Mace who nodded.

“Greyhound One to Greyhound Two,” Anderson called out for the second team on the radio.

“This is Greyhound Two,” Lieutenant Spader confirmed. “What’s up?”

“We need to check the basement, but our team’s two men short. We request support.”

“Let’s finish up here first. We’ll meet at staircase S2 on the ground floor in fifteen,” Spader suggested.

“Roger that, Greyhound Two. Meet you in fifteen. Over and out.”

“Private Porter,” Colonel Mace called.

“Yes, sir?”

“You’ll come with me, back to the command centre,” their commanding officer told him. “Lieutenant Anderson, you’ll keep me in the loop.”

“Of course, sir.”

So Mace left with the private while Anderson gathered his team to lead it downstairs and up the hall to meet Spader and her team at the south stairs.

Owen gripped his gun tighter as they stalked down into the basement. The beams of their torchlights did not reveal anything unusual. The halls were vacated. Everything lay silent. No bodies, no Cybermen, none of those other creatures that Jack had called Daleks when they were taking him to police headquarters before leaving for London. Owen had been driving and Jack had been sitting up front beside him, so the doctor had not been able to watch his boss as they talked; but in the few glances he did manage to cast Jack’s way, he thought Jack looked a bit green around the gills and ever so slightly terrified. There was no telling if he would ever get the chance to ask his boss why he was so afraid of a giant pepperpot, but he made a mental note of it in case the opportunity ever arose to inquire further.
Looking around Owen shone his torchlight over the doors to the lifts. He was not sure why he returned to the first one, but a moment later he realized that the door was distorted.

*What happened?* Owen wondered. *Did the lift crash?*

Hearing something clank inside Owen stepped forward and reached for the call button. It simply did not open, but that would not stop the Torchwood medic. Determined to get inside to see if they had perhaps found the first survivor he put his gun away and reached for the door to open it manually.

He groaned with the effort.

All of a sudden the two halves slid open.

Something metallic fell toward Owen.

“Exterminate!”

xXx

**Cardiff**

When Jack pulled himself up from the ground he did not know what had caused him to fall out of his chair, a nightmare or the rift alarm ringing in his ears. Still feeling just a little disoriented he stumbled to the door of his office. When he went out he found Toshiko at her workstation.

Jack groaned.

“You should’ve gone down to the quarters, Tosh,” he said. “I told you to rest.”

“Looks like another weevil alert,” she replied, not turning her gaze off her monitors. Her fingers flew over the keyboard.

“Can you get confirmation yet?”

“I got a definite Rift spike,” Toshiko said thoughtfully. “So if it’s a weevil… well, I don’t think that it’s one of our locals.”

“You mean it slipped through right now?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Jack decided. “There’s no need to wake Gwen and Andy.”

“Will you take care of it the way you did with the last one?”

“If I’m left no other choice… Tosh, you know that I didn’t want to kill it.”

“Yes, Jack. I just wish we could send them back.”

“As we don’t have that option we have to deal with them to the best of our ability.”
Jack watched Toshiko work on her computer. He always loved to watch her. When she was concentrated on a task at hand she was in her element, turning from a shy and conservative young woman into a skilled computer expert and alien hunter. She was smart, quick-witted, fast, and efficient.

Jack loved her.

“Okay, I’m going. Give me the exact coordinates when I’m on my way.”

“I’m coming with you,” she said, jumping up from her office chair. She clearly remembered what had happened earlier and was determined to offer him the support he needed.

“You don’t have to. I can handle it myself.”

“I know, but it’s training for me as well. I’m going.”

“No, Tosh. You’ll stay.” Putting a finger over her opening lips he stopped her from protesting.

“Seriously… we don’t know what’s still ahead. I need you rested. Stay on the radio if you want to, but you won’t come with me.”

Pouting she sank back into her office chair.

“Okay.”

Offering her one of his trademark smirks Jack said, “I’ll be okay. You’ll see.”

This could not really placate her, but she grudgingly conceded.

“Besides… Someone has to make sure that our guests don’t blow up the Hub.”

Snorting wryly Toshiko returned to her work.

“There was another rift spike,” she said. “The weevil probably isn’t alone anymore.”

She got no answer and when she turned her head he was gone.

“Hope you’re not making a mistake,” she murmured and returned to gathering as much information as she could. If Jack insisted on getting himself killed… at least it would not happen because she failed to provide him with the necessary information.

xXx

London

Shocked by finding himself face to face with a hostile alien the young doctor was unable to react at all. Suddenly Owen felt himself falling, hit the ground with his left side and groaned when something landed on top of him.

Crackling the impending blast died at the muzzle of the enemy’s weapon arm.
“Bloody hell!”

Twisting around Owen looked at what had hit him, catching a glance at lieutenant Spader’s fine features before she used her weight to keep rolling and bring them further out of the line of fire.

“Exterminate!” the alien screamed in its high distorted voice.

“Whoa!” Owen groaned, trying to extricate himself from the lieutenant’s hold. He paused when his gaze fell on her brown eyes. For a fleeting second she returned his assessing gaze.

“What did you find?” someone shouted behind them.

“Owen! Are you all right?”

“Yeah, Suzie,” Owen answered his team mate. “I’m okay.”

“And you will get up at once,” Lieutenant Spader whispered, “or that status will change the moment I reach three. One… two…”

Frantically Owen scrambled to his feet. Once he stood firmly he held out his hand for the lieutenant and Spader grabbed it, pulling herself up confidently. She did not even brush off her UNIT uniform before she shoved him aside.

Their weapons and torches raised her comrades stood on both sides of the open lift shaft, aiming at the creature inside.

“Exterminate!” it shrieked again, trying to fire, but its weapon arm emitted only a few sparks.

“Am I glad that that thing doesn’t work anymore,” Owen murmured.

“Bet you’re even more grateful for the lieutenant’s fast reflexes,” Suzie teased.

“Oh, shut up, you!”

“No reason to whine, Owen,” she taunted.

“Unless someone can tell me for certain that these things do not have the ability to self-repair,” Spader brusquely cut in, “we need to stop the chit-chat and get it contained and transported.”

“It’s called a Dalek,” Owen said smugly, glad he had pressed Jack for that information.

“I know what the bloody thing is called,” Spader snapped back. “Do you think UNIT doesn’t have an alien database? But every time we see these things, they are a little different.”

All of a sudden Owen did not feel that smug anymore and it was all he could do not to give it away somehow. It looked like the UNIT lieutenant knew more about those aliens than he did and that annoyed him. I can’t know the whole database by heart after all, he inwardly griped. Subtle irony that I was too busy shouting at the other drivers when Suzie looked them up on our way to London to remember more than just the basics about them.

“Its armour is cracked,” Suzie observed and stepped closer, lifting her PDA and scanner.

Now was not the time to entertain animosities. Still Owen inwardly rolled his eyes when he rejoined the team. Ready to draw his own gun he watched Suzie approach the alien.

“Agent Costello!” Sergeant Beatty barked. “I wouldn’t get that close to it.”
“Right. We don’t know what it’s capable of,” Spader argued.

“I’ll be careful.”

“You’ll be dead if you underestimate it!”

“I can take care of myself.” Suzie made small steps forward, repeatedly checking her scanner. “It’s obviously alive,” she mused.

“But is it still a threat?” Spader demanded.

“Well, as you said, we don’t know its capabilities,” Suzie replied evenly. “Let’s control and contain it, and once we have finished clearing the tower, Doctor Harper and I can arrange for its transport back to Cardiff.”

“Cardiff,” someone else grunted. “No way. Especially not alive.”

Looking over her shoulder Suzie recognized lieutenant Anderson.

“It might be sentient…”

“Oh, really?” Anderson barked. “Shoot it!”

“But its energy weapon is not functioning,” Suzie explained. “See where the shell is broken? We could open it, see what’s inside.”

“I won’t argue with you. Sergeant!” he gestured at Beatty. “Shoot the ruddy Dalek!”

“But…”

Suzie did not get any further. Taking her arm Anderson pulled her aside while Beatty stepped forward to follow his command.

“Sergeant, wait!” Suzie called out. “I override your order, Lieutenant. We’re in command here on our property! We get to decide what to do with it!”

“It’s a threat, Agent Costello!” Anderson spat.

“It’s incapacitated, Lieutenant…” Suzie began. “You won’t execute it.”

Being fed up by the argument Owen made short work of it and reached past the sergeant to pry the shell open. When he could not get a grip on it he picked up a metal bar, scrap from the bottom of the lift, and used it to break the crack open.

“Bugger! What’s that?” Spader exclaimed.

They all stared in shock at the thing inside the metal hull.

“Looks like… a brainopus,” Owen said.

“A what?”

“An octobrain?” the young doctor suggested, chuckling wryly.

And really the thing that was connected with its shell with wires and tubes partially resembled an octopus, greyish in colour, and slimy with a single eye. Owen counted six tentacles instead of eight,
though. So it’s rather a sextopus, Owen thought and bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from laughing out loud. Jack would get a blast from that name!

“Exterminate!” it shrieked again, some mechanics whirring ineffectively.

“Ah, well, looks like your conquering days are over, mate,” Owen said.

“Exterminate!” the thing shrieked. “Inferior life forms… identified as humans. You will be exterminated!”

“Possibly,” Owen growled. “But not by you.”

“Exterminate! Exterminate!” Once more the weapon arm crackled and sizzled, a few sparks flew, then nothing happened anymore.

“Guess it’s unsatisfying to be a helpless slimy blob,” Owen remarked dryly. “Trapped in a metal hull. No wonder they’re screaming.”

Someone snickered, another one snorted as he suppressed chuckles.

“Quit this nonsense!” Anderson barked. Nobody could react when he pushed his sidearm between them and fired a single bullet into the Dalek’s brain.

“What have you done?” Owen yelled. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I eliminated a threat to this planet.”

“Are you kidding? It’s alone and wounded! And essentially it’s a prisoner of war… and a sentient being! You murdered it!”

“What are you, its lawyer?” Anderson spat. “It’s too dangerous to be left alive. It could’ve wiped out the Cybermen on its own.”

“That’s what you’re saying,” Owen challenged. “When did you last confront hostile aliens?”

“That’s none of your business,” Anderson told him flatly and activated his radio. “Greyhound One to Trap One.”

“This is Trap One. What did you find Greyhound One?”

“We found a Dalek at the bottom of an elevator shaft,” Anderson reported. “It was alive but we eliminated the threat. Its armour was cracked so we opened it up and found a life form that looks like an octopus.”

“An octopus?”

“Yes, sir,” Anderson confirmed. “It has tentacles.”

“Contain the remains and send them to our lab. We need to find out as much as possible about them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Owen forgot about teasing the lieutenant when he realized that UNIT planned to keep the Dalek. His anger erupting as a fierce hiss he asked, “What do you mean with your lab?”
Torchwood Tower

conversion unit

_Bump._

_Bump!_

_Bump!_

Ianto’s heart thumped hard in his chest.

_No! No, please! It can’t be!_

Listening hard he tried to pick up another sound. Suppressing his laboured breathing in order to hear better made his breaths catch painfully in his chest. He wanted to be silent, so he exhaled slowly and attempted not to gasp in air next.

_Oh, don’t let there be a Cyberman. Please! Send a rescue team, scavengers, anyone… but no Cyberman!_

Panic threatened to take a hold on him. Once more he had to fight down his anxiety and he felt it become harder each time.

_I don’t think that I was mistaken. I heard it. I heard… something._

His effort to figure out what he really had heard led him to more speculations.

_What does that Cyberman look like? Does it have that metallic body? Steel from head to toe? Or does it rather look like… like… Lisa…_

Ianto choked.

_Bugger! No!_

Desperately he fought against the sickness that gathered up inside of him as he remembered how the Cyberman that appeared beside his conversion unit had looked.

Cyberman.

Lisa.

_It was Lisa, Ianto thought, choked up with grief. And it wasn’t Lisa. There was that helmet on her head, with the bars the other Cybermen had, too. But the helmet wasn’t closed. I could see her face._

_And her body wasn’t completely metal either. There were tubes and metal joints and partial armour. I couldn’t see her lower half, but it sounded as if she had metal boots as well._
And her voice!

The imagination alone was enough to give him the creeps.

*I bet she’d sound like them. Her voice would be distorted, synthesized, artificial. It would not be Lisa’s anymore.*

Would she remember?

For a moment she had stared down at him before she had turned and walked away.

Once more tears burnt in Ianto’s eyes.

Seeing her like that, physically recognizable as the Lisa Hallet he had known but no longer human, tore Ianto’s soul apart.

Tears ran down his face and tickled in his ears and hairline.

*I remember.*

He smiled to himself.

*We were out for a movie. I took her out to the old cinema I found. They had a classics night, showing two old Hitchcock films. We sat snuggled up to each other, Lisa grasping my hand and chewing on popcorn nervously. Later she told me that she had never seen the movies before. It had been exciting for her.*

*A little less exciting was the Bondathon she had to endure. She claimed to understand my passion for the secret agent, but I’m sure she was shaking her head as soon as I turned my back on her.*

*But she would never have said anything.*

Tears welled up again when he was overwhelmed with love for her. He could still not comprehend that she was gone. His mind refused to accept it.

And then his stomach lurched.

*She was in here!* Ianto realized with horror. *She was right in this unit! She was upgraded in it! Her blood…*

He gasped for breath.

The coppery smell was in the air ever since they were brought in by the Cybermen, but now he recognized with disgust that it came from her blood.

*Oh, my God! She died right in here! She told the Cybermen to take her first and died!*  

His throat tightened painfully.

*She sacrificed herself for me.*

Desperately he fought against his rolling stomach.

*I can’t go sick! If I vomit…!*  

“Don’t panic, Ianto,” he murmured as the terror threatened to take hold and he groaned.
“Emotions make you weak. Cybermen will remove emotions. You will be like us.”

The Welshman froze.

The synthesized voice of the Cyberman was way too much for Ianto’s frayed nerves and a terrified whimper escaped him.

tbc…
Using the invisible lift, Jack could enter the Hub without disturbing anyone with the proximity alert that sounded when someone came in via the tourist office and the cog door.

Toshiko was on the couch again, fast asleep. So Jack draped the blanket she had struggled off back over her sleeping form before he went down the corridor to the staff quarters. There he checked on their guests. They appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

Deciding that he was not needed right now, Jack retired to his office. He contemplated going up to the roof of the Millennium Center and letting his mind get aired out by the breeze coming off the bay, but he knew that someone had to keep an eye on the rift and so he stayed where he was. Jack sat down in his office chair and opened a drawer of his desk. He took out a glass and a bottle. Golden the liquid swashed in the glass. Jack closed the bottle and put it back into the drawer. He picked up the glass and leaned back in his chair.

Raising the glass, he murmured, “To the defenders of the earth and another day survived.”

Then he first enjoyed the scent of the very old whiskey he had poured before he sipped at it.

“Hmmm. To our brave constables and to brilliant Toshiko for guiding us.”

Another sip almost emptied the glass.

“To Owen and Suzie… who are brave enough not to call.”

Chuckling lowly he downed the rest of his whiskey.

*It could’ve been worse,* Jack mused, surprised that he could still enjoy the irony of being cheered by such a thought in his current state of exhaustion. *The rift became volatile. It could have thrown much worse stuff at us. I don’t think that we have any reason to sit back and believe that it’s over, but so far… it could have been worse. The rift is unpredictable. It can be calm for days and then it erupts with disastrous results. End of the world…*

For a while, Jack just sat there, trying to think of nothing. It was moments like this when memories flooded back into his consciousness. He recalled his first encounter with Torchwood, his first job as a freelance agent for the Institute, and serving in war. Thinking of World War Two reminded him of another life long, long years ago.

Absentmindedly, he rubbed his sore neck. The spot over his jugular vein was reddened. It throbbed.

*No surprise there,* he thought and was tempted to get the whiskey back out. *Having been bitten by weevils twice in one night is no joy. Coming back is no joy either.*

He groaned and picked up on earlier thoughts.

*What happened? What made me so different? I want answers!*

He knew that he would not get them. The only man who could probably answer them was neither
there, nor on this planet.

Not half a day ago he was here, Jack recalled bitterly. He was in London. He was there and he fought back the Cyber invasion. I’m sure that he defeated both Cybermen and Daleks.

And now he’s gone again, off into time and space.

He could almost hear Rose’s squeals of joy as she danced around the TARDIS’s console room.

Sweet Rose. I wonder what he told you when he left me behind. Did he tell you why? Then you’d know more than I do.

Then another idea hit him.

Rose! Were you with him at Canary Wharf Tower? Did he protect you? I hope he did. No! You didn’t get caught in the crossfire, did you? Cybermen were bad enough, but Daleks? Where the heck did the Daleks come from? They were defeated! Rose! You must have survived the battle. If he lost you at Canary Wharf I’ll regenerate him.

Deciding that he should not let his mind wander down that dark track, Jack set the glass down on the table and got up. Shrugging off his coat, he padded to the sofa where he removed his boots before he lay down. Sleep, though, did not come.

xXx

London

“What I mean is, that this Dalek’s going to be taken to the labs at UNIT’s headquarters,” Anderson calmly told him.

Owen was anything but happy.

“How do you get the idea that you will get the Dalek?” he challenged.

“First of all you don’t have the means to transport it,” Anderson remained calm in the face of the medic’s wrath. “We have full-size containment crates, lorries already here on the scene…”

“Which can easily be driven to Cardiff,” Owen countered.

“All you have is your bloody car.”

“It’s an SUV.”

“A Range Rover.”

“Lieutenant Anderson!” one of the other UNIT soldiers interrupted the argument. “Upon a word, sir…”

Casting Owen a warning glance, the lieutenant turned to join his subordinate.
To the medic’s surprise, a few soldiers arrived in the basement already, carrying a containment box. Reflecting his own thoughts, he heard sergeant Beatty note, “A bit small, huh?”

“It will do for the alien alone,” Anderson replied.

“By the way,” Owen cut in. “Once the tower is cleared, we could also use the labs here to perform the autopsy.”

Wheeling around, Anderson fixed the medic with a death glare.

“You don’t believe for a second that you’ll get authority over the tower back, do you?” he growled. “Torchwood is destroyed!”

“Not completely.”

“But your management is gone. For you it’s game over. The only say you will have is in the way of disassembly.”

“Well, actually with London’s director gone, Captain Harkness is now effectively the leader of Torchwood… of both offices.”

“In that case he will get to decide about the demolition,” Anderson snarled and returned his attention to the working soldiers in order not to throttle the medic.

“Looks as if he doesn’t like me anymore,” Owen murmured.

“You shouldn’t pick a fight with him,” Suzie said close to Owen’s ear when she leaned in from beside him. “We need UNIT’s support right now.”

“And I thought they needed ours.”

“It neither looks like they needed help nor do they want it,” Suzie said.

“I want this autopsy,” Owen insisted.

Together, they watched how the soldiers separated the slimy octopus from the metal hull and put it into the box. They saw the lid being closed and an energy field activated before the soldiers placed the box on a cart and wheeled it away. At the next staircase, four of them took the box by its handles and carried it upstairs. Others followed with the cart.

“I know,” Suzie agreed with her team mate. “But we still need to cooperate with UNIT. We need to search the tower.”

“It needs to be secured, I know that,” Owen sighed. “We have no idea what might be left in there after all. There could be more Daleks, more Cybermen, more anything. We don’t know what London worked on other than the experiments that led to… Ouch!” Owen groaned as her heel connected with his instep, glaring daggers at Suzie.

“Last time I checked I was in charge,” she whispered. Even though she knew that Owen did not discard the subject yet Suzie asked, “Lieutenant Anderson, is there anything we can do right now?”

“No, Agent Costello,” Anderson smugly said. “Unless you want to let Dr. Harper finish his sentence.” Straightening up, he glowered at them. “Because, if I’m not mistaken, the good doctor was about to confirm our suspicion that Torchwood is responsible for the invasion that could barely be fought back.”
“What gives you that ridiculous idea?” Owen demanded to know.

“The Cyber leader addressed the people via television sent from here, from Director Hartman’s office. The Daleks,” he pointed dramatically at the dead creature in the shaft, “came out of Torchwood Tower! And you say that you had nothing to do with it?”

“We didn’t.”

“Well, maybe they didn’t inform Cardiff, but Torchwood is definitely responsible.”

“Why? Maybe you did something that enabled the Cybermen to slip into our world.”

“I won’t argue about that with you, Doctor Harper,” Anderson snapped.

“Good,” Owen cheered wryly, “Then let’s stop the arguments and hand over the Dalek.”

Glimering at the medic Anderson was just about to blow when his radio crackled.

“Trap One to Greyhound One,” Colonel Mace called.

“This is Greyhound One,” Anderson answered.

“Lieutenant, did you already receive the containment box?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Prepare the Dalek for transport so we can send it to Headquarters. As soon as it’s contained, you will continue to search the tower.”

“Yes, sir.”

As he still was unwilling to let the matter slide, Owen pushed himself off the wall.

“Owen!” Suzie hissed, but he already stepped forward resolutely.

“May I?” Owen asked and took Anderson’s radio. “This is Agent Harper speaking. Colonel Mace, sir. I want to be present for the autopsy. I suggest that I’ll come along with the…”

“That won’t be necessary, Agent Harper,” the colonel interrupted him. “UNIT is perfectly capable of handling the alien. You will have the opportunity to study the reports.”

“Sir, Torchwood is not prepared to accept that. I’ll be upstairs in a minute. I can assist your scientists when they’re performing the autopsy…”

“You are not in the position to demand participation in the tests, Agent. I thought I made myself clear.”

Owen was fuming. His anger was not directed at Anderson and Mace alone, though, as he wished for some support from his team mate. As it was, though, Suzie even retreated from the discussion. When he looked around at her, he found her on the phone, staring at him adamantly. Sensing that he was fighting a lost cause, he agreed with Mace, “Yes, sir.”

Obviously he was not the only one who noticed that she made a call.

“So, what did your Captain Harkness say?” Lieutenant Anderson sneered, certain that they had won this match of wills with the Torchwood agents.
Cardiff

The phone startled Jack out of his already restless sleep. Once he struggled up from the sofa and had dropped into his office chair heavily, he grabbed the phone.

“Yeah?”

“Jack? It’s Suzie.”

“Great that you’re calling now.”

“Did I wake you?”

Jack could hear her surprise and almost chuckled.

“No, we’re busy,” he kept the illusion up. “What’s up? What can you tell me about Torchwood London?”

“Not much,” Suzie told him. “We’re not that far in yet. But I need you to make a decision.”

“What decision?”

He listened to Suzie explaining to him what they had found and that Owen wanted to perform the autopsy.

“No way,” Jack told his second in command, feeling a chill run down his back. There’s no way in hell they’re going to bring a Dalek into our Hub, no matter if it’s dead or not. “You have your orders. I expect you to follow them.”

“Shouldn’t we explore the creature further?” Suzie whispered, trying to avoid attracting attention of the UNIT operatives.

“No,” Jack brusquely replied. “I already know everything we need to know about them.”

“And what about Anderson?” Suzie asked.

“What about him?”

“He murdered it, Jack,” she told him. “It was helpless, and he murdered it.”

Jack felt his stomach twist in knots. He wanted to tell her Anderson did the right thing. He wanted to tell her he did not care, and he did not really, not about the Dalek. But what about the Doctor? What would he think?

You know what he would think, a voice in his head that sounded like Rose told him. Cold-blooded murder is unconscionable. He would give it a chance, a choice, something before killing it.

And then there was the fact that he had disobeyed Suzie’s orders.
“If you want to pursue it, you’ll have my blessing, but I wasn’t there so I can’t become involved,” he finally conceded. “Now wrap it up and stop wasting time.”

“Yes, Jack. Of course.”

“Keep me in the loop.”

“Yes, Jack. We’ll call soon.”

“I expect you to,” Jack said and put the receiver back on its cradle. Noticing movement out of the corner of his eyes, he looked up and saw Toshiko standing in the door. “Hey, Tosh. Did the phone wake you?”

“Yes. Was that Suzie?”

“Yep.”

“How are they?”

“Busy.”

“Jack?” she asked wearily.

“Yes, Tosh?”

“Am I supposed to pull the information out of your nose word by word?”

Jack chuckled.

“No, Tosh. I’m… There’s just nothing to talk about. UNIT was stalling and they only now went in. The Dalek was the first interesting thing they found.”

“What is that, Jack? A Dalek?”

“Alien race,” the captain told her. “The creatures that fought the Cybermen.”

“The things you said would be our end earlier when we saw them on the CCTV?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes.”

“How do you know them?”

“I… encountered them before.”

Toshiko did not miss the slight shiver in his voice. That encounter had been anything but good and she wondered when and where it had occurred.

“Will you tell me about it?” she prodded.

The ringing of the phone saved Jack. Quickly he picked up the receiver and answered the call. “Ah, yes, Prime Minister,” Toshiko heard him say. Offering him a short nod, she pivoted and pulled the door to his office shut behind her. Then she walked over to her workstation.

Sitting down in her comfortable office chair, she pulled up recent CCTV footage, 999 calls, and police reports. From experience she knew that not every rift activity was followed by immediate
action of alien origin. Communication of police, firemen, and even military were helpful.

Toshiko hoped not to find anything, but her search led to radio reports that begged for recco via CCTV. Hacking into the system that would provide her with the pictures she needed was only a matter of seconds. She became sober when she saw the uproar.

“Jack!”

He did not react and a glance in his direction confirmed that he was still on the phone. Urgently she gestured him to come over. “Jack!”

Now his gaze focused on her and he looked at her questioningly.

“Trouble,” she mouthed and waved at him again. She saw him talk into the phone animatedly. Then, still on the line, he got up. Looking out through the glass walls of his office he shrugged helplessly. Toshiko turned back to her workstation, her fingers dancing over the keyboard. A moment later Jack appeared beside her.

“Did you mess with the telephone?” he asked, smirking. “Suddenly the Prime Minister was gone.”

“As if I would…” she replied innocently and Jack’s smirk grew even wider.

“What’s up?” the captain wanted to know.

Wordlessly Toshiko pointed at two monitors on which she observed the reported turmoil.

“Wake Gwen and Andy,” Jack simply said. “Show them to the garage and I’ll be right back and pick them up.”

“Sure,” Toshiko confirmed and with another command she activated an alarm in the staff quarters while Jack darted back into his office and down his hole. Not a minute later, he showed up again just to vanish into a corridor, ready for action.

xXx

London

At some point during the argument, Suzie simply shook her head at Owen and got out her cell phone. Being fed up with the bickering, she decided to call Cardiff and ask whether Jack wanted the bloody thing before she expended the time, energy, and resources acquiring and transporting it.

Seeing that Anderson had already noticed that she checked back with their captain, Suzie did the only thing she could and resorted to an act, intent on keeping their authority which was not an easy task given the sheer number of UNIT members compared to the two of them. Nonchalantly she snapped her phone shut.

“He told me that it would not be necessary to waste Dr. Harper’s considerable talents with the autopsy of an ordinary Dalek.”

Owen looked at her with the same astonishment as everyone else.
“As we’ve had one in a jar in the archives for years he’ll be able to study it when we get back to Cardiff.”

Her plain words were directed at the UNIT team, but she shot Owen a glance that clearly told him to keep silent and swallow it. So Owen put on his best poker face and simply shrugged.

“That’ll do then,” he said, sounding bored.

*Good move, Owen,* Suzie thought and put her phone away.

Lieutenant Anderson glowered at them.

Knowing that she had offered Owen a corpse that did not exist, Suzie said, “We still expect you to send us the results, Lieutenant.” As an afterthought she added, “Every reference is valuable, and as you mentioned, they seem to continue evolving every time we see them.”

Seeing Anderson’s scowl smooth out, she inwardly sighed with relief. It looked like she could actually appease both parties.

“Oh, Anderson said, pulling out another radio unit. “This building has four staircases. Let’s split our teams up so that we can cover the stories more effectively. Lieutenant Spader, you should go with Dr. Harper and Private Tilley. Agent Costello and Private Hocke come with me. Greyhound three are Sergeant Beatty, Private Porter and Private Zimmerman, and Sergeant McBride will lead Greyhound four with Private Coleman and Private Barker. Let’s go.”

On his way to the stairwell, Anderson gave Sergeant Beatty his smaller radio and Lieutenant Spader gave hers to Sergeant McBride. The respective teams climbed back up to the ground floor and further to the first, second, third, back to the fifth storey and beyond to get to the sixth floor. From there they advanced carefully, searching each hall and every room. The second to tenth storey had been occupied by firms that were not connected with Torchwood and served as a cover for the Institute. They did not find much, which made Owen more and more uneasy as the lack of bodies suggested clearly where the majority of the untrained civilians had ended up. Except for a few that managed to escape, they all were converted. Every single one of them. Herded like lambs to the slaughter. It made Owen sick.

When they reached the eleventh floor, they finally entered Torchwood. It began totally harmless with a large reception desk and office after office. Nothing indicated that this organisation dealt with alien technology and life forms. The halls were covered with white linoleum and paths of sea blue carpet that also lay in the offices. Light blue walls with the occasional painting in white or black frames created a cool but friendly atmosphere.

Upon entering the twelfth storey, the interior changed. Now the linoleum was blue and there was no carpet. Owen realized that this was the first time ever that he got to see the headquarters. He never had a reason to visit it before. On the signs beside the office doors, he found the title of the division, Information Retrieval. Basically, it consisted of rooms filled with desks and computers. And bodies. Now that they had passed the storeys that were a front for the secret organization, they discovered more and more staff members.

They just went into a large room with lots of cubicles in which the employees had their desks. A chill ran down Owen’s back as he took in how the rays of their torches danced over the thin walls separating the workplaces and realized how different their Hub in Cardiff was to this building. Compared to this, their underground base had its own sewerly charm.

While Spader and Tilley went down the left row, Owen took the right one. Shining into every
booth, he made his way down the aisle. Feeling faintly horrified, he took in the decorations on the
desks and inside walls of the cubicles. Aside from the usual knickknack like plants and family
pictures, he also found a lot of ghost trivia. One of the booths was so overloaded with paper, plastic,
and plush ghosts that Owen felt misplaced to a souvenir shop.

The cubicle right across the aisle was the complete opposite. Owen did not find a single ghost there.
It was the tidiest workplace the medic had ever seen and if it was not for the coffee mug that stood to
the left of the keyboard and two photos beside the monitor he might have thought that it was
unoccupied. Owen smirked at the mug as it sported a Welsh dragon. *You can take the Welshman out
of Wales, but not Wales out of the Welshman.* Then he looked at the photos. One of the pictures
showed a pretty young woman with a skin like dark chocolate who smiled challengingly at the
camera. On the other was another woman, one arm wrapped around a little boy sitting on her thigh,
the other hand resting proudly on her round belly.

Owen swallowed dryly.

“Did you find something?” Spader queried.

“Nothing spectacular,” he murmured just as his torchlight slid over the name tag of I. Jones. “Just
looks like one of them didn’t get caught up in the hysteria about the ghosts.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Seeing all the ghost stuff in the other cubicles… yeah, kinda.”

“C’mon, Torchwood,” Spader prodded. “We don’t have all night.”

“No? I’d think we should be thorough rather than quick,” Owen said, stepping back out into the
aisle.

“Yeah, well, we’re just on floor number twelve yet…”

“So what?”

“The tower has fifty storeys,” Spader shrugged. “Just saying.”

“All right, so, for the sake of any survivor who might still be trapped, let’s search quickly and
thoroughly,” Owen grumbled.

Spader did not reply this time so Owen rolled his eyes and proceeded down the aisle, shining into
the next cubicles just long enough to make sure that he did not miss any body or survivor. Rejoining,
they advanced down another corridor until they reached a door that would not open.

“We’ll need a code to get in,” Spader grunted and entered a row of numbers without success.
“What about you, Torchwood? Do you have the right key?”

“Owen,” the medic corrected her and stepped up to the lock. “Or Agent, or Doctor Harper.” He
typed in his ID code, but the door remained closed.

“Why? Does it bother you?” she teased. “You are Torchwood.” She laughed at his sour look. “All
right… Owen.”

They needed to ask the other team to meet them. Suzie’s ID granted them access and the teams
searched the holding rooms in the secure area. None of the cells was occupied so they all left and
proceeded to the next floor.
“You were not as impressed by the alien as the others were,” Owen stated as he was walking beside Lieutenant Spader, Private Tilley following them.

“I’ve been part of several missions,” she replied, “that reconnoitred crash sites and other incidents.”

“So you’ve encountered aliens before.”

“I’m not unfamiliar with the situation,” she evaded his suggestion.

“Okay. I won’t dig deeper,” Owen reassured her. “I can’t let you dig deeper either.”

“Good. So we agree that we’re both no diggers.”

Owen chuckled and behind them Tilley suppressed a giggle.

For a while, Owen, Spader and Tilley proceeded in what could be called companionable silence. They were on one of the research floors, moving down a barren hall lined with doorways every thirty feet apart on each side. Each of the doors possessed an electronic lock, and the locks still held on most of the doors that were closed, despite the power failure. Those doors Lt. Spader opened with the override code that she had tried to use at the holding area already and that UNIT really should not have had. Torchwood would have reset it if they had known UNIT had acquired it.

They entered each lab with caution, one of them going right, one of them going left, and the third going straight ahead, calling out to each other as they counted corpses and verified that there was no danger lurking, and identified things that needed to be contained or cleaned up immediately.

They were approaching the fifth lab on the floor when Lt. Spader said something to which Owen was replying with a cheeky grin and a clever comment when the door and wall just above his head exploded outward with a thunderous crack. Owen fell backward with a yelp, chunks of brickwork raining down on him. He caught himself on one hand and pointed his gun toward the direction of the threat with the other. Spader and Tilley hit the deck on either side of the door, and with surprising, and for Owen, somewhat humiliating strength, the female lieutenant grabbed him by the ankle with one hand and bodily dragged him out of the line of fire.

“What the fuck was that?” Owen shrieked, and then, realizing he was shrieking, made a great effort to bring his voice back to a more manly tone as he surveyed the damage. “Bloody hell,” he muttered as he saw some shards of steel and chunks of concrete embedded in the wall just across the hall from where he had been standing.

“That, Doctor, is what happens when a soldier gets complacent,” Spader told him gravely. “I’m sorry, I should have remembered that I am working with a civilian and kept a better eye on you.”

Owen’s pride was slightly wounded by her comment, but now was not the time to argue the point, so instead he just said, “No need to apologize. I’ve done this often enough to know better.” Looking up at the remains of the door, he said, “Well, nothing seems to be coming after us. What do we do now?”

Spader’s reply, whatever it was going to be, was cut off by a call from inside the lab.

xXx
Torchwood Tower

conversion unit

His throat was sore.

A horrible thirst plagued him. Ianto wondered if he still had a voice but was not willing to give it a try. His tongue seemed to fill his whole mouth and was rough as sandpaper.

Panic had subsided to despair.

Still his mind could not stop circling around the burning questions of how close the Cyberman was to freeing itself and when it would appear by his side and restart the machine that would turn him into a cybernetic creature.

*Half human, half machine.* Ianto shuddered. *I don’t want to end like that. I’d rather be dead than mutilated, my mind mushy from drugs.*

His eyes burned, but no tears would come. A brief flash of panic hit him. He knew that lack of tears was a sign of severe dehydration and his fear made his stomach roll. He had always been under the impression that dying of thirst was a terribly painful way to go.

*How long has it been? Three weeks without food, three days without water, three minutes without air.*

In.

Out.

In…

Out…

Consciously taking breaths that deepened with each draw, Ianto tried to soothe himself. *At least I won’t be forced to wet myself again any time soon.* Of course, the memory made him conscious of the acrid smell again, and he wrinkled his nose.

*Am I really that bad off so quickly? Ianto wondered. I can’t be stuck for very long already. Hours, yes, but not days yet. Right? At least a day would have to pass to lead to first signs of dehydration, right?*

Ianto was sure that he had read something about it, but he was too much in an uproar to recall it properly despite his eidetic memory.

*Do Cybermen get thirsty? At least the ones that still have flesh? I’d think that they’d need nutrition to maintain their biological parts. The implants sure can’t keep the rest healthy, right?*

*How much of them is artificial? Is it really fifty-fifty? Maybe the percentage is different. At first they made completely cybernetic copies, just implanting the brain into a pre-made hull. With the new ones it could also be forty percent machine and sixty percent human. Or maybe the cybernetics prevail. Much of the upgrade could be internal and the flesh I saw only a hull for the artificial organs.*
Inevitably his mind was led back to Lisa.

*Seeing her like that was... horrific... monstrous. I don’t really have words for what it was.*

His stomach still threatened to turn when he thought of his upgraded fiancé.

*She’s gone!*

A sob escaped him. Fortunately the Cyberman remained silent.

*I guess I’ll follow her, Ianto thought bitterly. If no one is left out there to come and rescue anyone who might have survived in here... if that chance exists at all... I’ll die in here, of shock or of hunger and thirst.*

His face contorted with mental agony.

*I shouldn’t have cut Rhiannon short on the phone. And when did I talk with Mam the last time? Since working for Torchwood, I was so often so busy and when I was home it wasn’t for long and Lisa and I wanted the time for ourselves.*

*Mam! Tad! Rhiannon! I hope there were no Cybermen at your houses! I hope you’re safe. O Celi, fi angen at canfod 'ch ail!*

Grief tightened Ianto’s chest and even though he had thought that he was not capable of crying anymore, a few tears squeezed out of the corners of his eyes and trickled down into his sideburns.

tbc…

* Fi angen at canfod 'ch ail = I want to see you again.*
“Nice alarm you have,” Gwen grumbled as she climbed into the SUV. The shrill sound had kind of thrown her out of bed and before she knew how she got there, she sat on the floor halfway between bed and door.

“Yeah, it gets the job done,” Jack grinned and floored the accelerator.

“Ever been caught for speeding?” Andy demanded to know.

“Well, yeah, but why should I care?” It was clear that the captain did not see the point Andy was trying to make.

“Well, for one thing you’re endangering pedestrians,” Andy stated.

“And when the police pursues a suspect or hurries to a crime scene it’s okay that they’re speeding?” Jack chuckled, drawing the car around a corner and accelerating again.

“The police have lights and sirens,” Andy said.

“Torchwood doesn’t need them,” Jack replied.

Confused silence followed his question. The two police officers looked at each other and remembered what Jack had told them about his organisation, outside the government, beyond the police. They remained silent and Jack smirked even broader, electing not to elaborate on the life sign proximity sensors and the automatic trajectory compensators that usually guided the SUV around civilians. The system was not perfect. It could not compensate for crowds, and it could be overridden by deliberate acceleration toward a living creature or by bloody bad driving; but it had two advantages over traditional blues and twos. First off, it proactively avoided pedestrians rather than trusting them to have the sense and agility to get out of the way, and secondly, it allowed Torchwood to make a high-speed approach quietly.

Gwen could not help but grab for the door handle, when Jack swivelled the car around another corner. In her opinion, Jack had a quite interesting driving style.

Seeing her reaction made Jack realize that it was not the Torchwood SUV he was driving and he inwardly scolded himself, I shouldn’t have let Suzie and Owen have the car. It’s got no use for searching the tower, but I could really do with it. Then he remembered that he sat in a police car and searched for the switch of the lights as a compromise

“What are we up to now?” Gwen asked, trying desperately to keep her voice even.

“How about going for a swim?”

“Pardon?”

“We’re going to Splott Swimming Pool,” Jack told them.

“I didn’t bring my swim suit,” Gwen said wryly.
If the constables thought Jack was smirking before they were mistaken.

“Why hide such a marvellous body in a swim suit?” the captain murmured innocently, but his features belied his harmless tone.

Gwen could not quite hide her gasp with a cough.

“Well,” Jack said. “As much as I could see so far, all the right curves in all the right places.”

Gwen did not know what to reply. When she glanced at her partner she saw him staring out of the side window.

“You know what we’ll have to deal with, Jack?” she finally asked.

“Do you like fish?” the captain asked back.

“Why? Are we arresting mermen?”

“Not quite,” Jack chuckled and pulled the SUV up in front of the old building in Muirton Road. Two police cars were parked right in front, the constables standing beside them wearing dour faces.

“Will we need any special equipment?” Andy wanted to know as he got out.

Jack went to open the boot and gave each of them a gun. “In case you need it,” he said and met sceptical faces. “Just try to look as if you’d use them. You’ll have to look impressive when you face them.”

“Face who?”

“You’ll see.” Jack slammed the rear lid shut and pivoted on his heels. “You coming?”

Why won’t you tell us what we’re dealing with?” Gwen prodded as she followed him, darting past her uniformed colleagues. “We’ve proven that we don’t just run off.”

“That’s not why,” Jack smirked back at her over his shoulder, trying the front door. It was locked. He went along the building in search for another entrance.

“Then why?”

“Because I want to see your reaction when you see them for the first time,” Jack grinned. “You two are still green enough to be amazed every time you see something you never could have imagined. That look of awe and wonder is priceless, and my team have been at it so long I almost never get to see it from them anymore.”

Before either of them could reply, he vanished around a corner, so both constables had no other choice but to follow him again. They found him at another door.

“It’s broken open,” Jack murmured at the approaching officers and pulled his Webley out of its holster. “Be careful.”

“Jack…!” Gwen gasped with exasperation. “What about the other constables? Shouldn’t we ask them for support?”

“Well, actually we’re their support,” Jack replied. “They were ordered to clear the site and grant us access.”
“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Guess they think we’re special ops or something,” Jack shrugged.

“Well, you are, kind of,” Andy cut in.

For a moment Gwen mulled about that before she once more dug for an answer, “Now what will we have to deal with?”

“Don’t want to spoil the surprise,” Jack murmured, winking at her over a ridiculously mischievous smirk. “Let’s go.”

And with that he pushed the door open with his shoulder and, his gun raised, entered the hall behind, leaving the constables no other option than following him.

xXx

**London**

“Hello? Hello out there? God, please be human! We need help!”

Owen was about to get up and rush into the room, but a strong hand on his shoulder stopped him. Once more it was Lt. Spader who held him back.

“We don’t know what we’re dealing with,” she hissed. “You wanna get yourself killed? Fine. But not as long as I’m in charge!”

Owen could not help but smirk. He liked her. Maybe once this was over…

His thought process was interrupted abruptly when he saw something move across the cone of light and he followed it with his torch only to discover a vine, thick as a human thigh, reach out through the hole where the door once was.

“What the…?”


“Sounds human,” Tilley observed.

“Yep,” Spader agreed, “but it could still be alien. You go first, I’ll follow, then the doctor.”

Looking at the medic’s sceptical expression, she snarled, “Don’t you wrinkle your nose, just do as I say. C’mon.”

Scowling, Owen pointed his torch at the plant, “If you ask me… that’s the alien. You really want to go in there?”

In the next second, they all moved backwards because the vine unfurled and reached into the direction of Owen and Spader. Weapon raised, Tilley cautiously approached again, uncertain about shooting the vine or not. Hoisting their own guns, Spader and Owen moved sideways, still out of reach of the vine, to have a look through the gap in the wall. Their torches lit a bizarre scene.
Everything was tinged green because the neon tube’s light under the ceiling was filtered through foliage. The origin of the vines was not recognizable. They wound through the whole room and snaked through two doors to neighbouring laboratories, too. It looked as if the plant was breathing, taking draws in and letting air out again. Leaves underneath the ceiling were quivering. But before the soldiers could locate the source of the voice, a twine reached out for them and they backed off, aiming at the plant with their guns.

“What’s going on?” Owen demanded to know.

“The first time I thought I imagined it, but that thing really grabbed for us!” Tilley gasped. “Look!”

And really, the sprout wound searchingly toward the hole where the door had been. It was twisting and curling and a low surreal moan came out of the lab.

“What the heck is that?” Owen panted as he backed off together with the soldiers.

“A threat,” Spader answered. “How do we kill it?”

“What are you asking me for?”

“I thought you’re the one with the field experience,” Spader teased. “Now, show us what you’re good at.”

“Yeah, after you, please,” Tilley said.

“Thanks,” Owen replied. “But I have never seen a plant like that.”

“At least it’s not a Krynoid,” Spader gasped.

The plant extended its sprout even further and reached far into the hall now.

“Help us!” a voice waved out of the lab. “Please! Don’t leave us here!”

“We’ve gotta help them,” Tilley said.

“And we will help,” Spader answered. “But first let’s find out how, okay?”

“The thing’s growing, isn’t it?” Owen asked, watching the tentacle quiver.

“Probably.”

“Does it matter?” Tilley shrieked, backing off from the trembling sprout. “We have to stop it!”

“You said that it’s not a Krynoid,” Owen turned to Spader. “What’s a Krynoid?”

“As much as I know they plant their seeds in living mammals, turning them into plants. They can move and they can turn other plants into volatile beings.”

“Creepy.”

“I heard that two seeds are enough to transform a whole planet,” Spader said. “So yeah, thank God it’s not a Krynoid.”

The doctor nodded his agreement.

“I have no idea if it makes sense to cut back the vines,” Spader mused. “We should search for its
“Ok,” Tilley agreed, lifting the rifle again. “Try next door?”

“Yes,” Spader confirmed and pressed with her back against the wall beside the door. “On three. One… two…”

xXx

Cardiff

“Okay, be prepared for anything.” Jack said, leaning against the wall beside the door to the pool hall. “They’re usually wild and unpredictable. They’re throwing a party? They leave the place a wreck.”

“Great,” Andy muttered, brushing his hand over his bald head, irritated once more because there was no hair.

“Will you tell us what we’re dealing with?” Gwen prodded. “Might be helpful.”

“Why don’t you have a look?” Jack asked back, nodding at the window in the upper half of the door.

Of course Gwen followed the invitation and made a few steps forward, ducking until she stood on the other side of the doorframe, and then peeking through the glass. Her eyes widened at what she saw.

“Bloody hell! What are they?”

“Aliens, very pleasure-seeking, impulsive, and volatile aliens,” Jack replied, revelling in her fascination.

“From a water planet?” Gwen wanted to know, never turning her gaze off the creatures in the hall.

“We’re not sure where they come from, but both planets in question have big oceans,” Jack explained. “Though they don’t necessarily need them.”

“They have gills, don’t they?” Gwen asked.

“Well, yes, they do,” Jack confirmed. “But they don’t depend on water to breathe.” Impatiently, he was stepping from one foot on the other, still peeking through the window. “They can’t stay here. Remember to look impressive. C’mon.”

And with that Jack pushed the door open and entered the hall with the big public swimming pool. Currently it was occupied by about a dozen Blowfish. Three of them lounged on sunbeds beside the pool, the others were in the water. They were shouting and splashing and waving bottles at the newcomers. Empty bottles were scattered all over the tiles around the pool. In the air hung the slight scent of pot.

Open-mouthed, Gwen stared at the chaos in front of her. She could not grasp what they were doing
in the pool. Six of the humanoid fishes were entangled in pairs and Gwen wondered if they were having sex.

“Okay, okay!” Jack shouted cheerfully. “The party’s over! Come out of the pool! Now!”

Gwen and Andy did not understand a word, though, as Jack used a foreign language. All they could do was stand to both sides of him and try to look, as he had asked, impressive.

Then the water around one of the couples darkened, coloured by a dark green essence and shiny pearls. It floated around them and one after the other the white pearls turned bright turquoise.

“What are they doing?” Andy whispered.

“Fertilizing their eggs,” Jack murmured back before he switched to the alien language again, “The fun is over! Enough is enough! Get out of the pool! Now! And you back there, get dressed again!” Then he repeated the latter in English.

“Get dressed?” Gwen echoed incredulously.

“Sure,” Jack told her. “Blowfish usually have a good taste when it comes to their clothes. They love Victorian style suits and dresses.”

The trousers, shirts, and jackets lying crumpled beside the pool did not look Victorian, though. One of the Blowfish got up from its sunbed, but it did not grab for its clothes. Suddenly the fish had a weapon in its hand and directed it at the captain.

Both police constables raised their guns, too.

Jack stood between them, unimpressed.

“Don’t make a fool of yourself,” Jack chuckled. “Put the gun down.”

“No! Why should I?”

“Because I kindly ask you to put the gun down on the floor.”

All the Blowfish made roaring sounds that was apparently their way of laughing.

“I know you,” Jack continued. “You’re from here. You welcomed the kids who came through the Rift. Now the party’s over. Go back to your colony and don’t show up again.”

“We’re just having a bit of fun!” the Blowfish whined, pushing the gun forward.

“I have a feeling that they’re drunk,” Andy murmured to Gwen behind Jack’s back.

“And stoned,” she replied.

“And you two don’t let down your guard,” Jack whispered through his teeth as he grinned winningly at the fish.

“You want us to go?” the Blowfish challenged. “Make us go!”

xXx
London

“Three!”

Tilley pushed the door open and both soldiers directed their guns into the laboratory. The light was not as green as it was in the other room as not the whole place was filled with vines and leaves. So all three of them could clearly see the pot in the far left corner. Three sprouts wound out of it. They were not even that thick in the beginning, but then they grew and, as the soldiers and Owen knew, filled the whole neighbouring room.

“That’s it?” Owen panted incredulously. “That’s where that monstrosity comes from?”

Spader made a step forward and pulled the trigger. A blast of energy shot across the room and made the pot burst, burning the vines winding out of it.

“Came from,” she spat.

“Do you think that solved our problem at hand?” Tilley mused.

A loud moan rippled through them and made everything vibrate. The thick sprouts heaved with agony when they lost their roots and the leaves rustled.

“Look out!” Tilley shouted as a twine curled its way toward them. Quickly Spader turned and shot at the plant a second time. The sprout was blasted away and its remains splattered on wall and ceiling.

“Whoa! What kind of monster is that?” Spader said. “What does your bloody Torchwood keep here?”

“I have no idea,” Owen rasped, staring at another part of the giant plant. It was partly hidden behind the vines and leaves, but he could see enough for his liking. The thing looked like a blown balloon, green with red veins running through the transparent hull. Something was floating in the liquid inside.

“Ugh!” Tilley grimaced with disgust.

Owen also looked repulsed, but he struggled to mask his anxiety with sarcasm. “Hm, looks like Jell-O with fruits.”

“That’s sick,” Spader spat.

“What about the other people?” Tilley wanted to know. “We need to help them.”

“Yeah, sure. Let’s go back,” Spader agreed and turned to leave first.

The plant moaned again, and the sound rose to a muted shriek. The scraping of slithering vines made Owen’s skin crawl. Then the horrifying realization sank in. “It’s eating humans,” he murmured nervously.

“Yeah, we noticed,” Tilley replied. “So what?”

“So, if it’s eating, it may not be dependent on its roots for water and nutrients anymore,” Owen
explained, having to raise his voice as the sound of rustling leaves grew louder.

“So?” Tilley persisted, moving closer to Owen and Lieutenant Spader as more leaves and vines crowded into the room.

“Well, I’m no botanist,” Owen said. “But if it still has a food supply, it may not be dead yet.”

“Food supply?” Tilley echoed.

“That would be us!” Spader grunted as she stomped on a tendril as thick as her thumb that had made a grab for her ankle. “And I just really pissed it off!” She ended on a shout as a vine as big as her wrist snaked around her waist, pinning both of her arms and her weapon to her body on the second loop.

“Bloody hell! This is not good!” Owen yelped, his voice growing shrill and anxious as more runners twined their way up his legs, crisscrossing over his groin.

“Oh, God!” Tilley screamed, caught round the shoulders by one vine and bound from thigh to ankle by another. “Oh, God! I really don’t want… to die… this… wa…” The yell dwindled to a croak as the thick vine around the private’s chest wrapped tighter.

“Your knife, Tilley!” Spader shouted, calm and commandung. “Use your knife! Cut yourself free!”

“Can’t breathe,” Tilley gasped helplessly.

Taking his cue from the lieutenant, Owen said, “You don’t need to breathe to cut, soldier. You have four minutes before you die from lack of oxygen. Use them to save yourself. Your arms are free. Grab your knife and cut yourself out.”

“Shit!” Spader muttered. “Need a little help here!” she called, the anxiety in her tone belying her casual request.

Owen looked over his shoulder to see the lieutenant being lifted through the air to the gaping maw. “What would happen if you just shot that energy weapon?” Owen asked.

“I’d cook myself along with the vegetable,” Spader replied.

“Not a good plan then?”

“Probably not.”

Owen still had one free hand. He reached for his gun and waited for his moment. It was not easy to aim when he could not turn to face his target properly, but Jack would have his hide if he shot the person he was trying to rescue by firing off a careless shot in panic.

“Any time now, Dr. Harper!” Spader called.

The plant whisked her up into the air, just about to drop her into its digestive soup, when Owen saw his shot. The gun cracked three times, the plant shrieked again, and Spader hit the floor with a thump. Rolling on impact, Spader fired her energy weapon, first cutting Owen and Tilley free, then slicing through vines willy-nilly. Shouting over the screaming plant, she asked Owen, “What do you think? Can I risk a gut-shot or is that slop too acidic?” With a feral grin she added, “I’d hate to be remembered for getting my team cooked in digestive juices after we survived an alien’s attempt to eat us!”

“Do we have another choice?”
“I don’t know! You’re the doctor!”

“You better chance it!” Tilley screamed. “It’s snaking toward us again!”

“Hope it works,” Spader hissed as she aimed at the big bladder. “Take this!” And with that she fired.

Splattering digestive liquid everywhere the bubble burst.

Once more the plant shrieked surrealistically, its sprouts writhing. Then the vines sagged and the plant fell silent.

“What now?” Tilley asked nervously.

“Hope it’s really dead this time,” Owen mused as Spader stepped forward.

“On second thought, as this is Torchwood, maybe you should go first, doctor,” Spader smirked mischievously. “Then you’ll find out first hand if it’s not.”

“Find it out how?” Owen asked back.

“Well, going over and getting the Audrey-Jr-fodder out would be as good a way as any,” Spader teased and turned to lead them back to the hall to where the unlucky plant-victims had been awaiting rescue.

Owen could not help but laugh, “Let’s see if it lets go of them. I’m not Seymour Krelborn.”

“Well, at least you’re better looking than Rick Moranis,” she shot back, grinning.

Owen shrugged but returned her mischievous grin and followed her, Tilley right on his heels.

“We’re coming in now!” Spader shouted from outside the door.

“Okay,” a female voice whined. Sobs followed. “Get us out. Please!”

“How many of you are there?”

“I think there were five of us when we came in here!” she moaned. It was obvious how hard it was for her to call out for them.

“We’ll get you out!” Spader assured her. “Just hold out a little longer.”

“Got no other choice,” the woman sighed.

“We can’t see you from here. Where are you?”

“Near the back wall, I think,” a man’s voice answered this time. “I’m stuck in the vines. It took hold of me.”

“Okay…” Spader pulled the strap of her energy gun over her head and shoved the weapon on her back. Then she got her knife out.

“He must be over there,” Tilley said, pointing to their left side into the thick foliage filling the room.

Cutting at the vines they cleft through the green mass. When they reached the man all three of them had to work on the sprouts to cut him free. From there they fought their way further into the room in
order to release the other victims.

“Thank you! Thank you soooo much! We fled the Cybermen. This thing… Thank you!”

Over and over again the young woman expressed her gratitude as Owen and the soldiers worked on freeing her. They just pulled the last vine off her when one of the vines twitched.

“No!”

Feverishly they cut at the plant.

“Thought it was dead!” Spader shouted as she drove her knife into the strong green arm.

“You’re not the only one,” Owen snapped, pulling on the runner that wound around the woman. “C’mon! Hurry up!”

“There, that should be enough.”

“Yes!” Owen called out when the plant let go. He took the woman’s wrist and pulled her with him as he started for the door.

Rustling grew louder and more sprouts started to twitch.

“That’s not good!” Spader yelled.

“It’s got my ankle!” the woman shrieked. “Get me out! Get me out!”

“Hold still!” Owen shouted and pulled his gun out. He fired one bullet at the twine holding the leg.

“Now out!” Spader ordered and propelled them toward the exit. “Out, out!” she repeated as she shoved them through the door and into the hall. She never slowed her run, but pushed the others forward ahead of her. They were still running when Spader pulled out her radio. “Greyhound Two to Trap One!” she called the mobile headquarters. “We found survivors. Send another team in to collect them and bring us a flame-thrower… Yes, you understood right, a flame-thrower.”

“And maybe some Weedol in case that thing is fire-resistant,” Owen muttered wryly.

Spader just flashed him another of her beautiful, dangerous grins.

xXx

Torchwood Tower

conversion unit

Up high in the building, one storey below the rift chamber, the conversion chambers lay almost deserted. In one conversion unit lay the nearly completed Cyberman and in another lay Ianto Jones.

The young Welshman had to endure more than just forced immobility. The air was filled with the stench of blood, urine, and burned flesh and hair. Even though it had to be night the temperature did
not lessen, the warmth making the inactivity even harder to take.

Ianto was tired, but he could not fall asleep. A torturous restlessness made his body ache.

*Oh, Mam,* he thought. *Please help me. I don’t want to die like this. Oh, God.*

He had no way of knowing if his mother or his sister were still alive. How far did the Cybermen really spread? It was not only London. People had been seeing ghosts around the world, so it was only logical to assume that Cybermen had invaded everywhere the ghosts had been seen. They upgraded people and they killed those who were not *compatible.*

*How many did they upgrade? How many did they kill?*

Ianto shuddered. Once more his mind returned to a disturbing thought, *Is anyone out there or are they all dead? Am I the last one? The last truly human man on earth?*

His agile mind being trapped in the immovable body made Ianto strain against his bonds.

*Mam! Mam, please! Get me out! Please! Pretty please! Out. Just out!*

Ianto’s pleas remained unheard. He prayed for his family to be safe and knew that it was unlikely that they survived. His aching heart was harder to bear than his aching muscles.

Finally he fell into a restless sleep.

tbc…
"Oh, as you’ll go voluntarily, that won’t be necessary," Jack said, standing casually, his hands shoved in his trouser pockets.

Seeing that, Gwen felt a chill crawl down her spine. How did he expect to reach his gun in time?

"Not goooo!" one of the fish in the water whined.

"Well, you can go now, calmly, without raising attention, and we’ll collect the eggs and help you hatch them… or we’ll have to take you out, you’ll get locked up in our cells forever and the eggs will go to the trash. You can choose now."

The Blowfish looked at each other with what might have been incredulity in view of Jack’s brazenness, and burst into laughter once again.

"You’re… how do you call it… loco?"

"Oh, I know several words for it," Jack cheered. "Daft, crazy, barmy, loony, mad, meshugga, a nutter… pick one."

"You’re dead," the fish on the other side of the pool growled, taking aim at Jack.

"Who are you kidding?" Jack replied nonchalantly and, in a move so quick that neither the constables nor the fishes quite noticed it, he directed his own gun at the Blowfish.

The fish roared with rage and fired, but its shot only hit the ceiling as it lost aim after a small hole was punched in its forehead. For a few seconds, it stood rather immobile before it dropped forward and splashed into the pool. Screaming, the other fishes fled the water. Panicked and suddenly sobered, they searched for their clothes and the nearest exit.

Another warning shot from Jack made them freeze.

"Okay, guys," Jack said. "You can pick now, jail cells or hidden colony."

Beside him the constables still tried to look impressive. Andy had not moved much, his gun directed at the group of fish now standing beside the pool, huddled in a corner near a door. He drew confidence out of his steadiness. Gwen, though, repeatedly grabbed her gun tighter. First she aimed at the fishes in the water, then at the other across the pool, then again at the couple closest to her. She was on edge and her pulse throbbed in her neck. She had not been that scared when she faced the other creatures they had encountered, but could not tell why the fishes were different.

*Maybe because they’re stoned,* she thought. *Stoned people are unpredictable. Who knows what pot does to these creatures…*

"Time’s up, guys," Jack said. "What’s it gonna be?"
One of the fishes stepped out of the group. It appeared to be insecure but equally uninhibited, influenced by alcohol and drugs. Its gaze was unfocused but aimed to look at Jack.

“He… said that it’s not good there,” it hiccupped.

“Who said what about where?”

“Krr’ dip said we’d come here through a hole in space?” the fish to the left of the wannabe leader replied.

“Actually it’s a rift,” Jack told him. “So your eldest over there told you it wouldn’t be good to live in the colony?”

“Yes.”

“And welcomed you with booze and pot instead?”

“Yes!” all the fish answered as one.

“And you liked that?”

“Yesss!”

“But that’s not how we usually behave around here,” Jack told them dryly. “That’s unacceptable behaviour.”

The looks of the fishes turned sour.

“There’s no way back, guys,” Jack said, not unsympathetically. “The Rift only works one way. So you can live with your kind, hidden, but relatively free… or you’ll go to jail. Your choice. I’ll count to ten.”

Helplessly the fishes looked at each other. Their fin-crests on top of their heads rose with excitement as they started to discuss.

“One…” Jack said.

“What did you tell them?” Gwen wanted to know.

“I told them they can be locked up forever or live in a hidden colony.”

“There’s a colony of them around here?” Andy asked incredulously.

“Yeah… Two!”

“They live here in Cardiff?” Gwen was shocked.

“No, not in Cardiff. It’s a little distance outside. Three!”

“So where?” Andy prodded.

“You don’t have to know. You couldn’t tell anyone anyway.” Jack smirked. “And why’d you want to know? Wanna go and visit them?”

Both constables glanced at each other questioningly, then they shook their heads.

“That’s what I thought. Four!”
“And that works?” Gwen asked. “They stay there and live their lives?”

“More or less,” Jack huffed. “As I said, they love to enjoy themselves. Pot, booze, fast cars… they love everything that brings fun. Five!”

“Sounds like your ordinary junkie around the next corner.”

“Could be.” Jack chuckled. “Six!”

“What do you think they’ll do?” Andy asked.

“Are you kidding? You don’t think that they’ll go to jail, do you? Seven!”

One of the fishes left the group and came hesitantly closer. He held out a gun at Jack and looked down at his feet.

“We’ll come with you,” it said.

“Wise decision,” Jack praised. “C’mon. Get dressed and then we’re out of here.”

“Cool,” Andy sighed. “Can we put our guns down?”

“Yeah.”

“Great.” Breathing a sigh of relief, Andy put his weapon away.

“They make me nervous,” Gwen admitted.

“Never say that in front of a suspect or a prisoner,” Jack admonished her. “Didn’t you learn things like that at the police academy?”

“Um…” Gwen did not know what to reply.

“Okay, great, guys!” Jack cheered. “And now that we’re all dressed we’ll get into the car and I’ll take you to your new home.”

“You’ll go alone?”

“Well,” Jack purred, “First I’ll need another car. There are nine Blowfish and they won’t fit in your police car. But yeah, I’ll go alone. You don’t need to know where we’re going.”

“Where do you get a bus now?”

“That’s my problem. I’ll get one.” He fished his mobile phone out of his jacket pocket. “Keep an eye on them.”

“When you drive them to the colony we can go back to your headquarters?”

Jack had been on his way out to make the call in private, but now he turned back to face the constables. A mysterious smirk played around his lips. Then he winked and left.

xXx
London

“Thank you so much for getting us out,” Melinda Daintree said for the umpteenth time while Owen treated her injuries. They were in the triage tent down on One Canada Square. He knew that he would have trouble getting her to leave him alone. She was in shock and fixated on the first person who was kind to her and that was the young doctor.

“Okay, Miss Daintree,” Owen said. “You’re all patched up.”

“And it didn’t even hurt,” she smirked at him wryly.

“Good,” Owen grinned back. “So I didn’t forget everything since my time at A&E.” The truth was, the giant carnivorous plant had left the survivors with little more than scrapes and bruises and probably some pretty horrific nightmares. If Miss Daintree hadn’t been slightly shocky, he probably would not have considered escorting her down to triage.

“You’re not at a hospital anymore? Do you have your own office?”

“No, I’m a medical officer with a governmental organisation in Cardiff. They sent us here to help”

“Oh, so you’re a consultant?”

“Something like that, yeah,” he agreed. “Well, we’re done here. You can go home now.”

“Home?”

“You certainly don’t want to stay here, do you?”

“I don’t mind your company,” she purred, batting her eyes at him.

Oh, bloody hell, Owen thought, struggling not to roll his eyes. “Much as I would like to spend the rest of the night with you, there may be others in that building who need my attention,” he said patiently. “If you feel at all unwell while you’re waiting to be debriefed, just let someone know, and I’m sure they will look after you, all right?” he tried to sound compassionate and reassuring while still conveying the message that he was through with her and had to move on to something else.

It must have worked, because Melinda replied, a bit shakily, “I… I suppose. It’s just that… Well, you came from Cardiff. What… what does it look like away from here? Is it as bad as this everywhere?”

Owen took a moment to choose his words, and he must have hesitated a little too long, because she began to weep.

“See, that’s just it,” Melinda sobbed. “I don’t even know if I still have a home to go to! Dear God! What did we do?”

“Awww, c’mon, now,” Owen tried to soothe her, sitting down and putting an arm around her shoulders. “We came back from the Blitz after the Second World War,” he said. “As bad as it is out there, it can’t be worse than that.”

“You’re not very reassuring, you know,” she laughed through her tears.

“That’s another reason why I don’t work with patients anymore,” he said with a wink. “Seriously, though, you survived. That’s the most important thing. Now we all, every one of us, has to be brave
and go on. You and your colleagues…”

“Colleagues?” she interrupted him.

“The ones in the lab? Weren’t you working there?”

“No,” she hiccupped. “The Cybermen brought us in from the streets. We fled into the lab when those other things showed up.”

“I see…”

“I’ve never been *that* scared in my life before,” she rasped. “It’s been horrible! A living nightmare!”

Owen was not sure what to reply, so he picked up where he left off, “Anyway, you and the others escaped the Cybermen and survived that bloody Venus flytrap, so I know you got it in you to pick up the pieces and move on from here. That’s why I don’t have to worry about leaving you with these blokes now, isn’t it?”


“That’s my girl,” Owen said with a wink and a smile. “Just remember, you already survived the worst.”

“I w-will,” Melinda promised

“Good girl,” Owen gave her a genuine smile, feeling his stomach muscles flutter uncomfortably when he saw the look she threw at him. Actually he did not want to encourage her, not that way. Then he had to chuckle inwardly. *One rare opportunity, Dr. Harper, he told himself. Usually no female with looks like hers is safe from you.*

Of course he could not tell her that.

“Okay. I’ll have to go with my team again. You’ll take care, right, Miss Daintree?”

“Melinda,” she said, looking at him hopefully.

“Sorry, but I’ve gotta go now.”

“Well, if you’ve got to go, you’ve got to go,” she sighed.

On his way out, Owen could sense her gaze that bore in his back. *Or rather my backside?* the doctor wondered. Then he was outside and took a deep breath of relief.

*I wonder what Suzie’s doing right now. What’s her team come across?*

He had no chance to think about it further because his attention was drawn to the mobile barriers where soldiers limited the access to the plaza. People who came for help and needed medical assistance were allowed to go to the triage. The big tent was buzzing with activity. UNIT’s doctors were more than just busy. Other people who were just curious were waiting behind the fences.

And then there was that young woman who was shouting at one of the soldiers.

“How can one be so stubborn?” she complained. “I was only asking for someone responsible who can tell me about the registration of missing and dead people. Is that asking too much?”

Owen overheard that as he strolled over to the barrier. Turning to the soldier he said, “Excuse me, is
there a problem, Private?"

xXx

Cardiff

“I didn’t think that we’d have to clean up again,” Gwen sighed.

“So what?” Andy laughed. “You thought Jack would do it?”

“Well…”

After picking up the garbage and mopping the tiled floor of the pool hall, they had found a couple of buckets and were fishing the eggs out of the pool. Jack also had explained to them how they had to use the chemicals from the pool attendant’s closet to clean the water so that nobody would notice that a bunch of randy adolescent Blowfish had thrown a party.

“One thing’s for sure, though,” Gwen groaned as she reached out with the net to catch the last eggs.

“What?”

“That working for Torchwood is only a dazzling job at first sight.”

“And they say the police would do the dirty job,” Andy said. “At least we don’t have to clean up the bar after we arrest the fighting patrons.”

“Now that would be even better!” Gwen panted, stretching to reach some floating eggs.

“Whooooooaaa!”

“Gwen!”

Too late.

With a big splash, Gwen vanished in the pool.

“Ohhhhh! Bloody hell!” she panted when she surfaced again. “Andy! Get me out of here!”

But Andy could not help. He was holding his sides as he burst with laughter.

“Oh, I’ll be glad when we’re back on the beat!” she cursed, paddling to the pool’s edge.

“No, you won’t!” Andy snorted with laughter.

“I sure won’t miss this bloody job!”

She boosted herself up and twisted her body so that she came to sit on the edge.

“Yes, you will!” Andy told her.

“No, I won’t!”
Smirking wickedly, he gazed down at her.

“Yes, you will,” he said adamantly, and when she now raised her dark brown deer’s eyes at him, he could clearly see that he was right.

xXx

London

“Yes! There’s a bloody problem,” the young woman raged while the private was still trying to determine who Owen was, where he stood in the chain of command, and whether or not he answered to him. “My cousin works in that place. I’m trying to find out whether she’s dead or alive, and this prat keeps giving me the same useless response. It’s like calling customer service when the bloody computer goes down and working your way through three or four menus before you get to a pre-recorded message that says all representatives are busy at this time.”

Whoa! Take a breath! Owen thought, smirking to himself. He already liked her.

“I’m sorry, Miss,” the soldier tried to stand his ground. “But this area…”

“…is currently off limits to all unauthorized personnel. I know! You told me like six times. Look, I have family in there. I figure that’s as much authorization as I need.” Turning to Owen she asked, “Do you have any idea what in bloody hell is going on around here?”

“I’m Dr. Harper,” Owen introduced himself. “I’ll try to help you if I can, Miss…?”

“Jones, Martha Jones,” she said, flashing a dazzling white smile at him that was contrasted by her dark skin. Then she spat at the soldier, “See, that’s how you should treat a lady.”

Owen smirked.

“So you’re searching for one of your relatives,” Owen mused. “Where exactly was your cousin working?”

“At an office in Canary Wharf Tower,” Martha explained. “She’s a technician. Her name’s Adeola Oshodi.”

“I’m not sure about how many people are registered yet,” Owen told her, “but I could go and check if her name appears on any list.”

“That would be very nice of you, Dr. Harper.”

“Owen,” he offered, smirking at her.

“Martha.”

“I’ll be right back, Martha,” he told her and walked back to the triage tent. There he had to ask his way to someone who could actually answer the question of registration. Together with the private, Owen checked the lists for Martha’s cousin. Then Owen returned to the barrier.
“Martha, your cousin is still listed as missing,” he told her.

“Missing…” Martha mused. “Well, she must’ve been here when those Cybermen came. I’m sure she was at work.”

“The tower is not completely secured yet,” Owen confided in her. “So we can’t tell yet who was there and who wasn’t.”

“Could I wait somewhere around here? I could reach my parents and siblings, and my mum managed to speak to my aunt and uncle. Adeola’s the only one unaccounted for. I guess we were lucky, but I’d really like to stick around and make sure she’s okay, too.”

“I think you could always wait right here and…”

“I have a better idea,” Martha interrupted him. “I could help. I’m a med student. I could assist at the triage. Could you go and ask if that’s all right?”

“Sure,” Owen agreed, delighted that she would stay close by. “Just wait here and I’ll ask the officer in charge.”

“Thanks.”

So he returned once more to the triage tent where he stopped Dr. Granger and told him about Martha Jones.

“There you are!” someone called out just when he had finished his question. It was Lieutenant Spader. “Come. Our team’s supposed to go back in.”

“Okay. What do you say?” he turned to the doctor who nodded.

“I’ll talk to her,” Dr. Granger said and hurried to his next patient.

“And you come with me,” Spader grumbled. “We have another briefing!”

They went to another tent where the meeting just was about to end.

“We need to make faster progress,” Colonel Mace said right then. “I sent a team to work on restoring power. They said that they almost made it. When you go in… you’ll have all the power you’ll need back on.”

“Oh, great,” Owen huffed. “And whatever still is in there will have the same power available.”

The colonel did not need to answer his objection, because right at that moment a number of lights lit in Canary Wharf Tower.

xXx

Torchwood Tower

conversion unit
It did not feel as if time was passing at all.

Being trapped in the conversion unit, all Ianto could move was his mind. As he had quickly noticed, thinking about his family and friends was going to drive him mad. There still was no sign of any rescue team coming for possible survivors so he forced himself not to think about police officers and firemen either.

So what was to think about instead?

Unfortunately he was led back to the metallic stomps of the Cybermen. In the surreal silence around him, he could hear almost everything that came to his mind, not only the stomps but also the whirring of their hydraulics and their synthesized voices.

And then there was Lisa!

The glimpse he had caught of her was burned in his memory. When he now recalled the picture of her, he could see all the horrific details, the cables embedded in her body, the armour fused with her flesh, and the helmet augmented to her head.

A hitching breath caught in Ianto’s chest as grief overwhelmed him. His attempt to choke it down resulted in a painful lump that stuck in his throat.

*Oh God, this is a nightmare. Get me out of here. Please!*

But there was no way out. He could not free himself and help was nowhere to be seen.

Grief tightened his chest.

*They should’ve deleted me. At least it would’ve happened fast.*

When a low rustle and wheezing sounds waved through the conversion chamber, Ianto thought he was mistaken. The all enveloping silence had been deafening before and now the awakening of the ventilation system was as surreal as the silence had been.

*The power must be back!* Ianto realized. *Oh, God! The power’s back!*

Then he found out why that thought filled him with fear.

There was a snapping sound and then the hissing of hydraulics.

*What the bloody hell…?*

Panic grabbed for Ianto’s heart with its icy hand when the instruments hovering above his head started to move again.

“What the…!”

His words died in his throat to a painful croak.

Over him the saws began to whirl and the arm with the scissors descended.

“Shit!”

Sensor beams flitted over his body, feeding the machine with data. The scissors came even closer and opened.
“Nooooo!” Ianto screamed in a panic as the steel blade slid under his suit jacket. He could feel its cold, but did not know if it broke the skin.

“Oh, Celi! Nooooo!”

His voice was about to break with hysteria.

And the scissors started to work on him, cutting his clothes away, another metal arm coming from the side, taking fabric off him.

“Oooohhhhhhh, ceeeeeccccchwwch!”

Ianto could see it only peripherally, but he knew by the direction the scissor arm took where it aimed to cut…

…between his legs.

He was about to lose his mind. Scared half to death, he felt an embarrassing warmth down there as what little was left in his bladder trickled down his flesh and onto the metal table beneath him.

Suddenly a high screeching sound made his hair stand on end and his skin crawl.

“What…?”

His voice gave out as did his mind.

Scared beyond what he was able to endure, he lost consciousness.

tbc…

Chapter End Notes

“celi” is Welsh for “God” and “cechwch” is “shit”. At least the online dictionary said so…
Suzie Costello was not as comfortable with the UNIT operatives she was accompanying as Owen was with Lieutenant Spader and Private Tilley. Lieutenant Anderson treated her professionally, but except for communication necessary to coordinate their advance into the building they did not talk. As their leader, Anderson did not feel the necessity to make conversation and Private Hocke only seemed to speak when he was asked or spoken to.

So Suzie stalked down one corridor after the other, climbed stairs, and examined rooms alongside the soldiers. They worked efficiently without wasting much breath for unnecessary words.

That was why their team was the one that got the farthest up the tower so far, currently examining just another corridor of the Archives.

“Hold on a moment!” Suzie commanded when she noticed something strange.

“What is it?” Anderson barked.

“I thought I heard something,” Suzie told him. “We should check it out.”

For a moment all three of them stood and listened for any unusual sound.

“There’s nothing,” Anderson declared. “We’ll go on.”

“But I’m sure that I heard something,” Suzie said adamantly. “We should explore it!”

The radio interrupted them when Trap One called for Greyhound One. Anderson answered their boss and got new information about the rearrangements of troops. He just was told that a team was working on restoring the power when the lights of the corridor switched on.

“Great! No more torchlights!” Hocke said cheerfully.

Anderson shot him a death glare.

That was when a screeching sound echoed through the hall, followed by what appeared to be screams.

Suzie reacted at once, turning on her heels and starting in the direction of the sound.

“Agent Costello! Where are you going?” Lieutenant Anderson shouted and signalled Hocke to advance with the necessary caution. “Don’t rush it!”

His advise remained unanswered, though, as Suzie ran down the corridor and around a corner, driven by eagerness of finding survivors. Still she did not forget to be cautious, lifting her gun and aiming at whatever she might encounter in the new hallway. There was no obvious threat and the Torchwood field operative advanced down the hall. She heard shouts again and so she called out herself, “Hello? Who’s there?”

“Here!” someone screamed, the female voice short of breaking. “Who’s out there?”
“Help us!” a man joined her. “Get us out!”

“Where are you?” Suzie shouted back.

“We’re in here!” the woman yelled. “Please! Help us!”

_The elevator!_ Suzie realized, striding over to the closed doors. The panel was damaged and there was something like scratch marks in the varnish. Prying the doors open proved to be difficult, but with some effort Suzie managed a gap and put her torch between the doors to keep them from sliding shut.

“Hello?” Suzie said, squatting down. Through the gap, she could look into the carriage that was stuck between two storeys.

“Thank God!” the man replied. “We thought we’d be the only ones left. Can you get us out of here?”

“Yes, please!” the woman added. “Before they’re back!”

“The Cybermen are gone,” Suzie told them. “I’m Suzie. I’ll get help. Stay calm, I’ll be right back.”

When she got up, she almost bumped into Lieutenant Anderson.

“Find something, Agent?” Anderson grumbled, clearly unhappy with the agent’s swift reaction.

“Yes!” Suzie replied. “There are survivors in the lift. We need a rescue team with heavy equipment.”

Nodding curtly Anderson gestured Hocke to inform _Trap One._

“You’ve got to be careful!” the man in the lift warned. “They could come back anytime!”

“It’s all right, sir, the Cybermen are defeated,” Suzie said reassuringly. “There’s no need to worry. We’ll get you out. Just be patient a bit longer.”

“They’re not Cybermen,” he told her anxiously. “They’re something else. We ran in here and one charged at the lift. That’s why we’re stuck!”

“What was it? Big thing? Metallic? Looked like a pepper pot?”

“No! It was a creature!” he panted frantically. “It’s alive! Get us out! Please!”

“Yes, yes. In a minute or two.” Suzie did not have the patience to argue with him now. Anderson stared at her as if he wanted to skin her alive. “What?” she snapped. “We were looking for survivors and here they are.”

“We’re looking for possible threats.” Anderson was unapologetic. “You shouldn’t have jumped the gun on us.”

“Lieutenant, I respect you as team leader as an interdepartmental courtesy, but I’m not subordinate to you,” Suzie spoke in a strong but calm tone, proving to the UNIT soldiers that she was indeed second of command of Torchwood’s branch office. “We’re in Torchwood Tower, and effectively I’m in command of this operation.”

“I’m aware of that, ma’am,” Anderson told her brusquely. “Just as aware as I am that we should know better than to underestimate the dangers we might encounter. That’s why UNIT is providing
military backup to provide security. We need to co-operate.”

“Right,” Suzie agreed. “After all, the invaders may be gone, but we have no idea what is stored or contained inside the institute. We better had open our eyes and mind and act like the professionals we are.”

Anderson opened his mouth to reply, but closed it again. His gaze went past Suzie over her shoulder.

Suzie did not hear anything, but the frightened sparkle in Anderson’s eyes alarmed her. Something was in the hallway, and it certainly was not friendly. Whatever moved down the hall behind Suzie made clicking sounds, presumably with its claws.

“Your weapon,” Anderson hissed lowly.

“Already got it,” Suzie whispered back. “How far away?”

“Ten yards.”

Suzie nodded. “Three, two, one…”

Both Suzie and Anderson let themselves fall just in time to avoid the creature that jumped forward and landed on the spot where they had been a second before. It screamed, baring rows of needle-like, razor sharp teeth.

xXx

Cardiff

When they finally returned to Roald Dahl Plass, the first rays of light peeked over the horizon. Neither Gwen nor Andy had an eye for the beauty of the bay, though. They were simply dead tired. So they followed Jack through the tourist office to the elevator that brought them down to the Hub where they met Toshiko.

“Hey, Tosh,” Jack said. “Is everything calm?”

“For now…” she replied, sinking on the sofa across from her workstation. She had a mug in hands and the smell coming from it teased the constables’ noses.

“Hmmm, coffee,” Gwen said dreamily. “If I wasn’t that tired I’d love to have a cup.”

“Guess we had better go to bed,” Andy said. “Or maybe I should finally call my mother.”

“That’s a great idea, too,” Gwen agreed.

Fishing out his cell phone Andy switched it open. “Still no connection,” he murmured. “I tried it earlier, but the network seems to be down.”

Taking out her own phone Gwen grimaced as it did not start at all and groaned, “Looks like mine’s died in the pool.”
“Your mobiles wouldn’t work down here anyway,” Toshiko threw in, refraining from mentioning that she had blocked both the constables’ phones to keep them from blabbing and avoid distractions. “Besides, you’re temping for a top-secret government agency and haven’t properly vetted yet. You’ll call from a secure line or not at all. I can connect you with the computer.”

“That would be great,” Gwen cheered. “Could we do it now?”

“Sure… in a few minutes, okay?” the Japanese scientist replied, sipping at her coffee. “Jack, the thermos is in your office.”

“Thanks, Tosh. You’re a peach.”

Tiredly she smiled at him.

“Oh, and you’ll give your mobiles over to Tosh,” Jack told the constables.

“Will we get them back?” Gwen asked, toying with the phone in her hand but not handing it over immediately.

“If it’s at all possible, yes,” Toshiko replied.

“And if you don’t you won’t remember losing it,” Jack said cryptically as he slowly continued to his office.

Gwen frowned, but did not protest further when Andy complied without complaint.

“I really hope the Rift calms down now,” Jack murmured, stopping at the door to his office. Then he advised the police officers, “Take a break, sleep a bit. If something comes up I might need you again.”

“I was afraid you’d say something like that,” Andy chuckled wryly. “First a call. I need to know my family’s safe.”

“So do I,” Gwen said. Actually she should have checked in with Rhys much earlier, but first they had been so busy due to the Cyberinvasion and then she was so excited about their temporary assignment that she honestly did not think of calling him.

Suppressing a yawn, Toshiko nodded, “Okay, okay. I’m coming.” She swallowed a big gulp of her coffee, put the mug down and got up from the sofa. At her workstation she pulled up communication programs and began to type as she murmured to herself, “Rhys Williams…” as well as address and phone number as she tapped away at the keyboard. She might have rambled on, but she had made the connection and the ring tone sounded out of the speakers. Then they heard a deep and rather agitated voice, “Williams.”

“It’s me, Gwen,” she answered automatically and barely got to say her name before she was cut off by her boyfriend.

“Oh, my God, Gwen!” Rhys shouted. “I hardly dared to hope! I thought you’re dead! Where the hell are you?”

“Rhys, love. I’m fine,” Gwen tried to assure him. “It was the job…”

“Yeah, you’re the police, I know,” he barked. “Couldn’t you spare even a few seconds of your precious time to let me know you’re all right?”
“I’m sorry, love,” Gwen chirped in an attempt to appease him and was cut off again.

“At headquarters they couldn’t tell where you are. Your sergeant said you and Andy had checked out hours ago. It’s morning already… So where the hell are you?”

“I’m sorry, Rhys,” Gwen all but sobbed. “We were assigned to a special ops unit.”

“Special ops? In Cardiff?” Rhys muttered, incredulous.

“Oh, Rhys, I’m really sorry,” Gwen pleaded. “I’ll make up for it, all right? Tell me what I can do.”

“You can call your parents to get them off my back,” he grumbled, but he did not sound as angry as a few moments before. “Every thirty minutes they’re calling to ask for you.”

“Consider it done,” Gwen assured him. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart,” he told her with a tender note lacing his voice.

“Take care, Rhys the Rant,” Gwen teased with a low chuckle. “I love you.”

“Will do, Gwen. Be back soon.”

“I’ll try. I can’t tell how long we’ll be needed here. So sorry.”

“I understand,” Rhys said, but it sounded a little forced.

“Bye, love.”

“Bye, Gwen.”

For a moment, Gwen just stood there, thoughtfully, remembering Rhys’s voice, longing to touch him and share the exciting things she encountered during the last hours. Her insides churned slightly when she realized that she could never do that. So she never noticed that Toshiko typed away on her keyboard.

“Gwen?” Andy asked, taking her by the arm, shaking her slightly. “Hello!”

“What?”

“Toshiko asked you a question, partner.”

“I’m sorry,” Gwen smiled at the computer expert. “What did you want to know?”

“I have your parents’ data here. I’ll connect you.”

“Oh, yes, Toshiko. Thank you.”

Nodding, Toshiko entered the numbers and returned to her work while Gwen talked to her mother. The constable had just finished her call when a colourful blur jumped down from the gallery. It landed on Toshiko’s table and hopped down on the floor.

“Whoa!” Gwen shouted, startled by the sudden movement.

Toshiko craned her neck to check what had surprised the constable so much.

“Hey, Yvonne,” she purred, leaning down under her desk. “How are you, sweetie?”
“Oh, my God! It’s a cat!” Gwen gasped.

And really, at her feet sat a calico cat with long fur that looked up at her out of emerald green eyes. It tilted its head when Gwen bent a little forward.

“What did you expect?” Toshiko chuckled from under the tabletop. “A pet alien?”

“Would that be so unlikely?” Gwen laughed back. Then she turned to the cat, “Who are you, love?”

“Her name’s Yvonne,” Toshiko told her again. “She’s taking care of rats and mice for us. Don’t you, Yvonne, honey?”

The cat turned her head to the computer expert. Getting up, she went over to Toshiko and licked on her fingers. Disappointed by not finding anything interesting there, she returned to Gwen. She strolled right up to her, brushing against her legs, and meowed.

“What is it, love?” Gwen asked her, knowing pretty well that she could not answer.

Instead Yvonne cuddled up to the constable’s legs, strolling around them, and rubbing her head against Gwen’s shin.

“Are you hungry?” Gwen purred.

Yvonne meowed again. She craned her neck, rubbing as much of her body against the leg as she could. Her voice rose with every meow.

“Do you have a treat for her?”

“No. We don’t give Yvonne treats anymore,” Toshiko said. Then she chuckled. “There was a time when we all used to spoil her, with tuna, chicken, boiled eggs, whatever we thought she’d like. When Jack realized she was morbidly obese and had developed a bad habit of hanging around and begging whenever we were eating, he finally forbade us from feeding her anything at all.”

“Oh, really? So she doesn’t get any extra food? A Whiskas meal?”

“Jack feeds her twice a day, and when he can’t be here, he asks one of us to do it. I think Owen still sneaks her the occasional prawn cracker, but other than that, no, she doesn’t get any treats except for the rodents she kills,” Toshiko told her. She came around her workstation, a plush mouse in hand. “Hello, Yvonne. Do you feel like playing?”

Yvonne, though, meowed again and pressed harder against Gwen’s legs.

“What does she want?” Andy asked. “She seems to be fixated on Gwen.”

“Well, no matter what it is… I really need that shower.” She turned on her heels and started for the vaults. “Sorry, kitty, but I need to get off that smell.”

When Gwen started to walk away Yvonne hissed and jumped right after her. She meowed aggressively and dug the claws of her right front paw into Gwen’s trousers.

“Ouch!” Gwen squeaked, jerking her leg back. “That hurt!”

The cat, though, pawed at her again.

“Hey, those are my trousers!” Gwen tried to shoo her away, but Yvonne did not let her. So the
police officer became angry and raised her hand to lash out at the cat.

“Hey!” Jack’s voice thundered through the Hub. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Gwen flinched and lowered her hand.

“Don’t tell me the cat started it! I don’t want to hear excuses!” Jack bellowed as he came up to the workstation. “Yvonne! Love! Come with me!”

Unexpectedly, at least for the constables, the cat followed Jack to his office. Glowering at Gwen a last time he closed the door on them.

“What was that?” Gwen asked.

“Yvonne has already been here when Jack recruited Suzie,” Toshiko explained. “I was the second and then followed Owen. Yvonne, though, always stayed the first, a part of the team, kind of.”

“That’s kind of cute, actually,” Andy said.

Gwen rolled her eyes at him. “I’ll go have that shower.”

“Yeah, go!” Andy teased. “You smell of fish!”

“As if you’d smell any better!”

“I sure do!” her partner laughed. “You go ahead. I’ll just call my parents.”

Giving him a thumb up, Gwen turned and vanished in the tunnel.

xXx

London

“Agent Harper, you’re being insubordinate,” Colonel Mace growled.

“No,” Owen replied. “I’m just expressing my worry about giving potential dangerous elements in the Tower access to power again. We should wait until we completely searched the building before we restore power.”

Mace looked as if he wanted to explode. The colonel reigned his temper in, though, and asked, “What kind of threats are we talking about?”

“I don’t know, Colonel,” Owen huffed, nodding at the Tower. “A giant flesh-eating plant probably is only a foretaste on what awaits us. Do you know whether the Cybermen’s equipment was automated? There could be dozens of victims in there somewhere just waiting to be converted. Do you want to risk reconstituting their army?”

“But it’s also possible that restoring the power is our advantage,” Mace said.

“It’s possible, sir,” Owen agreed, “I was only saying that we should take into consideration that it
could turn out to be a disadvantage.”

“Your worry is noted, Agent Harper,” Mace said. “Now, if you want to go back inside you should catch up with your team.”

Following the colonel’s gaze Owen noticed that his designated team members were on their way back to the tower. Mock saluting at Mace, Owen followed them. Together, they approached with renewed enthusiasm. Greyhound Two was about to go back in.

Together with Lieutenant Spader and Sergeant Tilley, he started to walk toward the Tower. Greyhound Two was about to go back in.

“So what do you really think we might encounter?” Spader asked.

“I have no idea,” Owen huffed, holding the big gun he had insisted on taking with him tighter. “That’s what’s so exciting about it, don’t you think?”

“Exciting?” Spader chuckled. “Yeah, it can be exciting as well.”

“I see something else exciting,” Owen smirked at her.

“What could that be?”

“Well, I’m looking at you, ain’t I, love?” Owen replied.

“I suppose, but what does that have to do with anything?” the lieutenant said, biting back a smirk of her own.

“In that case I should probably rethink the witty mind…” Owen said innocently and opened the door for Spader and Tilley to pass. They walked straight past him and to their designated stairwell. Owen had to hurry to keep up with them.

“You need to get more exercise,” Spader suggested when they were back on the thirteenth floor, hearing Owen pant behind her.

“Yeah, maybe,” Owen agreed, wishing the weapon was not so heavy. “Maybe you should show me a good workout when this is all over?”

“Well, if you’re still up to it then…” Spader teased, taking the next stairs in a fluent run.

Owen grunted, but followed her right on foot.

“How about approaching a bit slower in case that we run into an ambush?” he gasped.

“Scared, Dr. Harper?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Maybe you’re right, though,” she said. “Maybe we should be.”

Raising her weapon, she stopped at the door to floor fourteen.

“Did you hear something?”

“I’m not sure,” she told them. “I thought I did.”
That was when her radio crackled.

*Greyhound One to all units!* Anderson’s voice echoed out of the radio. *We have a code 10 zero. I repeat. Code 10 zero! We’re under attack!*

tbc…
“Was she going to hit you, sweetie?” Jack murmured, as he sank into his office chair. “Come here, sweetie. Come.”

Clicking his tongue and snapping his fingers, he lured her closer. When he patted his thigh, she jumped up in his lap.

“Did Gwen scare you?” Jack murmured, letting his fingers trail through the thick long fur. Squirming, she turned around. Once Jack started to caress her tummy, she began to purr.

“Yes, my precious girl, you like that, don’t you?” Jack whispered, a tender smile cracking his features.

He really loved this cat. His mind was taken on a journey back to when he returned from a mission to find that their leader Alex had killed his whole team. Mercy killings Alex had called the massacre and begged Jack to forgive him that he could not do the same for him, a moment before he blew his own brains out.

That bloodbath had shaken Jack to the core.

His time with Torchwood had been a constant up and down and with Alex’s team he rediscovered a bright side of life. Jack knew that he would lose them one day, but that it happened by the hand of their leader shocked him.

It shocked him so much that he was not able to get up from where he had tumbled to somewhere by the basin. How long he really sat there, he did not know. It could have been hours, it could have been days. It felt the same and Jack did not care. When he could move again after what seemed to be forever, he stored the bodies and cleaned up the mess Alex had left.

After that, he sat on the stairs leading from the entrance to the workplaces and stared at the cold concrete floor and the stains that he could not get off. Jack ignored the ringing phone as well as his hunger and thirst. He spent the first night there on the stairs.

In hindsight, he was astonished that he could still grieve like that.

On the second day, he reacted to a Rift alert, but he functioned on auto pilot and returned to the Hub as soon as the situation was under control. Even though he did not feel like going out, staying put there turned out to be worse. The empty base was full of ghosts, imagined pictures or voices reminding Jack wherever he went of the tragic loss. The next night found him sobbing on the floor in Alex’s office where he sank down on his knees, mourning. Going in there had simply been too much. He dropped onto his side and there he lay, first crying then simply breathing.

Then something hit his forehead.

What…? he wondered, but could not make himself open his eyes.

Jack was beginning to think he had imagined it, when he felt it again. It was surprisingly soft. Curiosity won out and he looked at what disturbed his grief.
“Meow!”

The feeble sound tore on his nerves.

“What is it?” Jack asked.

Right in front of his head sat a kitten, white, red, and black in colour and with emerald green eyes. It meowed again, heartrendingly.

“Are you hungry?” Jack guessed and finally got up from the floor to go and find the kitten something to eat.

To his astonishment and joy, Jack found a package of fish-fingers. When they fried in the pan, the smell made Jack realize that he was hungry himself. Before he sat down to eat, though, he picked the breading off two of the fish-fingers and fed them to the tiny animal. Only then he ate himself. As the frozen meal had been the only thing in the fridge, Jack went to get groceries.

Over the next days, the kitten snuck her way into Jack’s heart. She was pretty cunning, reminding Jack of someone he knew, and so her name became Yvonne.

That was how she saved the captain’s sanity after the tragic loss of Alex’s team and he had shown her his gratitude ever since.

“Do you want to play?” Jack asked, crumbling a sheet of paper. “Wanna catch the ball?”

Snapping his fingers, Jack shot the paper ball off the table and Yvonne jumped like lightning after it. With mild amusement, Jack watched her paw at the ball. Then she took it in her mouth and returned to Jack, dropping her catch into his lap.

“Thank you, Yvonne,” he said, caressing her head right behind the right ear. She cocked her head into his caress, but he was forgotten instantly when he threw the ball again. With a long jump she darted after it.

Her momentum carried her past the paper ball and she slid over the concrete on her stomach…

…until she lost her grip on the plain rim of the manhole.

“Meow!” she cried out as she dropped, bottom first, down the cubby hole.

“Yvonne!” Jack called out, jumping up from his chair and darting to the ladder. Quickly he climbed down the bars. “Yvonne?”

“Meow!” she answered pitifully.

When Jack reached the bottom of the hole, his eyes needed a moment to adjust to the twilight. Then he found Yvonne sitting on the floor.

“Now that was a scare, wasn’t it?” he murmured, picking her up. “Come, I’ll bring you back up and then you’ll get an extra treat. Okay?”

So he climbed the ladder with the cat safely sitting in the crook of his left arm. Up in the office, he sat back down at the desk where he found a packed of Dreamies Cat Treats in a drawer and he fed a few bits to the poor cat that snuggled up close to him.

Slowly she relaxed and under his skilled fingers she soon purred again, forgetting about her fear.
London

Suzie had no time to relax at all because the creature turned its head, staring at her out of tiny black eyes. It issued a string of fast clicking sounds and tilted its head to the side. Suzie stared back at it, trying to keep her frantically beating heart under control. She did not dare to move and was not sure why. For some odd reason she believed that the creature could not actually see her.

“We have a code 10 zero!” Anderson yelled into his radio. “I repeat. Code 10 zero! We’re under attack!”

He did not get farther as the creature spun around and lashed out at him. Anderson brought up his weapon just in time, not to shoot, but to protect his body from the claws that sliced across the metal.

What is that thing? Suzie wondered, scrambling to her feet and stepping back from the attacker. She raised her gun and fired at its back.

Screaming, the creature reared and twisted around. Suzie saw the sharp teeth, aimed at the muzzle, and pulled the trigger. The creature clawed at her and its claws left kerfs in the floor. The impact of the bullets snapped its head back viciously and it finally staggered.

More shots thundered, this time coming from Anderson’s gun. Once more the body jerked before it collapsed to the floor and lay still.

“What kind of creature is that?” Suzie demanded to know. “Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“No!” Anderson replied. A voice echoed out of his radio. “I think it’s dead… No, I can’t identify it… It’s about seven feet tall, black, looks like… I don’t know, an oversized Gollum, even uglier, with razor teeth!” Lieutenant Anderson answered the question from Trap One. “It has sharp claws. It left scratch marks on my MP… Yes, it did! No, I’m not making that up, sir.”

Finishing the radio call, Anderson snorted with anger. “My imagination’s not running wild.”

“Okay…” Suzie replied, shrugging. “Where’s Hocke?”

Being asked now, Anderson realized that he did not know.Searching, he looked around the hallway but could not see the private. The lift doors were shut again. Someone had to have pulled the torch out of the gap.

“Private Hocke, state your position,” Anderson demanded over the radio and turned to the lift. “Help me, Agent Costello! He’s in there.”

Together they tried to open the doors again. They had almost made it, when Suzie felt chills run down her back. A second later, she realized why.

She had heard the fast clicking sounds again.

“You’re sure it’s dead?” she snarled at Anderson.
“Yeah. Why?”

With a feeling of dread, Suzie looked back over her shoulder and choked. There was another one of the strange creatures at the end of the hallway, hanging from the ceiling.

“Let’s see what it’s responding to,” Anderson murmured. “Move over to the other hall, out of its sight.”

Slowly, keeping an eye on the creature until they stepped around the corner, they stalked over and into the hall opposite the lift.

“Hey!” someone from inside the carriage shouted. “You’re not leaving us, are you? Hello?”

“Shhh!” Anderson hissed and radioed Hocke to keep them quiet.

The people in the elevator did neither listen to him nor to the private, though, and continued to call out for their presumed rescuers. They were making quite a noise and when Anderson peeked around the corner, he saw that the creature was closer now; its head tilted sideways, listening, fixating the lift doors.

Suddenly it jumped down on the floor, charging forward. Anderson was stunned by its speed. In a matter of seconds, it made it down the hall to the lift where it skidded to a halt on the linoleum.

Now Suzie could clearly see that it had three toes with big claws on its hind legs that were deeply bent as it squatted in front of the lift, scraping the claws of its two-fingered hands over the doors and leaving deep gashes. Its arms were disproportionately long while the short neck sat on strong shoulders with a hump of muscles on its back.

Suddenly it looked around at Suzie and Anderson.

Suzie held her breath and her hand closed even tighter around the grip of her gun. She could not spot the creature’s eyes at first. They were tiny and barely visible on both sides of the flat nose, or what she presumed was a nose, that sat high on the round head with its conic snout. Its round ears most likely served it like satellite dishes. From their place at the centre of its head, a crest of bony spikes ran down the neck and its back.

Deciding that two quiet humans in the corridor were less interesting than the people who made lots of noise in the lift shaft, it turned back and continued to try and pry open the doors.

As if it’s trying to open a tin of sardines, Suzie thought. And the people inside will be just as helpless as the pickled fishes if it succeeds.

“Why don’t we kill it?” she whispered at Anderson.

“I thought we’d see what we’re dealing with first,” he replied.

The creature’s head spun around and it listened intently for a moment before it continued its work.

Suzie wanted to object, but catching movement on the periphery of her vision, she backed off a little and looked up…

…to find another one of the creatures clamber around the corner on the ceiling.

“Look out!” she screamed and raised her gun, firing two rounds at the head of the creature.

The animal let itself fall and landed on Anderson who cried out with surprise and pain. It clawed at
him, cutting through his bullet-proof vest and he howled.

“Get off him!” Suzie snarled and poked it in the nose with the barrel of her weapon as she did not have the chance to reload first. It let go of Anderson and Suzie pulled him out. Awkwardly he got up to his feet again, bringing his second weapon up and firing.

The creature issued a peculiar scream and dropped to the floor.

“Fuck!” Suzie gasped as a second later two more of the creatures appeared in front of the lift, fighting over the dead body of their kind. The one that had been fully concentrated on the doors joined them, hissing and screeching, lashing out at them with one of its long thin arms. The others cried and struggled and then one of them looked right at Suzie.

“Fuck!”

The Torchwood operative grabbed Anderson’s vest and pulled him back with her as she retreated down the corridor.

“Yeah,” Anderson groaned, activating his radio. “Greyhound One to Trap One. We’re on code 10 zero again! We’re under attack! Code 10 zero!”

“That’s an understatement!” Suzie yelled into her radio. “We’re being hunted!” she added as she pushed the next door open that she came across and pushed Anderson through. She just managed to slip in and push the door shut as one of the creatures smashed against it with its full weight. It screamed.

Having a quick look around, Anderson stated, “Um… there’s no other exit.”

xXx

Torchwood Tower

conversion unit

When Ianto awoke, he was completely disoriented. His mind needed a moment to reboot, but then he recalled even clearer the horror of the restarting machine.

Oh, God! Ianto thought. The power’s back! It finished what it started! I’m a Cyberman!

Convinced that the panic filling him was a repercussion of his previous human state, he did not pay attention to his feelings. Only slowly, his startled mind settled down and he began to examine his current situation.

I can still blink, but Lisa still had her eyes, too. Should my vision be altered? Would Cybermen see differently? What am I seeing by the way?

Realizing that he pressed his eyes shut in denial, he opened them and gasped. Right above him still hovered the saws.

Okay… what’s that telling me?
He was confused.

They’re still out. So what happened?

Taking a deep breath, he attempted to sort his thoughts.

Breathing still feels the same… and when I roll my eyes I can see the tip of my nose. But Lisa also still had her nose. She wore that helmet, but I can’t tell if I do. Hmmm… I can lick my lips. There are my teeth. Feels normal. What else?

Moving his body was still out of the question. He was as stuck as he was before.

My fingers move. There, I can open and close my hands. I can brush my thumb over my index finger. I can also reach my little finger. Skin. I can feel my palm. So there’s no metal glove attached to my hand.

Carefully he tried to shift his position.

I can feel that I can’t move. Sore muscles, the hard steel of the table under me, steel around my wrists.

He wiggled his toes.

Shoes. I’m still wearing my shoes.

Apparently he was not altered at all.

What happened? It restarted, the scissors going for my clothes…

Rolling his eyes and straining to lift his head at least a few millimetres, which was thwarted by the clamps holding his head, he tried to take a look at his body. He could see the metal arm that held the scissors. There was another arm with a steel claw that held strips of cloth, shredded by the scissors.

My suit! Ianto realized. It tore my clothes to shreds.

Then another insight hit him.

I can think! Didn’t Virginia say something about being injected with some kind of drug? Turning her mind into mush? But I can think! I know that those cloths are the remains of my suit and shirt! I know that I still have my shoes on!

I know that I’m still stuck!

A sob painfully caught in his throat.

I’m still human!

“I’m still human!” he called out.

It excited him so much that he did not feel the cold breeze wafting through the conversion chamber now that the ventilation system was working again. Neither did he notice the strained hydraulic sounds of the Cyberman in the other cubicle.

“I’m still human! Oh, God! I’m alive!”

His joy found a sudden end when he heard the artificial voice of the Cyberman, “The power is
restored. The unit should have upgraded you. Cybermen will come and complete upgrade.”

Frozen with fear, Ianto lay in his bonds, praying that that would not happen.

Tbc...
A close call

London

Suzie felt shivers roll down her spine when she heard the creature scream again. Terrified, she stared at the door that, as she realized now, was partially made of glass. Unable to turn her gaze away, she murmured hoarsely, “What did you say?”

“I said,” Anderson groaned, “there’s no other exit.”

Suzie grabbed her radio, “Where the hell are you? We’re wounded and about to be eaten! So get your lazy arses up here!”

“Bloody government contracts,” Anderson grumbled as he looked through the glass to see the creatures scrabbling at the hinges, working them out of the cement-block wall with their fearsome claws. “Always cutting corners trying to get the lowest bid. Two thousand pounds for a reinforced door with a bullet proof glass window that can withstand a small missile, and they hang it with hinges from the neighbourhood DIY store. If these things knew what a Phillips screwdriver was, they could have had us for breakfast by now.”

“Yeah, well, be thankful they haven’t found the maintenance supervisor’s tool kit yet,” Suzie snarled, reloading her weapon. “When you’re done complaining you can help me pry the housing off this bloody thing.” She turned to the desk and fumbled with a surprisingly sturdy electric pencil sharpener. “If we can expose the electrics, we’ll upset the water cooler and throw it in the puddle when they come through the door.”

“You really think that will stop them?” Anderson asked, unsheathing an impressive combat knife.

“Doubtful,” Suzie admitted, “It’s the backup plan. It should stun them enough for us to get out of here and at least find somewhere safer to hide.”

Anderson looked down at Suzie’s shoes. “Those things waterproof?”

“Well, unless you can come up with a better solution, we’re about to find out,” she snapped, nodding toward the door, which was beginning to list badly in its frame as the top hinge worked loose.

“They’re about to break in!” Suzie screamed into her radio. “Now stop dawdling or there’ll be nothing for you but leftovers!”

“Over my dead body,” Anderson snarled, pushing himself up as far as he could with his injury and raising the combat knife.

Suzie jerked on the pencil sharpener, desperately trying to get it loose, knowing that they were running out of time. Abandoning her backup plan, she grabbed for her gun just in time upon hearing an ugly crack. Her head whipped around to see a creature drop through the doorframe together with the ruined door.

xXx
Toshiko was not sure why she felt so nervous when she approached Jack’s office. She had seen him vanish there with Yvonne and once Gwen and Andy had retreated to the staff quarters, she searched the computer network for news from London. Her attempt to contact Suzie or Owen had failed and she hoped that everything was alright. For a few minutes, Toshiko had busied herself with security checks before she could not bear it anymore and got up to meet Jack. Now she knocked on the door, her heart beating in her throat.

“Come in,” Jack called.

Taking a deep breath, Toshiko pushed the door open and entered the office. There she found Jack leaning in the big chair behind his desk and petting the cat that was purring contentedly as she curled up on his lap. It was a peculiar sight that still managed to warm Toshiko’s heart.

“What’s up, Tosh?” Jack asked. “Another alarm?”

“No, Jack,” she murmured. “The Rift seems to be quiet for now.”

“Good.” Jack sighed. “Anything else?”

“You forgot to confiscate their mobiles again,” she said and wondered at the same moment where that reprimand came from.

“Sorry,” Jack replied, sounding almost contrite.

“One day you will be,” Toshiko warned him. “All we need is somebody’s creepy ex tracking a smartphone online and getting curious about why they vanished on the invisible lift.”

“You’re right,” Jack agreed.

Forcing herself not to look down at her shoes and knead her hands, Toshiko fought for control and to look Jack in the eye. She could tell by the way he watched her that he sensed that she had something on her mind. She could not believe how anxious she suddenly felt. He must be able to hear my heartbeat, she thought. This is so not like me.

“What’s wrong, Tosh?” Jack asked, a hint of worry lacing his voice. “Can I do something for you?”

“Well,” she started and had to clear her throat. “Well, actually, Jack…” This is so hard. Say it now or leave. “Well, I could not help but wonder, now that Torchwood One is destroyed… Will that affect my contract?”

She was astonished to see Jack’s eyes widen with honest surprise and she wondered if she made a mistake addressing that matter.

A genuine smile spread on the captain’s handsome features.

“No, Tosh, it won’t,” he gently said. “Your contract is with me and Torchwood Three.”

“Are you sure?” Toshiko asked anxiously. “What if UNIT insists on closing our branch now that
the Institute is gone? They could do that, couldn’t they?”

“No, they can’t,” Jack assured her firmly. “UNIT is an international force. Torchwood was commissioned by Queen Victoria herself and is paid by the Crown. We may work with them occasionally, but we do not answer to them, and if they ever dared try to shut us down by force, they would be declaring war on the United Kingdom and its allies. Besides, we still have the Rift here that has to be guarded. Without us,” he shrugged his brows, his eyes sparkling with mischief, “who’d take care of it?”

His smirk failed to lighten up Toshiko’s mood.

“They won’t close us down,” Jack said with determination. “They won’t dare to. They know my reputation.”

The hint of a grin played around Toshiko’s lips at his unintentional double entendre which made Jack beam at her. Still he sensed that something was nagging at her.

“What is it, Tosh? Are you still worried?”

Using all her strength not to step from one foot to the other nervously, Toshiko searched for the right words, and suddenly it burst out of her, “I wondered, as I don’t know how to reach her, if you could check on my mother.”

Jack just stared at her in return, stunned. When he finally found his voice again, he sounded contrite.

“Oh, Tosh. I’m sorry…” Seeing her flinch, he rushed to say, “No, it’s not bad news. It’s my fault, really. I should have thought of that. I’m sorry, Tosh. Of course I will. Why don’t you have some rest and I’ll let you know as soon as I have the information? Okay?”

“Yes, Jack. Thank you,” she said in an unusually subdued tone and started to turn.

“You’re not mad at me because I didn’t think of making sure your mother’s alright myself, are you?” Jack asked worriedly.

“No,” Toshiko shook her head. “I know you were busy.”


“But when I arranged for Gwen and Andy to make their calls… I just want to know she’s safe.”

“I’ll let you know, Tosh,” he assured her.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.” He watched her go and sit down in the rec area. She looked tired both physically and emotionally. Taking a deep breath Jack picked up the phone.

xXx

London
His lungs burning in his chest, Owen kept on running. The weapon he was holding became heavier with every step he took, but he knew that he could not abandon it. That would be a deadly mistake.

At the same time, UNIT soldiers responded to the emergency code, picking up weapons and charging into the tower. A small army was on its way in now, advancing fast to reach the comrades under attack as soon as possible.

From the staircase, Owen darted out into a long hallway where he saw them, two ugly grey creatures scratching at the hinges of a door, while a third one threw itself against the door, dropping into the room together with it.

“Aaarghhh!” Owen screamed, grabbing his gun tighter and pulling the trigger as he advanced.

The creatures’ screeches made him cringe and he lost his aim. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure step up beside him. Shots thundered. Calmly, Spader walked towards the screaming creatures, firing steadily, making the black aliens writhe under the impacts of the bullets.

Pulling himself together, Owen joined the UNIT lieutenant.

Jerk the creatures went down.

Her weapon still aimed at them, Spader approached the pile of grey dead bodies. Then she switched the mode of her machine gun and blew a single bullet into each of the creatures’ heads.

“Better safe than sorry,” she said, but did not sound the least bit apologetic.

“No need to defend yourself,” Owen shrugged and looked around the corner into the room. There Suzie leaned against the wall, breathing hard. Protectively, she crouched beside Anderson who was on the ground, barely conscious.

“Great,” Suzie panted. “We need a medic.”

Grimacing, Owen glanced down at the fallen animals. “Sure they’re dead?”

“Well, they look dead to me,” Spader huffed and kicked at one of them. “Yep. Dead as a doornail.”

Owen smirked and could not help but point at each creature as he said, “Alright then… Ebenezer, Jacob, and Bob.”

“Get in there!” Spader commanded, not quite able to hide the hint of a smirk that cracked her features.

“Yes, Ma’am!” Owen replied and clambered over the dead bodies to get to his patient.

Shaking her head, Spader muttered, “You’re impossible.”

Out in the hall, the UNIT soldiers stood beside the killed creatures.

“What the hell are those things?” Tilley asked.

“I have no idea,” Spader shrugged.

From behind, they heard a clank and footsteps and turned around, ready to defend themselves. It was the backup.
“Those the attackers?” Sergeant McBride demanded to know.

“Yes.”

“Ugly brood.”

Spader nodded absently. “What about Anderson?” she called out.

“He’ll live,” Owen replied.

Spader nodded and reached for her radio. “Greyhound Two to Trap One. The situation is under control, the attackers are eliminated. One person wounded. Dr. Harper is treating him, but we still need a paramedic.”

“Copy that, Greyhound Two. Paramedics are on their way in.”

Spader took a deep breath. Three enemies down, but about two thirds of the tower still to secure.

xXx

Torchwood Tower

conversion unit

Ianto could hear the alarming sounds coming from the other cubicle. The Cyberman was straining against its conversion unit. Not knowing much about Cyberman physiology, Ianto wondered if it could succeed.

Can it free itself?

Will other Cybermen come?

Or are they all gone?

Hearing metal creak, Ianto shuddered and groaned at his hurting muscles. The forced immobility made his whole body ache.

What happened? Is it free?

Intently, he listened for stomping footsteps.

No, it still seems to be trapped.

Trapped.

Like I am.

Rolling his eyes at the scary arms that carried the saws and scissors, Ianto whined.

Not like me. It is already converted. Maybe not completely but at least enough to think like a full-fledged Cyberman. It wants my conversion. Wants to implant metal in my body.
Once more he shuddered.

Why am I worrying at all? Ianto wondered. I'll die in this thing anyway. No one will come for me. There are no search and rescue teams or they would have come by now.

Those ruddy Cybermen invaded our planet and killed all the people. And what for? To be sucked back into, well, where to? Another dimension? A parallel world? Empty space?

Ianto chuckled.

Serves them right. All the fuss for nothing.

Still, what are those pepper pots? And where did they come from? They certainly did not come together with the Cybermen, or did they? If they did they could have kept their fight in their world. We have enough to do with our own species without aliens bringing their wars to our planet!

It had happened, though, and Ianto had to deal with the consequences.

Unexpectedly a buzzing sound added to the mechanical noises of the Cyberman. It was not very loud at first, but then Ianto could clearly hear it.

It seems to come closer. What is it?

Then it was gone and something tickled in his left ear instead.

What?

As his head was stuck between the clamps, he could not move it away from whatever touched him. It moved in his ear conch.

“Oh, no,” Ianto groaned.

The tickling stopped and he heard the buzz again.

“No.”

Ianto saw something small and black that moved in front of his eyes and then it landed on his nose.

“Ugh!”

He sniffled and the fly took off again only to land in the corner of his left eye from where he could chase it away by blinking. When it alighted on his forehead, blinking did not help. The insect crawled over his skin, tickling him. Then it took off again only to stop on his lips next.

“Go away!”

It fled to fly a few rounds over Ianto’s face.

“Leave me alone!” Ianto shouted with frustration.

“You will never be alone,” the metallic voice from the other cubicle cut in. “You will be upgraded. We are the Cybermen.”

Ianto felt like he was going to be sick. It lasted for just a moment, though, before a white hot rage overwhelmed him. Those ruddy tin men would not break him and a guttural snarl escaped him.
tbc…
Emotive actions

Cardiff

A few minutes later, Jack strolled over to the sofa and gently shook Toshiko awake. “Hey, Tosh,” he murmured, lightly squeezing her shoulder. “In my office is someone on the phone who wants to talk to you.”

Open incredulity lighting in her eyes, Toshiko stared up at Jack. “You really…? Are you sure?”

“I am,” he smiled. “She’s waiting. Go.”

A delighted smile split her features as she jumped up from the sofa. She made three quick steps toward the office when she stopped abruptly and turned back to Jack. She quickly hugged him before she darted into his office.

Even from the distance, Jack could hear her talk excitedly in Japanese.

The captain smiled to himself as he walked along the railing and up the stairs to the kitchenette, searching for coffee. There was none in the thermos and he was not bent on using the monster of a coffee machine that stood on the left end of the worktop.

It was a hopeless affair. Whenever Jack tried to make coffee with the vintage model, it turned out to be some undrinkable slop. Toshiko did not try often to use it and Owen was ordered to leave it alone. Suzie was the only one who could worm a semblance of real coffee out of the old machine. Still Jack did not have the heart to get rid of the treasure.

It was one of the things that reminded him of the team he had lost on the turn of the year nineteen ninety-nine. Griff had brought it in and everyone teased him about the machine that appeared to be oversiz ed for a staff that consisted of only six people. Then they realized that it produced a seemingly never-ending supply of coffee and no one teased the young man anymore. The only downside was that Griff was the only one who could make a brew that deserved the title coffee.

Then Alex murdered the whole team, assuming that they were not ready for what awaited them in the twenty-first century. Mercy killings Alex called the slaughter of his team mates, and he was sorry that he could not do the same for Jack.

Jack wished that Alex could not do it for the others either, wished he had not understood it all wrong. All that was left for him to do was to deal with the bodies and to clean up the Hub. Then he locked away the treacherous locket that had caused him so much grief.

So no coffee.

He turned around and, leaning on the handrail, he looked down at the central Hub. Jack knew the exact spot where he had found Lisa Talbot. For a second there he thought he would see her body on the ground. James had been in the autopsy bay, and Craig was on the catwalk when he was shot. Jack had tried to argue with Alex, but it was impossible. The new millennium began with Alex putting a bullet through his head.

Jack found Griff in the archives, or what was supposed to become proper archives. Griff had wanted to spruce them up, but working the field had not left him enough time.
And then there were our amorous adventures, too, Jack remembered. Griff, I miss you.

This time he had lost none of his team, but Jack knew that there were all the more casualties in London. There were the Cybermen, intent on assimilating the human population, and there were the Daleks, intent on exterminating them.

Where the hell did the Daleks come from? Why London? Why this time?

Jack shuddered when he recalled the last time he had seen Daleks. It had been a hopeless fight, bound to lead to certain death, fought to give the one man who could save earth and the human race enough time to act.

I died, really died. It was my decision to fight and I never thought about it twice… until I returned and watched my home vanish in the vortex, left behind between corpses and Dalek-dust. He choked. I tried to put an end to it, only to realize that there was no escape, coming back over and over again.

There was no way back.

I have to find the Doctor. He’ll be able to set things right.

And I missed my chance, Jack thought ruefully. Guess it just was not the right time. Will it ever come?

Taking a deep breath, Jack tried to focus on the present. His team needed him. He had to be strong for all of them. They had survived the invasion. Now they had to deal with the aftermath.

He knew the cleanup would be a dangerous job, but he had had no choice in sending Suzie and Owen. Someone from Torchwood had to go. Archie from Torchwood Two could have steamrolled his way through the military and UNIT, but he lacked the field experience necessary to face any real threat once he got to Canary Wharf. Toshiko had field experience, but given her history with UNIT, he knew she would be on edge and that could make her careless. Besides, he needed someone in Cardiff to monitor the Rift while he was out chasing aliens. That left Suzie and Owen, and he could only hope they would both come back to him in one piece.

Jack realized that he had no idea how late it was.

It was dawning when we returned to the Hub. It must be morning by now. Once more he let his gaze wander through the base. We’ll have a lot of cleaning up to do. Maybe Gwen and Andy can help us out there, too.

Jack frowned. Something was wrong. He stared at a spot on the base level and could not decide what was bothering him.

Then it hit him like a cricket bat.

Light was falling in!

His gaze drifted up to the ceiling where, not far from the pavement stone that sealed the invisible lift, gaped a big hole. Suddenly Jack remembered the Cyberman breaking through the ceiling and being sucked through the hole himself.

“No, Scrappy! Not to the hole,” Jack heard a voice drift in. “Come here… heel… Scrappy!”

Jack groaned as he saw a clear yellow liquid sprinkle down into the Hub.
Chaos had visited London and left it devastated and shocked. Owen got an idea of what possibly awaited them when he stepped out of Torchwood Tower, supporting one of the men they had freed out of the elevator. Behind the police cordon had gathered even more people than he had seen there before. The buzzing of their excited discussions echoed over the plaza.

Soldiers approached the group that escaped the building. One of them helped Owen with the man who clung to his shoulders. Owen spotted a stretcher and steered in that direction. Then he saw Hocke with a woman in his arms and slowed his steps. The woman was strapped in on the stretcher and pushed away.

“Over here, sir!” another soldier gestured them and Owen followed him.

All of a sudden someone was in front of Owen and something furry hit his nose.

“Get out of my way!” the Torchwood medic growled, ready to shove whoever it was aside.

“A few words!” the man shouted. “Who are those people? What did you find in the tower? What happened?”

“Go back behind the barrier,” the soldier told him.

Unimpressed the reporter pushed his mike back under Owen’s nose, “Is it true that there are no survivors from those who were working in the tower?”

“Does this look like no survivors to you?” Owen growled.

Enthused by getting an answer out of his victim the man pressed, “Can you confirm reports that this was a terrorist attack?”

Owen stopped.

The soldier took the man’s arm and tried to lead him away.

“Sir, tell me about what you saw! How many casualties are to be expected?”

The medic’s features hardened. Making sure the guy he had helped was supported by the other soldier, he let go of him and closed in on the reporter with two long strides. Getting in his face, he hissed, “I had to pronounce the deaths of too many good people who died in there fighting to save sorry asses like yours. So go on, keep pestering me about what I saw, and you’ll risk getting lost among them.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Nah, it’s a friendly warning!”

“Benny? Are you recording?”
“Sure, Ainsley.”

“Ainsley? Is that supposed to be a name?” Owen smirked.

“Yeah. Something wrong with that?”

“Nope!” Owen laughed.

“That’s not funny!” Ainsley frayed.

Owen chuckled. ‘Grow up and grow some balls!

The reporter gaped at him.

“Sir, you’re interfering with the rescue. Go back behind the barrier,” the soldier came to Owen’s aid.

“And you’re holding back information!” Ainsley fired back. “No one’s telling us anything! What were those Cyberthings? Don’t tell us the invasion wasn’t real! We all saw them!”

“I don’t know what you saw, sir,” the soldier argued, “but there was nothing like an invasion.”

“Can you tell…”

“You’ll have to wait for the official press conference,” the soldier stated matter of factly. “And now step back before I have to arrest you.”

Grumbling, Ainsley and Benny shouldered their stuff and marched toward the barrier.

“Vultures,” Owen grumbled.

The soldier shrugged. “It’ll get worse.”

Worse? Owen was sceptical. How could it get worse? He spotted Suzie next to the command tent, arguing with Colonel Mace and went over to see what was going on.

“I won’t discuss this with you, Agent Costello!” Mace said distinctly. “Soldiers will take over the recon of the tower. You have no idea what you’ll run into next.”

“Exactly!” Suzie shot back. “No one knows what awaits us in the tower. Besides, I don’t have to remind you again that this is a Torchwood operation, right? UNIT is only here by courtesy.”

“Whose courtesy?” the colonel remarked wryly. “Yours?”

To his infinite surprise the Torchwood agent did not hesitate for a second.

“Exactly, Colonel Mace,” Suzie declared in a tone that testified to absolute certainty. “As I am the highest ranking Torchwood agent here I am in charge of the operation.”

“Agent Costello…”

“It’s a matter of fact, though, that neither of us is prepared to handle the situation on our own, so I suggest that we set aside our differences and return to the task at hand.” She eyed the colonel intently. “Do you agree?”

Scowling deeply under his uniform bonnet, he replied, “Yes.”
“Great.”

“So let me explain my intentions, Agent,” Mace said in a challenging tone. “What I wanted to say earlier was that we can’t risk losing either you or Doctor Harper fighting in the front line as your expertise is way too valuable. I suggest that soldiers will take over the recon of the tower while you supervise the mission and give advice when necessary.”

“I should go with them,” Owen threw in. “There can still be survivors in the tower, injured persons who need help, as soon as possible. We shouldn’t stand here wasting time while people wait for us to rescue them.”

Mace looked at him with a scrutinizing gaze. “I don’t think that you’re grasping the situation, Doctor. As far as UNIT is concerned this is not a rescue mission. That you found survivors is a plus factor, but altogether this is about containing and warding off possible threats. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Are you kidding?” Owen replied incredulously. “Do you know how many people were working in there? There have to be more survivors!”

“You think so?” Mace shot back. “Actually I doubt that we’ll find many more than the few persons who fled the tower right after the attack.”

“What makes you think that?” Owen pushed. “There could be lots of people trapped somewhere in the tower who’re hoping that we’ll find them! You just want to give up on them?”

“I don’t,” Mace said dryly. “I’m just being realistic.”

“And I refrain from giving up hope,” Owen argued. “That has nothing to do with losing sight to reality!”

Mace nodded slightly.

“I can see your point, Doctor,” the colonel said. “But before we start arguing about it let me show you something.”

Without checking if the Torchwood agents followed him, he turned and walked toward the river.

xxxx

**Torchwood Tower**

**conversion unit**

Ianto rolled his eyes.

The ruddy fly still would not leave him alone. As if that was not bad enough, the Cyberman continued to chant about Ianto’s anticipated conversion.

*I don’t think that any torturer could come up with anything worse.*
Blinking, he chased the fly away from his eyes. He could hear it buzz around for a moment before it stopped. This time it was one of the rare occasions when it landed on something else but him.

*For now,* Ianto thought miserably. *It'll surely return soon enough.*

He caught himself listening anxiously for the return of the buzzing sound and snorted with disgust.

*Waiting for it only makes it worse.*

Still he could not stop himself from listening. Intent on giving it another purpose, he told himself that he was straining to hear something that would indicate the appearance of a search and rescue team. That did not happen, though. Instead the insect resumed flying around his head.

From the other cubicle the Cyberman chanted, “We are the Cybermen. You will be like us. Resistance is futile. You will be upgraded.”

“Oh, shut up, you!” Ianto shouted.

Then he had to sneeze because the fly tried to crawl in his left nostril.

“Shit!” Ianto cursed when the jolt made his head and neck muscles ache and he groaned. “Argh. Why don’t you just leave me alone, ruddy thing? Go bother the metal man! Fuck!”

He spit out when the fly used the opportunity of Ianto speaking to explore his mouth.

“Bloody hell! Don’t you dare! Shoo!”

His disgust and fear that it would not stop pestering him, made Ianto’s voice rise, provoking the Cyberman.

“You are afraid,” it said. “But you need not fear. Cybermen will remove fear. Cybermen will remove sex…”

“Shut up!” Ianto spat.

“…and class and colour…”

“Oh, shut it! I’m *not* interested!”

“…and creed. You will become like us.”

“The fuck I will,” Ianto growled through gritted teeth, trying to avoid letting the insect enter his oral cavity again. *Where is it? Did it finally leave?*

Ianto had no such luck.

To his horror it landed further south this time. Reflexively his muscles tensed, sending the insect flying again only to land on very sensitive territory next.

*You’re not serious, are you?*

Ianto groaned when he sensed it crawl across his member.

*Don’t you dare!*

In addition to the fly tickling him in private places, the Cyberman’s droning faded into a white noise
cadence, an endless repetition of phrases which became a monstrous earworm for Ianto.

_This isn’t happening to me, Ianto thought. This is a nightmare. I’ll wake up and none of it will have happened._

He sighed, knowing that was not true.

_What did Dr. Dryden say in mental shielding class? Can sounds be blocked, too? Is there a way to just not processing them?_

Ianto tried to remember. Dr. Dryden always said that he believed the young Welshman to be talented. Considering how incapable he felt at shielding himself each time Dr. Dryden attacked him mentally, Ianto did not quite believe that.

Still he tried to block out the chants of the Cyberman.

When that did not work, he started to hum the first melody that came to his mind that happened to be “Put the lime in the coconut”. Unnoticed by himself the words pushed in his consciousness and he began to sing with the chorus while his subconsciousness provided the fitting pictures from a video clip that he had watched on youtube together with Lisa.

The fly chose that moment for another go at his mouth.

Ianto choked at the sudden touch on his tongue, not realizing at first what happened. Then he sensed the insect fly against the roof of his mouth and coughed. Breathing in, though, sucked the fly into his throat and he had no other choice but to swallow it.

“Hah!” Ianto crowed in triumph. “Serves you right!”

Enthused by his victory over the annoying insect, Ianto returned to his song, only to hear the Cyberman say, “Music is irrelevant.”

“It’s not,” Ianto pouted. Deciding that the Cyberman should know exactly who it was dealing with, he resumed singing, choosing “Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau”, the Welsh National Anthem, this time.

tbc…
London

“What are we doing here?” Owen asked as Colonel Mace led them farther into the Millennium Dome. “We should continue with searching the tower.”

“You can return to it soon enough,” Mace said, stopping in front of a door guarded by UNIT soldiers who stepped aside for their commanding officer. “Come.”

Still rather annoyed, Owen followed Mace. They had crossed the Thames in a boat, not knowing where the colonel was taking them. To both their surprise, they had entered the Dome.

It was then that Owen got a suspicion what they were going to see. As a doctor, he was familiar with general emergency procedures. They were not going to a triage. That was on the plaza. This was no hospital either.

Owen’s anxiety increased as he now stepped into a chamber that turned out to be a connection to another hall. From there, they went to a room that was now obviously used as an observation room. Through a window, they looked out at the centre of the Dome that was under construction. Freshly built structures which would later divide different recreation areas allowed the UNIT personnel to separate the people housed there.

“You brought the survivors here?” Suzie said.

“We did. And surely you can see why.”

“Tell me anyway,” she replied.

“Those people fled the tower. We had to stop them. What do you think they will tell everyone? An alien invasion? We’ll have to deal with them. That can take days. Weeks, even. Months.”

“Well, you could always… Ouch!”

Suzie glowered at him.

“Did you want to suggest retonning them?” Mace grinned sourly. “Don’t look at me shocked like that. UNIT knows about your little wonder drug. Fact is that Director Hartman was not willing to share the compound’s secret with us. You don’t want to break with that habit, do you?”

“That’s something that only the head of Torchwood can decide,” Suzie told him.

Mace huffed. “As we noticed earlier, Director Hartman is in no condition to make such a decision. So it’s up to you, right?”
“No, Colonel Mace, it isn’t,” Suzie said.

“So far we could not find any Torchwood official among the survivors,” Mace let her know.

“Well, in that case Captain Harkness takes over the leadership of the Institute.”

Colonel Mace snorted with undisguised disgust. “Captain Harkness?” he huffed. “You can’t seriously consider…”

“Why not, Colonel?” Suzie interrupted him brusquely. “As the leader of Torchwood Cardiff he is the highest ranking Torchwood officer right now. So he automatically assumes the directorship.”

“We’ll see, agent Costello,” Mace replied.

“There’s nothing to see or to argue about,” Suzie said. “And now we want to go down there to get a general idea of what we’re dealing with. Then we can decide what we’ll have to do.”

Her tone did not leave room for arguments. She turned on her heels and Mace’s only choice was to lead them down to the survivors.

xXx

Cardiff

When Jack returned into the Hub through the cog door, he found Toshiko at her workstation. Wordlessly, he sagged onto the sofa.

“Do we have some coffee left?” he sighed.

“Hmm, I’ll check on it, but I don’t think so,” Toshiko replied. “What were you up to?”

“I had to make sure nobody could fall in through the hole the Cyberman punched into the roof,” Jack grumbled and pointed tiredly up to the ceiling. “It’s too far away from the lift to be covered by the perception filter.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Jack chuckled bitterly. “Oh’s quite right.”

For a moment, they sat in silence before Toshiko said, “Thank you, Jack.”

Surprised he looked over at her.

“What for?”

“That you arranged the talk with my mother, Jack,” Toshiko meekly replied. “You didn’t have to do that. Domo arigato. Thank you very much.”

A small and yet warm smile spread on his features. “No problem.”

“You won’t get in trouble for breaking the rules, will you?”
Jack’s heart ached for his technician as he shook his head. He did not even think about that before he arranged the call. That Toshiko worried about it hurt.

“No, Tosh,” he softly said. “Nobody will get in trouble. Don’t worry.”

She did not look convinced but nodded anyway.

“What are you worrying about?” Jack gently asked. “About your contract? I told you there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I… just don’t want to… I can’t go back to that place,” Toshiko breathed. “I’m sure you had to agree to some rules to get me out of UNIT’s prison. You told me, only limited contact with my mother. I don’t want to risk that UNIT finds out and will come and…”

“Stop right there, Tosh,” Jack said as he got up from the sofa and walked over to her. Gently he took her chin and tilted up her head to face him. “I won’t allow it. This is an emergency. To hell with the rules. They’ll either agree with me or face my wrath. Got me?” he smirked. “Nothing bad will happen to you.”

“Not from UNIT, you mean?” she could not help but tease. “Torchwood’s not the safest job on earth.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yeah, given all those aliens and Cybermen… Well, you told me so before I made my decision,” Toshiko sighed.

“Do you regret it?” Jack asked. Secretly he was scared that the young woman would confirm his suspicion.

“Not for a second.”

Proudly Jack smiled down at Toshiko. Brilliant, courageous, and beautiful what more could a guy want?

Just for a split second there, Jack followed unchaste thoughts.

“Jack?” Toshiko pushed suspiciously. “What’s that twinkle in your eyes?”

“Ah, you know me, Tosh,” he smirked. “We just survived a global catastrophe. I’m sure we could find some creative ways to celebrate.”

“Oh, really?” she teased. “Well, a cute guy like you should have no problem finding someone to be creative with.”

“You think I’m cute?” Jack queried with obvious confusion.

“Ah, well, you know… I mean.”

“You think I’m more than just cute, right?” he challenged and saw her blush adorably.

Toshiko was not able to look him in the eye anymore, so Jack gently took her chin again to tilt her head back up.

“Do you think I’m hot?” he asked lasciviously.
No words came to her mind. It was all Toshiko could do not to turn and run. Jack’s face was right in front of hers and she got lost in his sparkling blue eyes while his male scent went straight to her head.

Jack looked into her big dark eyes and bent forward just a fraction.

“You do think that I’m hot, right?” he said hoarsely.

“Y-yes,” she breathed so lowly that Jack almost missed it.

The captain’s immediate response was to softly cover her lips with his own. His free arm slipped around her slender form to pull her a little closer and he sensed her shudder in his embrace. Her lips were trembling but she made no attempt to evade him. So he carefully intensified the kiss, caressing her with his lips until he felt a low gasp. Then he allowed himself to explore a little more and push his tongue out. The tip of his tongue danced over her lips, tickling, teasing, demanding entrance…

And Toshiko granted him access.

Putting all his extensive experience into this one kiss, Jack brought her close to delirium as he noticed when she slightly sagged in his arms. Slowly and carefully, he finished the kiss and drew back, steadying her with both arms now.

“I knew some creativity couldn’t hurt,” he said with a gentle smile. “Thank you, Tosh. For everything.”

Making sure she would keep standing, he released her.

Toshiko could just stare at him. She was absolutely certain that he did not thank her for the kiss. It was something that went so much deeper than that. Something he would never admit to.

“And you’re really sure there’s no coffee left?” Jack asked out of the blue. “I need some coffee! I should have brought some when I was out taking care of the hole in the roof.”

For a second, Toshiko was hurt. Then this is so much Jack, she realized. It’s his way of telling me that he cares deeply… but would never overstep the line unless I invite him to.

“I should go and get some coffee before the Rift throws the next challenge at us,” Jack said, smiling warmly at Toshiko. Oh, he sure would love to shag her, but she was a no-no and he would not break the taboo he created himself. Toshiko had been so badly used before that he did not want her to get hurt again.


“Thank you,” Jack said again before he went down the stairs and to the cog door.

xXx

Torchwood Tower

conversion unit
Unfortunately, singing the Welsh National Anthem did not impress the Cyberman at all. Ianto was still trying to block out its voice, but after the last line was sung, he had to pause. His mouth was dry, but that was not the only reason he stopped. With horror, he noticed that he had trouble recalling the lyrics. It was hard to concentrate and he yearned for something to drink.

*Mmm, a cool beer would be nice. Or one of those drinks Lisa loves so much.*

He choked.

*Loved so much,* he corrected himself. *Lisa is dead.*

Grief corded up his throat.

Quickly he tried to think of something to distract him. For some reason an old Welsh song came to his mind that his mother used to sing to his sister Rhiannon. Even though she was a few years older than Ianto he could remember it clearly. So he sang about *Myfanwy,* but the more he sang the more jumbled the song became until he could no longer keep the unwanted images of the converted Lisa at bay anymore. They painted a warped picture of the woman he loved, not human anymore but not quite Cyberman either with skin remaining visible despite the augmented cybernetic parts.

*Her face was the worst.*

The sight of the saws above blurred and he closed his eyes which made matters worse as he now saw Lisa with her lovely, beautiful face framed by the ugly helmet. No words could adequately describe the horror Ianto felt when he remembered her like that.

As his actual vision clouded his memories sharpened. Lisa, neck and shoulders covered by metal. Her head as well. None of her beautiful curls showing anymore. Instead a metal helmet with connected antennae. Metal strands spreading across her body like muscles.

*I couldn’t see her legs, but she made the same loud clanks as the Cybermen, so her long and slender legs must’ve been covered with a metal hull as well.*

He choked.

*I could see her dark skin, her full lips and her familiar features, but her eyes were empty. No recognition. A Cyberman.*

His eyes burnt with tears that would not come.

*How did she look without that stuff? How did her hair curl around her head? How did she smile?* As hard as he tried, Ianto could only recall the cybercaricature of her.

*Is that how I’ll remember her? A warped rip-off of the woman I loved?*

A bitter laugh escaped him.

*I don’t think that I’ll have to worry much about that. It doesn’t look like anyone’s coming and if nobody gets me out of this thing I’ll sooner or later be rat food.*

*Thirst! How long have I been trapped here already? It was late afternoon when we went back into ghost shift, wasn’t it? He rolled his eyes and sighed. There’s not much light. Artificial at that. Well, what little there is. The power’s back on, isn’t it? So why isn’t there more light? It’s just the little bit that was there before. More light would be good. Why? I wouldn’t see better. Must be the thirst. It’s*
starting to affect me. Sooner or later I’ll hallucinate.

The Cyberman was not a hallucination. It kept on repeating the same sentences over and over again.

Well, I think I prefer death by thirst over upgrading.

Ianto fought his rising depression.

I can’t know if I’m right. It’s still possible that there are search and rescue teams. I have to believe in it and fight my fear! It can take some time, though. We were high up in the tower already when we were caught and the Cybermen took us further upstairs. I didn’t count then, but we must be pretty near to the top, somewhere between storey forty and fifty.

That thought made him shiver.

Whoever’s going into the tower has to do it with the necessary caution. They can’t run blindly into trouble. How much time will it take them to reach this floor?

That was a question that was not easy to answer. Aside from the possible threats that still existed inside Torchwood, Ianto could imagine that the fight between the aliens had also caused a lot of damage. That also could make the approach difficult.

His musings could distract Ianto for a while, but when he ran out of arguments and his thoughts slowed down he heard it again, the chants of the Cyberman.

“Dammit!” he swore. “Can’t you stop that?”

“We do not recognize your authority,” the Cyberman replied. “You fear us. You do not need to fear. Cybermen will remove fear.”

Oh, stop listening, Ianto ordered himself. Or it’ll drive you crazy!

He chuckled.

“As if that would matter anymore!” he laughed. “Why shouldn’t I go mad? This whole life is absurd, and death’s the final word, but like they said, you must always face the curtain with a bow…”

“Death is irrelevant,” the Cyberman threw in. “It does not matter. You will become like us.”

“I don’t think so,” Ianto replied challengingly. “I’m not compatible, you know?”

For a moment the Cyberman remained silent before it said, “Then you will be deleted.”

“You know what?” Ianto huffed. “Fine with me!”

“Humans that are not compatible will be deleted. Anyone else will become like us. We are the Cybermen.”

A wicked grin cracked Ianto’s features.

“Who cares?” he laughed. “Life’s a piece of shit! It’s a laugh and death’s a joke. I laugh in their faces! Laugh with me? No?”

“Laughing is irrelevant.”
“I think it’s liberating!” Ianto shouted happily. “You think you’re good at slogans? Let me tell you, I can repeat myself, too!” And with that he began to sing again, “Keep ’em laughing as you go, just remember that the last laugh is on you. And always look on the bright side of life,” and he whistled the song’s hook. “Always look on the right side of life.”

Whistling again he started his own loop.

tbc…
Ianto Jones could be stubborn as the proverbial mule, but he sensed that at some point his voice would simply give out. It became difficult to sing, and honestly, the chorus began to drive him mad as well.

It worked, though. The Cyberman had been silent for a while now, but Ianto feared that it would start to repeat its chants as soon as he stopped.

And there just was no other choice but to stop.

It felt heavenly.

_How long will it last?_ Ianto wondered. _I don’t want it to start afresh._

For the time being, Ianto’s wish was granted. The Cyberman remained silent. Slowly the tension faded out of the Welshman’s muscles as much as he could relax at all in his prison. Letting himself go had been liberating for as long as it lasted, but now his exhaustion caught up with Ianto. He closed his eyes and tried to empty his mind, enjoying what little peace he had. The steady _ping_ of the blocked open elevator lulled him to a trancelike state.

“Ianto Jones!”

Ianto started in his restraints when he heard the artificial voice of the Cyberman call his name. His limbs hurt as did his head. Being forced into the same position for so long made all his muscles ache and burn with the desire to move. Repeatedly, he blinked to clear his vision but could not get it sharp.

_Why do I bother?_

In addition, Ianto felt raw panic and the urge to run, but there was nowhere to go. He could not escape the Cyberman.

“Who are you anyway?” Ianto choked. If that _thing_ managed to free itself… He should not think about it, especially not about the fact that this Cyberman had been a human being just a few hours ago.

“Human point two,” the Cyberman replied.

“Human point two?” Ianto echoed. He did not really expect the thing to answer so he was surprised to learn that it actually identified itself.

“Yes.”

Trying to grasp the concept Ianto asked, “Is that supposed to be a name?”

“Names are irrelevant.”
“Uh-huh,” Ianto mused.

“What does uh-huh mean?” it asked and Ianto thought he could hear confusion in its synthesized voice.

“You say names are irrelevant and still you called me by my name,” he said.

“It is your reference of identification.”

Ianto groaned. “Yes, it is. And your identification is human point two.”

“No. All Cybermen are human point two.”

“I see… and how do I identify you, individually?”

More silence.

“Individuality is imperfection. Cybermen will remove imperfection. You will be like us.”

If it would not have been so deadly serious, Ianto could have laughed at the tin man for being so pigheaded. “So you’re saying that you want to make me human point two.”

“Yes.”

“But human point two is far from being perfect.”

Once more silence met his words. It took a while before the Cyberman spoke again.

“Cybermen are superior to humankind. We will remove imperfection.”

“You keep telling me that, but do you actually believe what you’re saying?” Curiously Ianto waited for the Cyberman’s answer. After a while it said a single word.

“Yes.”

“Bummer.”

“What does bummer mean?”

“That means that I pity you.”

“You should not pity us. We are the Cybermen. We are perfect. We will make you perfect. Pity is an emotion. Emotions are imperfection. We will remove imperfection when we upgrade you.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I already am perfect,” Ianto challenged.

“Humans are imperfect. You need to be upgraded. You will be like us.”

“See, that’s the problem with propaganda,” Ianto told it. “You can only repeat the same phrases all over again and hope that they will stick with the person you’re trying to convince, because you have no real arguments to prove your point.”

Ianto wondered if it actually thought about his words or if it was just the lack of arguments that made it unresponsive.

“You will be upgraded,” it suddenly said. “You will be like us.”
“Excuse me,” Ianto stopped it. “But why are you always talking about us?”

“We are the Cybermen.”

“Oh really? But you’re alone.”

“You need to be upgraded. We will be the Cybermen. Together we will upgrade the world.”

“See, there’s your error in reasoning.” Ianto had to suppress an involuntary urge to chuckle. “I’m not a Cyberman. You are. There is no we.”

“There will be as soon as you are upgraded.”

We’re talking in circles, Ianto thought. It’s starting to confuse me. If I’m not confused already. It’s hard to think. But all I can do. I need to stay alert. What did I want to know?

“Upgraded to what?” he finally asked.

“To be like us.”

“Error! There is no us.”

It did not answer at once.

“We are the Cybermen.”

“Now isn’t that a proof for your imperfection?” Ianto demanded to know.

“Proof?”

The Welshman could not help but smirk to himself. “That you think of yourself as a group?”

“But… we are… the Cybermen.”

“You can keep saying that as long as you want. You are alone. There is no we. And don’t get started again on telling me that there will be as soon as I’m upgraded. I’m fed up with that. Why would I want to be upgraded by an inferior species?”

“The Cybermen are superior to humans.”

“How?”

“Well, you see, there’s that error in your identification already,” Ianto explained. He began to draw some morbid fun out of this argument. “You call yourself human point two.”

“We recognize no error. It is what we Cybermen are.”

Don’t start yourself with arguing about that we, Ianto told himself.

“But that’s the oxymoron.”

“The Cybermen are human point two. We do not recognize any oxymoron.”

“The contradiction in terms,” Ianto explained. “How can you number your upgrades consecutively if you claim to be perfect already?”

“Human point two is perfect. There will be no more upgrades.”
Ianto frowned. *Lisa! She still had a face. She still had flesh. She still had her beautiful tummy. She wasn’t like them. She wasn’t all metal!*

He held his breath until the nausea passed and then called out, “But you said Cybermen were perfect.”

“We are Cybermen. We are perfect.”

“No! You are human point two. You are *not* a Cyberman. I have seen Cybermen and human point two. They are different. If one is perfect, the other must be flawed.”

“Human point two are Cybermen. All Cybermen are perfect.”

Once more a frown creased Ianto’s forehead. Did he hear an edge of frustration in that voice? What would happen if he kept pressing his point home?

“And there is that oxymoron again,” Ianto insisted. “You say you are all Cybermen, but the original Cybermen and human point two are two different kinds of individuals. You said yourself that individuality is imperfection, so the fact the Cybermen are comprised of two different kinds of individuals makes them inherently imperfect. Can’t you see that?”

Again his argument was met with silence.

*Too funny. They upgraded a simpleton. So much for the emergency upgrades. Let’s see just how far I can take this argument.*

“Let me tell you something,” Ianto said. “There’s that man who invented computer software. Computers develop further and further and he tries to adapt to the development with upgrades on the software. Each new program has a number. He’s come much farther than two. And you claim to be perfect?”

But Ianto obliviously followed his train of thoughts, no matter if he got a response or not.

“To tell you the truth, even the newest program he made is full of errors. The system claims to be the ultimate system now but still you have to put up with the most curious malfunctions. Applying that to you means that Cybermen are merely a basic version, are in the fledgling stages.”

Still more silence.

“What do you do if there’s a malfunction?”

“We analyze the problem. It will be repaired.”

“If you are perfect, why do you have a protocol for handling malfunctions? In order to have developed a protocol for malfunctions, you must have had some kind of malfunction in the past. If you have already malfunctioned, you can’t be perfect!”

Ianto grinned smugly as he imagined the Cyberman stewing in silence.

“How do you indicate that there is a malfunction?”

Short silence.

“Reword your request. We are Cybermen. We do not malfunction.”

Ianto could almost swear that voice rose in pitch slightly.
“Yet you have a protocol for handling malfunctions, so obviously, you must occasionally malfunction. How would you tell your superior that you are not functioning within normal parameters?”

“Reword your request.”

“How do you let other Cybermen know that you’re broken?”

“Reword your request.”

“You know… I’d assume that a perfect life form would be able to understand and word such a simple question,” Ianto said wryly. He was barely able to contain his involuntary amusement. “Perhaps you are malfunctioning now.”

“We are Cybermen. We do not malfunction.”

“You and who else?” Ianto asked. He just could not resist going back to the we.

“What does that mean?”

There was that little quaver again. Was he actually getting through to the thing?

“You keep saying we, but you are alone. You are one. You are an individual, the only individual of your kind right now. You are not we. You cannot be we. How can a perfect being not grasp the simple concept of singular and plural? You are malfunctioning.”

“Reword your request. We are the Cybermen. We are perfect. We do not malfunction.”

tbc…
London

Meeting the survivors was no walk in the park. Suzie and Owen went to see the fully converted people first where Mace did not allow them to enter the court where they were held. Still the Torchwood agents got to see more than they actually liked.

Those people looked like true Cybermen and both agents were vividly reminded of the fight at their base in Cardiff.

“They don’t appear so aggressive,” Suzie murmured. “Maybe because they’re confined to the concrete space?”

“Actually I doubt that,” Mace said. “The Cybermen that attacked us were deleted by us at once. Those in there are different. When the others were gone they stopped. We found some of them walking around the plaza like they were in trance. We only brought those here.”

“Some of them also look different,” Owen stated, watching a couple of Cybermen in the left rear corner.

“Yeah,” Mace growled. “We assume that they changed their way of conversion. Cybermen of that type were found in shut down conversion units.”

“We didn’t get to any conversion units yet,” Owen said.


“Where did the Cybermen build a base in New York?” Suzie queried.

“An office building on Third Avenue,” Mace said wryly. “Apparently they used office reconstructions to conceal their infiltration.”

“How did they get there?” Owen mused aloud. “The breach was here. I could imagine some of them squeezing through earlier with the ghost shifts here, but in New York?”

The medic did not even notice that he had spoken out loud until he realized that Suzie and Mace looked at him quizzically.

“What?” he asked, looking from one to the other.

Suzie rolled her eyes at him.

“You think I might be right?” Owen chuckled before Mace could dig deeper and shot a mischievous grin at Suzie. “What do I know? I’m a doctor, not a quantum physicist.”

“What breach?” Mace asked.


“You called it a breach, Dr. Harper. What breach?”
This time Owen rolled his eyes. “Gotta call it something, right? Maybe it was a tear, a fracture, a crack… How am I supposed to know? I’m just glad that it, whatever it was, sucked them back in.” He turned back to look at the Cybermen. “Right now I’d like to know more about cybernetics. How does that work? They did what? Put the human brain in a metal body? And then?”

“I don’t care what they did,” Mace grunted. “The question is, what do we do with them?”

“In order to decide that it would be helpful to know what happened to them,” Suzie said.

“We know what happened to them,” Mace snarled. “They were converted into Cybermen. I’m not interested in how it works. I need to know if they’re dangerous or not and what we have to do next.”

The three of them kept watching the Cybermen for a moment.

Suzie sensed her insides knot up as she thought back to the fight. They had been lucky to survive the invasion. Whatever caused the Cybermen to return to wherever they came from saved them. The Cybermen that had entered the Hub were dead, but there would have been countless more of them outside that the four of them would not have been able to defeat. A shudder ran down her spine.

“And you have a good idea of what that would be, am I right?” she asked Mace.

The colonel turned to face her and declared, “Yes, Agent Costello, I do have an idea.”

“Which is?” Owen asked, still watching them. The physiology of the newly created Cybermen fascinated him.

“Euthanize them.”

“Euthanize them?” Suzie echoed tonelessly, knowing that Mace was right. They could hardly have Cybermen running around that could easily start to rebuild the army of steel.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t already considered it yourself,” Mace said wryly.

True. Thinking it and voicing it were two different things, though.

“It would be interesting to examine them,” Owen said thoughtfully.

“There’ll be Cybermen for autopsy once we’ve secured the tower,” Mace told him.

“We should have a look at the other survivors,” Suzie suggested in order to end the discussion. They could have academic and ethical debates once the immediate danger was contained.

“What’s over there?” Owen asked, spotting a guarded room opposite the areas where they were holding the converted people.

“Director Hartman,” Mace spat. “Or what is left of her.”

Owen nodded. He had seen the Cyberman when it surrendered. Thinking back on the moment now, he could hear its synthesized chant again. ‘I did my duty for Queen and Country.’ A chill ran down his spine and he turned to go to the partially converted victims.

Where the fully converted Cybermen had appeared rather lethargic, the partially converted Cybermen, if you could call them that, looked quite confused. Despite his professional curiosity, Owen was also touched by the human tragedies behind the stricken faces. Suddenly, he had to think of Katie. Shaking his head, he tried to chase the memory away. He knew what had happened to his fiancé because Jack got no chance to retcon him back then. Pictures of her opened head, an alien
creature squirming in her brain, flashed in front of his inner eye and he choked.

“Owen?” Suzie asked. “Are you okay?”


“You looked like you were miles away.”

“It’s nothing,” he said dryly, shaking his head. His gaze fell back onto the partially converted. “What do you want to do with them? You want to euthanize them, too?”

“It’s possible that we won’t have another choice,” Mace replied.

“But you don’t plan to put down the ones who escaped uninjured, too, right?” Owen challenged.

“Don’t be silly, Dr. Harper,” Mace huffed. “We’ll find a solution. Or maybe you will.”

“We can discuss that later,” Suzie cut in. “I want to talk with them.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Mace told her stiffly.

“Probably,” Suzie conceded. “But I’m still going to talk with them.”

Mace certainly did not like that, but he did not object again, leading Suzie to the hall of the escaped people and ordering the guards to let her through.

xXx

Cardiff

When Jack returned to the Hub with a big bag of ground coffee as well as fresh coffee to go in thermos mugs, he did not find Toshiko at her workstation. Surprised, he let his gaze travel through the central Hub. Where did she go?

Jack chuckled at his own confusion.

*She’ll be at the restroom.*

He went to his office and picked up the phone to call Archie. They talked for a few minutes until Jack excused himself, claiming he had to go out and save Cardiff again. The Cybermen were gone but there was still a lot to do.

After their chat, Jack felt a little better. Tiredness weighed him down, though, and he drank the rest of his coffee. It did not help. He was not physically tired.

Looking through the round window at the central Hub, he found that Toshiko was not back yet. Jack got up and strolled to the door to have a second look, but he still could not find her. His scalp tickled and he felt a wave of coldness wash over him.

*What’s wrong? Is my mind playing tricks on me? Where are you, Tosh?*
Taking a deep breath, he decided to check on the staff quarters. They had guests after all.

Just when he made a step forward, he noticed sudden movement on the periphery of his vision and something hit his left side. Whatever it was dropped to the ground.

Quickly, Jack pulled his Webley out and directed it at the attacker.

“Yvonne!” he gasped.

His shoulders sagged and he put his gun back in its holster on his belt. Then he squatted down beside the calico cat.

“Do you have to scare me like that?” he admonished the animal. “I could have shot you.”

Purring, she stepped forward and pushed her head against his leg. Then she smoothed her body against him and Jack could not resist petting her.

“Hey, Yvonne. Have you seen Toshiko?” Jack asked softly.

“Why? Did you miss me?”

Hearing her voice, laced with amusement, Jack scooted backwards and bumped into the doorframe. Startled, Yvonne ran away.

“I brought you coffee,” Jack muttered, straightening up. Gingerly he rubbed his backside.

“Thanks,” Toshiko sighed and picked up the mug.

“So, what were you doing?”

“I checked on the vaults,” Toshiko replied. “You’ve got to help me. I couldn’t move the weevil and the hoix on my own and we have to before they start to smell really bad.”

“All right. Finish your coffee first, then we can go down to clean up a bit as long as the Rift keeps quiet.”

Grateful, Toshiko sat down in her chair and nursed her hot drink. She sure could use it.

xXx

London

Suzie had hoped to get a better picture of what had been going on inside the tower during the attack by talking to the survivors, but she had to realize that that was wishful thinking. Whoever she asked had been far from the actual fight or barely escaped the solidifying ghosts. They all said that getting out of the tower had been their priority and that running to the exit had happened in a blur.

So the field operative was rather frustrated now. While Owen talked with a Torchwood employee, she withdrew from the conversation.
We’ll need a lot of retcon, she thought.  

Her gaze drifted over the survivors who tried to make themselves comfortable on the few camp beds UNIT had provided, some sitting, some lying down on them. Some of them looked battered, but most of them did not show any sign of the fact that they had been in Torchwood tower.

How many of them were working for Torchwood? Suzie wondered. I did not count, but there don’t seem to be many. Where are they? Did they fall in battle? Did they get converted?  

She choked and a chill ran down her back.  

About eight hundred people were working for Torchwood One. Now only so few are left?  

A couple caught her attention, the young woman whispering to her partner as she threw furtive glances at Suzie and Owen. He answered her equally lowly but energetically and his girlfriend hit him on the shoulder.

Their argument piqued Suzie’s curiosity. When she strolled over to them, they stopped talking. While he looked at the Torchwood agent defiantly she appeared rather uncomfortable.

“Something you want to tell me?” Suzie asked.

“No,” the young man snarled.

“Are you sure, Miss…?”

“Horton?” the girl answered insecurely. “C-carol Horton.”

“There’s no need to be nervous, Carol,” Suzie said in a chatty tone. “I just want to talk a bit.”

“But she doesn’t want to talk with you,” the boy growled. “So sod off!”

“Who asked you?” Suzie replied, fixating him with an icy stare that would have scared a weevil away. When she turned to the girl, she was all amicable again. “Now, why don’t you tell me what you have on your mind?”

“I… nothing,” Carol said. “I want to go home.”

“Why are you keeping us here?” the young man barked.

“Tony…”

“No, I want to know. What do you have to hide that you can’t just take our statement and let us go, huh?” he challenged. “What’s the big deal? The aliens? You want to detain us if we don’t keep our mouth shut?”

“Why are you shouting at me, Tony?” Suzie asked with a shrug. “All I want to do is talk. You’ll be able to go home soon when the situation is under control. It won’t take long.”

“That’s what they told us hours ago,” he snapped.

“And it will likely take several hours more,” Suzie retorted. “I can see that you’re angry, and I understand, really, I do. But we’re trying to save lives here and your attitude is not helpful.”

Tony took a breath like he wanted to argue but shut up instead, scooting back on the camp bed and hugging his legs to his chest. Suzie squatted down in front of Carol.
“Now, is there something you want to tell me?” she gently asked.

Undecidedly, she looked at Tony who just glowered at her. When she turned back to Suzie, she appeared to be ready to speak, but before she could utter a single word she began to weep, her shoulders shaking with her sobs.

“Oh, Carol. There’s no need tocry,” Suzie tried to assure her.

“Please,” Carol sobbed. “Don’t punish us.”

“Why should we do that?” Suzie prodded, confused.

“Because…”

Tony groaned, distracting her anew. Another sob hitched loudly in her chest and she coughed.

“It’s… we really wanted to get help, but…” Carol seemed unable to form a whole sentence between sobs. “We were so glad we got out of there alive and then… the soldiers grabbed us and brought us here. We… didn’t want to get into trouble.”

Now Suzie got an idea of why Carol was so reluctant to share her sorrow.

“Did you have to leave other survivors behind in order to get out?” she gently prodded.

Sobbing out loud Carol nodded.

“Where?”

Her short but firm request silenced Carol for a moment before it bubbled out of her, “At this horrible place,” she gasped. “When those metal men brought us into the tower they took us far up where they had this horrible place full of machines and screams and blood. They told us we’d be converted and…” once more she gasped for breath, “forced us to stand in line. One after the other was led in and we could hear the others’ screams and the screeching of the machines. It just was… horrible! We knew we’d be next and when they suddenly stopped Tony grabbed me and we ran.”

New sobs shook her which made her unable to speak.

“You ran and you only stopped when you got out of the tower again?” Suzie asked.

“No.” Carol shook her head and began to search herself for a tissue. “Right then we couldn’t get out. There wasn’t enough time. The tin men just stopped for a moment. It was like they had to update new information or something and then they continued. We just got past a couple of them when they resumed upgrading.”

Getting a package of paper tissues out of her jacket, Suzie pushed it in Carol’s hand. The young woman frantically fumbled a tissue out and blew her nose.

“What happened then, Carol?”

“We hid. It was a closet, I think. They kind of ignored it… Anyway, when we heard tumult we peeked out and saw them fly through the hall. We waited. Once everything was silent, we left our hideaway and tried to find the way out, and that’s when we found him.”

“Him?” Suzie prodded.

“He was trapped in one of the machines, screaming for help…” New tears made her sob with
anguish. “And we wanted to help, but… I was so scared that I urged Tony to go on. We said we’d get help when we got out, firemen or police… but we didn’t. Oh, God! We told nobody! Please forgive us! We were just that scared and…”

“How far up were you then?” Suzie interrupted her, knowing they would not prosecute her with non-assistance of a person in danger. Most likely these survivors were going to be retconned anyway. Then they would not even remember what they were punished for.

“Pretty far,” Tony grunted as Carol was unable to speak with sobs. “Almost at the top.”

Suzie heard it with dread. The recon teams were still far from reaching the top floors. They advanced relatively fast right now, but it could still take two or three hours until they were far enough up to reach the survivor.

“Thank you for telling us now,” Suzie told Carol, squeezing her hand. “I’m sure you’ll be able to go home soon.”

“Really? When?” Carol said tearfully. “I want to see my mom!” Tears formed in her eyes and spilt over her cheeks.

“Soon, Carol,” Suzie soothed. “You can go home soon.”

“Okay.”

Nodding encouragingly, Suzie got up again to return to Owen who had finished his interview. Together with Mace, he was waiting at the unfinished pathway that was guarded by armed UNIT soldiers.

“Something interesting?” Owen asked.

“Yes and no,” Suzie shrugged. “They didn’t want to tell me at first, but they certainly are traumatized so it’s no surprise they act a little paranoid. Anyway, they told me that they had to leave behind another survivor when they escaped the tower. By then they were very far up in the building and a lot has happened since then.”

“You mean that he might be dead by now,” Owen grunted.

“We have no way to know that, Owen,” Suzie said. “They said he was trapped in a machine…”

“A conversion unit!” Mace cut in. “So there can indeed still be Cybermen inside.”

“Wait a moment, Colonel,” Owen snapped. “We don’t know that for sure either.”

“But we can’t rule it out,” the colonel stated flatly.

“Right,” Suzie agreed, eyeing the medic intently. “Which is why we should not stall any further. We have a building to search and secure.”

“Let’s go then,” Owen said eagerly. “The sooner we get to him the more likely it is that he’ll still be alive.”

Suzie did not find it in herself to curb his enthusiasm. She knew how unlikely it was that the man still was alive. Glancing at her watch sobered her even more as about fourteen hours had passed since the first attack of the Cybermen.

“Yes, let’s go,” she sighed and had to actually hurry to keep up with Owen who already started for
the corridor to leave.

Before they could reach it, though, a sturdy man with grey hair came out of it, followed by a younger man in a chauffeur's uniform. He supported himself on a cane which did not lessen his impressive entrance. His charisma was palpable. Out of astute brown eyes he looked the group over.

Colonel Mace met him halfway and saluted, greeting him sharply, “Sir Alistair.”

tbc...
“At ease, Colonel,” the newcomer said calmly. “Give me a short overview.”

“We have four recon teams in the tower. The basement and the first seventeen storeys are clear. Two teams are guarding the lower levels. Survivors are currently held here before we can decide what to do with them.”

“I saw that converted people are among them.”

“Yes, sir,” Mace confirmed.

“That’s too dangerous. We’ll have to find another solution.”

“You mean killing them?” Owen cut in.

The older man eyed him sternly, clearly trying to judge who he was and which authority he had to be here and to talk to him like that. Sensing a conflict, Suzie stepped forward. All she knew about the man right now was that he was another soldier and of higher rank than Colonel Mace and she thought feverishly about what she should say.

“Suzie Costello,” she introduced herself firmly, “Torchwood, Cardiff…”

“Ah, you’re working for Captain Harkness,” the stranger said warmly before she could get any further and extended his hand. “I’m Brigadier Sir Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart.”

At the same moment he said his name Suzie knew who he was. Shaking his hand, she said, “It’s an honour to meet you, Brigadier, Sir. This is my colleague, Dr. Owen Harper.”

“Just Brigadier, Agent Costello,” the Brigadier replied with a small smile before he turned to Owen, “I understand that your Hippocratic oath makes you feel for the victims, Dr. Harper. But it’s a fact that completely converted people are an unpredictable threat. Therefore we have to make a hard but nevertheless quick decision.”

Owen glowered at him, but remained silent.

“Excuse me, Brigadier,” Suzie said. “As much as I know…”

“I’m retired. Is that what you wanted to say?” the Brigadier interrupted her. “I’m entitled to join this operation and as the highest ranking officer the decision about the remaining Cybermen is my responsibility.”

“And as the highest ranking Torchwood officer present I believe that I have a say in that matter,” Suzie told him frankly.

Mace snorted. The Brigadier glanced at him and guessed easily that the colonel had already experienced Suzie’s attitude and more than likely provoked it. Inwardly he smirked, but did not allow himself to show his amusement.

“Torchwood lost its right to make such decisions when your directorate first brought this invasion
down on us,” the colonel stated.

“To the best of my knowledge the directorate does not exist anymore,” Suzie said. “And I know that the current head of Torchwood would be quite annoyed if he were ignored.”

Once more, Colonel Mace vented his anger by snorting derisively. “I refuse to accept that … freak as the new director of Torchwood.”

Momentarily, Suzie was rather confused by Mace’s use of the word *freak* before rage bubbled up inside of her.

“Well, given your homophobic bigotry you would never be inconvenienced to work for Torchwood anyway, so there’s nothing more to be said about that matter.”

Just for a second there Colonel Mace looked startled before an expression of understanding flit over his features. If agent Costello was not aware why he had called Harkness a freak then that was all right with him.

As an experienced agent, Suzie noticed that Mace was confused for a second. His reaction just made no sense to her. Still, she made a mental note to find out the reason later.

“Actually, Agent Costello is not wrong with her reasoning,” the Brigadier threw in. “I’m pretty certain that Captain Harkness won’t be amused,” putting emphasis on the last word he fixated Mace with an icy glare, “if he’s left out of the decision-making. We should extend the courtesy and give him a call.”

xXx

**Cardiff**

Toshiko and Jack were glad that they did not have to store away the Cybermen as well. Moving the hoix and the weevil was hard enough, even though they could use a stretcher to take them to the morgue. Both bodies were heavy, though, which made manoeuvring difficult.

Once they got the corpses out of the way they cleaned up superficially.

“Jack?” Toshiko softly said, wringing out a cloth over a bucket.

“Yeah?” he looked up from scrubbing the floor.

“That Cyberman killed both the hoix and the weevil...” She paused. “What... what if they were not sucked back into Torchwood Tower?”

“They would have converted everyone to Cybermen,” Jack told her matter of factly. “Or would have deleted those who resisted.”

“But why?”

Backing off the place he was cleaning, Jack sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall, his forearms resting on his knees.
“For no particular reason.”

Toshiko looked shocked.

“They don’t need a reason. They have no emotions and are driven solely by the need to expand their empire.”

“But why did they come here?” Toshiko prodded. “Why not leave us alone?”

Jack shrugged. “Because they could.”

“But why?” Toshiko pushed. “We were no threat to them, were we?”

Jack smiled sadly.

“Just stop it, Tosh. No matter how hard you try, there’s nothing to understand.”

“Stop? I can’t just stop, Jack!” Toshiko frayed, starting to pace. “These Cybermen-things invaded our world, killing and… upgrading people. So many have died, Jack. And you say I should just stop? Should I forget about all the dead?”

When she turned around, she ran into Jack. Gently, he took her upper arms to still her.

“I can’t just ignore that, Jack. Don’t expect me… to… just forget it,” she choked.

Without saying a word, Jack pulled her forward and hugged her to his chest. Now he sensed her trembling. Carefully, not to startle her, Jack rubbed soothing circles on her back. Toshiko sobbed lowly and wrapped her arms around Jack. Her fingers clawed at his shirt.

“Shhh.”

Gently, Jack brushed a hand over Toshiko’s black hair. Slowly he felt her relax against him.

“Okay?” he whispered.

Toshiko seemed to contemplate this question before she softly answered, “No, Jack. Not yet.” Leaning slightly back, she looked up at him. “But better. We can finish up here.”

“My brave Toshiko,” Jack murmured, caressing her cheek. “I’m proud of you.”

“Careful, Captain,” she admonished with a small smirk.

“I’d never try to celebrate without your permission, Tosh,” he said softly. “You know that, right?”

Toshiko felt her insides knot up painfully when she looked in his eyes and saw real hurt and a hint of fear sparkle there. “Of course I do, Jack.” She smiled. “You did nothing wrong.”

“Okay.”

He released her and Toshiko wondered why he suddenly appeared so insecure. That was so unlike their exuberant captain. She racked her mind about how she could reassure him, and remembered that he was extraordinarily tactile.

“Come here,” she said, awkwardly taking his hand. “Come.”

Being too surprised to resist, Jack allowed her to pull him close. Stunned, he felt her searching hand
on the back of his neck and her tense lips meet his own. It was a light but sensual kiss and Jack enjoyed the sensation. Toshiko let the kiss linger for a long moment before she stepped back. When she looked at Jack, she saw him smile.

“Okay?” she asked.

“Okay,” he nodded.

In silence, they cleaned up the last of the mess and emptied their buckets before they put the mops back in storage.

“Can you check on the Rift, Tosh?” Jack asked. “I’ll be upstairs in a minute.”

“All right, Jack,” she agreed readily even though she eyed him intently. Was she mistaken or did he look rather melancholic? No matter what it was, she knew that he would not tell her.

“Thanks.”

Jack watched her head up the stairs before he walked down the corridor, deeper into the bowels of the Hub, to the morgue with its cryonic bays. There he stopped at bay thirty-one. Putting both palms against its door he stood and hung his head.

“Oh, Alex,” he murmured. “Was this what you saw? Was it the Cybermen and Daleks? Why didn’t you talk to me? After everything we went through together, why didn’t you trust me? That damned locket! You should have realized that it was betraying you. Why did you believe it more than me?”

He shook his head.

“I can’t believe that this is what you saw, Alex. Everything changes? How? Because the people saw the aliens? They saw the Sycorax and still they believe we’re the only intelligent race of the galaxy.” He snorted with wry amusement. “Old friend of mine put it in a nutshell. He said that humans have an amazing capacity for self-deception. Did I tell you about him? The most fascinating man I’ve ever met. He goes by many names and one’s the Oncoming Storm…”

Jack started.

Sucking in an astonished breath, he backed off from the bay.

“The Oncoming Storm! He was here! I know he was in London, fighting the Cybermen and Daleks! You were talking about a storm! Did you mean him? Oh, my God! Did you mean the Doctor?”

Confused, tired, and exhausted Jack stumbled forward, supporting himself against the drawers again.

“Oh, Alex. You got it all wrong. We’re here. We survived. The world keeps changing with every day, just a little bit, and… and you’re not here to see it.”

Jack sighed and stepped aside to another bay. Thoughtfully he stood in front of it, staring at the closed door.

“I’m sorry, Griff. I let you down. I let you all down.” He took another deep breath. “I won’t let that happen again.”

With a light pat against the drawer door, Jack turned around and headed up to the central Hub. When Toshiko spotted him, she gestured him to come over.

“It’s Suzie,” she said, holding out an earpiece at Jack. The captain took it with a sheepish grin at the
fact that they had discarded their communication devices on the desk before they went down to the vaults.

Putting it in his left ear, Jack said, “Suzie?” and gestured to Toshiko that he would go to his office.

“Yeah, Jack.”

“What’s up in London?” he asked on his way to his desk. “Did you search the tower?”

Suzie snorted. “We wish. Didn’t get further than the seventeenth floor so far. We found some aliens that most likely escaped from the secure archives and a few survivors in an elevator. Most people we find are dead…” she trailed off. “But that’s not why I’m calling, Jack.”

“All right. What is it, Suzie?”

“Right now we’re at the Millennium Dome where UNIT is keeping the people who fled the tower,” she explained. “And there’s someone here who wants to talk to you.”

All of a sudden, Jack’s heart jumped in his throat. For a second, Suzie’s announcement made him wonder if the Doctor was still there, even though it was not the Time Lord’s style to linger around.

“Captain Harkness?” a distinct male voice interrupted his train of thoughts.

“Yes.”

“Here’s the Brigadier, Captain.”

Jack gasped with surprise. “Sir Alistair! Did they call you back from retirement?”

“A unique situation requires unique measures,” the Brigadier replied. “UNIT knows that I have invaluable experience and does not want to turn down my advice.”

“They would be stupid not to listen to a man who fought the Cybermen when other UNIT leaders were still in primary school.”

“Yes.”

“So what can I do for you, Sir Alistair?” Jack asked cordially.

“Well, Jack, as Agent Costello has told Colonel Mace and me, you’re currently the highest ranking member of Torchwood. And we have some decisions to make.”

“Yes, I guess I am,” Jack said, sobering up instantly. He could judge by the Brigadier’s tone that something was not right. Inwardly he chuckled bitterly. How should it be?

With a sigh, Jack sat down in his office chair. Intently he listened to what the Brigadier and Mace, who now mingled in as well, had to tell him. For a moment, he mulled over the information before he made his decision.

xXx

London
In the Millennium Dome, Suzie and Owen watched with mixed emotions how the Brigadier and Colonel Mace stood aside to talk with Jack in private.

“What do you think?”

“What about what Jack will decide?” Suzie asked back. “You know Jack as well as I do.”

Owen snorted. “Do we know him? Really?”

Suzie shrugged.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Owen grumbled.

“Owen, did you think for just a moment about what might happen if one of them got loose?” Suzie said.

“I did,” Owen conceded. “But I don’t have to like the conclusion, or let those who have to make the decision come to it without being challenged.”

Looking at him sharply, Suzie realized that Owen did in fact know that there was no good choice. They had to take the hard way, no matter if they liked it or not.

They watched the Brigadier join a group of soldiers, giving them orders. The men walked away to return not much later with suitcases of equipment.

“We should return to the tower,” Owen said, starting to march to Colonel Mace to get back his earpiece. “I don’t need to watch this.”

Silently Suzie agreed. Owen retrieved both their earpieces and they headed back across the river to the triage station while the UNIT soldiers fulfilled their horrible duty.

tbc…
Leaning back in his office chair and staring into vacant space, Jack felt drained. Since the attack, he had hardly slept but had died five times. His body was protesting against this maltreatment with sore muscles and a beginning headache. There was a throbbing pain in his neck where the weevils had bitten him as well.

Making the hard but only logical decision about the fully and partially converted victims of the Cybermen, left him awfully tired.

Tired of death and destruction.

Closing his eyes, Jack tried to escape into the darkness, but instead of consolation all he found was more torment.

His own mind had not been a refuge ever since the fight against the Daleks on the game station and that had a lot to do with the fact that he did not know what had happened to him.

*Last man standing, three Daleks against me, and running out of ammunition. It was only a matter of time until the gun was empty. Ten rounds in the handgun, not enough for stalling.*

Dropping his weapon and anticipating the blast, he did not even see the shot that killed him.

*Alone. I’ve never been as alone as I was those first weeks trapped on the damned game station.*

It was a shock for Jack to realize that his escape had landed him in 1869, a shock that was only surpassed by recognizing that his vortex manipulator had burned out, leaving him stranded once more.

*Where did I land? Am I even on Earth?*

He found himself in a wilderness region and when he climbed the next hill, all he could see were the endless waves of a prairie. Thunder rolled, which confused Jack even more as the sky was an almost unreal shade of blue. The noise came closer and when Jack saw clouds of dust behind the next hill he understood that a herd of big animals was moving fast.

In his direction.

His heart beat wildly into his chest as he watched the bison come up over the mound and run directly toward him. Whirling around, Jack ran as fast as he could, but he was left no chance. The stampede was over him in seconds, crushing him under hundreds of hooves.

The first thing he remembered after that was a gasp that seemed to implode his lungs. His whole body was on fire, his muscles sore, and he was flailing helplessly. Just why was he alive? He could not wrap his head around it. What had happened? For all he knew he should be dead.

*Why am I not dead?*

Jack did not know for how long he lay there and he did not care. It was the painful beginning of his
long travels until he should reach the east coast and find a ship that would take him to England. There he went to Cardiff. Back then, he did not care if he found an incarnation of the Doctor that would know him. He wanted answers so desperately that he did not think about time paradoxes. Jack drank a lot to drown his sorrow and that often got him into trouble, namely street fights.

After one of those fights, he returned to the sight of two young women. Plucking the broken wine bottle out of his bleeding stomach, he tried to flirt his way out of it, but they knocked him out easily. Jack woke up in a prison cell where the women tortured him with electric shocks. Jack was thoroughly confused as their equipment was way ahead of their time. They mocked him and his eyes widened with panic when one of the ladies directed a gun at him.

Then she pulled the trigger.

“Why aren’t you dead yet?” the woman had asked with an icy cold voice that sent chills down Jack’s back. What made Jack shiver even more was that he could not answer her even if he wanted to, because he still had no idea. All he knew was that he did not age during the last twenty years of travelling. And that he could not die. Well, that was not quite right. He did die, but he did not stay dead.

And that confused him no end.

Why aren’t you dead yet?

Seeing that the women would imprison him forever if he did not agree to work for the institute they called Torchwood, Jack reluctantly accepted their contract. His job was to track down aliens or secure alien tech that came through the Rift the Doctor used to refuel the TARDIS on. Even after working for the Time Agency, Jack had never known that so much flotsam and jetsam was washed through holes in the fabric of time. It was terrifying. So the decades passed by, the people at Torchwood changing, replacing those who were killed in action. Everyone but Jack who remained the same all the time.

He had loved. More than once. He had been married. He had children as well. But what he could not find was the happiness he saw looking into the faces of other people, the happiness that originated from sharing life with a loved one, until death did them part. His curse was that death did part them, with the only difference that he was always left behind. Being unable to grow old with the one he loved, Jack fled into superficial relationships and meaningless sex, always haunted by the same question about why he could not die.

Why aren’t you dead yet? For over a century this question had tormented him now.

Last night, Jack had been closer to finding an answer than ever before when the Doctor was in London, and the opportunity just had slipped through his fingers. Jack’s heart broke and his body and soul ached with grief. A sob escaped him and he rubbed at his tear-burning eyes with his balled up hands.

A knock on the doorframe startled Jack.

Upon looking up, he found Toshiko under the entrance.

“What’s up?”

“Bad news?” she asked back as she took in his distraught appearance.

“No surprise in this situation, right?” he replied. “So what is it?”

Jack glanced at the clock on the wall. They’d only been back from dealing with the Blowfish for about four hours now, but there was no sense in groaning or rolling his eyes. The world did not stop turning just because a Cybermen invasion had occurred and it certainly did not show respect for Jack Harkness’s heartaches.

It was time to go back to work.

xXx

London

Owen did not want to think about what was happening in the Millennium Dome right now. Even though he knew that it was far too dangerous to keep the converted people alive, he loathed the idea of euthanising them.

With huge steps, he marched toward the triage tent. Suzie could hardly keep up with him.

“It was the only way,” she said.

“I know,” he grumbled back.

“We don’t even know for how long they might have survived without the hive.”

Abruptly Owen stopped in his tracks and Suzie came to a halt two steps ahead of him.

“Do you want to say that we did them a favour?” he spat.

“No. I just want you to keep in mind that their survival was highly unlikely anyway,” Suzie replied in a voice as calm as she could muster.

“Oh, so we just shortened their suffering? Is that it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But that’s what you meant, right?” he snarled. “They won’t make it through the night alive, so let’s put them down. About a day ago those… Cybermen were people, for God’s sake!”

“I know that.”

“How can you be so… so…”

“Professional?”

“Callous!”

Suzie scowled. “I feel regret about the casualties, Owen. Right now, we can’t afford giving in to our grief, though. We have a job to do. We’ll have to mourn the dead later.”

Frowning deeply, Owen tried to stare Suzie down. That never had worked before and did not work
now either. So Owen just huffed and strode past her to the triage. When he entered the big tent, he intended to help, but to his big surprise there was little to do. Some of the camp beds were not even occupied.

“Hey.”

Turning toward the voice, Owen discovered Martha Jones perching on one of the camp beds.

“Hey,” he replied. “So they let you stay.”

“Yes. Thank you, Dr. Harper.”

“Owen.”

“Owen.” She smiled thinly. “Sit with me for a moment?”

“Yeah,” he said and settled down beside her.

“There are no news about Adeola yet.”

“I’m sorry,” Owen murmured. “It sure takes its time to search the whole tower for possible threats and survivors. I’m sure you’ll get a message as soon as she’s found.”

“I hope so, Owen,” Martha said, doing her best to sound hopeful. If she was honest with herself, she did not expect a happy ending. Adeola was missing for too long. If she was alive, she would have found a way to contact her or her family. So the only logical explanation was that she did not survive the attack. After a moment of silent contemplation she said, “I think it’s kind of weird that so few injured people are here at the triage. There must be more survivors, don’t you think?”

Owen did not answer at once.

“I don’t know enough about the situation, but what I have seen was bad. Really bad.”

“You don’t think Adeola survived, right?”

“I don’t know, Martha,” Owen said. “There’s still a chance that she’s alive and was not found yet. Don’t give up hope.”

Martha sighed. “The more I think about it, the more I doubt that I’ll see her again. But I appreciate your effort to make me feel better. Thank you, Owen.”

Owen nodded and for a moment they sat in companionable silence.

“Owen, what happened here?” Martha suddenly asked.

“Pardon?”

“Don’t give me any shit covering it up,” she told him sternly. “I don’t believe in terrorists or whatever you’ll come up with. I know what I have seen. Those Cybermen were everywhere. And not only here in London. They were all over the world. They told us we’d become like them.”

“I have seen the news.”

“Don’t lie to me, Owen. I don’t know who Adeola really was working for, but I do know that it was no regular office.”
“Martha…”

“No, Owen!” she insisted. “Hear me out. It must have been something top secret. She never would talk about her work except saying that it was really important and that we would be proud of her when it would become public one day. What I do know is that her company was right here, in this tower, right in the centre of the attack. So… were they the target? Is her company the reason we were invaded by those *ghosts*?”

Listening to her made Owen increasingly uncomfortable. She had every right to be worried for her cousin, so he did not mind her being here. But she asked too many good questions and Owen knew that that would get her in trouble. With UNIT and ultimately with Torchwood as well.

“I could do with a coffee,” he said. “Do you want something to drink, too?”

“Yes, coffee would be good,” Martha replied.

“Okay, I’ll try to hunt one down,” he smirked and left the tent in search for said coffee. Not far from the triage, he found a UNIT officer who supplied the soldiers with drinks and got two plastic cups that he carried back to Martha, handing her one.

“Thanks, Owen,” she said with a small smile and tasted the brew. “Hmm, not good but strong. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Owen nodded, sipping at his own coffee. Once more, they sat in silence until Martha suddenly yawned.

“And here I thought that the coffee would keep me going,” she mumbled sleepily.

“You must be exhausted,” Owen said. “Why don’t you lie down?”

“No. There must be some work to do. And I need to know what happened to Adeola.”

“I’m sure you’ll be informed as soon as possible,” Owen reassured her and guided her down on the camp bed. “Rest.”

“Don’t want to,” she mumbled.

A second later, she was dead to the world. Owen took what was left of her coffee and disposed it in a bin bag.

xXx

**Torchwood tower**

**conversion unit**

“Reword your request. We are the Cybermen. We are perfect. We do not malfunction.”

Ianto could have screamed with mental agony, but he abstained from wasting his breath. The Cyberman could not let it slide. For the umpteenth time it repeated the same phrases.
Rolling his eyes, Ianto sighed, “There is no we.”

“You’re going to be upgraded. Together we will rebuild the Cyber-empire.”

“I am not gonna be upgraded,” Ianto insisted. He was tired. So ruddy tired. “Especially not by an imperfect being like you.”

“We are the Cybermen. You are human, so you are inferior.”

“Wrong!” Ianto shouted, unable to just let the thing talk.

“You will be upgraded.”

“No!” Ianto screamed. “No! No! No!”

“You will be upgraded.”

Ianto strained against the restraints but it was hopeless.

He screamed.

“You will be upgraded.”

There was a short moment of silence before the Cyberman spoke again.

“You will… will be… upgraded.”

Ianto pricked his ears.

*Something’s wrong with it.*

“Upgraded. Upgraded.”

“Now, don’t you say that you’re malfunctioning?” Ianto could not help but chuckle.

“We are the Cybermen.”

“Nah, you’re just one.” Ianto rolled his eyes. *Why do I answer it anyway?*

There were creaks and the whirring of blocked hydraulics.

“We… we are… Cybermen. We are the Cybermen. Upgrade. Up-up-upgrade, up…”

*What’s wrong with it?* Ianto wondered. *Well, I shouldn’t complain.*

“Cyber… Cybermen. We are the Cybermen-men-men.”

*On second thought, I probably have reason to complain. It won’t babble on like this, will it? Oh, please, don’t.*

“We… we are… we are…”

*Shut up!*

“Cy-cy-cyber-ber-men, Cybermen. We are Cy-cy-cy…”

*Stop it!*
“Cyber... men. You will... be... up-up-upgrade... upgraded.”

Oh, no! Stop! Please, stop!

“Cy...”

The artificial voice trailed off.

Silence fell.

And it remained silent.

Did I confuse it? I can’t believe it.

Ianto listened intently.

Has it really shut up? Finally?

Ianto hardly dared to hope.

What happened to it? Did it blow a fuse?

Waiting some more seemed to confirm it. Ianto could hear nothing but the hum of the ventilation and the constant ping of the elevator.

Having silenced the Cyberman felt like victory. Inwardly, Ianto cheered.

What Ianto could not know was that the interruption of the conversion had caused an improper finish of the upgrade. The Cyberman had been able to function but when it booted it already was doomed to crash. The malfunctioning circuits of the augmented cyberunits were destined to burn out. It kept going as far as it could and now it blew a fuse.

For Ianto it made no difference.

He was glad that the Cyberman finally shut up.

tbc...
“Okay, Tosh,” Jack barked over comm. link. “We’ve reached Trinity Street at the coordinates you gave us but nothing is here.”

“For your information, Jack,” Toshiko huffed. “I can only interpret the data I’m collecting. So I can’t tell for sure if it is an inanimate object or not.”

“I know, Tosh,” Jack said, trying for amiable but managing to only sound impatient. “Is it moving?”

“It is now, actually,” Toshiko replied. “It’s close to the café on the corner at Cardiff Story. Moving on the plaza… It looks… Oh, dear, I assume that we’re looking for a group of smaller individuals.”

“Great,” Jack huffed. “Can’t see them yet! Where the hell are they?”

“It’s not my fault what came through, Jack. I can’t do more than work! North! Go North!”

Realizing that he had vented his frustration on Toshiko, Jack rolled his eyes. “Sorry, Tosh. Can you tell a little more detailed than north?”

A commotion among some people who had been watching the news on the big screen on St. David’s Hall, diverted his attention. Scowling, he tried to see what was causing the people to sidestep. He heard someone yelp. Then someone pointed up to the crown of a tree.

“Tosh?” Jack murmured, seeing something small and green flit down the trunk. “I think we’ve got the lead we were looking for.”

“Okay.”

Quickly, Jack stepped up to the boot of their car, reaching for a suitcase he had taken with them when they left the Hub. He unlocked it and got the two guns the constables had returned to him after the blowfish incident and magazines out.

“Here,” he said, holding them out at the constables.

“Guns again?” Gwen complained half-heartedly.

“Jack. We walk the beat. We don’t carry guns,” Andy said.

“Now you do,” the captain replied, pushing the guns in their hands.

“But we never used one,” Gwen told him. “Not even on a shooting range.”

Jack huffed, reaching out and holding up her hand with the gun. “Well, hold the grip firmly, but not too tight…” He adjusted a little switch and said, “Release the safety…” He took her other hand and placed her palm under the wrist, saying, “Support with your free hand… And this,” he pointed at the part of the gun, “is the trigger. Keep your finger off it until you are pointing it at something you actually intend to shoot. And now we have some aliens to catch.”

Gwen looked stunned.
“C’mon!” Jack bellowed and started running, the two constables close behind him.

Startled people jumped out of the trio’s way.

“Where did they go?” Jack shouted, turning in full run to see if someone answered, his coat billowing around him.

Two teenagers pointed down Working Street, “They ran this way!”

“Thanks!” Jack yelled, not slowing down his run until shouts and a skirmish drew his attention to the glass foyer of the Cardiff Story, usually the first address where tourists gathered first impressions and knowledge about the city’s history as well as souvenirs and information about sightseeing and local events. People blocked the door, excitedly trying to avoid what was moving among them. It had to be small as they were looking and pointing down. Through the glass wall, Jack could watch how the commotion rippled on further into the building as well as toward the second door that led back out onto Working Street.

“Follow the one inside!” Jack gestured Gwen, who bounded up the stairs, shouting ‘police’ to make the people move aside to let her through.

“Unknown aliens in Cardiff’s city centre. Exactly what I didn’t need.” Jack muttered, searching for a trace of the other one. “There you are!” He started after the little green thing that rushed down the stairs and across the pavement toward the mall.

“Jack! What are they?” Andy shouted.

“No idea!” Jack replied cheerfully, if a bit out of breath.

More people shouted. Jack saw them point at him and Andy, only to realize that they actually meant the creatures that shot past them to join the one that was ahead of them.

Wow, fast little fellows, Jack thought, dreading what happened if they got into the arcades. We can’t shoot at them, neither in there nor out here. Crap! How do we catch them?

Suddenly the whole flock made a sharp turn left and ran toward the churchyard. They chased down the footpath between the wrought-iron fences, Jack and Andy on their trail. Before they headed straight into the old Victorian building of the market hall, another creature joined them. When Jack and Andy reached the entrance and slowed down, Gwen stopped beside them.

“What do we do?” Gwen asked. “The market hall’s certainly brimming with people.”

“Find them,” Jack huffed. “Identify and catch… or eliminate. What else?”

“You don’t want to let them run, do you, Gwen?” Andy teased.

“Stuff it.”

“Kids!” Jack cut in. “Easy. Just let us find them, okay? Then we’ll see.”

The constables nodded in agreement. They were about to enter the market when they heard someone scream and a whole bunch of people rushed toward the exit, squeezing through the opening and darting in all directions.

xXx
Owen needed a new coffee. When he got to the UNIT officer’s stand this time, he met Suzie.

“Anything new?”

“No,” she shook her head. “You?”

“Hmmm,” he shrugged, strolling away from the stand. Grabbing two sandwiches as well, Suzie followed him. Striding alongside her partner, she tried to push a sandwich in Owen’s hand that he shoved back.

“Take it,” she commanded. “We don’t know when we’ll get anything again.”

Grunting with displeasure, Owen snatched the bread and gulped it down with a few big bites. They still were walking and when they were out of earshot, Owen slowed down and murmured. “I had to dope a coffee.”

Suzie huffed.

“Why, Owen? Did anything go wrong?”

“Nah. Girl was asking too many questions.”

“So you thought it would be better for her if she won’t remember?”

“Yeah.”

Suzie shook her head. “It would have been better to keep your mouth shut and not say anything to her.”

“I didn’t blab, Suzie,” Owen defended himself. “She’s a med student and she’s smart. She asked about the Cybermen. Instead of information she got a coffee from me. You have a problem with that?”

For a moment, Suzie contemplated that. “No. Just be careful. We shouldn’t spend the stuff like water.”

“I don’t plan to,” Owen grunted and took a gulp of his coffee. “What about the survivors over there in the Millennium Dome? The ones who weren’t injured. Will we retcon them?”

“Probably.”

“Will you decide about it or should we ask Jack?”

Once more, Suzie took a moment to think about the question before she answered, “I could do it, but there are quite a few survivors, so we should talk to Jack about it.” Then she hushed Owen because she had spotted a UNIT soldier approaching them.

“Agent Costello?” he queried and Suzie nodded. “Ma’am, Sergeant Conway told me to inform you that the recon teams have reached floor twenty-five,” he paused, “and that you should switch your radio back on.”
Owen could just barely suppress a chuckle.

“Thank you for the information, Private,” Suzie said and watched the soldier retreat. Shooting a death glare at her partner, she turned her radio on and called for Sergeant Conway.

“Yes, Agent Costello,” he answered. “I wanted to let you know that we have passed several floors of archives and are now in security.”

_Security_

Suzie pricked her ears. “Can you restore the surveillance system?”

“Yes, ma’am. We used a generator to run the computers independently from the rest of the building and gained access to several systems. We could assign a team that stays here to support the recon teams. That could step up our progress.”

That was like music to Suzie’s ears. “Do that, Sergeant. Can you access the CCTV for the top floors? We were told about at least one survivor who had to be left behind.”

She heard him pass the request on to one of his men before Conway asked. “Do you know the exact floor?”

“About the top,” Suzie told him. “There have to be conversion units.”

Once more, she heard the murmur of the men as they searched on the internal camera network.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Conway reported. “The forty-ninth floor is unclear due to damage and reconstruction by Cybermen. There appear to be conversion units, but I can’t confirm the presence of any survivor. We’ll have to wait for the recon team to reach the floor.”

Suzie sighed. It had been worth a try.

“Thank you, Sergeant. Agent Costello over and out.”

Owen did not look happy either. When Suzie had asked about the survivor, he got his hopes up, but Conway’s reply was sobering.

“Guess we should give Jack a call anyway, don’t you think?” he asked, picking up on their earlier subject. “He’ll want to know how we’re doing. And honestly… I’m curious about what’s going on in Cardiff as well.”

“Well, I think Jack will be busy,” Suzie stated. “But you’re right. We should give him a quick call.” And she tapped at her earpiece.

_xXx_

_Cardiff_

Suzie’s call reached Jack at the worst possible moment.
“Not now, Suzie,” he said. “We have our hands full with a bunch of unknown visitors.”

“All right, Jack,” she replied. “Just wanted to let you know that we’re okay and making slow progress. We’re not back in the building yet.”

“Why not?” Jack barked, trying at the same time to push past the people welling out of the market and get inside. “Suzie! We need to keep an eye on UNIT! We don’t know what’s in the tower that they shouldn’t get their hands on!”

“I know, Jack,” she told him. “UNIT has access to the internal security and CCTV, though. I’ll call you later.”

“Later,” he replied and finally popped into the middle of the centre aisle. People came from the front and he let them pass, looking out for the reason of the panic. Someone was still screaming. Jack had to find out why. Grabbing an arm of someone, he yelled, “What’s going on? What did you see?”

“Don’t wanna stay until I can see something,” the man growled. “Let go of me!”

Jack did and the man drifted away with the stream of people and out of the market. A moment later, the constables were back behind Jack.

“Okay, we’re in. What now?” Gwen asked.

“Tosh!” Jack called over his earpiece. “Can you tell if our targets are still in the market? Yeah? All right. Gwen, Andy, go to the other exits and close the doors when everyone’s out.”

Without a reply, the constables ran off to do as they were told.

Jack saw the last customers flee the market and pushed the door closed. Then he ran toward the repeated screaming and into a market stall where he was confronted by a bizarre scene.

High up on a shelf crouched a woman, screaming her lungs out. On the ground was a bloody heap that was hardly recognizable as a human being with a bunch of creatures swarming the body. Two of the animals leapt up in front of the shelf, trying to reach the still screaming woman. Again and again, they jumped for their target, but the board in the middle had cracked and crashed to the ground, and the board on which the woman huddled was too high.

“Tosh?” Jack gasped. “Um, can you try to identify a species? I think our visitors could be dinosaurs.”

“Dinosaurs?” Toshiko answered over comm. link.

“Yeah. They look like reptiles anyway. About the size of a chicken, walking on its hind legs, long snout, thin neck, slender body, long tail.”

“All right, Jack. I’m searching… Hm, this one? No.”

“They’re carnivorous.”

“They are?”

“Yes, they’ve killed someone,” Jack said dryly. “A woman’s trapped atop a shelf by them.”

“I see,” Toshiko murmured. “Where are the constables?”

“Making sure the creatures can’t get out of the market and keeping nosy people out.”
“Good. I think I found the species. I guess you’re dealing with procompsognathus dinosaurs from the
Triassic period.”

“Pro-what?”

“Pro-comp-sog-na-thus,” Toshiko repeated. For a moment, she only heard the woman’s screaming.

“I’ll call them dinos,” Jack huffed.

From behind, Jack heard someone approach and discovered Gwen when he looked over his
shoulder.

“Jack? What’s up?” she panted. “We locked the doors and Andy’s talking with our colleagues to
convince them that they should guard the doors and not let anyone in.”

“Good.”

Her gaze drifted into the market stall. “Oh, my God!” she called out with horror and darted forward
only to be held back by Jack. “We have to help them!”

“I think we’re too late,” he murmured hoarsely, shoving Gwen aside to get her out of harm’s way.

“Well, and what about her?” Gwen pushed.

“They’re not at all bothered by our presence,” Jack mused aloud with morbid fascination. His
memories flashed back to a time when he had watched dinosaurs in their natural habitat.

“Jack, we should help the woman,” Gwen argued. “Now.” Jack, though, neither moved nor
answered, surprising the police constable with his lack of initiative. “Jack? What are we waiting
for?”

Shaking his head, Jack returned to the present. “We should get Andy, too. There are so many of
them.”

“He should be back in a moment,” Gwen said. “Can’t we chase them away from the body so she
can come down?”

“We can try,” Jack agreed, getting his Webley out and shooting one of the small dinosaurs. The other
reptiles jumped backwards when one of them was hit. They raised their heads, looking around and
sniffing the air. Then they continued to feed on the body. A few of them, crowded out from the
warm, human mammal corps, began to feed on their fallen comrade.

“Oh, God,” Gwen murmured, “they’re cannibals.”

“Most non-sentient animals are,” Jack explained. “It’s only when a species credits itself with having
a divine, immortal soul that they begin to care about how they treat their dead, and even then, in
some societies, eating bits of the deceased is part of the funeral service.”

“That’s disgusting,” Gwen sneered.

“Don’t judge,” Jack reprimanded her. “To some of those people, what you would consider a proper
burial is only suitable for executed felons. More to the point, what else do you notice about our little
friends here, apart from their dietary habits?”

For a moment Gwen watched silently and then gasped in astonishment. “They don’t run away.”
“Exactly, because they don’t know humans, and more importantly, they don’t know about guns,” Jack told her. “They have no reason to be afraid of us.”

“Then we should give them one.”

Gwen turned around and ran down the aisle. Confused, Jack watched her go to another stand and return with a bag and a few bottles.

“Wild animals fear fire, don’t they?” she said enthusiastically, holding up the liquor bottles.

Jack grinned. “Yeah. But cocktails will set the whole market hall on fire.”

Her excitement faded.


Scowling, Gwen tried to imagine what he meant. “Like a flamethrower?”

“Yes.”

“Might work. What about fire extinguishers?”

“Don’t think that’ll distract them enough.”

“So hairspray it is?”

Jack nodded and watched her run away again, this time returning with two bags of cans. Pushing a lighter in his hand, she asked, “Ready?”

Grabbing a big can of hairspray, he nodded, “Yep.”

“Go away!” Jack yelled when he entered first, stepping forward and waving his arms. “Shoo!”

The dinosaurs did not react, so Jack sprayed at them, holding the lighter to the gas that caught fire. Two of the creatures jumped away from him, hissing their annoyance.

“Shooo!” Jack growled. “Go! Go!”

Shouting, “Shoooo!” Gwen joined him. Their combined efforts finally made them back off.

“Keep them at bay!” Jack yelled.

“You spray again!” she called back. “I need a fresh can!”

So Jack used his makeshift flamethrower again to chase the small reptiles away from their meal. He had to sidestep a few times to keep them from surrounding them and coming from behind.

“Protecting their kill from other predators,” he murmured to himself before he yelled, “Gwen!”

“Here!” she replied, stepping up beside him. “My lighter wouldn’t spark.”

With a fresh can of hairspray, she approached the dinosaurs. Seemingly close enough this time because they huddled in the corner of the shop before they ducked through a gap in the counter and ran away.

“Gwen?”
“Yeah, Jack! Checking on them,” she replied and darted out of the shop into the aisle to watch where the dinosaurs were going.

Grasping the opportunity, Jack turned to the woman on the shelf.

“Hey, lady! Come down!”

From up on her perch, she stared at him, wide-eyed and incredulous. Then she screamed again.

“Come down now!” he commanded. “Or I’ll make you come down!”

When she still did not move, Jack grabbed her arm and pulled. She screamed even louder, struggling against his hold when she dropped in his arms.

“I warned you…”

Unwilling to argue with her, Jack tightened his grip on her and carried the traumatized woman to the exit. There he squeezed through, careful to pull the door shut behind him.

“Hey! What’s going on?” a uniformed officer confronted him.

“Torchwood,” Jack told him in his best commanding tone. “It’s our case. I’ll go back in. We’ll let you know when the situation is under control.”

“You can’t just keep us out of this,” the officer argued.

“It’s our jurisdiction,” Jack said grimly. “And now this woman needs to go to the hospital.”

He had spotted a waiting ambulance and hurried over to the medics. There he helped them to strap her onto the gurney as she started to ramble frantically about small reptiles and a vendor who got killed.

“She’s in shock,” Jack said. “Some water might help.”

“Over there,” a medic replied with a nod in the general direction.

Jack took a plastic cup and poured water in. Before he squeezed past the medic, he slipped a tiny white pill in that dissolved rapidly.

“Here,” he said, holding the cup up for the woman to drink. “This’ll help you to calm down.”

She still appeared to be confused and terrified, but she accepted the water from him.

“There you go,” Jack soothed. “The medics will take care of you. Everything will be fine. Thanks, guys,” he said to the medics. “I have to go back in.”

With that he jumped out of the ambulance and threw the door shut. Ignoring the angry police officers he ran to the market entrance and entered the Victorian building.

“Gwen?” he shouted. “Andy!”

“We’re over here!” he heard Andy reply.

Jack found the right aisle and joined them.

“Where are they?” he demanded to know.
“I don’t know,” Gwen admitted. “When they left the shop they ran in different directions. Some went down the walkway, others between the stalls.”

“We can’t let them get away,” Jack stated. “They’re too dangerous.”

“All right,” Andy shrugged. “Let’s go dino-hunting.”

No sooner said than done. Each of them darted in another direction, searching for the small dinosaurs.

“Got you,” Andy chirped as he spotted one of them. Spotting a bucket at the market stall to his right, he took it and carefully approached the prehistoric animal. “Easy. I won’t do you any harm. Come here.”

Cocking its head, the reptile watched him and chirped back. It did not seem to be the least afraid and eyed the unfamiliar creature hovering above him curiously.

When he was just inches away, Andy smashed down the bucket over the dinosaur.

“Gotcha!” he shouted happily and was about to let go of the bucket when he felt it bounce beneath his hands. The animal under it jumped against the walls of its prison and if Andy would not have held it down the dinosaur would have escaped again.

“Oh, no. You’ll stay,” he snarled, looking around in search for something to weigh the bucket down with. He grinned when his gaze fell on a sack of potatoes. Moving the animal with the bucket in that direction, he grabbed the sack and placed it on top of the bucket.

“Now try escaping,” he challenged. Hearing fast footsteps, he looked up.

On the balcony running across all four sides of the hall, Gwen chased after another procompsonagnosthus. She staggered around the corner and slowed down. The dinosaur was nowhere to be seen anymore.

“Where did it go?” she gasped. “Bugger!”

She searched in the café and under the table running along the handrail. It was gone. So she returned to the stairs, looking down. In the centre aisle she spotted Andy.

“Did you get one?” she called out at him.

“Yeah, one,” he shouted back. “And I didn’t have to shoot it.”

Hearing gunshots, they both assumed that Jack found at least one of their targets.

“I’ll come down!” Gwen yelled and rushed down the stairs. “I have no idea how we’re supposed to catch them. They’re just too fast,” Gwen panted as she slowed to a halt beside Andy. Jack joined them a moment later.

“And incredibly good jumpers, too,” Andy nodded.

“You don’t say,” Jack remarked wryly. “We still have to stop them… before they find a way out and attack someone else.”

“What about the man they have killed?” Gwen asked.

“We’ll deal with that later,” Jack told her, thinking of the body they would have to dispose of. “Our
priority is to catch the dinos.”

“Well, hunting them did not work,” Andy sighed.

“Yeah,” Gwen agreed. “We need another tactic.”

“Exactly,” Jack nodded. “And I know what we’ll do.”

tbc…
“So what are we gonna do?” Gwen demanded to know.

“We’ll stop them,” Jack replied grimly.

“How?”

“Well, for all that we know they’re trapped in the building… so let’s trap them all in one room. Then we can eliminate them.”

“You mean kill them,” Gwen huffed.

“Well, yes,” Jack told her. “Unless you want to set them loose in the city and watch how they mutilate the next shopper.”

Gwen scowled but refused to let it slide, “But those are real dinosaurs, Jack. Imagine what the palaeontologists could learn. They’re much better than fossils. They’re priceless.”

“They’re priceless hunters. If you want to catch one so that it can be experimented on to death… be my guest,” Jack said with an inviting gesture.

Sceptically, Gwen raised an eyebrow at him.

“That’s what I thought,” Jack grunted and with a whirl of his coat, headed for the exit.

“Um, where are you going?” Andy asked politely.

“You’re gonna need different weapons,” Jack growled. “Wait for me here.”

Watching him vanish into the anteroom, Andy shrugged, “Sure, we’ll wait. Nothing else to do, anyway.”

“What kind of weapons does he mean?” Gwen queried despite being certain that her partner did not know either. “Handguns would be enough to take those little dinos down, wouldn’t they?”

Rolling his eyes, Andy shrugged again. “We’ll wait and see.”

Snorting, Gwen turned away and looked around for any sign of the chicken-sized dinosaurs. She could hear some of them chirp somewhere but none of them was in sight.

“How are we gonna trap them all in one room? We’ll need something to attract them, right?”

“I’m sure Jack thought of that,” Andy replied. Leaning against a stall, he gave a rather relaxed impression.

“Aren’t you curious?” Gwen prodded, once more shifting her position. Seeing him shake his head did not serve to calm her. “Nervous?”

“No.”
“You probably should be. Those animals are dangerous.”

“A moment ago you defended them,” Andy teased.

“That was before Captain Harkness went to get some weapons that are supposed to be more effective against prehistoric chickens than these handguns,” Gwen retorted, holding up her gun. Under the enquiring gaze of her partner, she began to pace. “It’s him, not the dinos. He’s making me edgy.”

“Wonder why…” Andy murmured under his breath.

Glovering at him, Gwen tried to determine what exactly he had said but was interrupted. Hearing the door slam and footfalls, both constables turned their heads to see Jack approach, carrying two pieces of big and mean cast in steel.

“For goodness sake!” Gwen exclaimed. “What’s that?”

“The L85A2 British Army Assault rifle,” Jack replied easily, lifting one up to go along with his explanation. “Don’t point it at anything unless you intend to shoot it. Keep your finger off the trigger until you’re ready to fire. Fire in short, two or three second bursts. Reacquire your target and fire again. I know it will be tempting to just hold the trigger down until they’re all dead, but you only have 30 rounds in a clip. If the gun doesn’t overheat and explode in your face, you will run out of ammo. Short bursts are much more effective.”

He pulled four big chunks of metal out of his pockets and said, “Extra ammunition. That’s all you’ve got, so make every shot count.” With a few efficient gestures and terse words, he showed them how to remove an empty clip and replace it with a full one. “If it jams, don’t panic. Panic will get you killed. Just get out of the other one’s way, take the clip out, remove the jammed cartridge, reload, and try again.”

Then Jack shrugged his coat off to put it on the counter of the next stall.

“And just what are you going to be doing while we’re shooting the big guns?” Andy asked.

“Well, we need some bait, right?” Jack snorted and pushed the sleeve of his shirt up. “Unless you want to volunteer…”

“No, thanks,” Andy shook his head. “But neither should you.”

“What would you use instead?”

“This is a market, right? I’m sure there’s a butcher somewhere.”

“Yeah,” Jack agreed, nodding at a stall behind Andy. “Right over there. I see mince and sausages on display, but not a single dinosaur.”

“They just haven’t found it yet,” Gwen suggested.

“Or they’re just not interested,” Jack growled. “They’re hunters. They lust for fresh blood, and trust me, I know all about lust.” True to his word Jack sliced his forearm open, grimacing in pain, and blood dripped on the floor. “You two just wait,” he impressed upon the constables. “We have to make sure that we get all of them. They’re obviously pack hunters, so they should show up all together. So whatever happens, you’ll wait and give them time to gather. Got me?”

“Yes, Jack,” Gwen said soberly and Andy nodded.
“And then you’ll eliminate them. Don’t hesitate. Don’t be considerate of me. Just get the job done! No matter what happens! Or I’ll make you wish you had,” Jack threatened.

The constables first thought that he was joking, but his earnest look disabused them. Jack was deadly serious.

“All right,” Jack snarled. “Let’s do this!”

Reluctantly the constables stepped aside and let him go. Jack went down the aisle to the only unoccupied stall on the side wall. As the shops did not have back or storage rooms the empty store was the only space where the dinosaurs could gather and where Gwen and Andy had a free shooting range.

*This certainly wasn’t my greatest idea,* Jack thought as he stepped into the booth and leaned against the wall. The blood loss already affected him. He felt dizzy and it became increasingly harder to watch the aisle ahead where the constables got into position, taking cover in the bakery right at the centre crossing. Glancing down, Jack saw that a puddle had formed on the tiles and he choked.

Then he heard the chirps.

“All right. Here they come.”

Following the trail of blood, the little green dinosaurs ventured into the stall. Never hesitating, they launched at Jack who was somewhat disorientated by now. He felt the impact of a small body against his chest and gasped. The claws tore through his shirt and into his flesh. Then another dinosaur jumped up on his arm, digging its teeth into the cut.

“Argh!” Jack groaned through gritted teeth and closed his eyes.

The cheeps of the dinosaurs became louder and more excited. One ripped his left trouser leg apart. Next target was his leg itself and Jack sensed a blinding pain course through his body when a claw severed muscles and tendons. With his back against the wall, he gave in to the pain and slid down to sit on the floor.

*Good that I left my coat outside,* he thought. *It would be torn to shreds.*

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*Good that I left my coat outside,* he thought. *It would be torn to shreds.*

The small dinosaurs worked on his clothes and his flesh. Hearing more chirps, he opened his eyes again and his heart skipped a beat when he saw at least a dozen more reptiles rush in, speeding up to him, and jumping on his body.

*There are many more than we thought,* Jack realized. *Crap! I hope Gwen and Andy will wait long enough.*

Like vultures the prehistoric animals came over him, the claws slashing and the jaws pecking.

“This was a bad idea.”

Unable to stand, it Jack squirmed under the weight of the carnivores. With his left arm he unsuccessfully tried to shoo them away. Each of the dinosaurs probably weighed as much as a fat chicken, but all of them together were quite heavy and they easily held him down.

*Are they all here? What are Gwen and Andy waiting for?*

Suddenly, one of the dinosaurs jumped up on his head, a clawed foot finding a hold on his ear. A second later excruciating pain shot through Jack when the predator pecked at his eye and he
Knowing that she could not support Jack further while he and the constables were hunting the dinosaurs at Cardiff market, Toshiko searched for something else to do. Finding another task was not difficult. She still had not had an opportunity to check the Hub’s security system properly.

So she started a diagnosis program that helped her to check the mainframe for any security breaches. Thankfully the Cybermen had not caused any malfunction. Their base was safe.

*Well, except for the hole in the roof,* she thought wryly, looking up to the ceiling.

Toshiko got up from her office chair and stretched her tired muscles. Actually the rest of her was tired as well. She yawned. Then she left her workstation to climb up the stairs to the kitchenette and make some coffee. Halfway up, she realized that she did not fetch the coffee and returned to get the bag Jack had brought in earlier. As usual it was a fight to get the machine working, but finally it started to gurgle, producing the dark brew she needed.

With a fresh mug and a thermos jug she returned to her desk. Sighing she sipped at her coffee, leaning back in her chair and taking a much needed break.

Tapping at her earpiece, she tried to contact Jack.

“Jack? Jack, do you copy?”

That he did not answer did not bother her at once. He had told her that they were going to hunt the dinosaurs and would let her know when they were finished. Toshiko assumed that he was too busy chasing the reptiles to answer his comm.

Alerted by her computer beeping, Toshiko sat up to check on the origin.

“No,” she groaned. “Another rift spike.”

Her scanners told her that something came through, but it did not appear to be a life-form.

“More alien tech,” she murmured. “Let’s hope it’s just a toaster.”

While she continued to work, she kept an eye on the readings of the area where the rift spike had been. Not far from there was a hospital.

Toshiko hoped that everything would remain calm until Jack was able to deal with it.

“Jack?” she once more tried to reach him. “Jack! Do you hear me? There’s rift activity again. Jack?”

A frown creased her forehead.

“Jack?”

Now Toshiko became suspicious. It was not like Jack not to answer his comm. when she asked him to answer insistently.

*They must be pretty busy with the dinosaurs,* she assumed.
She was about to return to supervising the rift activity when she noticed that the presumed inanimate item had started to move.

“No,” she murmured to herself. “Someone must have found it. Why do people pick up unknown stuff that could as well be trash?”

Knowing quite well that whatever came through might as well look pretty or valuable, she watched the item’s movement.

_Could also be someone homeless who thinks that he can earn a few quid by selling it._

She sighed.

“Jack? Jack, please answer me.”

Her ear piece remained silent, though.

_We can’t risk it being something dangerous_, Toshiko thought and started to transfer the data she needed to her PDA, hooking it up with the rift activity locator as well. From the armoury she picked what she might need before she left the Hub for the underground garage to get her car.

_xXx_

“Let’s go, Andy,” Gwen prodded when she heard the first sounds of pain. From where she hid in the bakery, she could not watch what was going on and she inched closer to Andy who was cowering near the entrance and going to alert her when they were ready to go out and open fire.

“No, Gwen,” he replied, taking her arm to hold her back. “Look, there are more of them.”

And really, from around a corner more dinosaurs came running, following the trail of blood into the stall.

“Shit! That must at least be twenty of them now!” Gwen hissed. “We have to help Jack!”

“He told us to wait, no matter what happens,” Andy insisted.

“There are too many of them!” Gwen argued. “Andy! Did you see what they did to the other guy? If we wait for too long they’ll do the same to Jack!”

“Yeah,” Andy growled. “And he knew that when he volunteered.”

“It was his ruddy idea,” Gwen spat. “But... Oh, crap!”

The distinctive sound of claws on floor tiles skittered across the hall, alerting them to yet another group of dinosaurs running past them and toward the stall.

“Many more than we thought,” Andy rasped, gripping his gun tighter.

Another procompsognathus flit in from the left. A few seconds later, another came from the right.

That was when Jack screamed.
“We’ve gotta go!” Gwen shrieked, getting up but Andy held her back.

“Just give him another couple of seconds,” Andy choked. “We need to be absolutely sure.”

“Didn’t you hear that?” Gwen panted. “They’re tearing him to shreds.”

Andy stared into her dark eyes that looked at him with a strange mixture of horror and fervour and was still undecided. Jack had told them to wait for a reason. They could not risk a dinosaur escaping.

“They’re killing him!” Gwen whined.

Seeing that she was right, Andy nodded and started for the vacant stall. Gwen was faster and beat him to the t-crossing from where she could see the situation.

Gwen squeaked with horror when she saw Jack on the ground, the small predators feasting on him. Some looked up at the intruders and hissed angrily. Underneath the green reptiles Jack was writhing in agony, still screaming, especially as two of the creatures chewed on his lips and cheek. Another one pecked at his ear. There was blood all over the place and the animals.

“Oh, my God!” Andy gasped and raised his gun, firing at the dinosaurs.

“What are you doing?” Gwen panted. “You’ll hit Jack!”

Andy flinched and hesitated for just a second before he hissed, “You think that makes a difference?”

“I don’t wanna shoot him!”

“We might be doing him a favour,” Andy murmured and howled when she hit his upper arm. “He told us to eliminate the beasts, no matter what happened! It’s the least we can do!”

With tears in her eyes Gwen took aim and pulled the trigger. The noise was tremendous in the enclosed space, and she involuntarily closed her eyes as the recoil shook her entire body and made her teeth rattle in her head. When she released the trigger, two of the reptiles lay dead on the floor. One of them, crowded out from the warm, thrashing human feast, promptly leaped onto the corpses.

Gwen and Andy exchanged a look of horror. Then Andy set his jaw, Gwen took a deep steadying breath and nodded. They turned together and fired again.

Five more of the animals fell away. One of them was only wounded. It lay writhing on the floor, squirming, obviously confused and still anxious to get back to its meal. Gwen released another short burst of fire on it, following the body as the impact of each bullet moved it across the floor. In less than three seconds, there was nothing left of it but a pulpy mass of bloody flesh with bright white bones poking out.

Now the first of the animals connected her actions with the death of their brother and legged it.

“Don’t let them escape!” Andy shouted. “Dammit!”

Trapped between the outer wall and the constables’ guns the reptiles fled the body and the bullets, running around the vacant space in a snarl.

“They’re bloody fast!” Gwen whined at the agile animals as she removed an empty clip, and not knowing what to do with it, threw it at the dinos before sliding a full one into place.

“Just shoot them!” Andy commanded.
“I’m trying!”

“Crap!” Andy barked, and stepped back to stand against the wall. “My gun’s jammed,” he muttered.

Fighting the panic and trying to remember Jack’s instructions, he was working on clearing the jammed shell when one of the dinosaurs leaped on his arm, the claws digging into his flesh. Hearing him cry out Gwen whirled around, spotted the animal, and shot. Andy howled when the predator fell and its claws scratched his arm.

“Oi! Could have shot me!” he shouted, finally clearing his weapon and sliding a fresh clip of ammo home.

“But I didn’t, and it’s dead!” Gwen snapped back, firing into the mass of moving creatures again.

Andy spared half a second to think that over. “Good enough,” he decided, and fired again. A tiny, still civilised part of his mind was sickened that he and Gwen could banter at a time like this. A more practical part of him said that something so normal made the horror manageable. The part that wanted to stay alive told the other two parts to shut up and keep shooting.

There were only about eight dinos left. It was hard to tell for certain because the little beggars were so bloody fast, but the fewer there were, the harder it was to hit them. Gwen and Andy actually had to target the individual creatures instead of firing into a mass of movement and watching them fall.

“We need to slow down,” Andy said. “We don’t dare run out of ammunition before we get them all.”

“Right,” Gwen agreed. “Like the shooting games at the carnival, just follow it until you’re sure of your aim.”

“Exactly.”

It took about as long to get the last five dinos as it did the first twenty. In the end, they ran out of ammunition and had to beat the last one to death with their rifle butts. After all the blood and carnage, it was the crunching of fragile bones under hard steel that made them both want to retch, and then, finally, it was done.

“Did we get them all?” Gwen asked frantically, glancing across the stall.

The floor was covered with blood and the lifeless bodies of approximately thirty dinosaurs. It smelled of cordite, sweat, and death. Fearing the worst, Gwen rushed over to Jack and squatted down beside him. She knew at once that there was nothing she could do to help him. Blood was gushing out of a wound on his neck as one of the reptiles had ripped an artery.

Tears shot into Gwen’s eyes.

“Oh, my God,” Andy whispered as he stepped up behind Gwen.

It was obvious what was about to happen. Captain Jack was clinging to his life by a thread but they knew that it was only a matter of time until he would lose the fight. Jack was gasping for a final breath that he could not take and his body sagged.

“No!” Gwen cried. “No, Jack! Don’t die on us! Come back!”

But there was no coming back. Both constables knew that. Even Andy had to fight his tears.
“We need to tell Tosh,” Gwen sobbed. “And… Andy we need to clean up here. She needs to tell us what to do.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled tonelessly.

Slowly, Gwen straightened up. “I guess it would be a good start to find a wheelie bin and collect the dinos.”

“Probably.”

Taking a deep breath, Gwen turned around and left the stall in search for said bin. A few steps later, she was forced to stop because she started to shiver. Grief shook her body and she sobbed helplessly. All of a sudden, Andy was behind her, gently wrapping his arms around her and holding her while she wept.

xXx

During the drive to Llandaff, Toshiko tried again to reach Jack via ear comm. He still did not answer and finally she became worried.

“Jack, what are you doing? Answer me!” she called out in frustration. The captain could be so bloody stubborn.

A look at her PDA alarmed her. There was more than one dot on the screen now.

“No. Not while Jack isn’t responding.”

Toshiko sighed and turned left into Fairwater Road. Obviously the time for waiting and assessing the situation was over. She had to deal with this situation alone.

Pulling up in front of Rookwood Hospital, Toshiko saw a bunch of people leaving the building in a hurry.

At least there’s no panic, Toshiko thought. Not yet.

As she did not know what she had to expect, she grabbed her bag and the PDA and left the car for the hospital. On the screen, she could see that eight small objects moved inside the building. A single object was still outside and appeared to be stationary right outside the hospital.

I have to worry about the intruders first.

Tapping at her ear piece, she said, “Jack? Do you copy now? Jack!”

Anger and worry mingled with her anxiety as Toshiko entered the hospital. Following the signals on her PDA, she walked straight down the floor. A scream caught her attention and she turned right into an examination room.

“Get it off me!”

“I’m trying!” the nurse replied frantically, attempting to catch the thing that was crawling up the chest of the man who sat on the examination table.
Toshiko hardly paid attention to the scene but to what was attacking the man. It was a small metallic thing in the shape of a flattened egg that balanced on six wiry legs.

“Ouch!” the nurse cried. “Ow!”

“What the hell is that?” the man shouted. “Take it away!”

“It’s too fast!” the nurse yelled back.

When she grabbed for the spidery robot, it climbed over his shoulder, up the back of his neck.

“Hey!” the man shouted and reached up for it only to howl with pain. “I got an electric shock!”

“I know,” the nurse replied. “It hit me, too.”

“Let me help!” Toshiko cut in as she stepped forward. “Maybe I can get it!”

She was fast, but the robot was faster. It crawled onto the man’s face and two wiry legs pinned the eyelids of his left eye, making him cry out again. Suddenly a lens opened at the thin end of the flat body and a blue light examined the man’s iris.

It lasted for about ten seconds, then the light went out and the robot let go, dropping first onto the guy’s leg, rolling over and falling to the floor. Before anyone could react, it was out in the hall.

“What the hell was that?” the nurse gasped. “Are you all right?”

“I don’t know,” the man whined. “My eye hurts.”

Bending forward, the nurse took his chin to turn his head toward the lamp over the table so she could see better.

“Doesn’t look like it’s injured,” she stated.

“But it still hurts,” he complained. “It’s stinging.”

“Is it like the feeling you get when you get an eye-lash into your eye?” Toshiko suggested. “It didn’t look like it wanted to hurt you.”

“Who are you?” the nurse demanded to know.

“I just passed the room when I heard you scream,” Toshiko told her. “I just thought I might be able to help.”

“Are you a nurse or a doctor?”

“No.”

“Well, then thank you, but we’ll be all right now.”

Nodding, Toshiko stepped back and left the examination room. She had better things to do anyway. Whatever those spidery robots were made for, they were loose in the hospital, which was one of the worst places imaginable.

*I have to stop them before they cause real trouble.*

Toshiko had not quite thought this when an alarm started to blare.
tbc...
Revelations

Cardiff

Three attempts at catching the spider bots later, Toshiko sat down in a waiting area to think about a better plan.

What would Jack do?

For a long moment, she sat and contemplated her options. On her PDA’s screen, she could see that the spider bots’ movements were pretty fast.

At least they didn’t harm anyone. Looks like they’re meant for recon.

All of a sudden, she realized that there was a dot that remained stationary. The one outside.

I should check it out, she decided and headed for the exit.

A harsh rush of air greeted her when she left the building. Looking up at the sky, she sighed. The clouds gathering over Cardiff looked kind of weird. Toshiko suspected that they carried rain and was pretty sure that she would find out soon.

Now where’s my alien tech? It should be over there.

Over there was a row of bushes Toshiko walked around now to find a bench that was currently occupied by a teenager with unruly red hair, his eyes glued to something that looked like a video game. Toshiko was pretty sure the device had nothing to do with games.

“Hey,” she said. “What are you playing?”

“It’s… some kind of an action game,” he murmured, glancing up at her for only a second.

“I love action games,” Toshiko told him. “Can I have a look at it?”

“Ummm, I’m trying to figure out how to get to the next level,” he replied absently, tapping at the controls.

“Maybe I can help.”

“I want to find it myself.”

Boldly, Toshiko sat down beside him and cheerfully said, “Tell me what it does.”

Finally, he looked straight at her, eyeing her from her high-heeled winter boots to the matching black trousers to the lined anorak and the cardigan underneath, and scowled.

“Lady, even if I believed that you knew what I’m talking about… this is my game. Leave me alone.”

Sitting back on the bench and fixing his gaze back on the screen, the boy obviously considered the talk to be finished.

“Let me see,” Toshiko said insistently and snatched the device from the teenager’s grasp.
“Hey!”

“You,” she said angrily, pointing at him, “said I’d have no idea what this is or how to play. Let me prove you wrong.”

Once she held the device in hands, she realized that it was not hard to control it. *The design looks familiar. Could it be from our future?* She had no time to muse about her theory. She had to call back the spider bots.

“What are you doing?” the boy asked.

“Finishing what you started,” Toshiko replied. “Okay... this should be it.”

“But you’re not getting in another level,” the teenager complained. “You shut it down.”

“Exactly,” Toshiko smirked and stood up to walk around the row of bushes. Expectantly, she watched the hospital’s entrance, waiting for the spider bots to show up. It did not take long until they left the building and rushed on their wiry legs to Toshiko, climbed up her legs and along her arms and lodged into the bottom of the control.

“What are you doing?” the boy wailed, trying to grab the device. “Give it back.”

“No,” Toshiko told him flatly. “This is confiscated.”

“What?” he gasped. “It’s mine! Give it back!”

“This is government property. You found it after it got lost here near the hospital. I’ll take it back to where it belongs. Thank you for keeping an eye on it.”

With that, she turned on her heels and marched away.

“Hey, lady! That’s not fair!”

“Thank you!” she called cheerfully without turning around.

Back at her car, Toshiko opened the boot to put the alien tech into a containment box for transport. It would stay in there until she had time to examine it further.

*We might have further use for those spider bots, she thought. They’re good for recon.*

As she sank into the driver’s seat, she tapped at her ear comm.

“Jack? Do you copy?”

xXx

The gasp he resurrected with was burning in Jack’s lungs. Falling back from doubling up, he hit the back of his head on the tiles and he groaned.

Next thing he noticed was that the tiles were pleasantly cool. So he turned his head to rest for a moment longer, wondering what had happened this time. He appreciated the silence that enveloped him until he started to think about why it was so silent.
Forcing himself to open his eyes, he chanced a glance at his surroundings. There was blood on the floor. A lot of blood.

*Must be mine.*

Jack rolled onto his side, having a closer look at what appeared to be an empty stall at the Cardiff market hall. It was ravaged. Not only was there blood all over the space but he also counted numerous bullet holes in the wall.

*Oh, crap.*

Once more, Jack groaned as his memory returned.

*It was a terrible plan, but it seems to have worked.*

With considerable effort, Jack sat up. At once, he felt nauseous, the room starting to spin around him. Breathing as slowly and deeply as he could manage, Jack tried to fight the vertigo. When he could focus again, he could determine a difference between the blood spatters. A lot of them had to belong to the small dinosaurs.

*Good. They started to clean up already.*

A small smile lit Jack’s features as he thought of the constables who supported him.

*I should help them.*

Pushing himself up from the ground, Jack wanted to stand up, but the nausea hit instantly, making him tumble to the side. Blinding pain flared through his left leg, making the vertigo worse. He had to support himself against the wall and wait until he regained his equilibrium.

Staring at the tiled floor, he realized that his vision was blurred. Closing one eye and then the other, he found that his sight on the left eye was blurry.

*Shit.*

Jack could deal with his impaired sight. He knew he needed to find the constables and make sure everything got cleaned up thoroughly.

So he straightened up, intent on leaving the stall. Once more, he felt light-headed, swaying to the left.

“Ouch, that hurts,” Jack groaned, fingering his left ear. *Didn’t a dinosaur chew on it? But that doesn’t explain why I’m so dizzy. Must be the blood loss.*

Pulling himself together, he finally made his way out into the aisle. Stumbling along the shops, he slowly made his way to the next corner. When he approached the stairs to the gallery right next to the anteroom of the market hall, he heard someone talk and stopped, as much from nausea as well as curiosity.

“We have to tell Tosh, Andy!” Gwen whined. “We can’t deal with this alone!”

“We need to clean up and erase all traces of the dinosaurs,” Andy told her.

“I… I can’t. Andy! Jack is dead!”

“So it’s even more important that we pull ourselves together,” Andy insisted. “Jack would want us to. Or do you want to let him down?”
“No,” she admitted sheepishly. “It’s just… This is all new to us. He pulled us into his world, confronting us with those… aliens. We’re talking about dinosaurs here. Dinosaurs! Andy!”

“I know, Gwen,” her partner murmured. “Let’s keep going.”

“What about Tosh?” Gwen prodded. “We have to tell her.”

“Do you have her phone number? I don’t.”

“We could… well, we could use Jack’s ear comm.”

It was then that Jack decided that he had heard enough. With relief, he noticed that his nausea was not as bad anymore when he stepped around the corner to join the constables.

“Hey, kids!” he cheered, cringing at how unconvincing he sounded even to himself. “That was good work.”

Both constables’ heads whipped around at him, a mixture of shock and disbelief marking their features.

“You started to clean up without me,” Jack said with a crooked smirk. “I love your initiative.”

“Stay there!” Andy gasped, holding up his hands defensively. “Stop!”

For every step Jack made towards them, the constables made a step backwards.

“Hey! Easy,” Jack soothed. “And here I thought you’d be glad to see me.”

Backing further off, Gwen stuttered, “B-but you… you were… I mean. Y-you were… d-d-dead.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Jack smirked, holding out his open palms pacifyingly. It was not the whole truth as he still felt kind of dizzy and his vision was still blurred. His leg also hurt like hell. “See? No harm done.”

Demonstratively, he gestured at his torso only to notice the weird expressions of the constables. Looking down, he wrapped his arms around his chest to conceal the damage and tried not to look sheepish as he realized that his clothes were not rent and stained but literally ripped apart, holding together on just a few threads.

“You were dead,” Andy told him wryly. “The dinosaurs killed you. Some bullets hit you. We saw you die, for God’s sake!”

“But here I am!” Jack replied happily. “Alive and well.”

“That’s impossible,” Andy muttered.

“I’ve been called worse.” Jack eyed them expectantly but neither of them appeared to be particularly happy.

“Remember that I told you to wait no matter what happened?” he asked. “I knew what would happen, that’s why I was so insistent. Offering me as the bait… it was the only way.”

Andy looked like he was about to turn and run. Gwen’s shock, though, slowly turned into curiosity.

“But, Jack… How?”
“I don’t know.”

“It’s impossible, Gwen,” Andy huffed. “There’s no coming back! There isn’t!”

“And still I’m here,” Jack shrugged. “I don’t know how. I don’t know why. I only know that I do.”

Hesitantly, Gwen made a step forward.

“So… you can’t die?” she queried.

“Well, I do die,” Jack explained. “You witnessed me die. I… just don’t stay dead. And don’t ask again how or why. I really don’t know.”

“Jack!” Gwen called out, suddenly running toward him and throwing herself into a huge hug.

Jack swayed under the impact but appreciated her kind embrace, wrapping his arms around her in turn. Questioningly, he looked at Andy.

“I won’t hug you,” the constable grunted.

“Didn’t expect you to,” Jack chuckled. “Are you okay?”

Andy gave it some thought. “Yeah, I think I am.”

“Oh, Jack,” Gwen sighed against his shoulder. “I thought we lost you.”

“You didn’t,” he assured her. “That’ll be our secret, all right?”

Looking up at him out of her big brown eyes, she nodded.

“Andy?” Jack turned to her partner.

“This is outrageous.”

“Andy,” the captain prodded. “Please.”

For another moment, Andy hesitated but then he agreed, “Yeah. It’s our secret.”

“And not a word to Toshiko either,” Jack said.

“No?” Gwen wondered, letting go of him. “She must know about it, right?”

“Just don’t tell her,” Jack insisted. “She gets worried so easily. I don’t want her to freak about what already happened. So we’ll keep it a secret, all right?”

“All right,” they both confirmed.

“Great. Now let’s finish the clean-up. Someone should get the car.”

“Already got it,” Andy told him.

“Perfect,” Jack smirked. “Let’s get done then!”

“You should go and find new clothes,” Andy suggested wryly. “You can help us when you’re decent.”

Jack definitely was not the modest type, but he certainly agreed that his appearance was more than
arguable right now. So he was in another shop and about to stuff his torn and bloody clothes into a bin bag and to dress in new trousers and shirts when he received a message on his ear comm. “Jack? Do you copy?”


“Jack, finally. I was getting worried,” she admonished him.

“Those little dinos kept us busy,” he explained. “We’re cleaning up now.”

“Is everyone all right?”

“Yes, we are,” Jack confirmed. “One of the vendors didn’t have that much luck, though.” He heard Toshiko sigh. “As bad as it is, Tosh, it could have been worse.”

“I know, Jack,” she agreed. “Same here.”

“Why? Is something wrong?”

“There was a rift alert near Rookwood Hospital. I had to secure some alien tech.”

“Is everything okay at the hospital?” Jack demanded to know.

“Yes, Jack. I’ll head back now.”

“All right, Tosh,” he said. “Well done. Thank you. As soon as we’re finished, we’ll meet you at the Hub.”

She confirmed his message and Jack headed back to the constables to help them to eliminate the last traces of their fight with the procompsognathus dinosaurs.

xXx

Torchwood tower

conversion unit

The light was fading.

Ianto realized it with trepidation. So far, he had believed that it originated from lamps that drew their power from another source than the conversion units did, but he had to rethink that. As darkness fell, it became gradually colder.

Well, at first it was just less warm, but then an icy cold crept into Ianto’s body.

Maybe it’s because it’s so dark now. My mind’s playing tricks on me, making me believe that the warmth is fading as well.

For some time, he managed to believe that until it became obvious that both events were connected.
Ianto started to freeze.

*I'm sure that Cybermen feel neither cold nor heat. I doubt that there are sensors in their armour that are taking the temperature. And even if there were, they certainly have no concept of being cold.*

*So where did the light come from?*

Only one possibility came to his mind.

*It must have been a fire. A big one at that, that it spent light and warmth without flickering that much.*

With the cold came an urge Ianto had not expected anymore. At first, he ignored it, but with every minute passing, it became more pressing. Finally, he had no other choice. Despite the urge he felt there were just a few drops, though.

Rolling his eyes, Ianto forced himself to take slow and deep breaths. He felt a sob rise and tried to fight it. Painfully it caught in his chest. So he concentrated even more on controlling his breathing.

When he finally regained a state that resembled calm, he stared into the darkness and tried to empty his mind.

He did not prove to be successful.

*The saws. I can't see them anymore.*

*Is that such a bad thing? I didn't want to see them when I was still able to. They're still there, no matter if I can see them or not, and they won't go away.*

Chills ran down his spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

Ianto wished he was able to brush his palms over his freezing limbs.

He wished he could hug himself.

He wished he could move at all!

*I'm damned to wait for death,* Ianto thought miserably. *Why didn't she let me go first?*

His heart jumped into his throat, choking him.

*Then Lisa would be stuck in here! I wouldn't want that! I wouldn't wish that on anyone, certainly not someone I love!*

Recalling the reason why Lisa had sacrificed herself to give Ianto just a little more time to possibly survive the invasion, made his heart ache.

*Of course she hoped to save my life, but the knowledge I gathered as well. Only what difference does it make now? I stumbled into this 'mission' that's way over my head. How presumptuous of Dr. Markham to believe I could make it out of the tower.*

Ianto sighed.

*He said I could make a difference. Fine difference. I'm just dying more slowly than the others.*

Squeezing his eyes shut, he fought for his composure.
This is what was supposed to happen. Destiny loves to fuck with me.

Breathing in.

Breathing out.

Breathing in.

Breathing out.

Breathing in.

Breathing out.

Why is it so silent? No sounds except for that ruddy elevator door. I can’t stand that! There must be other sounds. Why can’t I hear them? Is my mind playing tricks on me?

I want to hear something else.

Anything.

Ianto grimaced at his desperate thoughts. He wanted to refuse to be beat. Still there was no denying that his situation was desperate as there was nothing he could do himself for his survival.

Nothing but to try and stay alert. Try to keep myself occupied.

A bitter laugh escaped him at that idea.

Well, if not occupied then at least distracted.

His inability to find a subject to properly think about made him groan.

I wish I could talk to someone. Well, not the Cyberman, though. And Virginia is gone. She left me alone. I’m all alone. There’s no one I can talk to.

Could talk to myself.

I’ll go mad.

I could talk to Mam. Or Rhi. Even though they’re not here I could still talk to my mother or my sister.

I should apologize. We lost sight of each other. Well, not true. I went away. I went to London, drifting from job to job, doing whatever I had to do in order to avoid having to go back home.

Was it foolish to want a different life?

Is this my penance for wanting a life so different from my parents’?

Once more, he sighed.

I’ll have a lot of time to spend thinking about stuff like this until I’m too weak and lose consciousness. How long will that take anyway? Well, it’s just a rough rule of thumb, but what did they say? Three weeks without food, three days without water, three minutes without air. That’s how long it will approximately take.

I still can’t tell how much time has passed since the Cybermen vanished. If I’d have to guess I’d say
twenty to thirty hours. So probably about the same time again until I pass out. Maybe less. Less would be good. But then, in case that someone still is out there, searching for survivors, if I pass out I won’t notice. I couldn’t call out.

Inwardly, he chuckled bitterly.

Does it matter?

I’ll die in here.

Sooner or later.

Part of me wishes it would be sooner. At least it would be over.

His heart clenched at that thought.

But that would mean letting Lisa down. She wanted me to live! However small the chances!

Maybe those chances aren’t as slim as I think. That I can’t hear anyone in the tower doesn’t mean that nobody’s there. Search and rescue teams won’t miraculously appear. They need time to get to the tower and then work their way up the storeys.

The logical part of his mind fought against the desperation induced by exhaustion and dehydration.

I have to hold out!

For Lisa!

Ianto was still debating the pros and cons when fatigue shut his mind down, making him drift off to merciful sleep.

tbc…
In the centre of the storm

Cardiff

“Is something wrong, Jack?” Gwen asked, eyeing him worriedly as they loaded the last bags with dead dinosaurs into the boot of their car.

“Just a little cold,” he shrugged, pulling the greatcoat tighter around his slightly shivering form.

“You sure?” she prodded, rubbing her palm over his back to warm him.

“Yeah, Gwen. I’m all right,” Jack assured her, shrugging her off as he slammed the boot. He could only hope that they would have a calm ride back to the Hub. The truth was that he was not quite all right. He still had not regained clear vision in his left eye and when he turned too fast he felt queasy. In addition to the pain came the cold each time he revived… and since the Cybermen attack he had done that six times now. He needed a break.

“Andy could drive back,” Gwen suggested, trying to manoeuvre him to sit in the back seat.

“That won’t be necessary,” Jack told her, stepping aside. “I’m all right.”

“It’s no big deal, really,” she prodded.

His death glare hit her full force.

“I’m all right.”

“Okay, okay,” she rushed to say and got in herself while Andy took the passenger seat.

Jack exchanged a last few words with the police officer in charge before he returned to the car. The sky was almost black, loud rumbling announcing a thunderstorm. Quickly, Jack got behind the steering wheel.

He had just shut the door when it started to pour.


Without commenting, Jack started the car and carefully drove down the pedestrian area before he filed into traffic. When they had left the market hall, he had contemplated hiding in his cubby hole or finding a high building to enjoy the view from the roof. Now Jack was pretty sure that he wanted to crash on his bunk only to come out if the world was ending.

Sudden lightning blinded him accompanied with a deafening crack.

The bright light and loud boom sent daggers lancing through Jack’s skull, and as he closed his eyes reflexively against the assault, he could no longer deny that he had not yet completely recovered from his last death.

Beside him, Andy hissed through gritted teeth when Jack barely avoided crashing into the opening door of another car. A second later, Gwen cursed from behind when Jack jammed on the brakes and the car skidded to a halt.
“What the…?” Jack gasped and jumped out of the driver’s seat, getting soaked instantly by the heavy rain. His gaze was drawn up at the black sky that lit up with lightning in short intervals. At least everyone else would take all the flashes for lightning.

Jack knew better.

“Jack? What’s wrong?” Andy’s voice drifted out of the car.

“No. No, no, no,” Jack muttered under his breath as he bustled back into the car.


Instead of answering, Jack floored the accelerator and turned the steering wheel, forcing the car around a bend and into a side road.

“Jack?”

Gnashing his teeth and gripping the steering wheel tight, Jack chased the car down the street, determined to get to an open place where he could assess the situation better.

“Jack, tell us!” Gwen pushed.

“It’s the Rift,” he pressed through gritted teeth.

“What is?” Andy asked.

“The lightning in the sky… it’s the Rift. It’s a Rift storm.” He had to suppress a shudder. “I’ve never seen such a big one.”

“You mean those flashes… they are…”

“Cracks in space,” Jack replied curtly. “This isn’t rain. It’s coming through from wherever the other end of the tear is.” Tapping at his ear comm. he said, “Tosh? Where are you?”

“Still on my way back. Why?” she told him. “I should stop before I check on the PDA.”

Okay,” Jack agreed, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel impatiently as he waited.

“Jack? The readings are going off the scale!” Jack heard Toshiko’s frightened voice in his ear plug.

“What’s wrong?”

Jack let out a shuddering breath. “Fuck.”

Heavy rain still drummed on the car, the windscreen wipers almost useless in their constant fight against the falling water. Even though his vision was pretty much impaired, Jack did not slow down, his gaze flicking from the sky to the street ahead and back. Once more, he looked at the Rift storm when suddenly Andy yelled and Gwen cursed.

Before Jack could react to the huge shadow they had noticed, the car crashed into something solid with a resounding thump. Fortunately, they were all wearing their safety restraints, even him, for a change, simply because he had taken too much of a beating lately to want to risk further injury as long as it was preventable.
So instead of shooting through the windshield, Jack was thrown forcefully into the belt and the airbag that popped up instantly. He cried out at the pain coursing through his body and gasped for breath in agony when his ribs protested against breathing.

“You okay?” he groaned at the constables.

“Still alive,” Gwen moaned from behind.

“Andy?” Jack prodded because the young constable did not reply at once.

“What the bloody hell is that?” Andy gasped instead of answering.

Following Andy’s gaze, Jack finally looked ahead to see a massive tree trunk covered with three-foot suckers collapsing onto the bonnet, making the whole car shudder under the impact.

“Fuck!” Jack cursed.

xxx

Torchwood Tower

conversion unit

In the darkness, Ianto saw colourful sparks dance before his eyes, but even when he closed them, he could not get rid of the spots. His mind tried to work a way around the blackness that enclosed him. That, his hunger, and, worst of all, his thirst were more torturing than being rendered immobile, even though his limbs and shoulders hurt from the enforced stillness.

As long as it hurts I’m still alive.

Ianto sighed.

There was nothing he could do. Thinking about it, that really was what ate away at him.

He was useless.

His mind was trapped inside his body with nothing to occupy itself with. Desperately, Ianto tried to concentrate on anything but his current position. The more he tried, though, the more forceful the remembered or imagined pictures of the saws above and himself held by the mechanism pushed back in his consciousness.

Stop it! Ianto ordered himself. Stop it, or you’ll really go crazy.

A stifled sob escaped him.

What difference does it make? I’ll die anyway. And it’ll be a long death.

Grief corded up his throat. Swallowing on that lump hurt. His chest tightened and made breathing hard for a moment.
Try to think of something nice. Like vacation in Brittany. Lisa and I sharing a sleeping bag because it was so cold in the tent.

Lisa.

At once, his breath caught in his chest again.

Another subject. Mam. Mam comforting me when I was a kid. Her soft voice murmuring reassurances. Her hand brushing over my hair. Her lips kissing my cheek. She’s always there when I need her, always supportive with calm strength.

I’m all alone.

I don’t even know if Mam’s still alive. Maybe she was killed by the Cybermen. They all could be dead. They could have been upgraded like Lisa. He felt his stomach churning at the thought of his gentle mother being converted into a cold, metal machine. Rhi like Lisa? Part of her human and another part cybernetic? The kids! David and Mica! What would they have done to them? Would they upgrade them? Or would they kill them like they executed Dr. Markham?

Markham.

I never knew that he actually searched for information about the ghost shifts. I sent him the messages, but nothing indicated that he reacted to them. Sure, he might have gotten into trouble if someone noticed him collecting information that he had no clearance for. On the other hand there were enough rumours coursing through the tower. Just nothing substantial.

Chills crawled down Ianto’s spine.

How many people fell victim to Torchwood’s arrogance? Cybermen now occupy every land mass on this planet. That’s what it said.

They were everywhere. In every house. On every street. Killing or upgrading. How could anyone possibly escape them?

I’m more than just alone. I probably am the only survivor. And that only because the ruddy conversion unit jammed.

Right now, Ianto could curse the unreliable tech for prolonging his suffering.

“Why don’t you finish what you started?” he yelled. “C’mon! Start running! Get it over with!”

Unheard, his screaming echoed through the storey.

Ianto thought he heard his echo. It was so terribly silent that his mind yearned to produce sounds.

“Shit! I wanted to work in a skyscraper, not to die in one! Help!”

His ears strained to listen for any response.

“Help!”

It was senseless. Nobody would come. They were all dead. Still Ianto could not quit. If he was not found then it would not be due to him staying silent.

“Help!”
“Anybody there?”
“Help me!”
“Heeeeeeelp!”

Surprisingly, tears stung his eyes. Unable to rein his emotions in anymore, he sobbed heartrendingly. Salty tears rolled down his face and his already sore throat suffered more and more with every sound he made.

Suddenly he stopped.

*What was that?*

Intently, Ianto listened. Actually, he was not sure about what he heard, but he knew that he *did* hear something.

*There. What’s that sound? A door? Can’t be. There’s no one left.*

His heart ached with the truth.

*Steps.*

*No. No, my mind’s just playing tricks on me again.*

Ianto quit listening.

Again, he wanted to scream, with fear, with grief, with desperation. His sore throat did not comply anymore. Silently, he cried, slowly drifting off to an exhausted sleep.

xXx

**Cardiff**

“Get out!” Jack commanded, unfastening his seatbelt and pushing the door open. “C’mon! Get out!”

The metal of the car’s body creaked as the trunk-like tentacle pressed against the vehicle, making it vibrate and finally sliding backwards.

Jack jumped out on the street and grabbed for the handle of the rear door to keep it open while Gwen struggled out.

“Andy?” he yelled.

“I’m fine!” the constable answered, pushing his door open. Another bump made the car bounce and the door fall shut.

“Andy!” Gwen shouted.

“Look out!”
Grabbing her arm, Jack swung the young woman around and in the gap between parked cars. Just in time to prevent her from being hit by the still open door as the car moved backwards. The tentacle shoved the car aside like a toy.

Once more, the passenger’s door opened and Andy fell out, rolling over his shoulder on the wet asphalt.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah!” Andy grunted.

In the constant pour, all three of them were quickly soaked to the skin.

“Jack! What can we do?” Gwen demanded to know.

The captain shook his head. “I don’t know. Either of you know a good recipe for calamari?”

In front of them squirmed the biggest octopus they had ever seen. Parked cars folded under its weight as if they were in a junk press. Streetlights bent like toothpicks. Glass shattered when the octopus pressed against the building.

“But we need to do… something,” Andy pointed out.

“I’m open for suggestions,” Jack quipped.

“Don’t you have bigger guns than the ones you gave us?”

“At the Hub.”

“Well,” Andy shrugged, “they’re better off there.”

Jack could not help but snort a laugh. Gwen, though, did not look impressed by Andy’s joke.

“Why do we get oversized animals through that tear in space?” she demanded to know. “Aren’t alien fishes and dinosaurs enough?”

“It could be worse,” Jack said.

“In which way?”

“It could be more Cybermen.”

Gwen uttered a pained sound. They all stared with trepidation and fascination at the giant cephalopod that squirmed in the narrow space between the houses. One arm lifted and swung high through the air before it crashed down on the pavement, making the ground vibrate under the impact.

“It’s impressive,” Andy stated. “Part of me wishes it wouldn’t die.”

“What do you mean?” Gwen asked.

“It’s an aquatic animal. It needs water to breathe. Certainly it won’t survive for long on dry land.”

“Not that dry right now,” Gwen sighed.

Steeling himself, Jack made a decision.

“You two, take care of the car and the rest of this trash,” he indicated the smashed cars the octopus
left behind. “We’ll meet back at the Hub. You’ll get in through the tourist information office.”

“And what will you do?” Gwen wanted to know.

“I’ll… try to distract it.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “No idea.”

“But, Jack! That’s too dangerous!” Gwen objected. “You could…” She could not make the word pass her lips.

“Die?” he continued her sentence and she nodded. Once more he shrugged. “Better me than anyone else, right?”

“I’m still scared for you,” she whined.

“Don’t be, Gwen,” Jack smiled and kissed her on the forehead. “I’ll be all right.”

Andy nudged Jack’s shoulder.

“I hate to interrupt your sweet moment, but our friend doesn’t want to wait for you.”

And really the octopus slithered away down the street. In its wake, it left more damaged cars behind.

“I lost track,” Jack said. “Where does this street lead to?”

“Toward the river.”

“Crap.”

xXx

Torchwood Tower

Searching Torchwood Tower was turning out to be far more horrifying than exciting. Climbing stairs and stalking hallways was not the bad part, Lloyd realized. It was not finding one vacated room after the other and it was not the constant threat of possible alien aggressors.

It was finding the bodies.

There were not many bodies. Lloyd thanked God that there were not as many as he had assumed they would find. Still the discovery of every single victim was horrible.

This was Lloyd’s first real encounter with death. His basic training had been all that could have prepared him for this mission. Lloyd did not feel prepared, though.

Soon it will be over, he thought as he stepped through the door and into a hall of the forty-ninth floor. Let’s see what we’ll find here.

Judging by the awful smell of death and destruction that greeted them, it could not be anything good. Slowly, Lloyd’s team walked down the hall. They could hear the repetitive ping of an elevator door.
At a junction, sergeant Beatty signalled the team to split up. So Lloyd reluctantly turned to the right to explore his part of the storey.

Turning around a corner, Lloyd stood at the mouth of a long corridor separated by plastic curtains. Here the horrible smell was even worse than before. He would have liked nothing more than turning around and legging it, but refusing to obey orders was no option. Carefully, his weapon raised, Lloyd stepped into one of the curtained cubicles.

Just inside, he stopped dead in his tracks. His stomach rolled and threatened to empty itself at the sight of the remains in the conversion unit that were hardly recognizable as human.

Coughing and choking, Lloyd stumbled backwards through the passage. Desperately, he tried to regain his composure. His heart beat wildly in his throat.

Pull yourself together, he ordered himself. You’ve got a job to do.

Taking a few deep breaths, he steeled himself and continued to search the cubicles. Every single one was as terrible as the other, like a scene from a horror movie. Lloyd’s mind skittered over the details, but he knew that they’d return to haunt him in his nightmares.

How many more?

Another curtain, another conversion unit, another victim. Lloyd was horrified by what he had seen so far, but when he stepped into the next chamber his blood ran cold.

The mutilated bodies have been bad enough but this, this is so much worse.

Unable to stand the sight of the seemingly untouched corpse of a young man, Lloyd fled the cubicle. He only made a cursory check of the next chambers before he returned to the entrance to the staircase to meet his team mates, eager to get out of this storey and ultimately out of the tower.

The team gathered at the door and started to climb up to the final storey.

xXx

London

“It’s about bloody time that they let us back in,” Owen spat as he and Suzie entered Torchwood tower.

Suzie chuckled. “You could’ve caught up to the recon team, Owen, but you chose to doze off on the bench.”

“Wasn’t much of a choice,” Owen grumbled. “I’m bloody exhausted, and you could’ve woken me up instead of letting me waste the coffee I had.” He pushed the door to the staircase open and stepped inside.

“You’re just angry that you lost precious time spent with Lieutenant Spader,” Suzie teased as she followed him. She was glad that Owen did not know that she fell asleep right beside him.
“I bet UNIT was glad we didn’t pester them,” Owen growled. “They’d love to get rid of us.”

Deciding to avoid a discussion about the latter, Suzie asked, “Up or down?”

“What’s downstairs except the garages and the dead… what did Jack call it?”

“A Dalek,” Suzie said. “Really, Owen, you should pay better attention.”

“I was paying attention,” he huffed.

“Yeah, to Lieutenant Spader.”

Owen scowled. “So what is downstairs?”

“According to Jack the secure archives.”

“That sounds interesting,” Owen grinned.

“You know we’re here to work, right?” Suzie said as she pulled out her torch and turned to the stairs that led down.

“Sure,” he drawled and quirked his eyebrows. “I enjoy my work.”

Rolling her eyes, Suzie kept walking, assured by the sound of his steps behind her. Sometimes the young doctor enjoyed his work too much to watch out properly. Suzie was concerned that that might get him or the team in trouble somewhere along the way.

“When will they turn the power back on?” Owen asked.

“When they have reached the top storey and have determined that it’s safe,” she told him.

“Good,” he grunted. “I wonder if UNIT already nicked something.”

“Not from the secure archives,” Suzie replied. “I doubt that they’re able to get in. At least it would be disturbing if they could.”

“True,” Owen remarked dryly. “Just how do we get in? Do you have the code?”

“I shouldn’t need one.”

“Excuse me?”

“I have the same clearance level as Jack. I should be able to access secure archives with a retina scan.”

“Here in London?” Owen wondered. “Are you sure you’re in their system?”

“All personnel with level A5 to A1 are,” Suzie told him.

“Well, let’s hope that you’re right.”

In the beam of Suzie’s torchlight, they could see that they had reached the eighth sublevel. This was the first one that belonged to Torchwood and the last that could be accessed with the regular elevator.

“All right,” Suzie said, turning to the door. “Let’s see what we have here.”

Carefully they entered the next hallway. From there they reached a big entrance hall with a counter
right across the huge elevator. To its left was another door.

“Armoury,” Owen read on a sign. “Response team alpha and beta. Their field agents?”

“Probably,” Suzie murmured, heading for the other door. “Come.”

“Shouldn’t we check on the offices?”

“UNIT did that already,” Suzie shrugged. “We have other things to do.”

Rolling his eyes, Owen followed her into another staircase and another floor down.

“I’m curious what they have down here,” Owen said as they entered sublevel nine. “That ship wreck would never have fit in, so what else could be important enough to be hidden?”

“I don’t know, Owen. That’s what we’re supposed to find out. We can’t risk that alien tech ends up in the wrong hands.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’re repeating yourself.”

“Huh?”

“That’s what you told me at least four times on our drive to London,” Owen huffed. “I’m dead tired. I don’t want to deal with alien tech. I could do with some action.”

“Didn’t you have enough action last night?” Suzie grumbled. “Really, Owen. Some more seriousness couldn’t be wrong.”

“I am serious,” he snorted. “If I’m going to have to look at files all night, I’m gonna fall asleep on the job.”

“Why don’t you go and see what a sphere chamber is?” Suzie suggested, indicating the door beside the sign she had read. “I’ll check the next rooms. Seem to be labs.”

“Okay,” he conceded and pressed the button below the sign. “Suzie?”

“Yeah?”

“When will the recon teams finish searching the tower anyway?”

“They were about to enter the top level when I talked to Colonel Mace. Why?”

Owen shrugged. “Well, this won’t open without power.”

Suzie tried the doors in front of her.

“Neither will these,” she sighed and shone her torch through a window into one of the labs. Everything appeared to be all right. As far as she could see nobody was inside. She activated her radio.

“This is agent Costello. When can we expect power to be switched back on?”

“Our teams reported that they have reached the top of the tower. Power should be back on any minute, Agent Costello.”

“Thank you, sir.”
As if on cue the lights on the ceiling flickered on.

“Now that’s much better,” Owen huffed and put his torch away. “Let’s see what’s inside.” He slapped on the button and the doors swished open to reveal a huge lab with a high ceiling. Confused Owen looked up in the hall and into the lab again. “Now that’s weird. This lab must be two storeys high.”

“What’s this?” Suzie asked and walked over to a distorted figure on the floor. “Owen?”

Looking around the lab, the medic had not paid attention to his partner. At her questioning tone, he walked over to her. The figure on the ground wore a lab coat, but it did not just look crooked, it also looked dried out.

“I didn’t know aliens practiced mummifying, too,” Owen said laconically.

“Owen!”

“Well, Suzie. Whoever this was is most obviously dead. I can’t help him so I’m much more interested in what this is.”

Following his gesture with her gaze, Suzie discovered a giant globe that hung in the air at the rear of the lab. The upper quarter of the front was open.


Suzie just rolled her eyes.

“Well, it looks like something was inside,” Owen said, bouncing up the metal stairs in front of the sphere. “I’d like to know what it was.”

“If the body’s poor condition is any indication of whatever may have been inside can do, I don’t want to meet it,” Suzie remarked.

“You may be right,” he said absently, standing in front of the sphere and staring at it.

“The labs aren’t our priority now. Let’s go further down,” Suzie told him, but he did not react. “Owen? Are you coming?”

Finally, he tore his eyes off the sphere and jumped down the steps to follow his partner out.

tbc…
Running down the street, Jack tried to ignore the pain that coursed through his body. Rest certainly would be better for him than chasing a giant octopus, but saving peoples’ lives was definitely more important than nursing the echoes of his wounds.

Still he yearned to lie down, even if it was not for long. Usually, he did not need much rest, sometimes, he did not sleep for weeks, but the last day had taught him that even his miraculously recovering body had its limits. Right now, he longed for final rest and he wondered if he would ever find it. There always was this short moment right before death, though, when he wanted to live. It had been especially strong when the Cyberman had electrocuted him, but it occurred each and every time. So Jack guessed that he, even tormented as he was, was not ready to cross that final passage.

He was as ready for the fight with the octopus as he could be and that had to be enough.

The giant animal was nowhere to be seen. It probably had reached the river.

*What shall I do if it went into the Taff? From there it can reach the bay and then the ocean.*

Jack knew that he had to stop it, but no idea how to achieve that. The giant animal surely had a giant appetite which would be ecologically devastating. And who knew if maybe it couldn’t interbreed with local octopuses?

For now, Jack kept running.

The constant pour from out of the rift did not make it easier to follow the octopus. Soaked as it was, Jack’s coat was heavy, but he ignored it. His strength was superior to that of twenty-first century humans, so a wet coat was not enough to stop him.

Hearing high pitched screams urged Jack to run faster. At the end of the street, he saw a dark shadow move and closing in on it, Jack realized that it was the octopus.

With tentacles at least eighty feet long and a head the size of a hot-air balloon it really was impressive. So impressive that it made anyone who saw it run.

And it was surprisingly active for a sea-creature trapped on dry land.

*Well, not that dry currently, Jack thought, glancing up at the rift storm. This tear is so big. What happens if it doesn’t close itself?*

Tapping at his earpiece, he contacted Toshiko.

“Tosh, where are you?”

“On my way inside, Jack,” she replied. “I’m just heading for the elevator.”

“Good.”

“What’s happening out there?”
“It’s like an ocean’s raining down on us through the rift,” Jack gasped. “Tosh, is there any indication that the rift will close?”

“Still riding down, Jack. Give me just a moment to get to my computer.”

Impatiently, Jack stepped from one foot on the other while he watched the octopus squirm on the crossing ahead. He could not tell if it had injured anyone, but he knew for sure that it could not stay where it was.

“Okay, Jack. I’m at my workstation. One moment… All right, I don’t think that it’s about to close. How bad is it?”

“I can’t tell for sure, Tosh. Really bad, though, if the rift doesn’t close.”

Even as he spoke, he realized that he was terribly right. So far the flood of water could flow into the sewers and the river. But what was going to happen if it became just too much to drain off? What if it stayed open for days or weeks and drained off an entire world’s oceans? What would happen to earth with all of that excess water? Jack did not want to think about that possibility.

He also did not want to speculate about what could happen if the octopus escaped into the open sea. As big as it was, it would not have a problem reaching the ocean. It would not matter if the barrage was closed or not.

Before Jack could question the wisdom of his action, he ran toward the octopus, shouting at it from the top of his lungs. The oversized animal remained totally unimpressed. So Jack kicked at one of its tentacles. The limb jerked, swinging at Jack and pushing him a few good yards aside.

“Ugh!”

With a dull thud, Jack landed on his behind. In this case, his flesh hurt more than his pride. Getting thrown off balance by such a big opponent was no shame. Seeing no alternative, Jack approached the animal again that now slithered across the narrow park along the Taff.

“Hey! Stop! What do you think where you’re going?”

Of course the octopus did not react to him, so Jack sped up and managed to grab the end of an arm.

“Stop!”

When it moved, water squeezed out from under its mantle, splashing over the lawn and washing Jack’s legs out from under him. He held on to the arm and was swept off his feet when the octopus thrashed about. It was about to go over the handrail and into the river.

Jack managed to pull out his Webley and fired at the flexible arm without knowing if he hit it or not. It moved pretty quickly and twirled Jack around in its hold like a girl twirling a baton. All of a sudden, the captain sensed something squeeze his bottom in a way that might have been quite enjoyable under different circumstances. As it was, Jack was not pleased to realize that he got stuck in a suction cup. Once more, he fired at the octopus, but bullets did not achieve anything.

So Jack reached for his belt to pull out his knife that he had added to his equipment after their encounter with the giant mantis. Driving it into the octopus’s arm to its hilt again and again, Jack tried to free himself. Painfully, he bounced on the floor only to be lifted up anew. With rising desperation, he drove the knife into the octopus’s flesh. For a second, Jack hung upside down before he felt the grip of the tentacle release. With an incredible speed, he flew through the air and crashed into a tree.
Jack did not feel his neck snap and was dead when he hit the lawn.

xXx

Once the octopus was gone, Gwen and Andy did not need long to clear up the scene. Their own car was still mobile, so they called in their colleagues, explained the trashed cars and street lights by a lorry driver rampage, and ordered in tow trucks. As soon as the other constables were in control of the situation, they took their car and headed back to the Hub at Mermaid Quay.

“How do we get in without Jack?” Andy asked. “You think Toshiko’s already back?”

“We’ll see, Andy,” Gwen replied as she pushed the door to the tourist office open. “And if she’s not back yet we’ll wait for her.”

Gwen brushed her wet hair back. Looking around the small office, they both searched for another door. Seeing it as their best option, Gwen went behind the counter and through the beaded curtain, but the even smaller room behind did not offer a doorway either.

“Gwen?” Andy called out, scanning the ceiling with his eyes in search for a security system. “Did you find something?”

“There’s no door here,” Gwen said with obvious confusion when she returned to her partner. Leaning on the counter she let her gaze drift around. “But Jack wouldn’t have sent us here if we couldn’t get back in, don’t you think?”

“Why are you asking me? I don’t know him any better than you do.”

“Well, just thought you’d have an idea.”

“I don’t.”

Gwen huffed. “At least it’s dry in here.”

“Yeah,” Andy drawled and looked out of the tiny window. “The question is for how long. If it keeps raining like this we’ll get a flood.”

“Hopefully not!” Gwen exclaimed, looking at her partner with wide eyes.


“Actually, I can,” they heard her reply. “Why aren’t you with Jack?”

“He sent us back,” Gwen told the room in general as she could not see any communication system. “Can you let us in?”

Toshiko chuckled. “What’s the magic word?”

“Open sesame?”

This time Toshiko laughed.

“Please, let us in,” Andy said.
Still chuckling, Toshiko scolded, “I already unlocked the tourist office for you when I saw you approach on the walkway. Why don’t you try the big red button under the counter?”

Leaning over the counter, Andy searched for it, asking, “Gwen?”

“Um, yeah, I see it. I thought it’s an emergency button or something!”

“Obviously it isn’t,” Andy gruffly said and pushed the button, being rewarded by a clicking sound. To both their astonishment, a part of the side wall of the office swung backwards into a secret passageway. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” the disembodied Toshiko said and they could almost hear the smirk in her voice.

“I didn’t want to accidentally blow up the base,” Gwen complained just as she slipped through the opening before the door closed. “I mean who the hell paints the button to a secret entrance bright red?”

“That’s hiding in plain sight,” Andy snickered.

At the end of the corridor that the constables entered, the doors of an elevator swished open to carry them down to the Hub. Upon their approach, a huge cog door rolled aside and sturdy metal bars swung open to let them pass while an alarm blared.

“Well, nobody will sneak in this way,” Andy remarked.

“I hope not,” Toshiko said.

They still could not see her as she was hidden behind the array of monitors at her workstation. Both constables climbed up the stairs to get to the same level.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Gwen asked.

“It’s a massive Rift storm,” Toshiko told her. “It’s nothing like we’ve ever experienced. We can only hope that it will close.”

“What if it doesn’t close?” Andy wanted to know.

Pausing typing, Toshiko looked up at him. “Let’s assume that it will. I don’t want to experience anything else.”

“So what are we gonna do now?” Gwen cut in.

“There’s nothing we can do right now,” Toshiko shrugged. “I’m trying to trace that octopus. It’s in the river and swimming toward the bay.”

“Shouldn’t we try to catch it before it reaches the ocean?” Andy wondered aloud. “As huge as it is it could become dangerous for ships.”

“Do you have any idea how to catch it?” Toshiko asked back. “We don’t have a fishing trawler that we could use.”

Both constables were at a loss. They usually dealt with drunk people at a bar, fighting neighbours, or shop lifters. None of them knew how to deal with an alien giant octopus.

“There must be something we can do!” Gwen frayed. “Jack’s alone out there. We have to help him.”
“He’ll let us know when he needs help,” Toshiko stated. “Jack sent you back. That’s what you did. Now we’ll wait for his instructions.”

Still on edge but unable to release their tension by fighting the octopus, the constables settled on the couch in the rec area. They were eager to help, but there was nothing they could do but wait.

xXx

London

On sublevel ten, Suzie found what they were looking for. Opposite the secure elevator was a security office and next to it a reinforced door with a biometric lock.

“This must be it,” she said.

“Well, let’s get in then,” Owen grunted.

“Don’t be too optimistic,” Suzie huffed. “You’ll see.”

In front of the scanner, she bent slightly forward for the security system to activate. It scanned her eye, but nothing else happened.

“I’ll see what?” Owen asked.

“It should open now,” Suzie said with irritation. “I have the necessary clearance.”

“You probably should tell that to the retina scanner,” Owen suggested wryly.

Shooting a death glare at Owen first, Suzie turned to the scanner again to give it another try. She heard a low buzz while the machine worked, but the result was the same: the door remained firmly shut.

Stepping up beside his partner, Owen called out, “Open sesame!”

Her fists on her hips, Suzie glowered at him. “Very funny.”

“It was worth a try,” Owen shrugged.

“Owen, you’re impossible.”


“You’re just a big kid,” Suzie complained, knowing quite well that she should not get started with a discussion like this.

“Still talking about Jack.”

Suzie rolled her eyes and racked her mind how she could possibly bypass the retina scanner, but even with all of her technical skills, this was way over her head. She had to concede that Toshiko might have a chance to crack the system, but for her it just was impossible.
“You wanna take root there?” Owen asked.

“Just thinking.”

“I don’t assume that it has a psychic link,” he teased.

Once more, Suzie just rolled her eyes. Sometimes the medic was just plain annoying. Her radio chose the moment to crackle and Lieutenant Anderson queried, “Greyhound One for Agent Costello. Do you copy?”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Suzie answered.

“Agent Costello, please come up to the top storey.”

“What did you find there?” Suzie asked, remembering how they had watched on CCTV how all the Cybermen and Daleks had vanished into the top of the tower.

“Your presence is required here immediately, Agent Costello. Please come up to the fiftieth floor.”

Suzie scowled. She did not like to be ordered around by Lieutenant Anderson, especially as she was in charge here along with Colonel Mace.

“We’ll be there as soon as possible,” she replied and switched off the radio.

“Aren’t you curious what they want?” Owen queried, having a closer look at the scanner.

“Likely to throw us off the roof and claim the ruins for UNIT,” Suzie quipped. Owen chuckled and she admitted, “I am curious, but do they need to know that?”

“Nope.”

“Exactly.” Angrily she turned around. “Just why doesn’t that thing work?”

Straightening up, Owen smirked at her. “Well, let me take a wild guess… Because Torchwood One wanted to make sure that nobody from Torchwood Three can access their best kept secrets?”

Glaring daggers at Owen as well as the retina scanner, Suzie took a deep breath, trying to reign in her temper. Overtired as she was, it would be too easy to just give in to the urge to hit something… or someone, and it was not Owen’s fault that Torchwood One were a bunch of paranoid twats, although he could be a little less amused.

“Let’s go,” she said and marched back to the staircase. From the basement, they used the elevator to ride up to the fiftieth storey. As soon as they stepped off the carriage, two UNIT soldiers awaited them.

“Colonel Mace wants to speak to you,” he said. “This way.”

Suzie and Owen followed him past the foyer and down the hall to an open plan office. To their right was a glass wall that separated another office from the big room with two rows of desks. One of the big panes was splintered. To their left were the desks and two huge levers. Colonel Mace stood beside one of those and looked at the Torchwood agents expectantly.

“Agent Costello,” he growled. “Tell me what the hell Torchwood was doing here.”

Suzie had the impression that the colonel was actually pretty upset and tried to hide it behind anger. He certainly was royally pissed, so she probably was better off treading carefully.
“Torchwood Three was not informed about the latest projects,” she replied evasively.

“Don’t you dare to try and fob me off with this lame excuse!” Mace erupted, his face turning a dangerous shade of red. “You knew about this! And now you’re trying to cover it up.”

Holding eye contact with a firm gaze, Suzie replied, “No one of Torchwood Three knew anything about whatever was going on here. We’re not here to cover up for the mistakes of Torchwood One. We’re here to prevent potentially dangerous artefacts or important documents to get into the wrong hands and ensure the integrity and security of the Institute.” *Or whatever is left of it.*

“Exactly what I mean,” Mace growled.

Suzie glanced at Owen who stood next to a desk, bending over the body that was halfway sprawled over the tabletop. Pulling gloves on, he picked up what looked like one of the ear pieces they were familiar with. Light blue strands that appeared to be fibre glass hung down from it. Looking closer at the body, Owen noticed the hole in the woman’s ear shell and deduced that the ear plug had been pulled out of it.

Owen walked around the chair to check on the woman from the other side. Squatting down beside her, he examined her but could not find any other injury.

*Well, if those strands were somehow connected to her brain, pulling them out must have killed her.*

She looks almost peaceful, he thought as he studied her features. Somehow she looked familiar, but he could not place her. So Owen got up to have a look at the man at the next desk. It was not really surprising to determine the same cause of death. Looking back over his shoulder, Owen racked his mind about where he had seen the woman before, until the scales fell from his eyes.

*This must be Adeola!* Owen realized. *Martha’s cousin. So she was right with her assumption.*

Taking a deep breath, he sighed. *How many people have lost relatives or friends yesterday? Adeola’s not the only one who didn’t survive the invasion.*

“Owen!”

Startled, the medic looked around at Suzie. “What?”

“I was talking to you.”

“Sorry, I was thinking. Those two probably were controlled by the Cybermen.”

“We assumed that much as well, thank you,” Mace huffed.

“The question is from where they controlled them,” Owen thought out loud.

The soldier who had shown them to the office cut in, “There are lots of conversion units on the storey right below. So they could have had their base of operation there as well.”

“Did you find any sign of it?” Owen wanted to know.

“Not to my knowledge,” Mace told him.

“Then we should check it out,” Owen shrugged. “Suzie?”

“Go ahead, Owen. I’ll have a look at Director Hartman’s computer.”

Nodding at her, Owen quickly left the office, secretly glad to get away from the UNIT soldiers.
Cardiff

His return was as gentle as his death had been violent. Instead of being forced back to life with an agonizing gasp, he found himself in a most welcome embrace. Soft, warm lips pressed against his own, something that Jack knew to relish. A moment later, he wrapped his left arm around the back of the neck of his kisser and felt a gasp wash into his mouth. Whoever was helping him tried to back out with surprise at Jack intensifying the life-giving kiss but relented a second later.

Curling his fingers, Jack teased the onset of hair on the back of his rescuer’s neck. Lifting his hand, he let the soft strands run through his fingers. The kiss had a strong taste and tickled a little against his cheek due to stubble.

Finally, Jack let go and his partner straightened up. When Jack opened his eyes, he looked right into brilliantly sparkling green irises. The concerned look on the young man’s face made him smile. Surprisingly, his rescuer tilted his head aside. Even though the look of concern remained, the young man appeared to be self-conscious about something. That made Jack aware of a scar beneath and beside the left eye.

“You have gorgeous eyes,” Jack praised, ignoring the way the man flinched.

Concern quickly changed to confusion. “Pardon?”

“No, really. I don’t think that I’ve ever seen such lovely green eyes… You don’t wear contacts, do you?”

“Well, I do, but they’re not coloured.”

“Beautiful.” Jack smirked. Maybe the day was not that bad after all.

“Don’t you have other problems?” the man asked with growing irritation.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you in pain? That was a nasty crash. Maybe you shouldn’t move too quickly. I’m gonna call an ambulance.”

Ambulance? Now Jack was confused. Why should I need an ambulance? Oh, the octopus.

Offering his saviour a reassuring smile, Jack said, “No. That won’t be necessary.”

“Oh, you don’t!” the man chided and held Jack down by the shoulders when the captain tried to sit up. “That monster smashed you into a tree. Your ribs could be broken or you could be bleeding internally.”

“I’m all right,” Jack insisted. “It certainly looked worse than it actually was.”

Snorting derisively, the man shook his head.
“That crash could have killed you.”

*It did,* Jack thought miserably.

“What the heck did you think when you tried to tackle the beast?”

“Didn’t think,” Jack admitted.

“Sure looked like that. Looked like suicide, actually, when you attacked it with your bare hands. Giant octopus, my God! Fell from the sky like a herald of the apocalypse.”

For a second, Jack just stared at him, incredulous. Then he laughed out loud.

“What’s so funny?”

“You know,” Jack gasped between laughter. “You almost got me. Fell from the sky. Oh, really. That’s good.”

“I’m serious.”

“Gorgeous and brilliant. I could just kiss you.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” he refused, his initial forwardness being curbed by suspicion at Jack’s directness.

“But you already did,” Jack pouted. Still, he could not help but notice the way his rescuer held his head sideways again. He could not tell how old the scar was, but no matter how long ago he had acquired it, it certainly seemed to affect the young man’s self-confidence.

“No, that was resuscitation.”

“No, that was fantastic,” Jack cheered, beaming up at the young man with one of his patented dashing smiles.

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Oh, we can change that,” the captain smirked, finally sitting up. “I’m Jack. Captain Jack Harkness. And who are you?”

“Ydris Rhydderch.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ydris.”

“What are you a captain of?” Ydris asked. “Air Force?”

“Nope,” Jack shook his head. “How did you get that idea?”

“Your coat.”

“Oh.” Jack grinned. “Found it at an outlet shop. Reminds me of better times.”

“Better times…” Ydris sounded confused.

“Yeah, long story.” Jack shrugged. “Where did the octopus go?”

“Into the river.”
“Did you see in which direction?”

“Toward the bay.”

Thoughtfully, Jack nodded and got to his feet. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Ydris, but I need to go and try to catch it.”

“Haven’t you had enough of it already?” Ydris asked, standing up, too.

“Nope,” Jack smirked, turning to leave. “Gotta go. See you.”

“Can I help?” Ydris called out after him.

“No!” Jack called, jogging along the river, “but thanks for the offer.”

Water splashed up under the impact of his boots, the drops mingling with the dashes swinging out of his coat and the falling rain. Lightning flashed above. It was so intense that Jack slowed down to look up. For a second there, he could see a black crack before more flashes forced him to avert his gaze. The pour stopped. When Jack looked up the dark clouds evaporated, revealing a cold but still blue sky.

Inwardly, Jack cheered as he saw the rift close and kept running.

tbc...
Good things come to those who wait

Chapter Notes

I guess, the title applies as much to Ianto as it applies to you, right? I never thought that this story would become so long and there are still chapters to come. My muse would appreciate some inspiration for the sequel she's working on. Thanks for being in for the ride. :) Enjoy!

Cardiff

“Toshiko?” Jack called out for his computer scientist over his ear comm. “Are the…”

“Jack! It closed!” Toshiko interrupted him excitedly. “The rift is closed!”

“I know! We have a bright clear sky out here,” he panted as he ran along the river. “Are Gwen and Andy back at the Hub?”

“Yes, they’re here.”

“Tosh, the octopus is in the river. Look up everything you can find about octopuses. We need to catch it before it can get into the ocean.”

A bit ahead, he could see big ripples disturb the surface of the river where the giant animal searched its way toward the ocean. Jack caught a glimpse at the dark red body when it squirmed around. He was now approaching the next bridge across the Taff. Accompanied by the blowing horns of angry drivers, Jack ran up the street and across the bridge. At the handrail, he stopped for a moment to look down at the river. There was the dark shape of the octopus. It was moving down the river again.

“Jack?” Toshiko came over ear comm. “For some reason I can’t get a trace of the octopus. Do you know where it is?”

“It’s still in the Taff, heading for the bay,” Jack replied. “Do you have information for me about it?”

“Well, according to Wikipedia the common octopus lives off crabs and crayfish and hunts by night,” Toshiko read out to him. “It can change colour to blend in with its surroundings so it can catch unwary prey that strays across its path. They are venomous, paralyzing their prey to take it out before they retreat to a calm spot like a cave to eat.”

“Great. Just how do we catch it?”

“Do we really have to?” Andy asked from the background. “Would it be so bad if it escaped to the sea?”

For a moment, Jack thought about that. Why did he want to catch the alien animal? There had been a time when he wanted to defend creatures from Torchwood. Had working for the Institute for such a long time changed him?
“You still want to catch it?”

Surprised, Jack turned around to come face to face with Ydris.

“What are you doing here?”

“Thought I should keep an eye on you,” the young man shrugged.

“Why’s that?” Jack asked with growing irritation.

“Someone’s gotta consider your wellbeing as you obviously don’t.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Jack had to laugh.

“Kid, believe me, I’m perfectly capable of taking care of my own.”

“Didn’t look like that earlier,” Ydris remarked wryly, not the least startled by being called a kid. “Let me help.”

Inwardly, Jack had to smirk as Ydris was more forward again. Just as Jack did not care at all about the scars, it ceased to bother the young man in his presence. “Look, Ydris,” Jack said. “I don’t know what you think is going on, but be assured that it’s not as exciting as it seems to be. There’s nothing you can do. Go home.”

Once more, Ydris shrugged. “Home’s boring. I’d rather stick with you.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

A wide smirk cracked Ydris’s features. “You gave a quite different impression when you woke up earlier.”

Jack scowled.

“Admit it, Captain. You like having me around.”

“Jack?” he was stopped from replying by Toshiko. “What do you say about the octopus? Do we let it go or try to catch it?”

Torn between Toshiko and Ydris, Jack racked his mind about whom to answer first. “Tosh, we should catch it. I don’t want to have to worry about it making itself at home in the English Channel. It’s the busiest shipping lane in the world. We don’t want to risk any confrontations.”

“Not to mention that people eating octopus is quite common compared to octopus eating people.”

Jack stared at the young man with disbelief. “Come again?”

“Who knows,” Ydris said. “Maybe it develops a taste for humans. Though it didn’t seem to like your taste.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jack grunted.

“Well, the way it smashed you into the tree suggests that. They taste with their suckers, you know?”

“No, I didn’t. And now I really have to go.” Jack turned to leave but spun back around when he heard footsteps from behind. “And you stay where you are.”
“Make me,” Ydris challenged.

Jack reached for his belt. “Too bad, I didn’t bring my handcuffs.”

“Only use them in bed, do you?”

Jack had to admit that he did not often meet someone who could return his flirting so charmingly. That did not mean that he was at a loss for words, though.

“I’m game if you are.”

“Didn’t you forget something?” Ydris tilted his head at the Taff.

“Well, on a less busy day.”

“Let me help…” Ydris trailed off, leaving the implied possibilities hanging in the air.

Slowly, a smirk spread on Jack’s features again. Why not, he thought. I always have retcon if it gets too complicated.

“Okay.”

Before Ydris could reply in any way, Jack pivoted around and resumed running. At the end of the bridge, he turned right down to Clarence Embankment. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the young man running on his left.

“What are you gonna do?” Ydris panted.

“Still thinking about that,” Jack admitted. He could not see the octopus anymore and feared that they had already lost it.

“We should trap it somewhere,” Ydris suggested. “Maybe in one of the locks to the docks?”

“I’m not so sure if it would stay in there.”

“True. In captivity octopuses are known to escape their aquariums in search of food.”

“Thanks for the encouragement,” Jack huffed.

“Let’s go to the yacht club?”

“We could get a boat and see where it’s going,” Jack agreed. “This way.”

They ran across a park at the mouth of the Taff. Now they could already see the small marina of the yacht club.

“How about this one?” Ydris pointed at a boat that was about to berth.

“That’s ours,” Jack agreed and entered the quay, Ydris right in his wake. At this time of the year not many people were out on the bay to sail except an elderly couple that watched them disapprovingly as they ran to the boat.

“Torchwood!” Jack called out as he jumped aboard. “I’m commandeering your boat.”

“You what?” the man who had just started to moor the boat replied angrily. “Who the hell are you?”

“Someone who’s got the authority to take your boat in an emergency,” Jack told him with a
surprisingly reassuring smile, taking the rope out of the man’s hands. “Thank you. Ydris?”

“Coming,” his companion said and entered as well, quickly climbing behind the steering wheel. “Keys?”

“Keys?” Jack repeated and extended his hand expectantly.

Frowning deeply, the man let the keys drop into Jack’s open palm.

“Thank you,” Jack smirked and tossed the keys at Ydris. Then he pushed the boat off the quay.

“Tosh? We’re heading out to the bay now. No sign of the octopus at the moment.”

“Who’s we?”

“I picked up a stray searching for adventure,” Jack told her, smirking at Ydris over his shoulder.

“I bet he’s cute,” Toshiko murmured.

“Actually he is,” Jack told her and grinned as he imagined her blush at being caught. “Next time just think it,” he teased. “We want to trap the octopus. Do you have an idea where we could do that?”

“We could probably lure it into a trap with food,” Toshiko said. “Just where?”

“Ydris thought we could use one of the locks.”

“It might be able to get out of there,” the computer expert argued. “It must be something that we can lock properly once it’s inside. They like tight spaces.”

Thoughtfully, Jack looked out at the bay in front of him in search for the invertebrate when it hit him.

“Tosh! What about the tunnel for the sub?”

“You mean the one to the tidal basin?” she called out with shock. “Jack! I don’t think that’s a good idea!”

“Do you have a better one?”

“Jack, if it manages to get into the Hub…”

“It won’t. We can lock the tunnel on both ends. It’s safe.”

“I still don’t like it.”

Jack nodded. “Objection noted. Now please come up with something to lure it in.”

“Under protest,” she confirmed.

“Good girl,” Jack murmured to himself.

“I heard that.”

The captain could not help but laugh out loud at her response. He simply loved Toshiko.

“Who are you talking to?” Ydris asked.

“Tosh is our computer expert!” Jack shouted. “She’s brilliant!”
“I’m looking forward to meeting her!” Ydris yelled back over the rushing wind. “Who exactly is we?”

“Torchwood!”

“And what the bloody hell is Torchwood?”

“We are Torchwood!”

“Yeah, but what exactly is Torchwood? You deal with things like this giant octopus for a living, don’t you?”

“What if we do?”

“I’d like to apply for a job!”

Jack’s mood sagged at that. Ydris seemed to be a genuinely good guy with wit, good looks and gorgeous eyes, but that did not exactly qualify him for working at Torchwood.

“There is no job vacancy.”

His companion did not answer but when Jack turned his head, he saw a determined look on the young man’s face. Scowling, Jack shook his head. I shouldn’t have encouraged him. Well, he won’t remember.

There was still no sign of the octopus. Jack was not sure how deep the bay was, but it was obviously deep enough for the alien to hide. He was about to contact Toshiko to ask if she had something on her scanners when he heard faint screams. Looking around, he realized that he had been searching in the wrong direction.

“Ydris! Over there!” he pointed right at Mermaid Quay where the octopus was about to crawl up the pier.

“What does it think it’s doing?” Ydris wanted to know.

“I don’t know! Go ahead and ask it.”

“No, thanks.”

“Don’t you like octopus?”

“Oh, I like octopus all right,” Ydris chuckled. “But this one’s a bit too old and tough for my liking.”

“I agree with tough,” Jack said. “But we have no way to tell how old it is.”

“Let’s settle on too big.”

It definitely was too big as it now squirmed on the boardwalk in front of the tourist office, slithering toward the stone slope up to the oval basin. An arm wrapped around the bridge across as it squeezed into the opening that appeared to be too small for its giant shape.

“You gotta love octopuses for that,” Ydris cheered. “They’re fascinating creatures.”

“A little too flexible for my liking.”

“I don’t believe that,” Toshiko quipped in Jack’s earpiece.
“Oi! No fair teasing when I’m on the job, Tosh!” Jack replied.

“*Oh, and what have you been doing with your stray?*”

Ydris pulled up alongside the pier of the small marina. As soon as the hull touched the wooden planks, Jack jumped out of the boat to follow the octopus. Quickly, Ydris wrapped a rope around a pole and ran after Jack.

Above them, lightning cracked on the clear sky and a crack opened, water splashing down on Mermaid Quay.

“No!” Jack screamed at the sight. “Damnit!”

“What the hell is that?” Ydris shouted, the octopus momentarily forgotten.

“Long story!”

“Look out!”

Ydris’s warning came too late. With an enormous speed, the octopus squeezed back down the path and onto the boardwalk, one of its arms slapping against Jack’s legs, pulling them out from under him. Seeing another arm swing around, Ydris jumped aside. Landing on his side, he caught a glimpse at a bright flash behind the octopus. He rolled over the wooden planks to avoid being crushed by the giant tentacles.

“Jack?”

Scrambling to his feet, Ydris looked around in search of the captain and spotted him on the boardwalk between the octopus and the tourist office. Ydris choked at the sight of the sheer size of the invertebrate. It did not appear to be that huge before.

Suddenly, he felt something wrap around his waist. Before he could take a look, he was swept sideways. He just managed to take a last gasp of air before he was pulled under water.

Jack saw the octopus grab Ydris right before it slid back into the bay.

“No!”

Without stopping to think first, Jack dove headlong into the bay in order to follow the creature. Under water, he was confronted by a swirl of arms but he could not see Ydris anywhere. Desperately, he tried to spot him as he had to watch how the animal slithered over the ground toward a dark hole.

*Now you’re going into the tunnel?* Jack inwardly cursed. Then he discovered the young man trapped in the embrace of one of the tentacles. *Ydris!*

Jack tried to dive after him, but he had to surface again to breathe. Wildly, he gasped when he popped up like a cork out of the bottle. Taking two breaths, he dove again. When he reached the tunnel, the air was already burning in his lungs, but he had to keep going.

All Jack could see was a dark shadow in front of him. Taking his chance, Jack followed it. He just had passed the tunnel’s entrance, when he heard a muffled clank. Turning his head, Jack realized that the tunnel had been locked.

*No! Tosh! Not now!*
Now he was as trapped as the animal and he felt the desperate urge to breathe all the more now that panic kicked in.

_Ydris!_

A tentacle rolled in the confined space and Jack grabbed it. It was mere luck that he happened to catch the one that held his new companion. Jack sensed more than saw him and felt his way to Ydris’s head.

Taking his face with both hands, Jack pressed his lips to those of the unmoving man. Ydris’s eyes flew open as life-giving air flowed into his mouth. First he struggled, but Jack’s grip did not lessen and finally Ydris took hold of him in turn.

Jack’s body spasmed as the last of his oxygen left him in a desperate attempt to save Ydris’s life. Finally, he had no other choice but to gasp for air and renewed panic flooded him as water streamed into his lungs. He had to let go of Ydris. Frantically, he thrashed about in search for a way up and out of the water which was impossible as the tunnel lay completely under the level of the bay. The last thing Jack became aware of before he lost consciousness was that the tentacle wrapped around him, too.

xXx

**Torchwood tower**

**conversion unit**

Ianto could not tell what had woken him up, but, for better or worse, he was awake again. Or was he still unconscious and only dreaming he was awake? In the darkness, he could not tell the difference.

_Am I awake?_

It looked like that.

_Great. Did I wake up to experience exactly how I die?_

A metallic sound startled him.

_What was that? Sounds as if something fell. How? Gravity finally taking over? Or is someone here besides me?_

Ianto contemplated if he should call out.

_Could also be an enemy_, he mused. _Though, a quick death might be preferable over slowly wasting away in this thing_. Anxious shudders rippled through his aching muscles. _You’re stuck here and have no way of getting yourself free_, he reasoned. _Don’t call out, and you’re sure to die slowly, and alone. Call out, and it could be one of those creatures, in which case you’ll either die quickly and alone or be converted, which may be worse than death unless they completely wipe your mind. Or it could be help, in which case, you’ll be rescued, or, more likely, die slowly, but not alone._
The next sounds he became aware of were footsteps.

_No. I must be mistaken. That can’t be. After all this time._

Still he listened intently. Whoever or whatever it was moved around in another cubicle. Ianto even thought he heard someone murmur.

If he could he would have shaken his head.

_Can’t be, can it?_

“Suzie, you should have a look at this.”

**What? A human voice!**

Pain coursed through his stiff body as his tension increased.

“It’s horrible,” he heard someone somewhere to his left say. “There are bodies in the conversion units. All in different stages of conversion.” He paused. At least Ianto was pretty certain that it was a he. A he with a London accent. “On second thought, you probably shouldn’t look at it. It would haunt your dreams.” In a considerably lower voice, he added, “I for one know that it’ll haunt me.”

Deciding the odds were in his favour, and that a quick death or conversion was preferable to dying of thirst and injuries here on the table, Ianto gathered what little courage he had left and called out.

“Hello!”

_Oh, my God. Was that me?_

Ianto was shocked by how hoarse he sounded. Panic clawed at his stomach painfully.

_I’m not loud enough! He won’t hear me!_

“Help!” he tried once more, putting all his strength in.

“Huh?”

The sound of confusion filled Ianto with little hope.

“Help! Please!” he managed to call out and felt his voice give out.

“Is anybody there?”

_Yes, me! Ianto wanted to reply, but his vocal cords did not obey his mind. Please don’t go away!_

“Hello?”

Ianto could see the faintest beam of a torchlight. Then he heard plastic rustle.

“Here,” he tried. “I’m here.”

The ray of light turned in his direction. Once more, plastic swished and fast footsteps approached him. All of a sudden, the torch shone directly in his face and Ianto had to shut his eyes quickly. They were hurting from the sudden brightness.

“Holy shit!” the man exclaimed. “Suzie! One of them is alive!”
His voice rang in Ianto’s ears. After the long time of silence even that almost hurt. The light moved away and he opened his eyes again. Squinting sideways, he caught a glimpse of the man beside him.

“Yeah, looks like that. I don’t think he’s injured.” A mischievous chuckle followed. “Nah. Had to think of Jack. Yeah, come down here.”

Ianto heard something rustle and then a foil blanket was awkwardly spread over his body. A second later, the man’s face hovered over him, the beam of the torch giving him a rather ghostly appearance.

“Hey. I’m Owen Harper,” the man introduced himself. “I’m a doctor. Can you tell me your name?”

“I-Ianto,” he croaked.

“All right, Ianto. Did you work here?”

Frowning with irritation at this being the medic’s second question he managed a low, “Yes.”


Realization dawned in Ianto. “To’chwood three?”

“Yeah,” Owen agreed, raising an eyebrow with astonishment at the accusatory tone.

“So that’s… why… it’s taken… so long,” Ianto croaked that hoarsely that Owen had trouble understanding him.

“Well, UNIT sent soldiers in to search for survivors and secure the tower,” the doctor said. “I can only guess that you passed out and that that’s why you weren’t found earlier.” Anger laced his voice at the realization that the search parties had overlooked the young man. Pulling himself together for the sake of his patient, Owen tried for reassuring as he continued, “But we got you now. Everything will be all right. We’ll get you out and to a hospital and sooner than you think you’ll be home again.” While he was talking, Owen rummaged through his rucksack to retrieve a bottle. “All right, mate. I got some water. Be very careful. Only a small sip at a time, yeah? A sip, then swallow, sip again…”

Ianto scowled at the sight of the sports bottle and his insides constricted. A very real fear spread inside of him.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?” Owen growled. “You’re dehydrated. You need water, at least until I can get an IV running. Now drink.”

“No. No… Ret… reton.”

Owen could barely make out the words.

“You’re scared that I’m trying to reton you?” he asked, puzzled.

“Yeah.”

Owen snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous, Ianto. Giving you Retcon now, in the state you are, I might as well put a bullet in your head.” Lifting the bottle up, he splashed something in his open mouth. “Would I do that if it had Retcon? Now drink the ruddy water!”

Ianto’s wry chuckle turned into coughs. He liked the doctor’s attitude. Gratefully, he accepted the nozzle being pushed between his dry lips. Getting some water out was easier said than done, but
when he managed it, Ianto relished the fresh and slightly sweet taste. For a moment, he kept the water in his mouth before he swallowed and sucked on the bottle again.

“That’s it. Careful. Don’t want you to choke on it.” Ianto took a few more gulps before Owen removed the bottle. “Feeling better?”

“A little,” Ianto confirmed, still sounding hoarse, but his throat and tongue did not feel like a rasp anymore. “Thank you.”

“No problem, mate.” For a second, Owen’s attention appeared to be divided. Ianto could not see that he was tapping at his ear piece, but he could see him nod. “Ianto, what’s your last name?”

“Jones.”

Owen repeated this for Suzie who was looking for the name on the staff list. Forwarding her next question, Owen asked, “Which division?”

“Information Retrieval.”

Giving Suzie the information, Owen wondered why it rang a bell. Why did the name sound familiar?

“Information Retrieval!” the medic suddenly gasped. “Hey, I’ve seen your desk!”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, when we were searching the tower. We went through your office where I saw your desk.” He snorted a laugh. “It was the only one without any ghost stuff.”

“Yeah…” Ianto replied with wry amusement.

“I take it you were not a fan, huh?”

“They creeped me out,” Ianto admitted.

“Yeah, guess they creeped us all out.”

At that Ianto laughed, though it sounded pained, “So you say.”

“Huh?”

“Your sweatshirt.”

Looking down at himself, Owen realized that he still wore the sweatshirt with the ghosts spoofing Casablanca. Rolling his eyes, he shrugged, “I liked the design.”

“Did you think you’d impress the girls with it?” Ianto prodded.

Grimacing, Owen shrugged again.

Ianto huffed. “That’s what Larry said, too.”

“Who’s Larry?”

“The guy sitting right across from me. Did you find him?”

“I don’t think that he was at his workplace,” Owen recalled. “Sorry. I can’t tell where he is yet. What’s his full name?”
“Lawrence Dorset.”

Contacting Suzie, Owen asked her about Ianto’s colleague and answered her requests with, “No. No, he’s all right. He’s stuck in a conversion unit, though. Can you get some paramedics up here? Thank you.”

“Something wrong?” Ianto wanted to know.

“Nah, just getting things into motion,” Owen assured him. “Hey, I’m gonna check out another unit. See if I can work out how to open those clamps, all right?”

Ianto was not particularly happy to hear that.

“Don’t go.”

“No need to worry, Ianto,” Owen told him. “I won’t be far away.”

His logical mind told Ianto that he had no reason to panic, but his subconscious did not agree, making his heart jump into his throat at the prospect of being left alone again. The couple that had found him had told him they would get help as well, but in the end no one came. Why should Owen be any different? Apparently, his growing anxiety reflected in his features as he saw the medic scowl.

“Easy, Ianto,” Owen soothed, “I won’t leave you alone. I just don’t want to experiment with this unit as long as you’re in there. That’s logical, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Ianto admitted. He felt Owen’s hand on his right shoulder, squeezing reassuringly.

“Tell you what, Ianto. I’m gonna keep talking to you while I have a look at the other unit. Is that okay?”

Taking a deep breath, Ianto thought about this suggestion before he conceded with a trembling, “Yes.”

“All right,” Owen said with a broad smirk. “But I need to warn you. I might start to ramble.”

Once more, he squeezed Ianto’s shoulder before he stepped back from the conversion unit and out of Ianto’s sight. Immediately, the Welshman’s anxiety returned. At first, he did not listen to the doctor’s babbling, but then he noticed that he was talking about his encounters in the tower. Ianto heard for the first time about giant carnivorous plants in the labs while the unknown black predators rang a bell. If he remembered right, he had heard something about them from Collin.

All of a sudden, Ianto heard metallic clanks and Owen cheer, so he assumed that he found the right button. He could not help but feel a rush of joy.

His delight was tainted by the sound of marching boots as they neared his cubicle, and then he heard Owen swear.

tbc…
Breath-taking

Cardiff

“Oh, and what have you been doing with your stray?” Toshiko teased again as she brought the Torchwood sub into its docking bay. When she could banter with her team mates, it made it easier to do her job because it took her mind off exactly how dangerous their work was. If she thought too much about the risks they took every day, it would paralyze her with fear and she would be useless to them.

Now she efficiently reconfigured the sub’s sonar in order to generate a sonic pulse that the octopus hopefully responded to.

“Jack?” Toshiko shouted but got no answer.

Anxiously, she climbed back out of the small submarine that floated in its dock in the tidal basin to get to her workstation. Water splashed in from the ceiling as it had started to rain again. Thankfully, the valuable tech was on the railway level. Toshiko just was not sure for how long it would remain safe there.

“What’s wrong?” Gwen demanded to know.

“Nothing so far.” Toshiko dropped into her chair and pulled up the CCTV of Mermaid Quay to have a look at the bay. What she saw made her blood run cold.

“Quick!” she shouted. “With me!”

Automatically, the two constables followed her to the armoury where Toshiko grabbed two big guns from their mounts on the wall and pushed them in the policemen’s arms. Andy rolled his eyes.

“Come!” Toshiko ordered them, leading them to the big pavement stone that sat right next to the water tower. “Get up on this.”

“But…”

“No buts! Get up!”

Submitting themselves to her command, the constables complied. As soon as they stepped on, Toshiko pushed a button and the paving stone started to rise toward the ceiling.

“Ohhh shit!” Andy exclaimed.

From up on their rising vantage point, the constables watched Toshiko run back to her workstation. Then they lost sight of her when the lift carried them up through the ceiling and locked in front of the water tower.

Down in the Hub, Toshiko stared with horror at the scene on her monitors. Thankfully, there were not many people on the Roald Dahl Plass. Then she saw the boat arrive.

“Jack, what are you doing?”

She had no way of knowing if he heard her as he did not answer.
In the meantime, the constables did not have to search for the reason why Toshiko had sent them up to the Plass in front of the Millennium Centre. The octopus squirming up the slope and onto the oval basin simply could not be overlooked.

“Oh, crap!” Gwen grabbed her gun tighter. “Let’s get it over with.”

Side by side, they approached the huge invertebrate. Two people fled toward the buildings of Mermaid Quay, scrambling up the big stairs and almost falling over their own feet.

“You know as well as I do how this thing works?” Andy asked, nodding at his gun.

“I’d try pulling the trigger,” Gwen sighed, lifting her weapon and doing just that. A bright flash erupted from the muzzle and shot toward the octopus. It thrashed about with its arms before it retreated back down the slope to the water.

Toshiko watched that with trepidation as now Jack and the stray as Jack had called him were confronted with the octopus. A squeak escaped her when the octopus wrapped its tentacle around the young man and pulled him into water with it. To her infinite horror but no surprise at all, she saw Jack follow the creature and its catch.

“Gwen! Andy!” she called out only to realize that neither of them had an ear comm. “Please come back!”

She switched to the security system for the tunnel and decided that all she could do now was to go through with their plan. That was if the octopus decided to actually go into the tunnel. A moment later, a flicking light alerted her to the presence of an intruder. On her monitor, Toshiko now saw millions of bubbles obstructing the underwater camera’s view of the underground tunnel which confirmed the presence of a large, fast moving intruder, but it also prevented her from seeing what had become of Jack and the stray, so she did what she had to do and locked the tunnel to keep the creature from escaping.

Out on the quay, Gwen and Andy ran down the slope, saw the octopus disappear, and hurried to the tourist office. Andy bent over the counter to press the button and let them back in and they rushed through the opening and to the elevator.

When the cog door rolled open with its distinct alarm, Toshiko sighed a breath of relief. Now that the animal was trapped inside the Hub all it could do was to come up in the tidal basin. At least Toshiko hoped that it would do that. Otherwise Jack and the young man were as good as dead, either drowned or eaten by the alien creature.

Quickly, Toshiko pushed the last thought aside. Now the internal sensors detected the octopus and she locked another gate behind it to keep it from hiding in the tunnel.

“Tosh!” Gwen screamed.

That and water splashing made her look up from her workstation. She definitely did not need her cameras and sensors anymore. A tentacle whipped back and forth in the tidal basin.

Faster than any of them had expected, the rest of the arm and then the body squeezed out of the tunnel and into the central Hub.

Andy did not hesitate and fired his weapon at the giant invertebrate.

It thrashed about, hitting the windows to Jack’s office with a tentacle and smashing the glass. Owen’s workstation crashed under the impact of another arm. Two tentacles wrapped around the
water tower as it tried to pull itself out of the water in search of a hiding place.

Now Gwen shot at it as well.

Even though the blast did not kill it, it at least let go of its prey. Both men landed in the tidal basin. At once, Andy leaped into the pool to pull them out. Gwen took hold on Jack’s coat to keep his head out of the water while Andy shoved Ydris up the slant side of the basin. There was no way in hell, though, that she could lift Jack’s deadweight onto the walkway. Toshiko came down the stairs and ran over to Gwen to help her with Jack.


The constable waded through the basin and took hold of Jack’s legs, shoving him up as Gwen pulled. Between the two of them they managed to lift him up on the walkway.

“He’s not breathing!” Toshiko called out. “What about Jack?”

“He’ll be okay,” Gwen reassured her, feeling for his pulse point at his neck and hoping that the other woman would not notice that it was only half of the truth because Jack was most definitely dead. “Andy, go and help Tosh.”

Right at that moment the water tower thundered under the impact of a bolt of lightning. Electricity crackled. An alarm blared and the cog door rolled shut, the steel gates in front of it also locking tightly in addition.

“No!” Toshiko called out. “No!”

There was nothing she could do when the power surge overloaded the Hub’s system, causing a lockdown. They saw and heard the doors close and lock. Then the lights went out.

The stench of burning calamari hung in the air.

“Do you have an emergency generator?” Andy asked before he bent down for resuscitation again. He blew air in the man’s lungs, straightened up and massaged his chest. “C’mon!”

“We might get some light back,” Toshiko told him, “but we won’t have control over the computers or the security system for at least six hours.”

“What happened to the octopus?” Gwen asked and reached for the torch on her belt. Abandoning Jack, she stood up and shone in the direction where they had last seen the creature.

It lay slumped behind the water tower, its flesh blackened from the stroke of lightning.

“One, two, three, four, five,” Andy counted with his efforts of bringing Ydris back to life. Now it was Toshiko who breathed for him. Again, Andy started his compressions when suddenly the body beneath his hands arched up and the young man coughed up a gush of water.

xXx

Torchwood Tower
“What the hell?” Owen muttered to himself as he heard the distinct sound of men in boots approach at a steady march. This was not the sound of paramedics arriving with a gurney. Alarmed, he rushed to the aisle between the plastic curtained cubicles and was just in time to see armed UNIT soldiers pass, Colonel Mace right on their heels.

“Suzie? What’s up?” he said as he followed the group. “What? Not so fast. What did you say?”

Anger welled up inside the medic when his partner told him that Colonel Mace did not authorize the paramedics to go in to the conversion units. Pushing the plastic curtain aside, he squeezed past a soldier who directed his weapon at Ianto, the narrow ray of the torch mounted on the assault rifle making the fearful expression on the trapped man’s face even more prominent.

“What the hell are you doing?” Owen demanded to know.

“We’re dealing with a possible threat,” Mace answered dryly.

“What kind of threat?” Owen frayed, feeling rage rise at UNIT’s attitude. “An unarmed man restrained by a metal frame?”

“O-Owen?” Ianto cut in, his voice hoarse and trembling, laden with fear. “What’s going on?”

“That’s what I’d like to know, too,” Owen snarled, glowering at the colonel. First they missed the survivor and now they threatened him. The shine of a number of torches made the scene somewhat surreal… and Owen feel like he was standing on the wrong side.

“You asked for medical attention for someone trapped in a conversion unit,” Mace stated. “I could not allow anyone to enter an unclear situation. We need to make sure that this man is no threat.”

“Does he look like a threat to you?” Owen challenged, imposing himself between the soldier and his patient. Without comment, the soldier shifted his stance to reacquire his target, but Owen moved with him, pulling out his own weapon as he did. “Do that again, mate, and it will be you we carry out in a body bag.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that, Doctor,” Mace snarled at him.

“Maybe not,” Owen growled. “But then you’ll be running from Captain Jack Harkness for the few remaining days of your life, Colonel.” He heard Ianto making distressed noises behind him, but he could not very well turn his back on that lunatic Mace and his tin soldiers to comfort the young man. He really wished Suzie were with him.

“Look at him!” Owen barked. “He can’t lift a finger, let alone attack anyone!”

“He might do if we tamper with the conversion unit and it continues to convert him,” Mace snapped back. “We have to consider more than just the safety of the paramedics. As we don’t know what these things might be capable of, we need to ensure that no convertee ever survives.”

“He’s no convertee!” Owen shouted, sensing his rage getting the better of him. How could this man talk about euthanizing the converted victims in front of the trapped man? A moment ago, he had been furious at the UNIT soldiers overlooking Ianto during their search but now he became strangely relieved that they did. It was all Owen could do not to explode and just pull the trigger. “He’s no danger! He’s just stuck!”

“We’d like to verify that ourselves,” Mace told him flatly.

Owen shivered with rage, racking his mind about how he could make the colonel understand.
“Achos ‘r cara chan dduw,” Ianto swore. “Quit fighting over me like a couple of dogs going after a bone and get me out of this bloody thing! Dead or alive, I’m caring less and less.”

The bitter words tore at Owen’s soul, enforcing his wish to reassure and comfort his patient. First he had to protect him, though, as Mace still remained unimpressed.

“Get the hell out of here,” the medic hissed. “Let me do my job.”

The soldier glanced at the colonel.

“Get... the hell... out of here,” Owen repeated more insistently. Daring to step out of the line of fire, he turned to Colonel Mace. “All of you. Out. Now!”

“Dr. Harper,” Mace barked, “of all the insubordinate…”

“I don’t answer to you!” Owen yelled, getting in the officious colonel’s face. “I’m not your subordinate, so I cannot be insubordinate!” His gun pointed at the floor right then, but he did not actually need it. For a split second, he saw fear flicker in the colonel’s eyes and used that to his advantage. “I can take care of myself. We have cleaned up after you lot often enough. We can deal with this on our own as well.” And, backing him out of the doorway, Owen hissed. “Now get out of here.”

Realizing that Mace was not his sole problem, Owen raised his gun again, directing it at the soldier who still aimed his weapon at Ianto.

“And you, mate,” the medic growled. “Should go with him.”

Fixating the doctor with a cold stare, the soldier lowered his weapon slightly and replied calmly, “No.” Turning to Colonel Mace he added, “Sir, with your permission I will stay.” Seeing the acknowledging nod, he faced Owen again, “I’ll stand back, but I won’t leave you here without backup. Something could still go wrong. Then you’ll be glad to have my support.”

Owen was ready to object when Ianto spoke up.

“It’s all right, Owen. Let him stay.”

“You sure?”

“Well, better safe than sorry, right?”

Owen did not like to hear that. Some optimism was in order right now.

“Ianto, don’t talk like that…”

“Ianto,” Ianto cut him short. “If you had any sense, you’d be grateful to him for volunteering,” the young Welshman lectured. At first his voice shook a little, but he gained more confidence as he spoke. “If something goes wrong and the machine continues where it left off I don’t want to be responsible for killing the man who tried to save me. I’d attack you. I don’t want that to happen. And most of all I don’t want to get trapped in a metal hull like that.” Rolling his eyes, he tried to get a look at the soldier. “If the machine restarts... kill me.”

“Don’t you dare,” Owen told him gravely. “I opened that other unit, so that’s what I’m going to do now. I’ll get you out and we won’t have to talk about shooting anyone.”

“Owen, wait!” Ianto pleaded.
“What’s wrong?” the medic gently asked, bending down to him over the table a little awkwardly in order to avoid touching the saws. Carefully, he rubbed his shoulder.

“I think this unit jammed,” Ianto told him. “At first there was no power, but then it was restored and the machine started to run… until it made some horrible noises and stopped.”

Owen grimaced thoughtfully.

“There… must be a syringe somewhere to my left,” Ianto explained and his tone became more anxious again. “I… I have talked with other victims. One of them said her thoughts were so mushy and assumed that a drug was the reason.”

“You talked with the others?” Owen asked as he straightened up. Walking around the head of the unit, he got on the other side to search for the syringe.

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

Ianto issued a strangled noise. “They died.”

Rolling his eyes at his own insensitivity, Owen said, “I’m sorry, Ianto. That was a stupid thing to ask.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” Owen objected. “Don’t think you’d have to endure everything we do or say just because you’re stuck in there. Tell us if you don’t like… or need something.” Before Ianto could argue, Owen cut him short, “Don’t you dare to start a fight. We’re here to take care of you. Got me?”

After a short moment of silence, Ianto uttered a shaky, “Yes.”

“Good.”

Owen turned to the machine and fumbled around with something. When he straightened up again, he held something up into the ray of his torch for Ianto to see.

“I got it,” Owen cheered.

“Great,” Ianto murmured at the sight of the syringe. “Put it far, far way. Will you?”

“I will,” Owen promised. “And now we’ll get you out of that thing.”

While Owen walked around the unit to where the control buttons were, Ianto imploringly hoped that the medic would be successful.

xXx

Cardiff
Water poured out of the unstable crack in space above the oval basin. Occasionally, lightning flashed. One blast hit the water tower right across the Millennium Centre. The metal column thundered under the impact and a second later, a backlash shot up from the tower into the crack that flickered and grumbled before it snapped shut like a zipper, leaving a clear blue sky behind.

Some sunlight filtered through the tent over the hole in the ceiling of the Torchwood Hub, dipping the main room of the base in a rather dark twilight.

Gwen now sat on the sofa in the rec area, Jack lying beside her, his head resting in her lap. Toshiko was busy trying to get running whatever might still be running, and Andy was in the morgue with Ydris, using his first aid skills to check on the young man. Absently, Gwen twirled a strand of Jack’s hair around her fingers.

With a sudden tortured gasp, Jack arched up from the couch and fell back. Instantly, he felt the pain coursing through his body, paralyzing him. Lifting his arm was such an effort that he quit trying.

“Shhh, easy,” he heard a female voice just a moment before he became aware that someone was soothingly brushing a hand over his forehead and cheek. “You’re safe.”

Jack groaned.

“Tosh?”

“No, it’s Gwen,” she murmured. “How do you feel?”

Jack snorted. “Wrong question.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Jack moaned. “Where…?”

“In the Hub.”

Jack scowled. “Why’s it so dark?” The sound of embarrassment that Gwen issued confused Jack. Something was not right. “Gwen?”

“Toshiko said that we’re in lockdown.”

“Lockdown?” Sitting up as quickly as Jack did was not such a good idea. Groaning, he leaned against the backrest. “Lockdown?”

“Yes.”

“How did we get in he… Ydris!” Jack called, worry spreading across his features. Reassuringly, Gwen’s hand alighted on his shoulder. Almost inaudibly, he asked, “Where’s Ydris?”

She hesitated for a second to contemplate her choice of words, “Andy’s checking on him in the morgue.”

Guilt and regret surged through Jack as all he heard was the word morgue.

“He’s all right, Jack,” Gwen assured him, grabbing his elbow to keep him from charging off when he really ought to be lying down.

“Where’s Tosh?”
“She said she wanted to have a look at the mainframe, see if the lightning caused any damage.”

“What lightning?” Jack gasped, staring at the constable incredulously.

“The one that hit the water tower.”

“Oh.” Jack blamed it on the horrible headache that he was a little slow-witted right now. He tried to think of why lightning should have hit the water tower and with it the rift manipulator. The volatile rift came to mind that had opened a new crack right above the oval basin when the giant octopus climbed up the stone slope. Realization made his eyes widen with shock. “How did we get in here?”

“The octopus held you both,” Gwen explained to him. “It let go of you when Andy shot it.”

“What happened to it?”

“Fried.”

“Come again?”

“It was fried as it held on to the water tower when the lightning struck.”

“Oh.”

Even though Jack still felt light headed, he knew that he had no reason to sit around while the rift spat out all kinds of stuff or creatures. So he unsteadily got up to his feet, ready to face the next challenge.

“Jack!”

Toshiko’s shout alerted him to balance himself just in time to avoid being knocked off his feet as the computer expert rushed up to him and threw herself into a huge hug.

“I’ve been so scared,” Toshiko murmured against his chest. “I thought we lost you. When the octopus pulled you both into the tunnel… It was horrible. I thought you drowned.”

_I did_, Jack thought and held her tighter.

“Jack.”

This time it was a male voice that made Jack look up to find Andy come up from the morgue, supporting a quite pale Ydris.

“Ydris, are you all right?” Jack asked worriedly.

“Yeah… just your plan for catching the octopus proved to be suboptimal.”

A soft smile played around Jack’s lips. “We have staff quarters down there,” he gestured at a tunnel that lay deep in the shadows. “You should take a break.”

“Same applies to you,” Toshiko stated firmly, pushing herself off Jack and fixating him with a stern gaze. “The Hub locked down. We won’t be going anywhere for the next six hours. At least. You should use the opportunity to get some rest.”

“I ca…” Jack started to object only to realize that he could not come up with a persuasive argument.

“We all need a break, Jack,” Toshiko argued. “This is our chance.”
“A warm bed sounds wonderful,” Ydris said, his teeth chattering. “I’m still cold.”

“You’re also still wet,” Andy scolded. “We need to get you out of those clothes.”

Hearing that made Jack aware why he himself felt that uncomfortable. He was soaked as well.

“I’ll show our guest to the staff quarters,” Jack offered. “Come, Ydris. This way.”

“We’ll come with you,” Gwen piped up. “There’s nothing else we can do anyway. Right, Toshiko?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Go. I’ll take a nap here on the sofa. Then I’ll notice if anything changes.”

“Thank you, Tosh,” Jack said, offering her a smile of genuine gratitude. “I really appreciate your efforts. Yours as well, Gwen and Andy.” Then he turned to Ydris. “Let’s go.”

The young man nodded and accepted Jack’s help when they made their way toward the tunnel.

“Jack!” Toshiko shouted, rushing up to him, a torch in hand. “Here.”

“Thanks, Tosh.”

Jack led Ydris deeper into the Hub where Gwen and Andy went into the first room they came to while he and Ydris continued down the hall and to one of the other rooms furnished with simple beds and drawers.

“Come, let me help you,” Jack suggested and reached for Ydris’s wet clothes.

The young man scowled at him but did not object. So Jack helped him out of his clothes and into the bed, pulling the covers up over him. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed, watching him. Ydris looked up at him and held his gaze. Slowly, a smile grew on Jack’s features.

“What?” Ydris asked.

“Nothing. Just enjoying the sight of your gorgeous eyes.”

“You can’t feel that bad if you’re still up to flirting,” Ydris remarked, reflexively tilting his head sideways. Jack chuckled lowly. “You have no idea.”

Ydris’s expression remained earnest until he finally said, “Thank you.”

For just a second Jack was confused again but puzzled the information he had together. “You’re welcome.”

Thoughtfully, Ydris watched Jack in turn. The captain did not move away so the young man decided to push his luck by asking, “How often did you pull that stunt off since those Cybermen attacked?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Ydris snorted derisively. “Quit toying with me. I know what I’ve seen. You were dead after the octopus smashed you into that tree. And I bet you also drowned after you shared your breath with me. So stop taking me for a fool. How often did you die? Talk to me.”

At first, Jack was taken aback. Actually, he should have anticipated a question like this, but for some reason he had fooled himself by assuming that Ydris did not notice anything. Just like Toshiko, Suzie
or Owen who did not know about his immortality. Once and again, he thought about telling them the truth, but the little devil in the back of his mind always told him that he would leave as soon as the Doctor showed up again and so he left it to destiny for them to find out or stay oblivious. Being confronted directly now, he became angry.

“That’s none of your business,” he spat and stood, intent on leaving.

“You didn’t tell anyone, did you?”

Now his soul hurt as much as his misused body did. Jack was glad that he turned his back on Ydris as he felt tears sting his eyes.

“How does that work?” Ydris wanted to know.

Battling emotions cording up his throat, Jack could not say anything.

“How can you live without confiding in someone? You must be incredibly lonely.”

It was said without any mischief. Ydris appeared to be absolutely honest and rather compassionate than spiteful. Jack still could not answer, but he sensed tears roll down his cheeks.

Ydris remained silent now and Jack just stood and fought his emotional uproar until he heard a strange noise from behind.

“Something wrong?” Jack asked, turning around and realizing at the same moment that Ydris’s teeth were chattering.

“I’m still cold,” Ydris said.

“I know something that helps,” Jack said and shed his clothes. Before Ydris could come up with any reply, Jack already had climbed into bed with him. “Come here.”

All of a sudden, Ydris became resistant when Jack tried to pull him in. Jack let his hand rest on Ydris’s shoulder.

“No ulterior motives, Ydris,” he murmured. “Just field first aid for hypothermia, been in use since man was living in caves.”

For a moment, the Welshman contemplated if he wanted to trust Jack before he warned, “Don’t take advantage of this situation.”

Snuggling up to Ydris from behind, Jack pulled him against his chest.

“No worries,” Jack sighed. “Usually you were totally right with your assessment, but right now I’m absolutely beat. I’m content with cuddling.”

It was the utter truth. Jack was incredibly sore. Even breathing hurt.

So he enjoyed the warmth and the feel of the other’s body in his arms and slowly relaxed. Listening to Ydris’s regular breathing, he fell asleep.

tbc…
Anxious silence had settled over the conversion chamber when Owen was about to push the equivalent to the button that had opened the restraints on the other unit. Ianto could hear it snap in its frame when Owen pressed his thumb on it. A whizzing sound followed.

Nothing happened.

“Um…”

Once more, Owen pushed the button, there was a whiz again, but still nothing changed.

A distressed sound of frustration escaped Ianto.

“Oh, oh,” Owen muttered. His gaze was drawn to the thick metal clamps that held the young man in the conversion unit and knew that they were confronted with a massive problem.

“Must be because it jammed,” Ianto sobbed. “Oh, God! I won’t ever get out of here!”

“Stop that right now!” Owen barked without thinking. “Of course you’ll get out of there! It… just will take a little longer.”

“I don’t want to know how much longer longer is, do I?” Ianto whined. “Get me out, Owen! Please! Get me out!”

The impending panic resonating in the young man’s voice pierced Owen’s heart. He rushed over to the head of the table to be able to touch Ianto reassuringly. The younger man’s face was contorted with mental agony. Owen’s soothing caress did nothing to reassure him. His breathing was accelerated, coming and going in short, irregular gasps.


At first, he got no reaction. It took Owen a good deal of murmured reassurances to calm his patient down.

“You know, Ianto, we should get some light back, don’t you think?”

“Y-yeah,” Ianto replied. “It’s creepy just with the torch.”

“Right.” Owen turned to the soldier. “Could you help me with that?”

“Sure,” the UNIT soldier told him and activated his radio to ask for help with the light.

“What’s your name, by the way?” Ianto demanded to know.

As soon as he finished his conversation on the radio, the soldier stepped forward to get into Ianto’s field of vision.
“I’m Private Nichol.”

“Not your rank, you git,” Owen growled. “He asked for your name!”

“Owen,” Ianto said waringly, but any reprimand he might have issued was interrupted by the young soldier.

“Sorry. Yes. My name’s Dennis.”

“Hm hmm. Thanks, Dennis.”

“No problem, sir.” He paused for a moment. “I’m sorry about the circumstances. I’m sure you’ll be okay eventually.”

“Let’s hope so,” Ianto choked.

“That’s got nothing to do with hope, Ianto,” Owen cut in. “We’ll find a way to get you out. One way or the other we’ll free you.”

“If you say so.”

“Argh!” Owen howled with exasperation. “Right now I could throttle you, Ianto Jones!”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize!” the medic spat. “You have the right to be angry and frustrated. Be that, okay? Just stop talking as if you’re going to die in there. I won’t let that happen! Now repeat this: I trust Owen to free me and I’m gonna be okay. C’mon!”

Taking a deep breath first, Ianto tried to follow Owen’s command. His lips moved, but no sound came out. He just could not make himself say it.

“Oh, no. Don’t chicken out. C’mon, we’ll do it together. I trust…”

“I… t-trust…” Ianto sounded awfully shaky. Not knowing why his voice shook did not prevent him from hating it.

“I know you can do better than that,” Owen pushed. “Did you talk to your superior like that?”

“No!”

All of a sudden the force was back in Ianto’s tone.

“Then stop kidding around! I’m superior to you as well, so treat me accordingly.” On the periphery of his vision, Owen saw Dennis turn his head to hide his smirk. “C’mon now! I trust…”

“I trust…” This time the words came out clear but still sounded flat and totally unconvincing.

“Owen to free me…” the medic continued.

“I… I t-trust Owen t-to free me…” Ianto repeated, loathing the way his voice developed a life of its own again that he found incapable of influencing.

“And I’m gonna be okay.” Owen made it sound like a challenge.

Ianto tried to meet it, but all that came over his lips was a jaded, “A-and I’m g-gonna be… okay.”
Ianto hissed the last word so fast that Owen almost missed it. This was pretty unsatisfying.

“All right, Ianto. And now convince me that you mean what you’re saying.”

The Welshman rolled his eyes.

“Owen, I can’t,” Ianto groaned.

It was all the medic could do not to erupt with anger. At the last moment, he reigned himself in, realizing that he really expected a little too much of the trapped young man. His features softened, but he still kept his voice firm.

“You’re exhausted, I know. I just don’t want you to give up. We’ll find a way to get you out. Until then we’ll try and make you more comfortable… as much as possible.”

Ianto huffed. “Once I’m out you’re free to try and see if this gets comfortable in any way.”

“Well, you know what I mean,” Owen said sheepishly.

“I do, just didn’t want you to forget.”

“I won’t. Believe me, I won’t.”

Ianto coughed, which drew the medic’s attention. Feeling the younger man’s forehead for excessive sweating, Owen asked, “Are you having difficulty breathing?”

“You mean does it hurt?” Ianto groaned. “You should ask what doesn’t hurt, actually.”

Despite the graveness of the statement, Owen snorted a small laugh. “Seriously, Ianto. Does it hurt in your chest when you cough or do you feel short of breath?”

“My throat’s dry, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Any signs of increased anxiety?”

“Yes…” Ianto drawled, wondering what the medic was aiming at, “due to facing an impending upgrade.”

Grimacing, Owen decided that that had been a stupid question. The anticipated reprimand, though, failed to appear.

“I’m just asking because lying flat for so long might result in fluid collecting in your lungs,” the medic explained, earning another groan.

“You know, some fluid in my mouth might help.”

“Huh?”

Ianto chuckled at his confusion. “I’m thirsty. Do you have some more water?”

Owen smiled. “Sure I do. Just a moment…”

Turning away, Owen practically dropped out of Ianto’s field of vision. The Welshman heard him curse. He also heard a scraping noise and rumpling, followed by more curses. Despite his dreadful position, Ianto laughed at the medic stumbling over his rucksack.
“That’s not funny!” Owen spat.

“Yes, it is!” Ianto chuckled and burst into laughter again, ignoring the pain caused by the vibration as his head was held by the metal clamps.

“Really not funny,” Owen growled as he reappeared beside the head of the unit.

“Oh, yes, it is!” Ianto smirked.

“I agree,” Dennis cut in between suppressed snorts of laughter.

Glaring daggers at the UNIT soldier, Owen called out indignantly, “What happened to respecting your commanding officers?”

“Evaporated with my commanding officers turning out to be presumptuous twats.”

Snorting wryly, Owen replied, “Speak for your own office.”

“You think Captain Harkness is more lenient towards you than Hartman was to us?”

Beside him, Owen shrugged. “All things considered… he probably is.”

“Really?” Ianto prodded as he could not quite believe that. All the rumours that had coursed about the head of Torchwood Cardiff had given him another impression.

“Don’t take me wrong, he can take rigorous steps and sometimes he’s just plain scary, but altogether he’s easy to work with.”

“Hmmm.”

Ianto needed a moment to let that sink in. Owen used the moment to finally retrieve the water bottle as well as his stethoscope while Ianto mulled over the information.

“What’s on your mind now?” Owen wanted to know.

“Something I thought about earlier when you defended me against the UNIT soldiers,” Ianto told him.

“Like what?” Owen glanced at Dennis who just shrugged indifferently as much as Owen could tell in the scarce light.

“Well, it’s not that I don’t appreciate you taking up for me,” Ianto said, “but I wouldn’t want to be in your place when your boss hears about that little performance.”

Now it was Owen’s turn to laugh. “Are you kidding? Jack’ll buy me a beer for that!” His expression became thoughtful. “I really could do with a cold beer now.”

“Oh, I could do with a beer as well,” Ianto sighed.

“Ohhh, no. You won’t get a beer,” Owen quickly objected. “That’ll have to wait. Unless you’re counting root beer as beer.”

“Thanks but no thanks,” Ianto warded off. “First, I don’t like its taste, and second, sugar takes a lot of water to digest and as I’m already dehydrated it wouldn’t be advisable.”

Owen gaped at him.
“I’d be happy, though,” Ianto went on, “if you’d ever offer me some of that water you’re holding.”

Realizing that he had been outwitted by his patient, Owen pouted. Still he held the sports bottle out so that Ianto could take a few sips. Then he took his stethoscope and reached out with it awkwardly as he tried to get between the saw and under the foil blanket to listen to Ianto’s breathing.

“So what’s the verdict?” Ianto asked.

“I can hear nothing unusual,” Owen smirked. “You’re all right.”

A relieved sigh escaped the young Welshman. Owen’s earlier words had worried him.

“So you really think your boss would buy you a beer for brushing off the Colonel?” Silently, Ianto was glad that he did not sound as hoarse anymore.

“Oh, yeah. He definitely would.”

“And if he found you attractive, he’d buy you a beer anyway?” Dennis queried teasingly.

“Hey, that’s none of your business, UNIT,” Owen snarled.

“But he would, wouldn’t he?” Ianto picked up on the subject.

His eyes growing wide, Owen stared at the Welshman. “You’ve met him then?”

“Owen, really. I work for Torchwood One,” Ianto said with what was quickly becoming a familiar eye roll. “The rumour mill here is worse than it was at school.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah,” Ianto confirmed. “I wouldn’t have believed it myself if I didn’t work here. There’s a lot of gossip.”

“I tend not to believe that.”

“Why not? Stranger things have happened than Torchwood employees gossipping. What I really find weird is that there are a lot of religious people working for the Institute, mostly Christians, but some other religions, too. That’s strange for a place like Torchwood, don’t you think?”

Owen nodded.

“Of course some talk more than others, but all considered Torchwood One has a quite active grapevine.”

“Even where Torchwood Three is concerned?” Owen prodded.

“Especially where Torchwood Three is concerned.”

Now Owen became rather flustered, which made Dennis chuckle again.

“Shut it!” Owen frayed. “You’re gonna tell me what was rumoured about us here.”

Innocently, Ianto looked up at Owen which made Dennis laugh.
“What’s so funny?”

“You two are entertaining.”

“Entertaining?” Owen snarled sarcastically. “I’m happy that Ianto’s predicament is so entertaining. Maybe I should shove you into the next free conversion unit.”

“You know I meant your attitudes,” Dennis replied defensively. “Actually, I admire Ianto for his quick-wittedness despite the condition he’s in.”

Silently, Owen had to agree, but as glad as he was that his patient was willing and able to banter with him, still he was not amused by Dennis’s reaction.

“Don’t lay into him, Owen!” Ianto tried to defuse before the medic could come up with a proper response. “The situation’s awkward enough even without you spoiling for a fight.”

Owen was saved by the appearance of another man who pushed aside the plastic curtain.

“You still have no light here?” he wondered aloud.

“As you can see, we haven’t,” Owen remarked wryly.

Thoughtfully, the man rubbed his chin. “Hm, I’m gonna check if there’s power at all on this storey. Otherwise we need to get a generator. I’ll be back.”

With that, he was gone again.

“At least something’s happening,” Owen growled to himself.

“Why? What else do you expect to happen?” a female voice chided teasingly.

Owen sighed. “I don’t know, Suzie.” He watched how she awkwardly manoeuvred a movable stand through the opening in the plastic enclosure. “I’m exhausted. Don’t weigh every word I’m saying.” Turning to Ianto, he added, “Remember my earlier warning, do you?”

“About you starting to ramble? Sure I do. I’m immobile, not stupid.”

Owen snorted with amusement.

“Suzie, I’d like to introduce you to brave Ianto Jones.”

Brave? Ianto thought. What choice do I have?

“Ianto, this is our second in command, Suzie Costello.”

“Nice to meet you, Agent Costello,” Ianto said and rolled his eyes in order to take a look at the woman who stepped up beside him. Her face was framed by dark unruly curls and even though she looked at him out of dark compassionate eyes, Ianto could not help but sense some reluctance in her. “I’d shake your hand, ma’am, but I’m a little tied up at the moment.”

“Did you just call me ma’am?” Suzie asked with confused amusement.

“Yes, ma’am,” Ianto said earnestly. “My predicament restricts my mobility, but that’s no reason to forget my manners.”

Suzie chuckled.
“A few minutes ago that sounded quite different,” Owen pointed out. “What happened to showing no respect for your superiors?”

“I never said I wouldn’t show them respect,” Ianto argued.

“Yes, you did!”

“No, I didn’t. I was talking about having no respect.”

Owen opened his mouth to reply but could not find the right retort.

Ianto smirked. “I was just teasing you as you had to point out that you’re superior to me.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, you needed some putting down.”

Suzie laughed softly.

“I see no need to be so formal,” she said. “Just call me Suzie, all right?”

“Yes, ma’am… Suzie.”

Offering him a sincere smile, she shrugged her shoulders in order to take her rucksack off. Just when she put it on the floor the light flickered on.

“Finally,” Owen said. “Are you okay, Ianto?”

“Y-yes,” the Welshman told him. He had to close his eyes for a moment, even though the lamps provided just an indirect light.

Suzie squatted down in search of something. Owen walked around the head of the table to see what she unpacked.

“Here, I brought you a blanket,” she said. “And the medics sent up the supplies you asked for and a few other things they thought you might need. Mace said he was keeping his people down below. Didn’t want all the medical personnel concentrated up here in case things went awry, but you should feel free to contact him if there’s anything you can’t handle on your own.”

“Twat,” Owen snorted and took the army blanket from her. “This’ll be a bit more comfortable than the foil blanket.” A little awkwardly, he tried to replace the first aid blanket until Dennis put his weapon down to help him. “Thanks.”

“Yes, thank you, all of you,” Ianto said. “Though I’d prefer to get out of this thing.”

“I’m a technician,” Suzie told him. “I’ll have a look at the conversion unit when Owen’s finished.”

“Okay… Owen, what are you up to?”

“I’ll get an IV line running, supplying you with fluids and nutrients,” the doctor explained as he rummaged through the rucksack to retrieve what he needed. “I bet you’re hungry, but I don’t want you to throw up if you can’t handle food right now. Okay?”

“You’re the doctor.”

“So they tell me.” Owen smiled reassuringly at him. “Don’t worry, Ianto. I won’t do anything
“Okay.”

“Well, Ianto, I’m gonna have a look at your hand,” Owen informed him as he stepped out of Ianto’s line of sight again. “Hm hmmm, that’s promising… I need to put on a tourniquet.”

Somewhat awkwardly, Owen worked on Ianto as he did not want to risk to touch the saws that looked pretty sharp. Once he managed to put the strap around Ianto’s right upper arm, he pulled it tight which made Ianto groan.

“Sorry, can’t spare you that,” Owen murmured automatically as he turned back to Ianto’s hand. He was a little worried that he would not find a suitable vein at once as Ianto was dehydrated. “There… yeah, looks good… You’ll feel a little prick,” Owen warned as he disinfected the spot that he chose as his target. He rolled his eyes at Dennis who snorted as he tried to stifle a laugh. The medic took hold of Ianto’s hand in order to insert the needle and felt his patient tense up instantly. “So, Ianto Jones. You’re Welsh right?”

And before Ianto had a chance to tense even more it was over.

“Yes. And you’re a Londoner.”

“Guilty as charged,” Owen chuckled.

“I’m from Newport,” Ianto said thoughtfully. “How did you end up in Cardiff?”

“That’s a long story,” the medic replied and paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. “To put it short, I met Captain Jack when a patient died under mysterious circumstances. I couldn’t let it slide when the management said that nothing suspicious had happened. Nobody would admit to seeing the mysterious American in an RAF greatcoat who had been involved in the death. I prodded for answers and was ordered to take a vacation. I still tried to dig deeper and suddenly Jack was back…and offered me a job.”

“I see,” Ianto murmured softly. A smirk played around his lips that made Owen curious.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing,” Ianto said, hardly able to suppress a chuckle. The vibration sent renewed pain from his head down his neck.


“Well, that must have been the first time that someone was hired for being a pain in the arse.”

Now Owen chuckled with him as he hung up the bags on the rack Suzie had brought in. “Probably.”

“Not for Jack Harkness,” Suzie quipped.

“Oi! I’ll have you know he hired me for my medical skills,” Owen admonished heras he connected the bags with the tubes. “He knows he’s not going to sample the other.”

“Yeah,” Suzie said earnestly, “Jack’s very practical in hiring new people. They actually have to have useful skills they can contribute to the team…still searching for Owen’s, though.”

“Speak for yourself, Suzie,” Owen snapped. “Hired right off the street…”
“Yeah, but any skills one can contribute to Captain Harkness will certainly enhance one’s resume, or so I’ve heard,” Ianto cut in with wry amusement.

“It is not true that Jack hires his people for their sex-appeal,” Owen told him. “Though some carnal attraction can be helpful…which would make you a prime candidate.”

There was a moment of surprised silence, which Owen did not notice as he was busy preparing the IV while Ianto, Suzie, and Dennis exchanged amused glances. Ianto finally broke it, “Excuse me, Doctor, did you just hit on me?”

“Hmmm?” Owen asked absently. Then the question sank in, “What? Nooo! I’m not wired that way. It’s just that Jack has a type, and you’re it, mate.”

For just a moment, Ianto’s smirk became crooked.

“True, Jack does have a type,” Suzie muttered under her breath, leaning down toward Ianto so he could hear her rather than Dennis, while her gaze was fixed on the medic. “Breathing, willing, and sentient. He might do his best to persuade someone, but he’ll never use force. And breathing is optional, depending on your biological requirements.”

Ianto snorted with amusement.

Fixating the Welshman with a hard stare that completely failed to dispel the young man’s smirk, Owen very deliberately changed the subject, “So, what else did you hear about us?”

“Hm, let’s see…” Ianto trailed off when Owen took his hand to attach the IV line. A distressed sound made the medic look up.

“Something wrong?”

Ianto issued an unidentifiable sound and pressed through gritted teeth, “Don’t like doctors.”

“Oi!” Owen pouted. “Why’s that?”

“Bad experiences,” was all that Ianto offered as an explanation. “Maybe I’ll make an exception for you.”

“You’d better,” Owen replied teasingly and opened the drip.

“Or what?” Ianto challenged.

Owen bent down to his rucksack again. When he straightened up he held up a syringe. His smirk would have put the Cheshire Cat to shame. “Well, if you don’t… I’ll tell Jack he’d like you to work with him.”

“And that’s supposed to impress me?” Ianto shot back.

“Once you meet Jack in person you’ll realize that it’s a not an empty threat,” Owen calmly said.

For a moment that silenced Ianto.

“What do you have in the syringe?” he then asked worriedly. He really disliked needles and drugs.

If possible Owen smirked even wider.

“Painkillers.”
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Ianto still could not estimate how much time had passed. It was comforting, though, to know that he did not have to spend this time in solitude. True to his word, Owen had not left his side except for when he went to check out the other conversion unit, and when he left Ianto’s field of vision he talked to him.

Not for the first time, Ianto wondered for how long he would be stuck in this horrible place. Suzie had examined the conversion unit and decided to go and experiment with an unoccupied machine. Currently, Owen was not in sight, but Ianto could hear him talk with Dennis.

Rolling his eyes, Ianto caught a glance at the IV line where the fluids were dripping into the tube. Steadily they supplied him with much needed liquid and nutrients. They already showed their effect. Ianto felt better with every minute.

And that caused new problems.

His agitation rose.

The only thing that could freely move was his mind, so his thoughts drifted around in all directions. It took him to Virginia, to Lisa, to his family, and to the attack of the Cybermen. Memories or imaginations, each picture was more horrid than the other. Snippets and flashes of trivial stuff tried to distract him from his morbid musings.

Suddenly an image appeared before his mind’s eye that he could not push aside. Fiction mingled with reality and he groaned.

“Ianto?”

At once, Owen appeared at his side, worry creasing his forehead.

“I’m all right,” Ianto moaned. “That is, as well as I can be stuck in here.”

“Yeah… I’m sorry. I wish I knew how this thing works.”

“You’re doing what you can. That’s okay.”

Owen sighed. “You shouldn’t be that understanding, Ianto.”

That made the trapped young man scowl. “Why not?”

“You’re so serene that I can’t help but assume that you’ve given up.”

“I haven’t given up!” Ianto replied calmly. “I… I guess I just freaked often enough already that I don’t find it in me anymore.”

“I see.” Thoughtfully Owen let his hand trail over to Ianto’s shoulder, stroking it reassuringly. “What made you groan?”

Ianto issued a bitter chuckle. “I had to think of a movie, one of my favourites.”
“Yeah? What movie?” Owen prodded.

“Goldfinger.”

With a smirk, Owen shot back his reply without thinking, “Ah, I know, the iconic moment when Goldfinger has Bond tied to the gold table, about to slice him in half with that industrial laser.” Too late Owen realized his mistake, but to his relief Ianto did not seem to be affronted as he assumed Bond’s role.

“Do you expect me to talk?”

Putting on a respectable imitation of Gert Fröbe, Owen positively growled, “No, Mr. Bond. I expect you to die.”

Ianto’s grin faded.

“I’m sorry, Ianto. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No,” Ianto quickly said. “No, it’s okay. You were good as Goldfinger. It’s just… I just wish I could escape this bloody thing as easily as Bond got off that table.”

“I know,” Owen murmured, squeezing Ianto’s shoulder. “We called the fire department. They’re sending someone.”

“Okay… as long as it’s nobody with a double 0 designation.”

Owen smiled. “Well, you seem to be quite a James Bond fan.”

“I guess that much is obvious,” Ianto chuckled lowly.

“Is he the reason why you joined Torchwood?” Owen queried.

Ianto felt heat rise in his cheeks. “Maybe subconsciously,” he admitted. “But actually I was just looking for something more important than serving coffee.”

“Oh?”

“I was working at a coffee shop,” Ianto sighed. “It was a good job, but not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.”

“Then how did you come to join Torchwood?”

At that Ianto squirmed a little in his restraints.

Owen smirked. “A woman?” The blush colouring Ianto’s cheeks assured Owen that the young man was doing all right, at least physically. He also took a pleasure in bantering with him as it clearly distracted him from his dreadful position. Still he wondered if it was wise to push much farther. “Are you a ladies’ man like Bond? I bet you are.”

“Yeah, sure,” Ianto replied sarcastically. “Though I’m more like the Bond in *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*.”

“Oh?”

“He got married.”
“You’re married?”

“Um, well, no. I was engaged, but... she died in the attack.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Ianto.” For Owen it was a plain and painful truth. Along with his own sorrow, he could not help but worry about how he was not able to talk about anything without upsetting the young man. Whatever he addressed it seemed to inevitably leading to distressing Ianto again. For the first time, Owen felt really tempted to open up toward someone only to be unable to do so. So he settled for, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Ianto could see the sincerity in Owen’s eyes and something more. It was as if he knew Ianto’s pain.

“Owen?” Ianto asked when he sensed Owen retreat.

“It’s... We have something in common then after all.”

Clearly, Ianto sensed Owen’s reluctance and knew that he should not push the topic. It was obviously painful for him to talk about it and Ianto understood only too well why. His grief over losing Lisa was still fresh, an agony that had not really hit home yet. So it was not difficult at all to take their conversation into another direction.

“You do know On Her Majesty’s Secret Service, don’t you?”

“I’m sure I’ve seen it,“ Owen told him, his relief at the change of the subject palpable. “But I’m not sure what it was about. Who did Bond marry?”

“Contessa Teresa di Vicenzo,” Ianto answered without hesitation. “She was played by Diana Rigg.”

“Diana Rigg...” Owen repeated thoughtfully, contemplating where he had heard that name before.

“Emma Peel,” Ianto prodded. “C’mon, Owen. You know The Avengers, right?”

“The Avengers...” Owen mused aloud. “Yeah, that rings a bell. That’s a 70s spy show, right?”

“The 60s, actually,” Ianto corrected.

“Don’t be picky.”

“I’m not picky. I’m just correct.”

“I like this quote,” Suzie threw in as she pushed past the plastic curtain, glowered at Owen and dropped her voice to say, “You have a license to kill, not break the traffic laws.”

“Don’t get started about my driving again,” Owen snarled.

Ianto snickered. “That was Q, referring to the new BMW he had prepared for Bond in Tomorrow Never Dies, because he knew from experience that he wouldn’t get the car back in one piece.”

“I’m starting to think you’re a James Bond geek,” Owen teased.

“I’m not a geek,” Ianto complained. “I’m a fan.”

“So, Tomorrow Never Dies, that one’s with the new guy, right?” Owen asked. “What’s his name again...?”

“Pierce Brosnan,” Ianto, Suzie, and Dennis said at the same time.
“Thanks,” Owen replied wryly.

Ianto chuckled. “Can anyone of you tell me why Brosnan couldn’t play Bond in The Living Daylights?”

“Are we on a quiz show now?” Owen wanted to know.

“It’s your job to make him feel better, right?” Dennis challenged.

“So what?” Owen spat.

“Well, Doctor, if a James Bond-themed pub quiz achieves that… let him ask away.”

“Are you the doctor now?” Owen grumbled. “Don’t you have something else to do anyway? Why don’t you go and see why the firemen aren’t here yet?”

Rolling his eyes, Dennis plucked out his radio and stepped out of the cubicle to contact the mobile headquarters undisturbed.

“So why?” Ianto grinned up at Owen.

All the medic could do was shrug and Suzie did not know the answer either. A moment of silence passed before Owen prodded, “Will you enlighten us?”

“Sure,” Ianto told him. “Brosnan had to decline the role back then, owing to his contract for the detective series Remington Steele. Timothy Dalton played in The Living Daylights, instead and he also starred in Licence to Kill before Brosnan inherited the role in Golden Eye. That was in 1995. Now, who sung the title song?”

“Tina Turner,” Suzie took her cue.

“Bugger! I knew that!” Owen called out.

“Then you should have answered faster,” Suzie taunted. “My score.”

Ianto laughed.

“Who’s ahead?” Owen asked eagerly.

But Ianto destroyed his hopes with a wry, “You’re all tied. Well, not as tied as me that is.”

Sensing that the mood threatened to tilt again, Owen prodded, “Then you should keep asking, Ianto. See who’s a Bond expert.”

At first, Ianto appeared to be undecided, but he probably was just thinking about his next question before he reluctantly asked, “Owen, what did Honey Rider do when Bond met her in Dr. No?”

“Argh! I know that!” the medic cursed. “Bugger… Shells! She was gathering sea shells.”

“By a hair’s breadth,” Ianto smirked, “but correct. Hm, Suzie, what is super villain Blofeld doing when he is first introduced?”

“Hah! That’s easy!” Suzie shouted with glee. “He’s petting his cat!”

“That’s correct! All right, Owen, here’s a tough one,” Ianto said. “What’s the title of the only Bond movie that was not produced by Eon Productions Ltd.?”
“Ummm… I didn’t even know they weren’t all produced by the same company,” Owen grumbled. “Who the hell memorizes that?”

“Ianto, obviously,” Suzie chuckled. “Which one was it?”

“It was Never Say Never,” Ianto told them earnestly. “The last one with Sean Connery. His Bond-girl was Kim Basinger.” Lowering his voice, the Welshman stated menacingly. “Owen. You are the weakest link. Goodbye.”

For just a second, his companions stared at Ianto incredulously, but then they could not help but laugh out loud.

“Oh, Ianto! You’re unique!” Suzie praised, caught up in the banter and never recognizing that she should be more careful with what she said. “Just never do that toward Jack, okay? He hates The Weakest Link.”

“Oh, really?” Ianto queried, his curiosity piqued.

“I didn’t know that,” Owen threw in. “How do you know?”

“I was watching it with Tosh on a calm afternoon when Jack strolled past the rec area. He did not just stop when he looked at the TV, he froze, and when the next candidate was sent on the walk of shame, he made a beeline for his office.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Owen scoffed. “We’re talking about ruddy reckless and fearless Captain Jack Harkness. He’s not scared by a quiz show, is he?”

“Well, obviously he is,” Suzie shrugged, trying to dismiss the whole thing as she now felt bad about exposing Jack’s vulnerable spot.

“On second thought,” Owen mused aloud, “Anne Robinson is quite scary.”

While the others kept talking about the host of The Weakest Link first and TV shows in general next, Ianto’s thoughts drifted into another direction. They returned to Suzie’s remark about Captain Harkness hating the quiz show. Of course, Ianto had noticed that the other Torchwood agent wished she could take her words back and he would not prod further, but that could not stop him from thinking. Ianto was sure that there had to be a special reason why the head of Torchwood Three who was indeed known to be reckless and fearless was thrown off balance by a TV program.

Taking guesses about said reason was senseless. Ianto knew that. But it was enough to make him think back to what he had heard about Jack Harkness before. However, rumours were rumours and Ianto assumed that each of them was based on a half-truth and it was impossible to tell what was true and what was pure imagination.

One thing seems to be true, though, Ianto thought. And that’s that he knows how to enjoy himself.

“Ianto?”

Startled out of his musings, Ianto looked up at Owen’s concerned face.

“Hey. I wondered if you’re still with us.”

“Yeah, just lost in thought,” the Welshman assured him. “Don’t worry. I won’t go anywhere.”

“What was it this time?” Owen queried.
Ianto scowled. “Did someone tell you that you’re awfully curious?”

“I thought that’s a basic requirement for our job.”

“So, a good deal of curiosity and sexual appeal…” Ianto paused when he saw the agents above him scowl, “along with medical and technical skills combined with computer genius and a man of action make up the team of Torchwood Cardiff?”

“Hey! I’m a man of action, too,” Owen mock-pouted.

“We’re all field agents,” Suzie added. “Guarding the Rift keeps us quite busy.”

“I bet,” Ianto agreed and reflexively tried to nod. Pain shot through the back of his neck and his shoulders which made him groan.

“What’s wrong?” Owen queried, instantly back in doctor mode.

“My shoulders are on fire, actually,” Ianto moaned. “My body’s supported by the metal frame, but my head isn’t. It’s stuck between the clamps.”

“Oh.”

Inwardly, Owen cursed himself that he did not notice that when he had a look at Ianto’s general condition earlier. Now he rummaged through Suzie’s rucksack in search for something that he could use to support the young man’s head. Luckily, he found a towel that he pushed under the back of Ianto’s head and stuffed it in under his shoulders as well.

“Better?” the medic wanted to know.

“A little.” Ianto consciously tried to relax his muscles but that did not quite work. He needed to distract himself. “Owen? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“You’re not here to search for survivors, right?”

“Pardon?”

“I mean, you didn’t come from Cardiff to offer your medical skills, right? You’re here for the alien tech and all the other stuff.”

Owen did not like where this was going so he opted for reassuring his patient, “What’s important now is that we’re here. And I won’t go away. I’ll take care of you. That’s a promise.”

“Owen, I’m Torchwood, too.”

“I know, Ianto,” Owen replied a little sourly. “But whatever my intentions were when I got here, now I’m your doctor, and I won’t abandon you. Got me?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

For a moment, silence settled over the conversion chamber until Ianto broke it, “Owen? How bad is it?”
At first, Owen was confused. “How bad is what?”

“How bad is it?” Ianto queried anxiously. “I mean, Cybermen everywhere. They were on the telly. It told us that all humans would become like them. I saw them kill. I saw the results of their conversions… So, what’s going on out there? Is it all gone? Is London destroyed?”

Finally, Owen realized what Ianto was asking about. He had been here in the tower during the attack and got trapped here. He most certainly had no opportunity to look outside and least of all did he know what had happened outside the confines of Torchwood.

“Actually it’s not that bad,” Owen explained.

“No?”

Owen shook his head. “No. There’s not much destruction. Sure, there have been fights. I saw some fires burning on our way here but that was about it. I think that Torchwood tower, as the centre of the storm so to speak, was hit worst.”

“I see.”

There was a pause before Ianto asked, “How much time has passed?”

“Since the attack?”

“Yeah.”

“Um…” Owen looked at his watch and thought about when exactly the Cybermen had entered their world.

“Owen, which day is it?”

Wide-eyed, Owen realized that his patient seemed to have totally lost his sense of time. Checking on his watch again, he replied, “It’s Wednesday, a bit after two pm.”

Ianto was shocked. He had thought that much more time had passed. Now he realized that not even twenty-four hours had passed.

“I see.”

The medic was under the impression that Ianto drifted off with thoughts again. He did not want him to start brooding but needed him to remain optimistic or at least focused. Providing Ianto with fluids was all well and good, but that was not enough. The longer the young man was stuck the more it wore him out, physiologically and psychologically. The latter was just as bad and could cause physical reactions. It definitely was not desirable.

Just what can I do to help him? Even though he obviously is an avid fan of James Bond, improvising a Bond quiz could not grab his attention for long. We have to get him out soon. Then he can be treated properly and return home. Thinking that, Owen felt a sudden pang as his own demons returned with a vengeance. Nobody’s waiting for him at home anymore. He said his fiancé was killed during the invasion. I hope he has support to help him deal with his grief.

“Ianto? Do you want to call someone?” Owen asked. As soon as he had asked this, he saw Ianto’s eyes widen and his mouth open to answer. Only a second later, though, Ianto pressed his lips together. Intense thinking furrowed his forehead. “Ianto?”
“I… No.”

*Now why do I not believe you?* Owen wondered, surprised by the young man’s reluctance. *I’m pretty certain he wanted to say yes and bit it back. Do we have even more in common?*

Looking at Suzie, he saw her nod slightly at him before she turned around and left the cubicle. Thankfully, he returned his attention to Ianto.

*He seems to be debating with himself.*

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Ianto just snorted wryly. “Are you a psychiatrist, too?”

“No.”

“Well, you sound like one.”

“Oi! Excuse me! I just thought I could do you a favour.”

Pivoting around, Owen vanished out of Ianto’s field of vision so fast that the young Welshman felt a pang of anxiety. All of a sudden he was all alone again and he did not like that one bit.

*He won’t have actually left, right?* Ianto told himself. Still he bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from calling out reflexively. At the same time, he was mad at Owen, even though he could not tell why as the medic only had tried to be considerate. *There was no reason to brush him off that rudely.*

With every passing second, Ianto felt more uncomfortable.

“Owen?” he anxiously called out.

A few seconds later, the medic was back at his side. A sob caught in Ianto’s throat as he muttered, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. Don’t be angry, all right? Don’t leave me.”

Confusion furrowed Owen’s forehead.

“No. No, mate, I wasn’t angry,” he said gently. “I’d just thought of some supplies we might need when we get you out of that thing and wanted to check on them before I forgot. I’m so bloody tired right now that I seem to have the memory of a goldfish and forgot I’d promised to keep talking to you.” He grinned sheepishly. “If it happens again, just say something.”

“Really?”

“Really, Ianto,” Owen insisted. “People often tell me I’m a prat, but I’m a good doctor. If the former gets in the way of the latter… call me on it.”

“Okay.”

“You know,” Owen murmured, “it’s your decision if you want to call someone or not. I just thought that you must have family and that you’d like to know if they’re all right, your parents or… do you have siblings?”

“I have a sister,” Ianto admitted and sounded not the least happy. “I haven’t seen her since I moved to London.”
“You’re estranged then?” Owen guessed.

“Well, yes, I think that’s what we are.” He sighed. “I… I want to call her… and mam. But… I don’t know how they’ll react if I call now.”

“I see. And with now you mean right after a worldwide crisis.”

“You call a Cybermen invasion a worldwide crisis?” Ianto queried with obvious surprise.

“What else would you call it?”

“Invasion?”

“Okay… but you know that you can’t talk about it to anyone outside Torchwood, right?”

Ianto grimaced. “Owen, I’m not stupid. I know that. And the last thing I want to happen is to be retconned. Well, except being stuck in here forever.”

Retconned!

“Hey, how the hell do you know about Retcon in the first place?” The first time when Ianto had mentioned it, Owen had not realized what the young man said as he had been busy assessing his condition, but this time he noticed it. Especially that he seemed to be quite anxious about being drugged. “You were mostly shoving files around, weren’t you?”

Ianto snorted angrily. “Well, that’s what they did as a punishment,” Ianto said. “Or when you were discharged from Torchwood’s service. Or to witnesses. They erased their memories.”

“Upon discharge?” Owen heard that for the first time. “Who did that?”

“Torchwood.”

“Who exactly?” Owen prodded.

“The management. Everyone at Torchwood knew that… “ Ianto paused and when he continued his voice was full of sarcasm, “even those who were just shoving files around.”

Owen was taken aback. Retconned upon discharge? How much would they erase? The whole time of service? Losing several years of my life? Just like that?

Before he could ask Ianto more about it, though, he heard steps approach and a moment later Dennis pushed the plastic curtain aside to let three firemen in who carried rescue gear like they would use for freeing someone out of a car wreck.

The first of them stopped at the foot end of the conversion unit, looked at the machine, and let out a dry, “Oh.”

tbc…
“Now oh sounds encouraging,” Ianto wryly quipped. “What do you say at first sight? Any idea how to get me out?”

“Let us have a second look and we’ll talk about it in a few minutes,” the fire-fighter said. Slowly, he walked around the conversion unit, looking at the construction. “My name’s Roland Jeffreys,” he introduced himself. “I see you’re already taken good care of.”

“Yeah,” Ianto murmured as he tried to follow the man with his eyes. He thought that he looked nice, probably in his mid forties with ashy blond hair. Stubble covered his cheeks and dark shadows began to form under his green eyes. He’s probably been on duty since the attack. He must be tired. And now they’re here just because of me. I’m not in danger, at least not imminent danger. They should take a break before they keep working on me. What am I thinking? Get me out! Now! A shudder ran through Ianto’s body before he tried to pull himself together and added more firmly, “Owen’s doing a good job. But I shouldn’t tell him that. Gotta keep him on his toes.”

The men chuckled.

“I’ll remember that,” Owen grumbled, but the look on his face told Ianto that he was taking it with good humour.

“Hm,” Jeffreys said. “Actually I don’t think that we’ll get far with the hydraulic cutter. This frame is too sturdy for it.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Ianto sighed. “Any good news?”

“The good news is that you’re not injured and you are alert,” Jeffreys told him. “After all, the world needs more lerts.”

“But it could do with fewer noyds,” Ianto told him.

Jeffreys frowned. “What’s a noyd?”

Owen smirked.

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Owen told him. “He’s more than alert. He’s sharp as a bloody tack and almost too clever for his own good. I think he was trying cleverly to tell you that he’s anxious to know what happens now.”

Coming to stand near Ianto’s head so he could look the young man in the eye, Jeffreys said, “Now we’ll make a plan on how to get you out of this thing.”

“Okay.”

Owen did not think that Ianto sounded convinced and he could not begrudge him that. Ianto had every right to assume that the people whose job it was to rescue people out of burning buildings or
car wrecks would be able to free him. Still he’s trapped in this ruddy conversion unit. Trapped and alone he was, hearing the screams of his dying colleagues, smelling the fire and the blood, feeling the cold. Considering that he has great presence of mind now. I wonder how I’d do after spending a day captured in a machine that was about to kill me.

He looked at the fire-fighters who had gathered in a corner of the cubicle in order to discuss their options and wished he knew what they were talking about. At the same time, Owen knew that it was good that Ianto could not hear them because he could deduce from their earnest expressions that they were confronted with a difficult task.

“Ianto? I’ll be right back,” Owen said, squeezing the young man’s shoulder reassuringly. “And just a few steps away. All right?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Once more, Owen brushed his hand over Ianto’s shoulder before he went to join the firemen.

“We can’t use the cutting torch either,” one of them just said. “No matter at what angle we apply it, we’ll burn him.”

“I still think that we should use the circular saw,” another man cut in.

“No matter what we’re gonna do, we should test it first,” Jeffreys insisted.

“There are several bodies to free so they can be recovered,” Owen told them wryly. “You can test it on those units.”

“Do you have an idea why the machine doesn’t release him?” Jeffreys wanted to know.

“He said it jammed,” Owen shrugged. “I tried to unlock the unit in the next cubicle and it opened, but it was not occupied. So either that was the reason or the one Ianto is trapped in is malfunctioning.”

“I see.” Thoughtfully, Jeffreys rubbed his chin. “From what I have seen I’ve gathered that you lot are some kind of Special Ops or military hardware developers. Don’t you have equipment that could help us?”

“If we did, do you think we would have called the bloody fire department?” Owen growled.

“Oh, sorry, I suppose not,” Jeffreys said humbly. “Just thinking out loud.”

Owen sighed. “No, it’s just been a really long day for me, and an even longer time for my patient,” he apologized, “It was a good idea, but no, we don’t have the equipment to handle something like this.”

Distressed sounds from behind made Owen look around.

“Ianto? Is something wrong?”

“You’re aware that I can understand you, right?” Ianto groaned. “If you don’t have any idea at all how to get me out, you should have the balls to tell me.”

Steeling himself, Owen left the group to return to Ianto’s side. There he looked the young man straight in the eye and told him firmly, “Right now we don’t know how to get you out.”
A small smile spread on Ianto’s features. “Well, nobody can say you’re a coward.”

“No,” Owen agreed, “and just because we hadn’t told you yet doesn’t mean we weren’t going to tell you. We actually had to talk it over to realise we don’t have a bloody clue what to do at the moment.”

Ianto scowled. “If that was meant to be encouraging, it really wasn’t.”

Owen snorted a laugh. “In Cardiff, I would say ninety percent of the time we have no clue what we are doing and only the vaguest imitation of a plan the other ten percent, and we do all right.”

“Are you attempting reverse psychology now?” Ianto asked. “Wanting me to encourage you to cheer myself up?”

“No, but don’t kid yourself, Ianto,” Owen told him. “This place worked exactly the same way, just with a bigger budget, nicer clothes, and more bureaucracy. My point is, Ianto, we may need some time to work it out, but we will work it out, yeah?”

Ianto tried to nod again, winced in pain, and said, “Yeah, and all I want is for you to be honest with me about my chances, all right?”

Once more, Owen was amazed by the presence of mind his patient was showing. He did not want to imagine what Ianto had endured since the attack and still he argued his case without losing his composure. Well, most of the time.

“Owen? Something wrong?” Ianto asked, picking up on Owen’s moodiness.

“Yeah.”

“Besides me being stuck in here?”

“Yeah,” Owen admitted with a sickly look. “I just realized that I’m not as courageous as you.”

At that Ianto downright laughed. “I seriously doubt that, Owen. I might fantasize about being like James Bond, but I could never do your job, not in a million years.”

Owen smirked. “Well, you’d have to study medicine first,” he replied with a wink.

“All right,” Jeffreys cut in, clapping his hands together. “We should take our equipment and test it on an unoccupied unit. Let’s go.”

xXx

Cardiff

The first thing Ydris Rhydderch became aware of when he woke up was that he was comfortably warm. There was a soft pillow under his head and a fluffy duvet wrapped around his body.

And then he sensed the arm snaking around his chest and memories flooded back.
That’s Jack, he thought. Cuddling me warm up after our bath in the bay. Ruddy octopus almost drowned us. A shame it had to die. It didn’t choose to end up here. Wherever it came from, I’m sure it would rather to stay there.

A sigh escaped him when he thought about the unusual turn his day had taken.

I didn’t think that it could get any weirder than those Ghosts turning into Cybermen, but that tear in the sky? Bloody hell! And all that rain! Raining giant alien octopuses, no less.

It probably wasn’t the best decision to run toward the centre of the storm. Watching Jack fight the octopus was worth a little risk, though. Inwardly, he chuckled. Wasn’t much fighting, though, was there? Mostly Jack getting smashed into a tree.

Pretty resilient of him to return, though. I’m sure his neck was broken. But what’s a man coming back to life between all the other things that have happened today?

Ydris tripped over that thought.

Extraordinary and bizarre doesn’t even begin to describe it. He came back from the dead!

The young man had to take a deep breath at that.

Christ! I must have lost my bleeding mind. If I’m just imagining all of this, I can only be a nutter. If it’s real and I’m not completely freaking out, then I was already so far down the rabbit hole there’s no way back.

And I’m ok with that.

What the hell does that mean?

Probably has something to do with my mother.

Anyway, Jack came back from the dead. I wonder if he’s the only one or if there are others like him? Like in the Highlander movie. Does he die for good if someone severs his head?

His low chuckle triggered a reaction in the man lying behind him. Jack moaned in his sleep and his grip on Ydris tightened, but he did not wake up.

The movement made Ydris aware of how snugly Jack spooned up to him and he shuddered.

Strange and yet pleasurable, Ydris thought, trying to define more precisely where his skin got seared. Thigh against thigh, my bottom, chest against shoulder blades and an arm wrapped around me. I can feel his breath on the back of my neck.

It was more than the sum of this addition that made Ydris feel butterflies in his stomach… happy butterflies. And still there was a small voice at the back of his mind, whispering to him. True, he liked both women and men, but something about Jack was different and he did not mean the fact that the man did not stay dead.

He had sensed it even before Jack returned, when he, even though he was pretty sure that it would not achieve anything, resuscitated him. There had been the slightest chance that the broken bones would leave the man paralyzed but alive if he managed to revive him. That was why Ydris had even tried it.

All of a sudden, an arm had wrapped around him and it was definitely no imagination that Jack was
kissing him.

*And what a kiss that was! This man has some serious animal magnetism,* Ydris thought and felt chills run down his spine. *Sound asleep, and I can feel the desire and lust rolling off him in waves.*

Besides the itching sensation of sexual tension, Ydris felt another urge to become prominent. So he carefully tried to remove Jack’s arm without waking him which proved to be easier said than done. As soon as he tried to extricate himself from Jack’s grasp the captain tightened his hold.

“Oh, c’mon. Let go,” Ydris hissed and froze when he heard the door handle being pushed down. A thin ray of light came in when the door opened and a diminutive figure slipped in. An unconscious move from Jack fortified Ydris’s urge and he groaned.

“Jack?”

“No,” he whispered back.

“Ydris. You okay? I just wanted to collect your wet clothes.”

“Thanks,” he trailed off, searching his memory for her name, “Toshiko.”

“No problem.”

He did not see her pick up the clothes or turn around to leave, just that the light moved in the darkness.

“Toshiko!” he called out lowly.

“Yes?”

“He’s fast asleep and… I need to go to the bathroom…” *Could it possibly be more embarrassing?* Softly chuckling, Toshiko replied, “Yeah, that’s Jack for you. He’s got a pretty possessive nature, hasn’t he?”

She came to the bed and reached under the blanket without hesitation, taking Jack’s arm and holding it while Ydris freed himself.

“Thanks,” he sighed, as he scrambled out of the bed.

“I put some of our spare clothes on the chair,” Toshiko told him, shining into the direction with her torch while she faced the door.

“Ah. Thanks again.” Ydris found a pair of extra-large track pants with a drawstring waist and a huge, comfortably warm sweater.

“Sorry, those sandals are the only shoes we can offer,” Toshiko murmured.

“That’s okay. They’ll do for now,” Ydris put on the clothes that were slightly oversized for him and slipped on the sandals with the single adjustable Velcro strap. “Where do I find the bathroom?”

“I’ll show you,” Toshiko whispered back and waited in the corridor for him. “This way.”

“This is a pretty big base,” Ydris stated as he strolled along beside her. “Is it right under the Plass?”

“Yes.” She snickered a little. “So, Jack didn’t want to let you go, huh?”
“No,” he replied with quiet discomfort, surprised that she was so forward.

“Probably is afraid to lose you as he just saved you from drowning.”

*Ah, she didn’t think of the obvious other reason,* Ydris thought with relief. “Let alone from being eaten by a giant octopus.”

“Yes.”

They walked in silence until Toshiko stopped beside a door.

“You know, Jack rarely sleeps. I was surprised that he was that dead to the world, even after the long stressful hours.”

*Especially after dying several times.* Ydris quickly thanked Toshiko and vanished in the bathroom before he could blab. When he came out again, she was waiting for him.

“So, what exactly do you do here?” Ydris asked. “You fight aliens for a living?” In the scarce light of her torch he could not see much, but he still could tell that she did not seem to be surprised by his question. *Well, there’s no denying it anyway, as one almost killed me.*

“Yes,” she told him simply.

“Are there job vacancies?”

Toshiko took a deep breath before she answered, but other than that she appeared to be unfazed.

“This is not a job that you choose on a whim,” she said.

“I know,” Ydris replied.

“Really? I heard Jack turn you down before and now you’re asking me?”

“Yes.”

Toshiko sighed. “We’re not hiring.”

“Too bad.”

Suspiciously, she looked at him, not convinced that he would give up that easily. Ydris smirked.

“I’ll pester Jack about it.”

“Well, you can try,” Toshiko shrugged before she turned around to lead the way back to the staff rooms.

xXx

**Torchwood tower**

“What are they doing?” Ianto gasped anxiously.
From a cubicle to his right came terrible noises that made Ianto’s blood curdle.

“I assume that’s the circular saw,” Owen told him.

“Oh, shit!”

The sounds alone made Ianto sick. He did not want to imagine what it looked like to watch the fire-fighters work on the conversion unit with a huge circular saw that made a buzzing screech that reminded Ianto of the caterwauling of a tormented ghost. Surely sparks were flying as the saw cut through the metal, swirling so fast you couldn’t see it turn.

*Just like the smaller one that’s hovering there over me.*

Horrified, Ianto stared up at the instrument in question, unable to avert his gaze. Slowly, his thoughts drifted from the blade cutting through metal to tearing flesh and splashing blood.

*No! Crap! Stop thinking!* Ianto ordered himself. *No! Stop!*

His mind did not comply, providing him with more fantasies about mutilated bodies that mingled in with his memories of Lisa in the metal armour of a Cyberman.

For a few seconds the noise stopped before it started again, sounding even more horrible than before. Then it rose in pitch and Ianto heard nervous shouts before someone let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“What’s wrong?” Ianto called out with fear.

“I’ll check!” Owen replied absently, switching into emergency mode and darting for the exit.

“Owen?”

The medic did not answer. Instead, Ianto heard the fire-fighters yell agitatedly. Several times someone called for a doctor and among the fearful voices was an anguished scream.

“Owen?” Ianto yelled. “Owen! What’s wrong?”

Still he got no reply. All he heard was the commotion going on in the other cubicle.

“Owen!” Ianto tried again.

“Oweeeen!”

tbc…
“Owen! Please!” Ianto cried.

Tears of fear stung his eyes. The excited noises from the other cubicle tore on his nerves as he still could not tell what was going on. Judging by the screams and the speed with which Owen had vanished, something terrible had happened. Ianto did not want to imagine what it was. The man’s screams alone made his skin crawl and his insides constricted painfully. Breathing became increasingly difficult as his throat tightened with every breath and his lungs did not seem to expand sufficiently anymore.

Once more, he tried to call for Owen, but he could not get a single sound out.

Breathe!

It was impossible. His whole body started to tense and he trembled as he desperately gasped for air when the panic attack overwhelmed him. Wildly, his heart beat in his chest, which hurt from the overstress.

I’m having a heart attack!

The additional stress of an assumed threatening heart failure pushed Ianto over the edge. Screaming, he strained against his restraints. With his eyes tightly pressed shut, he battled the metal frame that held him.

In his agitation he did not notice the hand that alighted on his forehead. When he did it did little to calm him. Soothing murmurs right beside him reached his ear but not his mind. Wildly, he tossed and writhed as much as his bonds allowed, screaming all the while.

“Ianto Jones!” a sharp voice suddenly cut through his anxiety.

His eyes flew open and he stilled, but his breaths still came in rapid gasps. Suzie stood beside the conversion unit, staring at him with a strange mixture of anger and disgust. Seeing her like that scared Ianto. It looked like she was about to slap him.

Actually that was what Suzie would have done if it had not been for the arms with blades that still hovered over Ianto’s body. She could not lean in over him in order to slap his cheek.

“Are you with me again?” Suzie asked, sounding more compassionate now.

Taking a deep breath first, Ianto returned a shaky, “Yes.”

“Good.” Her expression softened. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“It’s okay,” Ianto sighed. His chest still hurt as did his joints from struggling. “I thought I was dying.”

“You sure sounded like that.”

Ianto scowled. From the other cubicle, he could still hear anxious voices.
“What happened?”

“What actually I’m not sure,” Suzie admitted. “Owen just called to tell me that I should return to you as he had to assist the fire-fighters. I think one of them got injured.”

“Injured,” Ianto snorted. “Stop kidding. It sounded like he got slaughtered. Tell me the truth. Please.”

“I’m sorry, Ianto. I returned straight to you and I don’t want to interrupt Owen.”

“He’ll tell you when he can, right?”

“Sure.”

“He’ll save him,” Ianto said with slightly wavering voice.

“He will do his best.”

Chills chased down Ianto’s spine. Even though he knew why Suzie did not confirm his statement, he could not help but shudder again as his fear returned with a vengeance.

*Please, God, let him be all right. Don’t do that. Don’t let the man who came to save me die.*

Suzie carefully placed her hand on Ianto’s shoulder.

“Before Owen joined Torchwood he worked at A&E,” she said. “If anyone can help the fireman it’s Owen.”

Ianto could not say that he felt reassured but he believed Suzie that Owen would do whatever was in his power to help the man.

New sounds made Ianto prick his ears. The light thumps of shoes and the swirling sound of wheels approached the neighbouring cubicle.

“This must be the paramedics,” Suzie murmured. “Shall I go and see what’s going on?”

For a moment, Ianto thought about that.

“No,” he said. “No. Don’t disturb them. Owen will tell us as soon as he can.”

A mysterious smirk played around Suzie’s lips.

“What?” Ianto queried.

She chuckled lowly. “Do you know something about him that I don’t?”

“What do you mean? Because I think that he’ll inform us?”

“Yeah.”

Ianto had to admit that he did not even think about it. There was no doubt in his mind about Owen letting him know what had happened.

The sound of the excited chatter faded away, leaving the storey terribly silent once more. Even though he knew that Suzie was right there at his side, Ianto sensed renewed anxiety tighten his chest.

Then he heard steps again and a moment later the plastic enclosure was pushed aside.
“Whoa,” Owen said. “That was close.”

“What was close?” Ianto asked before Suzie could even open her mouth.

“The saw,” Owen panted. “They were trying to cut the restraints when it got stuck. Upon trying to get it loose a splinter came off.”

“The guy who got hit…” Ianto gasped. “He’ll make it, right?”

Owen sighed. “We’ll have to wait and see. He was stable when the paramedics picked him up. We’ll see how he comes through surgery.”

“He needs to have surgery?” Ianto called out with fear. “How bad is it? Could he die?”

This time Owen shrugged. “I could tell you that I’m optimistic, because I really am… But when it comes down to it, the truth is that we can only wait and see, and trust the doctors to do their job.”

Trust. Actually, Ianto’s belief in that word had suffered since he first heard the rumours about the experiments Hartman and her team of scientists were undertaking. Suspicion had become his second nature and the Cyberinvasion had proven him right. Seeing the doctor’s blood speckled sweater now did nothing to assure Ianto. But I trust Owen, he realized with surprise. If he’s optimistic that the man has good chances, I should be optimistic, too.

“You asked me to be honest with you,” Owen said, sounding just the slightest bit sour.

“I know… and I appreciate that,” Ianto told him. His voice was still wavering and despite his attempts to pull himself together he sounded weepy. “I’m sorry, Owen. I’m scared. This man… he came to help me. Now he’s injured and needs surgery and maybe he’ll die…”

“Ianto, stop that,” Owen commanded. “Stop. I didn’t say…”

“But you didn’t deny it either!” Ianto argued. “I asked if he could die and you said that we’d have to trust the doctors at the hospital! Now what am I supposed to think, huh?”

“Ianto, we did what was in our power to help him. Now it’s up to the medics and his surgeon. They will let us know when he comes out of surgery.”

“But, Owen…”

“No buts, Ianto,” Owen cut him short. “We’ll get to know as soon as possible. And that’s the best I can do for now. All right?”

Ianto looked decidedly undecided.

“Can you calm down now? Because I’d hate to have to sedate you.”

“Don’t you dare!” Ianto hissed. “I can calm down. You’ll see.”

“That’s good.”

Suzie leaned in to Owen to whisper something in his ear and the doctor nodded. Then Ianto saw her leave.

“Are we on our own now?” Ianto asked.

“Well, Dennis is back, too,” Owen said. “And the fire-fighters will return as well.”
“I see. Okay,” it came easily over Ianto’s lips, but he was not quite that sure that it really was the truth.

xXx

Oh, my gosh!

Suzie stood at the entrance to the first of the seven storeys that had been identified as belonging to the archives. What she saw upon stepping through the door were rows and rows of shelves filled with folders. Slowly, she wandered down the centre aisle, looking left and right, trying to judge what was stored in this section.

I need an index or I’ll be searching forever, she thought miserably, searching for a computer.

She found a desk and as she approached it, she became uneasy and slowed her steps. The archives were vacated and Suzie knew only too well where the employees had gone and what had happened to most of them. All of a sudden, she became aware of the oppressive atmosphere and she took a deep steadying breath that seemed to smell of sweat and smoke and anxiety and caused Suzie to shudder.

Pull yourself together, Agent Costello!

Still she felt kind of lost in the fifty-storey building, especially knowing that Owen and Ianto as well as Dennis and the firemen currently were the only people inside. Being left no choice, though, she walked around the desk. As she turned to the computer, she discover that it was running.

So she rolled the office chair in position and sat down. When she moved the mouse, the screensaver vanished to show a start menu with a login request. Automatically, she entered her password and was granted access. Navigating the archive’s program, though, proved to be more difficult. When she could not find her personnel file at the first attempt, she tapped at her earpiece in order to call Toshiko.

“Tosh? Are you there?” Suzie asked with mild confusion when her colleague did not answer. “Jack? Do you hear me?”

Now that’s weird. Where are they?

“Owen,” she called the medic. “I’m in the archives and tried to ask Tosh for help…”

“Repeat the latter,” Owen chuckled.

“Haha, very funny,” Suzie complained. “I couldn’t reach her. Can you try to contact her or Jack while I’m gonna explore the program further?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

Suzie refrained from being intimidated by the unfamiliar program. There had to be functions that were similar to what she knew. Finally, she managed to find the archive code for her and Owen’s files and got up to retrieve the documents. She strolled along the shelves in search for the right row
before she stepped around a corner. Slowly, she let her gaze drift over the folders until she discovered Owen’s file.

For a moment, she was tempted to open and read it, but she thought better of it and tucked it under her arm before she went to search for the documents about herself.

xXx

“I’m sorry that I ran away,” Owen said.

“No problem,” Ianto assured him. “He needed you more than I did.”

The medic’s only answer was a thoughtful smile.

He’s smart. He’s nice. I wonder how he ended up with Torchwood One. Inwardly Owen chuckled. As if it would make a difference if he was an idiot. He worked as a researcher, collecting information. A drone in Hartman’s beehive. Owen scowled at his thought. That is not good. I’m comparing Torchwood One with the Cybermen.

He pursued the thought anyway, and came to a disturbing conclusion. It really isn’t that farfetched. It sounds as if Hartman had practically created a cult of personality around herself where most of the personnel didn’t question the Ghost Shifts, and those who did kept their questions to themselves for fear of being retconned and dismissed. I doubt anyone outside of the upper echelon of scientists and administrators had a clue what they were up to until it was too late and the ghosts turned into Cybermen.

“Owen!”

“Huh?”

“So lost in thought? Was it nice?” Ianto teased.

“Actually, no,” Owen shrugged. “Did you ask something?”

“Yes. What’s his name?”

“Pardon?”

“The injured fire-fighter, Owen,” Ianto prodded. “What’s his name?”

At that the young medic actually blushed as he realized that he had no idea.

“You don’t know,” Ianto stated.

“Actually, no,” Owen admitted sheepishly. “I was too busy saving his life to ask. But I’m sure that crew manager Jeffreys will inform us as soon as he knows more about his condition.”

Ianto sighed. “All right.”

By the look on Ianto’s face, Owen could tell that it was anything but all right, but there was nothing else he could tell him. All they could do now was wait.
That must be horrible for him, the doctor thought. Trapped like he is time certainly seems to pass slowly. And now the worries for the fire-fighter are weighing on him as well.

Besides worrying about the injured man, Ianto followed different thoughts. Among other things, he contemplated the weird kind of luck that chose him to survive while others died in the attack of the Cybermen.

I’m nobody special, just an office worker who’s collecting information. I’m not a James Bond kind of guy who risks his own life to save others. So why did this of all units jam? Why was I spared and not the others? There must have been many people working here at Torchwood who should rather have survived than me. Markham for example. Or Lisa.

Thinking of Lisa made his heart ache again so he pushed the thought aside.

Markham virtually ordered us to survive. Now look how I managed that. Lisa’s dead, converted into a Cyberman. And what about me? I’m locked in a conversion unit. Absolutely useless. And into the bargain a fireman almost died because of me.

“Hey, there. Ianto! Stop brooding.”

“Huh?”

It was Dennis who had interrupted his dreadful train of thoughts.

“Talk to me,” Dennis prodded.

“About what?”

Dennis shrugged. “What kind of movies do you like? Except James Bond, that is.”

“All kinds of movies, actually,” Ianto said. “I don’t really like horror movies, though. Lisa loved those. The creepier the better.”

“My thing are action movies.”

“Like the Die Hard trilogy?”

“Yeah, stuff like that.”

Peripherally, Ianto noticed that Owen activated his ear comm.

“Repeat the latter,” Owen chuckled. His grin had something evil. A moment later he became earnest again. “Sure.”

“Something wrong?” Ianto asked.

“Not to my knowledge. I’m just going to call my boss, all right? I’ll be right over there.”

“Sure, Owen. We’ll be okay,” Ianto assured him with a grateful look at Dennis.

Owen stepped aside, but as neither of the men tried to restart the conversation they could understand how the doctor tried to contact Captain Harkness. When Ianto heard Owen curse, he could not help but worry again.

“Is he not answering?”
“No,” Owen growled as he returned to Ianto’s side. “But he most likely is busy.”

“Busy flirting?” Dennis could not help but tease.

“Hey! You don’t know him. You’re not Torchwood! You better keep your mouth shut,” Owen barked. “Or even better now… get out of here and see if you can’t make yourself useful.”

“Owen…” Ianto tried to stop him. If Owen kicked the UNIT soldier out they would be on their own. He did not want Dennis to go.

“I thought, I’m useful here,” Dennis replied calmly.

“You are,” Ianto quickly replied.

But Owen did not seem to listen. “Are you still here? Get out! C’mon! Move! Out!”

With shooing gestures the young doctor chased the soldier out of the cubicle.

“Owen, wait!” Ianto shouted but to no avail.

For a moment both men were gone until Owen returned, cursing under his breath.

“Owen, why did you throw him out?” Ianto demanded to know. “He was just trying to do his job.”

“No, he was trying to do my job.”

“What? By talking to me?” Ianto frayed. “He’s not a doctor, you are. He can’t do your job. You’re just pissed off because he made a joke at Harkness’s expense.”

Owen’s mouth opened for a juicy reply, but he stopped himself and remained silent.

“I get why you’re testy, Owen. You’re tired and you’re worried,” Ianto said. “You’re loyal to your boss. That’s commendable. Still it’s not Dennis’s fault.”

Closing his eyes, Owen took a deep breath before he murmured, “I know.”

“You’re worried, right?” Ianto prodded. “Because Harkness didn’t answer.”

Owen sighed. “I’m worried because Tosh doesn’t answer,” he admitted. “Usually, she surveys the operations from the Hub or in special cases from the SUV.” Once more, he took a deep breath. “They both would’ve come with us, but after the attack of the Cybermen the Rift became volatile. Someone had to deal with it.”

“It’s just the four of you in Cardiff, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That must be hard,” Ianto softly said. “I don’t understand why Harkness is playing the renegade. The Headquarters could support you.”

Now Owen laughed out loud. Gathering his breath, he replied, “We’re doing okay… with lots of pizza and an extra dose of particularly strong Starbucks coffee.”

“Starbucks?” Ianto wrinkled his nose. “Why don’t you make it yourself?”

“Because our coffee machine hates us.”
“Maybe I should give it a try. The guys in my division liked my coffee. I’m good at making coffee.”

“Oh really?”

“Former barista, remember?”

“Well, then don’t mention that to Jack unless you want to be kidnapped back to Cardiff. Though I doubt you’d succeed. I swear, our coffee machine hates everyone.”

“Get a new one.”

To Ianto’s surprise Owen looked rather shocked.

“I guess I don’t want to know,” Ianto said, rolling his eyes. “But still, four agents to guard a rift in time and space? You certainly could do with some support.”

“Are you volunteering?” Owen murmured. “As I said, you’re Jack’s type. I bet he wouldn’t kick you out of bed either.”

Now it was Ianto’s turn to be shocked.

“I am not volunteering,” he stated firmly in reply to the not so subtle allusion.

“Too bad,” Owen shrugged.

Ianto sensed a chill run down his back just a second before he saw a smirk tug at the corners of Owen’s mouth. Then the medic winked at him.

“You’re just pulling my leg!” Ianto complained.

“Only partially. We’re not hiring. But I could imagine Jack being quite interested in you.”

“I have a fiancé,” Ianto huffed only to feel a sudden pang at the realization, “I had a fiancé.”

Owen did not know what to reply. Any attempt only made him relive his own agony.

“You’re worrying about your colleagues,” Ianto stated.

“Well, yes,” Owen admitted. “That they don’t answer their comms. doesn’t mean that something happened to them, but I can’t rule it out either.” He took a deep breath. “We have to think positive. Jack and Tosh can take care of themselves.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Ianto said. “They’ll be all right.”

“Yeah.”

What Owen had said left Ianto thinking again. Even though he did not want to show it, it was quite obvious that the young doctor worried about the whereabouts of his team mates. And that reminded Ianto of his sister. Before he could ask Owen if he could place a call, though, the plastic sheet was pushed aside and Jeffreys appeared at his side.

“How’s your colleague doing?” Ianto asked at once. “Will he be all right?”

Jeffreys smiled grimly. “We’re waiting for news from the hospital. They promised to call as soon as he’s out of surgery.”
“Oh, my God.” Ianto felt horrible for being responsible.

“You shouldn’t worry about him,” Jeffreys said. “You concentrate on yourself. That’s what Sebastian would want you to do as well. Got me?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Jeffreys smiled encouragingly.

“Now, can you get me out?”

As soon as the question was asked the smile faded from Jeffreys’s features.

“I’m sorry,” the fire-fighter said, “but I’m afraid that we don’t have the right equipment to open the machine.”

A distressed sound left Ianto’s throat before he could stop it.

“What we can do,” Jeffreys elaborated, “is to remove the blades.”

Out of widened blue eyes Ianto stared up at the fire-fighter, then at the saws above him, and choked.

tbc…
Slow progress

Torchwood Tower

It was quite obvious for both Jeffreys and Owen that Ianto was scared and they could not begrudge him that.

“How?” Ianto hoarsely asked.

“We can use the circular saw to remove the arms that hold the blades,” Jeffreys explained. “But it won’t go through the restraints.”

“The saw…” Once more Ianto choked.

“Yeah.”

Ianto looked less than convinced that that was a good idea. The screaming of the saw still rang fresh in his ears, causing renewed chills to chase down his back.

“We don’t have to do it,” Jeffreys said. “I just thought that it would make things easier when they’re gone.”


“It would make it easier for Dr. Harper to treat you for example,” Jeffreys explained.

Of course, Ianto could understand that. He was not exactly fond of the sight above himself. Still his anxiety tried to get the better of him. Ianto closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing evenly as his breaths threatened to become erratic again.

“Ianto, we don’t have to do it, if you don’t want to,” Jeffreys assured him. “Your decision.”

My decision. Ianto was momentarily at a loss. He did not know what to decide. Removing the blades won’t get me out. Jeffreys is right, though, when he says that it would make it easier for Owen to manoeuvre. So I should probably let them do it. Still I’m scared. They’ll work with the big saw right above me after all.

Thinking about it physically hurt as Ianto was horribly tense. A shudder coursing through him made his muscles ache. Finally, he made his decision.

“I’d like to call my sister first. I need to know if she and her family are all right. I just need a minute or so…” he trailed off as he felt rather awkward.

“That’s okay,” Jeffreys said. “We’ll prepare while you make the call. All right?”

“Yes.”

Nodding in confirmation, Jeffreys turned around to inform his men and get the equipment ready. As he left, Owen took out his mobile phone, Ianto gave him Rhiannon’s full name and the number in Newport, and Owen dialled.

As nervous as Ianto had been when he had to make the decision about the blades being removed, it
was nothing compared to how he felt now that he was about to talk to his sister.

*If she even answers. Maybe she fell victim to the Cybermen. And what about Johnny and the kids? What if both parents are dead but the kids survived? Mam can’t take them in. Could I?*

*Not with a job like Torchwood. Though this probably is the end of Torchwood. I didn’t have a chance to ask Owen yet, but the Institute was in the centre of the storm so to speak. I wonder if it can be rebuilt at all.*

“Ianto?” Sharp with excitement the voice of his sister startled him out of his musings. “Ianto! I thought you were dead! Where are you? How are you? Talk to me! Are you all right?”

“Rhi…!” Ianto tried to interrupt her to no avail.

“Yan? I’m scared to death. Talk to me! C’mon, Yan. Now answer me, for God’s sake!”

“I would if you’d let me!” Ianto groaned, rolling his eyes at her use of his nickname.

“You’re not telling me I’m talking too much, are you?” she groaned, but then her voice softened, still sounding kind of exasperated, “Sorry, Yan, but after years with only the annual Christmas card, I guess I have a lot of questions.”

“I’m… just glad that I finally got an opportunity to call you,” Ianto said. “Are you all right? Are the kids all right? Johnny?”

“We’re doing okay now, Yan,” Rhiannon told him. “After those things showed up everything went mad. Johnny wasn’t here and the kids were crying. I didn’t know what to do but climb up to the attic and pull up the ladder. I was so scared that they’d hear and find us.”

“I’m sorry, Rhi,” Ianto choked, blinking back rising tears.

“You should be,” she teased, but he got it wrong.

“I couldn’t call earlier,” Ianto defended himself. “If you thought things went mad in Newport you can’t even imagine what was going on here…”

“I mean the years before the crisis, Ianto,” she clarified. “For all we knew, you could have been dead. Why didn’t you call once? Nobody knew where you were except that you went to London. Why, Ianto? Is it something I did?”

Now Ianto cried for real, his voice shaking when he tried to speak, “No, Rhi. It was me. I’m sorry. I wish I’d have been there to help you…”

“You could help now and tell me what the hell *did* happen, Ianto!” she prodded. “Those things, those… Cybermen. They weren’t a figment of my imagination. That thing spoke to us. It scared the hell out of the kids. What were they? Are they gone now?”

Ianto trembled in his restraints. This was almost more than he could bear right now. His gaze flicked to Owen who watched him with obvious concern. It would be so easy to tell him that he could not keep talking. Still he knew that he had to.

“I… I don’t really know, actually,” Ianto told her. “Why do you think I would?” Above him, he saw Owen raise an eyebrow curiously and wondered what he was thinking.

“Well, you’re in London, aren’t you? The news came from there, right?”
“Rhi, I was at the office when it happened. We were ordered to evacuate, but we couldn’t get out.”

“You couldn’t get out?” Rhiannon gasped with renewed anxiety. “Ianto! You are all right, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Rhi, I’m fine. I just… I didn’t see a thing and now no one will tell me anything. They just say that the danger’s gone, but not what it was.” He heard his sister huff.

“Who are you trying to kid, Yan?” Rhiannon scolded. “Tell me the truth.”

“I really don’t know. There’s rumours but I don’t know what to believe.”

“Tell me about those rumours then.”

“Look, Rhi. I can’t talk right now. There are other people waiting to call their families. I just wanted to hear if you’re all right. I’ll call again, but I have to quit now.”

“Promise you’ll call,” she prodded.

“I promise. Say hello to Johnny and hug the kids from me, okay? Bye.”

“I will. Bye, Yan.”

Ianto sighed a breath of relief, when Owen lifted the phone up and cancelled the call. Then the doctor dialled another number and scowled at the result.

“Is Doctor Sato still not answering?” Ianto queried. For a second there, he could have sworn that Owen appeared to be confused by his question.

“No.” Owen scowled thoughtfully. “Actually I couldn’t even get a connection.”

“To the phone at your headquarters or mobile?”


“Can’t tell,” Owen murmured. “We were so busy. Didn’t exactly look at my watch regularly.”

Ianto wished for something encouraging to say, but claiming that Owen’s co-workers would be all right would be pretentious, and he knew neither Captain Harkness nor Doctor Sato, which made it impossible to judge how serious the situation really was.

“The landline could be damaged,” he finally suggested.

“That doesn’t explain why they don’t answer their comm. links,” Owen snarled. “Something bad must have happened. We shouldn’t have split up. Torchwood One isn’t our responsibility. The Rift is. We should be with our partners in Cardiff.”

Yes, they should be, Ianto thought. All of a sudden, he felt bad about keeping Owen stuck with him and he told him so.


“I won’t be alone,” Ianto told him, though it did not sound very convincing to his own ears. “There’s Jeffreys and there’ll be paramedics…”
“Stop right there,” Owen huffed. “I’m your doctor. Plus, I promised to stay with you, so I’ll stay. Got me?”

“Yeah,” Ianto reluctantly conceded.

Before he could argue further Jeffreys came back into the cubicle, declaring, “We’re ready.”

“So are we,” Owen told him with a glance at Ianto. The young man looked nervous which was no surprise at all.

“All right,” Jeffreys said, stepping beside the conversion unit. “Could you help me, Dr. Harper?”

“Sure,” Owen nodded and reached for the safety blanket that the fireman held out to him.

“What’s that?” Ianto demanded to know.

“This will protect you against sparks,” Jeffreys explained. “Or fine splinters.”

Ianto choked. Suddenly, he was not so sure anymore that this was a good idea.

“You can still change your mind,” Jeffreys said. “If you don’t want us to…”

“No!” Ianto rushed to say. “Do it. It’s just… it’ll be dark under this. I won’t see…”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?” Owen cheerfully cut in. “I wouldn’t want to watch them work on the blades. Do you?”

“Actually…” Ianto began, starting to think. “No. Don’t think so.”

“Okay, then?”

“Y-yeah.”

Encouragingly, Owen nodded at Jeffreys and they lifted the blanket up again only to stop when Ianto called out.

“I forgot to ask Rhi about Mam!” the young Welshman gasped. “Can we call her again? I’ll be quick. Really.”

The men exchanged a look and Jeffreys nodded, taking the blanket back from Owen who got out his phone to dial. The medic watched his agitated patient while he was talking to his sister a second time. The young man’s relief was palpable when he finished his call, reassuring his sibling that he would contact her as soon as possible.

“Good news?” Owen asked as he put the phone away and grabbed his end of the blanket.

“Yes,” Ianto confirmed. “We’re good to go then.”

“All right.”

Carefully, they spread the heavy blanket over Ianto’s upper torso and head. Then they awkwardly pushed it further down.

Even though Ianto knew that nothing dangerous happened yet, he had to fight another surge of panic when he was dipped into darkness. His breath caught in his chest. This was kind of claustrophobic.
“All right,” he heard Jeffreys say. “Let’s get this over with.”

For just a second, Ianto considered calling out in order to stop them, but he bit his bottom lip, intent on enduring the procedure. To his surprise, he felt the blanket move a little and a moment later, a hand alighted on his shoulder, squeezing reassuringly.

“Owen?”

“Yeah,” the medic replied. “Told you I wouldn’t leave you.”

“Th-thanks.”

Ianto really felt grateful to the doctor and even more so when he heard the circular saw start with a whining sound that changed to a screech, when it was put against one of the arms the unit’s instruments were mounted on.

Despite his intention not to do so, Ianto screamed.

xXx

Cardiff

When Jack woke up, he felt not quite as sore and drained as before. Tossing and turning under the covers, he tried to find a more comfortable position until he realized that it was futile as something important was missing. He finally opened his eyes to be surprised that it was not entirely dark. So he looked around, searching for Ydris.

“Hey.”

Turning to the sound, Jack found the young man sitting astride a chair, his arms folded on top of the back rest and his head resting on his arms. He had to smirk at the sight.

“Hey.”

“Your partner said I should let you sleep,” Ydris told him.

“Toshiko?”

“Yep. I think we both were worried.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Jack murmured and pushed the covers back to get up. The moment he stood beside the bed, he saw Ydris’s expression change radically.

“You know no shame, do you?”

“Oh, I do,” Jack let him know. “Just not about my sexuality.”

“Well, that much is obvious,” Ydris quipped as he watched Jack clearly react to his presence.

“What can I say,” Jack shrugged. “You’re hot and I’m not made of stone.”
“Stone wouldn’t grow like that.”

Jack smirked. “You like what you see?” He chuckled at the way Ydris quirked his eyebrows sceptically. “I could go get my handcuffs.”

“Actually…” Ydris started evasively, “thanks, but no thanks.”

“Well, I don’t really have the time anyway. What a pity.” Jack found the clothes Toshiko had brought in and slipped on a pair of trousers.

“You know a way out Toshiko doesn’t?” Ydris queried.

“Why? Is the hub still in lockdown?”

“Yeah.”

Jack’s shoulders sagged and he sighed. Then he dropped back down to sit on the edge of the bed.

“You’d rather be out there again,” Ydris stated.

“I hate to be stuck here when I’m needed elsewhere.”

“Protecting Cardiff.”

“Yes.”

With both hands Jack ruffled his hair before he put his elbows on his knees to hide his head in his hands. It clearly ate away at him that he was rendered useless in his own headquarters.

“Doing a good job so far.”

That made Jack look up just to see Ydris shrug.

“It still exists,” the young man said. “Judging by what I witnessed earlier, that is no matter of course.”

For a moment, Jack was too stunned to answer.

“Whenever weird things happen here, is it due to this phenomenon the octopus came out of? What do you call it again?”

“The Rift,” Jack told him automatically.

“Yeah. Are all the supernatural events happening in Cardiff connected with this rift?”

“Not all of them.”

“What about the ghosts? Did they come through the rift?”

“No.”

“Where did they come from then?”

“I don’t know.”

Ydris scowled. “Then why do you say that their appearance had nothing to do with the Rift?”
“Because the Rift is a local phenomenon,” Jack explained. “The appearance of the ghosts was worldwide. I think it’s most likely that they came from a parallel universe.”

“Parallel universe. I see.”

Intently, Jack watched the young man, surprised that he accepted everything with quiet serenity. Then he remembered that Ydris had already asked for a job with Torchwood. Jack knew that certain people were fascinated when they first learned about the confirmed existence of aliens and the fact that Torchwood dealt with extraterrestrial visitors. Usually they were excited, dazzled by the rush of adrenalin they experienced in whichever situation they happened to encounter aliens and Torchwood agents.

Ydris had shown fascination as well, but Jack sensed that his attitude was different. Now that he felt more secure in Jack’s presence, he had something easygoing about himself and the way he reacted to the revelations about the Rift.

“What?” Ydris chuckled. “Was I supposed to freak?”

Quirking one eyebrow curiously, Jack deadpanned, “Kind of, yeah.”

That made Ydris laugh. “About the aliens…” he paused a moment to heighten the tension, which seemed to work as Jack leaned forward expectantly, “or about your blatant advances?”

This time, Jack laughed as well. “Oh, Ydris Rhydderch, you don’t know what you’re missing!”

“Hire me and I’ll help you with the aliens. I’m a quick learner.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are,” Jack quipped with a salacious grin that left no doubt about his intentions.

“How quickly the aliens are forgotten…” Ydris teased.

That instantly wiped the grin off Jack’s features. “You’re right, the power should be back on soon, so I shouldn’t just sit and twiddle my thumbs,” he declared and strode to the door. “I have to get ready. With the rift being as volatile as it is right now, I have to be prepared for more disaster.”

“I’m glad to see you’ve got your strength back,” Ydris said, getting up when he saw that Jack already was in the hall. Following him, he added, “Though you might be a bit ahead of yourself.”

“Why?” Jack asked, pivoting around.

“You miscalculated,” Ydris shrugged.

“Why? Just how much time has passed?”

“About four hours.”

Jack clearly was surprised, but he recovered quickly. “So we have another two hours to kill.” he beamed at Ydris. “Do you have any idea what we could do?”

Stepping forward, he reached out for the young man, but Ydris backed off. Jack scowled. The way Ydris had reacted to his flirting had promised more. Now, he was surprised to see the Welshman avoid him. Once more, he showed him the unscarred side of his face and Jack began to understand.

“Ydris,” he said, carefully cupping his chin to try and turn his head. “Accidents happen. I mean what I said. You have gorgeous eyes.”
“You think so?” Ydris murmured, facing Jack, but avoiding his gaze.

“Yes,” Jack whispered back and leaned forward, breathing a kiss on the skin beside his left eye. Ydris flinched, winding out of the light hold. “Is it more than that you don’t like me to look at it?”

Grimacing, Ydris nodded. “It ruined everything.”

“How so?” Jack could not help but ask.

It took a moment for Ydris to decide about his answer. “It… it’s not just superficial, you know. I had perfect eye sight, but… after the accident I needed glasses.”

“So…?”

“I wanted to be a pilot.”

Oh, Jack drew the conclusion, “And you can’t become a pilot with the impaired sight.”

“A cornea transplant would fix it, but I’m never going to get to the top of the list because I still have full vision in the other eye. If I could find a dedicated donor, someone to bequeath their cornea directly to me when they die, I could have it done, but then I’d have to pay for it myself, there’s no telling if they’ll pass on in time for me to resume my military career, and really, it’s bloody ghoulish.”

“Yeah.”

Thoughtfully, Jack nodded. He still felt as if there was more to the story. “And?” he prodded.

“And I had to quit uni,” Ydris spat. “Once I had recovered, I wanted to start again, but I… I ran out of money, and given how I financed my studies. They didn’t let me come back.”

“Oh?” Jack was intrigued. “Why was that a problem? What did you do?”

Ydris rolled his eyes uncomfortably. “I was working for an escort agency.”

Jack scowled. “And that’s why they didn’t let you continue studying?”

“What? No,” Ydris shook his head. “The escort agency wouldn’t take me back. I found another job, but it wasn’t enough to support me, the rent, the car… even though I sold the latter, I was forced to quit.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Jack did not want to argue about other possibilities to organize his studies as it became obvious by Ydris’s tone that he wanted to quit this conversation as well, so Jack asked, “Do you plan to pick up where you left off?”

Ydris shrugged. “Too late, I guess.”

“Only if you decide that it’s too late.”

“I’m not actually interested anymore, okay!” the young man finally growled. “Now let it slide.”

“It’s all right to be angry,” Jack said. “But you shouldn’t hold a grudge forever. You’ve got your life to live, Ydris. And this…” Once more, he reached out for him to pull him close and kiss his scar. “This shouldn’t stop you from doing it.”

“But…”
“No buts,” Jack scolded, caressing his cheek. Then, he smirked. “We could start right here and right now with celebrating the fact that we’re alive.”

This time, Ydris smirked back. Obviously, he made up his mind because he caressed Jack’s neck, let his fingertips run over his skin, finding their way to the back of his neck. Then he took hold of Jack and pressed a kiss to his mouth.

“I like your idea of a pastime,” Jack murmured against Ydris’s lips. “Should I go and get my handcuffs now?”

“That won’t be necessary.” Ydris mumbled back, kissing him again and shoving him backwards into the room, pushing the door shut.

xXx

Torchwood tower

“Ianto?” Owen called out softly and squeezed his shoulder. “You can open your eyes now, mate. It’s over.”

Rigid with terror, Ianto lay in the conversion unit and kept his eyes firmly shut. He was not sure if he wanted to obey. Fear made his whole body ache and even if he wanted to, he just could not move a single muscle.

“Ianto, are you listening?” Owen asked calmly. “Jeffreys is done with the blades. They’re all gone. You’re safe.”

Really?

Ianto thought he said it out loud, but when he got no response, he was not that sure anymore. Breathing was hard. Each breath seemed to catch in his chest before the air could reach his lungs. So he concentrated on breathing in and out consciously.

“He’s still terrified.”

That’s Jeffreys, Ianto realized. He must think I’m a pathetic coward. And Owen as well.

“He’s got every right to be scared,” Owen replied.

“I don’t think I can imagine what he’s going through,” the fire-fighter said.

“I’m still here, you know,” Ianto threw in without looking at either of the men.

“I know, sorry,” Jeffreys told him. “I’m just impressed.”

“Impressed?” Finally, Ianto opened his eyes to look at the fireman.

“That you’re doing that well, actually.” Jeffreys told him. “Sure, you’re terrified. There’s no shame in that in your situation. Still you manage to pull yourself together when it’s necessary. Most people would just freak.”
“Oh.”

Owen smirked. “Don’t you think that they did a good job?”

Glancing upwards, Ianto had to agree. Not a single one of the torture instruments was left.

“Your work certainly increases the value of the property,” Ianto said. “I refuse a raise on my rent, though.”

While Jeffreys chuckled, Owen laughed out loud.

Between hiccupping gasps for breath, Owen snorted, “I’m surprised you even pay rent, seeing that you were working here.”

“Yeah, should have read the small print more carefully when I signed my work contract.”

“So true.”

“The Institute didn’t pay me enough for something like this.”

“Apply for early retirement. I’m sure it’ll be granted.”

Ianto was about to answer, when he bit his tongue. They were not alone and there were things they should not talk about in front of outsiders. So Ianto settled for, “If anyone’s retiring it should be the management.”

Owen was about to retort that that was Jack, when he thought better of it, realizing that Ianto did not need to be reminded of the fact that no management was left.

“Our cue to leave then,” Jeffreys said. “I’m sure the next job’s already waiting.”

“Long shift ahead?” Owen asked.

“Two hours on the regular shift,” Jeffreys replied. “But nothing’s as usual lately. We’ll be off duty when we’re off duty.”

“I know what you mean,” Owen sighed. “Irregular hours are the usual.”

“Part of the job,” Jeffreys shrugged.

“Yeah.”

The fireman got out his mobile phone to check for incoming messages and sighed.

“Nothing new on your partner?” Owen queried and Jeffreys shook his head.

“I’ll call you,” Jeffreys promised. “As soon as I know myself.”

“Thanks.”

“Thanks for getting rid of those instruments as well,” Ianto cut in. “I hope your colleague will be all right. I’m so sorry…”

“Thank you,” Jeffreys cut him short. “Good luck. I’m sure Dr. Harper will find a way to get you out. We’ve got to go now.”

He turned around to follow his colleagues who had already left, taking the equipment with them.
Ianto heard the plastic curtain swish and fading footsteps, then he was alone with Owen again.

He didn’t say goodbye, Ianto noticed. Maybe because he doesn’t believe what he said. He probably thinks that I’ll never get out. He won’t call either.

“Brooding again?”

Shifting his gaze to Owen first, Ianto then rolled his eyes. “I’m not brooding, I’m thinking.”

“Same difference, don’t you think?”

Ianto just huffed.

“Really, you shouldn’t be brooding that much, Ianto. We didn’t exhaust all possibilities yet. We’ll find a way to get you out. It… will just take longer.”

“How encouraging.”

“Stop it, Ianto. We need more time,” Owen explained. “We didn’t have a chance yet to search the tower for anything that could be helpful. We still have to examine the Cybermen’s technology. Suzie’s good, but Tosh is better. As soon as we’re back in touch with her and Jack, I’ll ask them to come to London. Together we’ll find a solution.”

“Together…” Ianto whispered and was tempted to ask for how long Owen had now lost contact with his team mates in Cardiff.

“Yes, together,” Owen insisted. “That they don’t answer the phone doesn’t mean that something bad has happened. I have faith in them. Tosh or Jack will call. I’m sure of that.”

“If you say so.”

“Whoa!” Owen howled. “Ianto Jones! I could just grab and shake you! Or slap you!”

Instead of expressing his frustration with Owen and his general condition, Ianto yawned widely.

“Oh, yeah. I know that feeling,” Owen said, trailing off as he yawned with Ianto. Then he tapped at his ear piece. “Yeah, Suzie? Oh? Can’t be that difficult to find, can it?”

Curiously, Ianto listened to the part of the conversation he could hear. “What is your partner searching for?”

“Files,” Owen replied curtly.

“What kind of files?”

Only now, Owen seemed to pay attention. “Personnel files.”

“Yours?” Ianto queried. “I mean, of your team?”

For just a moment, Owen hesitated before he answered. “Yes.”

“I could help. Give me the ear comm.”

Reluctantly, Owen agreed. Then he listened with astonishment to how Ianto guided Suzie through the archives.
“You must have good memory if you can navigate those giant archives just in your mind,” Owen said as he removed the ear piece.

“I’m just familiar with the system.”

“It’s still impressive.”

Snorting, Ianto rejected the compliment. Then he yawned.

“You should try to get some sleep,” Owen suggested.

“Nah, I’m all right.”

“Sure, that’s why you’re yawning that widely,” Owen teased. “You need your rest.”

“You need some rest as well, if you’re working since the attack,” Ianto shot back. “You should have a break as well.”

“I won’t leave you alone, Ianto. I promised. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. You can have both, you know.”

“Oh?”

“Well, if I can sleep in this thing you can find rest on the floor beside it.”

Incredulously, Owen stared down at Ianto.

“Ianto, you…” he trailed off, thinking, “are absolutely right.”

Seeing his patient’s smirk warmed the medic’s heart.

“You’re okay with me getting some sleep?” Owen queried, afraid that he might feel abandoned.

“Are you kidding?” Ianto asked back with a wink. “What kind of use is a tired doctor to me?”

Relieved, Owen laughed softly.

“See you later then,” he said.

“I won’t go anywhere,” Ianto teased. “Sleep well.”

tbc…
When Ianto woke up, he felt rather groggy which was not surprising after the long hours he had spent trapped in the conversion unit. And his martyrdom was not over yet. His aching muscles only were part of it. Ianto’s head also hurt. Together with fluids and nutrients the IV line supplied him with painkillers, but those did little to alleviate his pain.

Where’s Owen?

Rolling his eyes, Ianto tried to determine where the medic was but he could not see him in his immediate proximity. Unable to move, the only way Ianto could find his doctor was by calling out.

“I’m here,” Owen answered from somewhere near the entrance to the cubicle. “I thought you were still asleep.”

“I was,” Ianto replied. “Just woke up.”

“You all right?”

Ianto snorted. “As all right as I can possibly be. Any progress in getting me out?”

At that, Owen hesitated for a moment before he said, “I’m deliberating with a colleague on what we can do.”

“I see. And which options do we have?” Renewed anxiety made Ianto’s heart thump in his chest. For no particular reason, his throat corded up. The tension in the room was palpable. Ianto just sensed that something was about to go wrong.

“Well, we have tried everything we could think of,” Owen said. “But right now I see no other way than to…” he hesitated for a second, “amputate.”

“Ampu…”

The word caught in his throat.

“Yes,” Owen confirmed. “We already prepared the procedure. All we need now is your approval.”

“My approval?” Ianto rasped. “You actually expect me to consent to amputating my hands and feet? What then? I’ll be useless! I won’t be able to do a thing!”

“It’s the only option that’s left,” Owen calmly replied.

“What’s life without hands and feet?” Ianto all but shrieked, his voice threatening to break. “I could as well be dead!”

“Don’t say that, Ianto,” Owen said. “You won’t be useless.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Ianto spat.

“There’ll be something. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. There’ll be medical possibilities
as well.”

“Possibilities,” Ianto huffed.

“Yeah. Artificial replacements. There are some really good ones lately. Researchers are making progress every day. And we’re Torchwood, right? There’ll be a way.”

Ianto felt tears sting his eyes. He still could not wrap his head around the fact that this was his only way to get out of the ruddy conversion unit.

Losing my feet, that would work somehow, he thought. There was this boy at university who lost his lower leg to cancer and he could even jog again with his artificial limb. But my hands? What am I supposed to do without hands?

Finally tears rolled down his face.

If we don’t do it I’ll be stuck in here forever! Oh, God! What’s worse? I don’t want to slowly waste away in this thing! Trapped like I am now I can do even less than I could without hands. One way or the other I’ll be dependent on others, but with artificial limbs I even have a chance to return to a more or less independent life.

Never would he have thought that he would have to make a decision like this. For a second, he wished for his heart to just stop and relieve him of his suffering.

There’s no other way. Accept it, Ianto. Your life won’t ever be the same, but you’ll at least be alive.

Gathering what little courage he had left, he told Owen that he agreed. The medic nodded with grim understanding and reassured Ianto that everything would be all right in the end. Another man had arrived while Ianto had been thinking about his decision. Owen introduced the man as Dr. Fairstein, a surgeon who would support the Torchwood doctor. Both men prepared the surgery with silent efficiency.

At last, they informed Ianto that they were ready, asking his permission.

Knowing that he had no choice left, Ianto nodded.

With trepidation, Ianto watched how Owen injected the anaesthetic in his IV line. Almost instantly, he felt the effect. Panicked, he wanted to call out and tell Owen that he had changed his mind, but the drug did what it was supposed to do and everything went black.

xXx

Cardiff

Toshiko could not stand idly sitting around. After a few hours rest, she was up again, checking on Mainframe first and then turning to the more prominent problem of them being stuck inside their own Hub. The base had been forced into lockdown by the lightning’s impact. Now she wanted to try and see if she could not find a way to reverse it.

Working on the problem kept her mind busy for a while, until she figured out that she could forget
about overriding the lockdown without an autonomous source of energy. With a deep sigh, she grabbed her laptop and sat down on the sofa.

*Did I put the backup file of the translation program on it? I hope so. Then I could at least work on something useful.*

A moment later, she groaned with frustration. Yes, she did have the backup file, but not with the latest updates.

“Bugger! Stupid me. What now?”

For another ten minutes, she occupied herself with playing Solitaire, then the game could not capture her interest any longer. Being unable to get on the internet, she could not check on any news either, see what the media said about the Cybermen and the strange occurrences in Cardiff. She still could not contact her team mates in London, which made her rather anxious as she knew that they could still get in dangerous situations.

*Nobody knows what’s inside the tower,* she thought. *I hope Suzie and Owen are all right and are making progress.*

*Have they even noticed that we’ve gone silent? If they did they must be worried about us. Well, Owen probably isn’t. Guess he’ll be too busy examining what they find at Torchwood One.*

*On second thought, Suzie might be as well. Once she’s focused on a task she’s impossible to divert. Usually a good thing. I know, though, that Jack wasn’t happy when they didn’t call earlier.*

*Well, now they can’t call. Lucky them. At least they have something to do while I’m stuck here being useless.*

*I can’t even monitor the Rift. Now of all times! I hope it finally calms down again and that the crack over the Plass was a last flare-up.*

Being unable to find something productive to do, she put her laptop on the coffee table and sat back on the couch. She could not find rest either, though. Obviously, she was too wound up by the latest events.

*I’m surprised that the constables can sleep.* She chuckled lowly to herself. *Maybe they’re simply too exhausted. They’ve worked hard and they really did good work. Don’t know what we’d have done without them. Especially with the octopus. Jack probably would be dead now and Ydris as well. He was lucky to survive the dive in the bay. Thank Got for Andy doing CPR. I need to thank Gwen for helping Jack, even though she won’t remember anything of their mission once Jack cuts them loose.*

She scowled at her next thought.

*Jack won’t be happy about having to reton Ydris. He didn’t even pretend he wasn’t interested, not that Jack would. And Ydris sure seemed curious about Torchwood. He was pretty insistent about applying for a job. He might even fit in, but we’ll never know.*

*I wonder what they’re doing down there right now.* She mulled that over for a moment. *On second thought I probably don’t want to know.*

She was startled by the awakening Hub, realizing that she must have fallen asleep in the end. Eagerly, she hurried over to her workstation to supervise the reboot of the system. First thing she did then was to check on the rift activity.
Thank God. Everything seems to be quiet now.

Her fingers flew over the keyboard, navigating through the monitoring program. It seemed to be running smoothly and did not show any Rift spike. For all Toshiko could tell, there was no fluctuation in time or space at all.

*Do us the favour and stay that calm.*

Once she made sure that the city was safe for now, Toshiko put on her ear comm. and called for Suzie.

“Tosh! You’re back! What happened?” her co-worker’s excited voice echoed in her ear.

“The Hub went into lockdown,” Toshiko explained.

“And you were completely cut off communication,” Suzie reasoned. “Wow. Why did it lockdown?”

“We had an intruder and were struck by lightning simultaneously. I need to run a diagnosis to be sure, but I think it was the massive discharge.”

“I see.”

“What’s up in London? Are you making progress?”

“Yes and no,” Suzie said. “We’re finished going through the tower in search of possible threats. We had a short look at the top storey and we found a huge sphere. I collected a few files Jack asked me to get. I’m about to go and have a second look at Hartman’s computer. Unless you want to do it yourself.”

“I can hack into it,” Toshiko told her. “Where’s Owen?”

“Conversion chambers. He’s not to be moved from there.”

“Why?”

“He found a survivor.”

“Jack didn’t send him to London to play doctor.”

Suzie chuckled at her way of phrasing. “Owen won’t abandon his patient, Tosh. He’s in full-blown doctor-mode. He won’t go anywhere.”

“Jack won’t be happy,” Toshiko mused aloud. “What about the paramedics? Can’t they take care of the victim?”

“They probably could,” Suzie replied. “Are you going to tell Owen?”

*xxx*

**London**

*conversion chamber*
Waking with a start, all Owen knew was that a horrible scream echoed in his ears. For just a second, he did not even know where he was before memory set in and he recognized the conversion chamber.

With the recollection came the realization of who was screaming.

*Ianto!*

Frantically, Owen scrambled to his feet. What he found made his insides constrict. It looked like the young man in the conversion unit tried to thrash about in sheer panic, screaming at the top of his lungs, his features contorted in utter agony. Any movement was prevented by the restraints on the metal frame, though. Owen just knew that Ianto had to be in agony, bruising himself wherever his body was pushing against the frame and his muscles cramping painfully as they pushed and pulled against immobile limbs.

“Ianto?” Owen queried with urgent concern. “Ianto, what’s wrong?”

His patient did not react to him, though. His eyes pressed firmly shut, he just kept screaming.

“Ianto!”

Even when Owen called out more insistently, he triggered no reaction in the panicked man.

“Heck, Ianto! Answer me. C’mon. Look at me.”

Still Ianto did not respond.

For lack of other options, Owen took hold of Ianto’s shoulders, shaking him as much as the unit allowed. When that did not work he patted his cheek.

“Ianto! C’mon! Focus. Look at me. Ianto! Look at me!” Gradually, he raised his voice with frustration. How should he get through to him? “Ianto! Hey! Open your ruddy eyes! C’mon!”

Finally, Ianto stopped in need for air. He took a shuddering breath.

“Ianto? Do you hear me? Look at me, mate. C’mon.”

Ianto’s eyelids fluttered open. His blue eyes were bright with impending panic. Then renewed cramps hit his limbs and Owen knew that he had to do something. Reaching for his bag, he went through his supplies until he found a muscle relaxant. As quickly as he could with the necessary care, he filled a syringe to inject Ianto’s IV with it.

Carefully, Owen took hold on the young man’s left leg to massage the hurting limb. Feeling how hard the muscles were, he cursed himself for not thinking of it earlier. Immobilized as Ianto was it was only a matter of time until his muscles cramped. While he worked, Owen murmured reassurances.

“That’s it,” Owen said, forcing himself to speak low and calm again. “Listen to me. Everything’s all right. You’re safe. Nothing bad has happened. Okay?”

“Y-y-yeah,” the reply shuddered over Ianto’s lips.

“Do you hurt?”

It took Ianto a moment to process the question and answer adequately. “Not worse than before.” Tears rolled down his cheeks and his features crumbled. “Did you really have to do that?”
“Do what?” Owen queried, puzzled.

“A-amputate…”

His answer came so choked that Owen had trouble understanding him. A moment of shock passed before he realized what Ianto meant.

“You think I amputated your appendages in order to get you out?” he asked with clear disbelief. His heart ached with sympathy when he saw Ianto’s features contort with confusion and hurt. “Ianto! I didn’t do anything! It was a dream, Ianto. A nightmare. You had a bad dream. That’s it. Only a nightmare.”

“A-a n-nightmare?” Ianto stuttered.

“Yes.”

“You d-didn’t…?”

“I wouldn’t even think of it,” Owen affirmed. “Well, maybe I would. But I’d have to be really desperate by then and I can assure you that I’m far from desperate now.”

“But you…”

Ianto fell silent when he reflexively tensed his muscles to gesture and felt the resistance of the metal restraints. It was painfully obvious that he was unable to move at all and realization dawned on him.

“It’s as real as if it really happened,” he sobbed. “We were talking about it. You stood right there and injected the anaesthetic to knock me out for the surgery. I remember it.”

Owen did not know what to say. His insides were knotted up hard with compassion. Carefully, he placed his hand on Ianto’s dark curls and ruffled his hair affectionately. He saw tears roll down the young man’s pale face.

“God, I still think it happened,” Ianto whined. “How can it feel that real? It’s so weird.”

“How would amputation get you out anyway?” Owen asked in a teasing tone. “Should I amputate your head as well?”

“Um…” For a second, Ianto was at a loss for words. “No, not really. I still need it.”

Owen chuckled. “That’s what I thought.”

The medic checked on the IV and palpated Ianto’s limbs.

“Okay, Ianto. Don’t play the hero; tell me honestly how much you hurt.”

“I’m not playing the hero,” Ianto grumbled. “And I don’t hurt.”

Owen scowled. “Your muscles are hard. You’re about to cramp again. So don’t waste my time and tell me the truth.”

Rolling his eyes Ianto groaned. “All right! I hurt. But it’s bearable.”

“Define bearable.”

“Am I the doctor or are you?” Ianto huffed.
A sigh escaped Owen. “On a scale of one to ten with ten being the worst, what is it?”

“Hm… maybe a four,” Ianto suggested. “But you don’t want to give me more painkillers, do you? Don’t kill me with them.”

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing,” Owen grumbled. “There’s no need for you to suffer when you don’t have to, though.”

“As long as it hurts I’m still alive.”

“Oh, Ianto!” Owen growled. “Stop being so cynical.”

“Cynical? What’s cynical about the truth?” Ianto sounded choked and it was obvious that he was fighting with his tears. “I’d be dead by now if it wasn’t for you.”

Partially, Owen was touched by this admission, the part in him that was proud of his medical proficiency and yearned for appreciation. At the same time, though, Owen felt anger. It was a strange mix of irritation caused by Ianto’s admission and annoyance at his obvious inability to make his patient feel safe and cared for, to reassure him and to alleviate his fears.

“What’s wrong with what I said?” Ianto asked meekly.

If possible that irritated Owen even more.

“Nothing,” he snapped, mentally slapping himself when he heard how the single word came over his lips. *What the hell did I do to make him ask that? Can’t I even control my expression? What kind of a doctor am I?* Consciously softening his tone, he said, “There was nothing wrong with what you said, Ianto. I guess I’m mad at myself.”

“Why?”

“Hm, I think because I feel like I have ballsed up.”

Now Ianto was genuinely confused.

“Why would you feel as if you have messed up?”

“Because it’s my job to help you.”

“I don’t get it,” Ianto said. “You helped me the whole time since you found me. Why do you feel like you failed?”

“You were in pain,” Owen argued. “I should’ve realized that your muscles threatened to cramp. In your position it’s too obvious not to be noticed. I should’ve acted earlier.”

“Bollocks,” Ianto firmly replied.

“Excuse me! I am the doctor!”

“Great,” Ianto huffed. “Because I wasn’t sure for a moment.”

It was then that Ianto noticed that Owen appeared to be distracted. He seemed to be listening to something.

“Your partner?” Ianto asked lowly.
The medic nodded and mouthed and Cardiff.

Ianto smiled with relief and murmured, “That’s good.”

Owen scowled at what he heard next, the discussion about paramedics assuming the care of his patient triggering his professional territoriality as well as his protective instincts.

“You do realize that I can hear both of you, right, ladies?” Owen cut in sarcastically. “Nice to hear your voice again, Tosh. Jack? Are you there, too?”

“Not yet,” Toshiko said.

“Now where is ruddy Captain Jack?” Owen grumbled. “Gotta talk to him.”

xXx

Jack did not need long to figure out that Ydris was indeed a quick learner. In addition, he was adventurous and flexible. Two qualities that Jack appreciated.

Right now, the young Welshman was sprawled prone on the covers, his hands clawing at the pillow. He was breathing hard and groaning with pleasure.

A smirk cracked Jack’s features as he heard Ydris gasp. It filled him with pride that he was the reason for the young man’s delight. He felt the passion build up inside him and pushed the sense of urgency aside.

His impeccable sense of time had told Jack that the six hours were over and the lockdown about to be reversed.

Jack was not interested in returning to work, though.

At the moment, he was more interested in making his newfound partner scream with blissful agony. So he allowed himself the luxury of ignoring his internal clock, knowing that Toshiko would call him in case the Rift monitor issued another alarm.

A shudder rippled through Ydris and subsequently through Jack, pushing his pleasure up a notch. He was about to reach the crest of his joy and judging by the sounds coming from Ydris, he was close to it as well.

Jack wanted it to be perfect for both of them and held back in order to control the right moment…

…only to feel his passion evaporate with the hard knock on the door.

A Welsh curse was muffled by the pillow when Ydris buried his head in it. Jack’s cursing would have been easier to understand if it had not been in a language Earth did not yet know.

“Jack, I’m sorry to interrupt…”

You have no idea, the captain thought bitterly.

“…but I got in touch with Suzie and Owen, and Owen asked for you, saying, quote Now where’s ruddy Captain Jack? Gotta talk to him. We have a situation here and he has to move his sorry arse
“to London as soon as Cardiff’s safe” end of quote.”

Jack tensed at that.

_Last time I checked I was giving the orders_, he thought and leaned down to kiss Ydris’s cheek before he climbed off the bed and picked up his ear comm.

tbc…
“Where are we going?” Gwen asked eagerly, accepting a coffee mug from Toshiko. “Mmm, I needed this.”

“Tosh and I are going to London,” Jack explained and held out another Starbucks cup to Andy. “We’ll drop you off at home so you can rest properly. If we need you when we get back I want you to be fit.”

“But we just got up, Jack. We are fit,” Gwen replied and yawned.

“Probably not as rested as you thought?” Jack suggested with a smirk. “The coffee will help.”

“Coffee always helps,” Andy said and took a sip of his hot beverage.

“Well, then. Let’s go,” Jack declared, clapping his hands together. “Ydris! You don’t have a coffee yet!”

“I don’t want to,” Ydris shrugged.

“Want something else?” Jack suggested. “I think there’s some lemonade in the fridge. Shall I get you one?”

“It’s okay, Jack. I’ll have something when I get home. You want to head to London.”

“Doesn’t take long,” Jack warded off, hurrying up the stairs to the kitchenette where he got a can of coke from the fridge. It didn’t take him a minute to be back with the team again. Opening the can, Jack held it out to the young Welshman, “Here.”

Rolling his eyes, Ydris accepted the can and drank. “You’re a pain in the arse.”

“Oh, really?” Jack smirked.

“Yeah.”

“Whenever is good for you,” Jack teased with a roguish grin.

“It would be good for all of us if we would leave now,” Toshiko cut in before the men decided to vanish in the vaults again.

“You’re right,” Jack agreed readily. “C’mon.”

The team followed him through the armoury and to the underground garage where they squeezed into Toshiko’s car.

“What about our car?” Andy asked. “It’s in rough shape.”

“True,” Jack murmured. Glancing at Toshiko, he imagined her at her computer station, planting a false report of theft. She was so good at such things. Her talent definitely made his life easier. “We’ll take care of that when we get back.”
“I have no idea why I’m so tired,” Gwen mumbled behind her hand, trying to suppress a yawn. “We had hours of rest.”

“Well, it’s a strenuous job,” Jack shrugged. “Not as quiet as the life of a cop.”

“Hey, walking the beat is no child’s play!” Gwen argued tiredly.

“Didn’t say that,” Jack smirked over his shoulder.

“You meant to say that Torchwood is worse,” Ydris threw in.

“You got it.”

“Well, it’s one hell of a job,” Gwen agreed.

“Sure is.” Jack’s smirk softened when he looked over at Toshiko again and pride warmed his insides. Then he turned back to the constables, “And you did it well.”

“Um, Jack,” Gwen said. “Could we make this arrangement more permanent?”

“Like what?”

“Like you hiring us,” Gwen declared.

“Good luck,” Ydris chuckled lowly toward the window.

Jack still heard him and had to smirk again. “Sorry, there are no vacancies.”

Gwen looked devastated. For a moment, she remained silent, deep in thought, before she said, “Well, we could liaise, right? Andy and I, we could be like your liaisons with the police.”

“Why would we do that?” Jack asked back.

“All this tech you have. You’re much better equipped than the police. Why keep it to yourselves? You could help.”

“Right, I can see the mistake. You think because I got you and Andy as temps while two of us are in London in a crisis we’re prepared to work with the police. Sorry. Nothing like that will happen.”

“But you fight aliens for a living,” Gwen argued, sounding more energetic now. “Supporting the police would be peanuts for you.”

“We’re busy.”

“And your work’s more important?”

“Now you’ve got it.” Jack had to admire her stubbornness.

“Well, that’s tough shit. ‘Cause when we’re back at work tomorrow we have a duty. I’ll tell my superiors about who you are and what you can do.”

“If you remember,” Jack nonchalantly replied.

“What d’you mean?”

“How was your coffee?”
Gwen stared at him as if he just stabbed her. “Have you poisoned us?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Jack waved off. “It’s an amnesia pill. My own recipe, with a touch of denial and a dash of Retcon.” He looked at their dumbfounded faces and it was all he could do not to laugh. Usually, he did not tell the people that they were about to lose their memories. Why bother if they forgot anyway? Taking a breath, he continued, “Wake up tomorrow morning, you’ll have forgotten everything about Torchwood.” At that his gaze drifted to Ydris. “Worse still, you’ll have forgotten me… which is kind of tragic.”

The constables slowly got over their shock and appeared rather flustered now. Helplessly, they looked at each other, then at Ydris who remained surprisingly composed.

“Tosh?” Gwen said. “Help us.”

Toshiko just kept driving.

“Don’t think you can fight it by staying awake,” Jack informed them. “I mixed in a little bit of sedative, too.”

“Bastard,” Gwen tried to spit, but the venom in her voice was softened by a huge yawn. Beside her, Andy sagged and his head dropped on her shoulder. A moment later, she was asleep as well, slumped over in her safety belt.

Ydris fixated Jack with an unreadable gaze. “Was that really necessary?”

“Procedure,” Jack shrugged.

“Sucks.”

“Yeah,” Jack agreed. “It’s the way it is.”

“She’s right,” Ydris stated, never raising his voice. “You’re a bastard.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

He prepared himself for another argument, but right then Ydris leaned his head against the window, his body giving in to the drug induced sleep.

“Thank God,” Jack thanked whichever deity he might believe in. “That took a while.”

“Are you surprised?” Toshiko wanted to know.

“A little.”

“Probably because you usually disappear before they’re knocked out,” she remarked.

Incredulously, Jack eyed her intently, his head tilted sideways. He appeared to be scandalized. “Something wrong with that?”

“We rarely seem to care if the people are going to be okay.”

“I don’t use this stuff lightly, if that’s what you mean,” Jack told her bluntly. “They were helpful, but we can’t allow them to remember us.”

“I know.”
“Then why are we arguing?”

“Because we shouldn’t forget.” She found a free space on the kerb and parked the car. Turning in her seat, she faced him. “Was it really necessary?”

“Yes,” Jack told her without hesitation.

“All right.”

Jack was glad that she accepted his answer so readily. He left the car and opened the rear side door to pull Andy out. Putting the constable’s arm around his neck, he dragged him to the building his flat was in. A few minutes later, he was back to get Gwen and finally Ydris. Then he did not return for a while.

“What took you so long?” Toshiko asked impatiently when Jack finally climbed back into the car.

“I made them comfortable,” he shrugged.

Toshiko eyed him sceptically. “Comfortable?”

“Yes,” Jack told her bluntly with a salacious grin.

“Do I want to know more?”

At that, Jack grimaced thoughtfully before he shook his head. “No.”

Rolling her eyes, Toshiko started the car and joined the traffic.

xXx

Torchwood tower

conversion chambers

“Owen? How much time has passed?”

“Since when?” Owen asked back, deliberately keeping his voice as calm as possible even though he sensed that he became increasingly testy himself.

“Since you talked to Captain Harkness. I kind of lost my sense of time.”

“About half an hour now.”

Ianto sighed.

“I know, it’s hard to wait,” Owen told him. “Why don’t you try to get some more sleep?”

“I don’t think I can.” Despite his best efforts, he sounded weepy.

“I could help you.”
“No!” Ianto rushed to reply. “No more drugs.”

Holding up his hands defensively, Owen said, “No problem. Just a suggestion.”

“You can keep suggestions like that to yourself.”

“Okay.”

Uncomfortable silence fell between them. Owen glanced at Dennis who stood beside Ianto on the other side of the conversion unit. On the one hand he appreciated his presence as he did not have to deal with this situation on his own. On the other hand he would like to be alone with Ianto.

**It would be different if Dennis was Torchwood. But he’s UNIT and we shouldn’t talk about Torchwood internal matters as long as he’s with us.**

As if on cue, he heard fast steps approach and the plastic curtain was pushed aside by Suzie.

“All right,” she said, facing the UNIT soldier. “The situation is under control. You can go.”

“Excuse me, you’re not my commanding officer.”

“Right now I am,” Suzie replied calmly. “I just met with Colonel Mace and the Brigadier. We are in charge. If I tell you to leave, you leave.”

Regretfully, Dennis looked at Ianto. It was obvious that he felt responsible for the young man’s wellbeing. Still, he raised his radio to call his commander. Scowling, he accepted his confirmation.

“Well, I think that means goodbye,” he said with barely hidden disappointment as he stepped closer to the conversion unit.

“Doesn’t mean we can’t keep in touch,” Ianto murmured.

“Guess they won’t let us.”

“They can try.”

Dennis grinned. “I really like your attitude. You don’t take any crap from anyone.”

“I had two years of practice,” Ianto stated. “I’ll call you.”

“Okay,” Dennis said, lightly squeezing Ianto’s shoulder encouragingly. “See you.”

“Right. See you,” Ianto confirmed.

Then Dennis left the cubicle. As his steps faded, Owen turned to Ianto.

“Made a friend?”

“He didn’t want to go,” Ianto said. “I offered him an easier way out.”

The medic was surprised by this answer.

“Something wrong, Owen?” Ianto asked. “Should I have begged to let him stay?” When Owen did not reply at once, he snorted. “Didn’t think so.”

Suzie smirked. She had to admit that she also was impressed by the young man. Right now, she had more important things to do, though.
“Owen, do you need anything?”

“Like a bath and a decent night’s sleep?”

“No… Like medical supplies for example.”

“Well…” Owen squatted down to check on his supplies. “No, I don’t think I need anything right now. Why are you asking?”

“Because I won’t be back that soon,” Suzie explained. “I have to take care of UNIT staying off our turf.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I just went to see Mace, talk to him about the survivors, when I walked in on him talking to the Brigadier about what they should do with the tower now.”

“Oh?”

“I had to remind them that Torchwood is in charge and I told them to wait until Jack arrives.”

“Great. He’ll love it,” Owen huffed and became sarcastic, “He was always great at politics.”

“You probably noticed earlier that he’s not in a good mood, right, Owen?” Suzie told him.

“I explained the situation to him myself,” Owen grunted. “He understands that I won’t leave my patient.”

“Actually, any paramedic could do this job. Right now, you’ve got nothing to do but monitor his condition.”

“Ya think?”

“Yes, I do. And I know that that’s not why you were sent here.”

“That’s tough shit, Suzie,” Owen frayed, “because I won’t abandon Ianto!”

“Didn’t tell you to,” she snapped. “Just stating a fact. ‘Cause you probably can imagine that I’m not happy either having to deal with UNIT all on my own.”

“Oh, c’mon! Admit it, Suzie Costello. You love being in charge.”

Suzie did not answer, but that was not necessary. Her discomfort was clearly written on her features and Ianto could also sense it. Right now, she wished that Captain Harkness was here already.

“I’m keeping you from doing your job,” Ianto murmured.

Owen sharply turned his head to look at him. “I am doing my job. Don’t let her tell you any different.”

“Maybe UNIT was right,” Ianto said. “Maybe they should have sh…”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” Owen barked, getting into Ianto’s face by leaning over the unit. “It’s very important for your future that you change your way of thinking, Ianto Jones. Start arguing with me about what should have happened to you in order to make my life easier and I’ll make you my coffee slave for a month. Then you really will wish UNIT had got to you.”
Wordlessly, Ianto stared up at him. This was not an empty threat, but, in order to do so Owen had to get him out. So in the end it was a promise rather than a threat. Ianto had to bite back a smirk.

“What are you going to do next?”

“Well, I’m going back down in order to keep an eye on UNIT,” Suzie stated. “And Owen will stay here.”

“He should go with you if it’s that important,” Ianto offered and felt anxious butterflies in his stomach at the prospect of being alone. “I’m grown up. I can stay on my own for an hour or so.”

Owen scowled deeply. “I’d agree… if you weren’t stuck in there. There’s no way in hell that I’m gonna leave you just to baby-sit UNIT.”

“Where’s the difference?” Suzie teased.

“In the necessity,” Owen grumbled.

“Anyway…” Suzie said. “I have to go back down. See you later.”

“Have fun,” Owen teased.

“It’ll be just like Christmas,” Suzie remarked wryly as she left the cubicle.

Now Owen and Ianto were alone.

“And what are we doing now?” Owen turned to Ianto. “Play *I spy*?”

Ianto snorted with wry amusement. “I spy with my little eye something that is silver.”

“The shutter?”

“Yes.”

“Okay… I spy with my little eye something that is transparent.”

“The plastic curtains.”

“Right. It’s your turn, Ianto.”

“I spy with my little eye something that is silver.”

Owen scowled. “The ring around the shutter.”

“No.”

“The body of the mounted armoury.”

“No.”

“The frame of the conversion unit.”

“No. Game over.” Ianto smirked sourly.

“What was it?” the medic demanded to know.

“Your ear comm.” Ianto chuckled at the doctor’s grimace, but a second later his mood dropped.
“This game sucks.”

“True.”

“The whole situation sucks, Owen,” Ianto whined. “I believe you when you say that you’ll find a way to get me out, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m still stuck.”

“I’m sorry about that. We could examine what is left of the Cybermen’s technology, or search the tower for tools that might help us,” Owen explained. “My best bet, though, is Jack.”

“I wish I could share your trust,” Ianto sighed. “Don’t get me wrong. I don’t doubt you have your reasons to assume he’ll be able to help. I don’t know Captain Harkness, though. I’ll form my opinion about him later.”

Once more, Owen could not help but admire Ianto’s serenity. Even though he had moments when he sounded close to desperate, he was able to pull himself together and show an incredible presence of mind.

“Will be best,” Owen said. “Jack is… Jack after all.”

“As in he’s hard to explain, best to be experienced?”

Owen laughed.

“Be careful what you wish for. I don’t know anyone else who’d get us access to a top secret research facility by snogging the guard.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. I think they even dated later. She was quite impressed by his disarming personality.”

“But that’s not the reason why you think he could get me out,” Ianto stated.

“No. He simply knows a lot about alien technology. He’s not as good with computers as Tosh is, but he has an understanding of the objects left by the Rift that we don’t have.”

Reflexively, Ianto nodded, his movement painfully prevented by the clamps holding his head, and a groan escaped him.

“I’d really like to meet him,” Ianto said. “He must be an interesting person.”

“Depends on how you define interesting, I guess,” Owen replied with a broad leer.

Realizing that he would not get more information about Captain Harkness except stories about his amorous adventures, Ianto tried to change the subject.

“You mentioned earlier that you have searched the whole tower… so… What did you find? How many survived?”

“Do you mean Torchwood personnel?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, we actually can’t tell yet as a lot of civilians were in the tower after the attack, brought in by the Cybermen for upgrading.”
Of course, Ianto noticed how evasively Owen answered and drew his own conclusion. There probably was only a handful of people left. A handful from over eight-hundred. The idea made his insides churn and he quickly asked the first thing that came to his mind just to change the subject again.

tbc…
“What did Owen tell you?” Jack queried.

“Not much, actually,” Toshiko replied curtly as she concentrated on driving. “He wanted to talk to you.”

“And he did.”

Smiling softly to herself, Toshiko kept driving. She could imagine that Jack was not happy to be asked by Owen so insistently to call him back. He definitely was not happy about being interrupted while shagging his stray.

_Ydris seems to be a nice guy, Toshiko thought. I would’ve liked to get to know him better._

“What are you thinking about?” Jack prodded.

“Ydris,” Toshiko replied matter-of-factly. “While you prepared to leave, I checked up on him. He’d be an asset to the team.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“You didn’t ask.”

Jack huffed. “Do I always have to ask for your opinion?”

“No,” she shook her head. “But you made clear from the start that you would retcon him along with Gwen and Andy, so I didn’t bother.”

Jack scowled.

_I was so set on the we’re-not-hiring-routine that I didn’t even consider otherwise. What’s wrong with me? Is something wrong with me? Why didn’t I see the potential that Toshiko spotted?_

_Well, I had other things on my mind, actually. There was no room for thinking about possible new team members, no matter how handsome and flexible they are._

For another moment, Jack was brooding before he returned to his previous question.

“So you don’t know anything about him?”

“You mean Ianto Jones?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he was born in August 1983 in Newport. Started to work at Torchwood One in 2005,” Toshiko recited what she had read earlier. “Before he joined the Institute, he drifted from job to job and he has a minor conviction for shoplifting. Now he is a junior researcher in Information Retrieval.”

“Okay.”
For a few kilometres, Toshiko just kept driving before she broke the silence between them.

“You sounded so distracted earlier. What’s bothering you?”

Releasing a long low breath, Jack closed his eyes and leaned his head against the backrest. How could he possibly explain what went through his head? He had never given away much about himself and he could not start with talking about the Doctor now that he had missed him. He had no reference, so he had no way of expressing his mixed emotions now which ranged from excitement to abandonment and loss.

“I was thinking about what happened at Canary Wharf,” he finally said. “We still know next to nothing about the attack.”

“Suzie said that UNIT has the situation under control,” Toshiko replied. “That the tower is safe.”

“Yeah. I meant the actual attack. I want to know what happened.”

Toshiko scowled.

“Don’t get me wrong, Jack. But why is that so important for you?” she queried. “I mean, it’s over. They’re gone.”

“In order to learn, Tosh.”

“Do you think they could come back?”

“What I think is irrelevant,” Jack told her quietly. “We can’t rule it out, so we should learn whatever we can in order to be prepared for the future.”

“Because the twenty-first century is when everything changes.”

Her dry remark made Jack smirk.

“At least one of you has listened to what I’m saying,” he chuckled.

“Jack,” she replied, tongue in cheek. “You didn’t think we would ignore you, did you? What would we gossip about?”

He huffed in mock annoyance.

“As long as it teaches you something.”

“Jack, without you none of us would be where we are now,” Toshiko told him earnestly, contemplating if she should stop the car. “I know I wouldn’t be. I’d sit in a tiny UNIT cell. Or maybe I’d be dead… And we wouldn’t have survived the Cyber-invasion either.”

For a moment, Jack was stunned. He would never have anticipated a reaction like this.

“But, Tosh. That was your doing. I…”

“You made the difference, Jack,” Toshiko cut him short. “Don’t argue with me.”

“But…”

“Don’t.”
Knowing by experience that he would lose an argument with his computer expert, Jack leaned back in his seat and remained silent. It was just as well. He did not feel like talking anyway. He felt his mind being torn by woolly thoughts only to be unable to take a hold on any of them. It was a swirl of battling emotions that threatened to overwhelm him.

*Focus, Jack,* he told himself. *You need to focus on the task at hand. And that’ll be opening a conversion unit. Damnit! They should be able to handle that. Doesn’t UNIT have someone who can figure out how the Cyber-technology works? It’s not the first time they’ve been confronted by Cybermen.*

*Nothing against Owen’s compassion, but I didn’t send him to London to pamper the first survivor he happens to stumble over. We’ve got a job to do.*

At least Suzie’s doing her best to keep UNIT at bay. We need to control their access until we know how much was damaged and what we’ll have to take with us to Cardiff. Then I won’t mind them taking the tower apart. I don’t want anything to do with the headquarters.

His train of thought was slowed down thinking about London as the Institute’s headquarters. Torchwood One was in fact the head of the organization while Torchwood Three was just a branch office.

*According to what we know so far Torchwood One’s completely destroyed. What if the Institute closes for good? What will happen to the Cardiff office then?*

*No, the Crown can’t close our branch. Someone has to monitor the Rift. I don’t want to imagine what will happen if nobody takes care of the flotsam and jetsam washed through it.*

A shudder ran through him at the idea that UNIT might be put in charge of the Rift.

*I have to prevent that.*

The day was drawing to a close and Jack was still lost in thought when they reached the outskirts of London. More than a day had passed since the attack and the world appeared to be back to normal. Pedestrians were out on the streets, shops were open and life was going on as usual. It looked peaceful. For now London was safe.

xXx

**Torchwood tower**

**conversion chamber**

“Tell me more about those predators.”

“What predators?” Owen queried.

“You mentioned them when you were checking on the other conversion unit,” Ianto told him. “You said you encountered them while searching the tower.”
“Oh, those predators,” Owen drawled. “Ugly brood. Hard to kill as well. There were five of them when we reached the storey where Suzie and Anderson were under attack…”

“Five, huh?” Ianto teased, seeing the passionately told story for what it was, a tall tale.

“Okay, there were three,” Owen admitted. “But that didn’t make the situation less dangerous. We knew they had our colleagues cornered. Wow, that was a rush of adrenalin when we came in and spotted them. Far more scary than Weevils. Anyway, we shot at them and two charged at Lieutenant Spader. I fired the whole magazine of my machine gun to stop them. When they were down, I made sure that they were dead by putting a single bullet in their heads.”

“What did they look like?”

“Lean, black, ugly,” Owen shrugged. “Huge fangs and claws. Suzie later told me that she thought they were nocturnal animals, using sound to orientate themselves.”

“That makes sense,” Ianto murmured.

“What makes sense? Do you know them?”

“No. I heard stuff about them. The management was quite secretive about it, brought it straight to Secure Archives, but there still were rumours. At first there was only one animal. According to what I heard, it was a gift from another institute, no idea which one, though. Someone said blood tests would have revealed that it was related to bats… and that it was pregnant.”

“You mean that those beasts were just its young?” Owen gasped.

Inwardly, Ianto laughed at Owen’s shocked look. “Yep. Big, ugly, several months old cubs.”

“Pups,” Owen corrected.

“Excuse me?”

“Baby bats are called pups,” Owen explained, trying not to sound smug. He had already worked out that the younger man was a bit of a walking encyclopaedia and it pleased him to know something Ianto did not. “You say they’re just a few months old?”

“You know that some species grow faster than others,” Ianto smirked. “I think the female was brought in about six months ago.”

“Really growing fast then,” Owen said with wonder. “They were bigger than humans.”

“I guess the scientist who was working with them will regret that they’re dead.”

“I don’t,” Owen snapped. “They tried to eat my partner.”

*There’s no accounting for taste*, Ianto thought but bit the comment back. These people might not appreciate his dry wit the way his friends did… used to. He felt his heart clench once again with the loss, and then forced himself back into the moment, saying, “I’m curious about what else they’re hiding down in the Secure Archives.”

Owen blinked at his sudden change of subject.

“So am I,” the medic admitted. “We couldn’t get in yet.”

“I guess Captain Harkness will be able to get in, won’t he,” Ianto suggested. “Or someone else of the
“Yeah…” Owen trailed off, wondering if any higher ranking Torchwood personnel were left.

“You mean if anyone else is left who could get access, right?”

“What? You read minds?”

“No,” Ianto replied. “I’m just good at guessing. Plus, you reacted so evasively when I asked you about the survivors. It must be bad.”

“There’s no point in discussing this until we know more,” Owen stated.

“I could help you,” Ianto suggested. “In a crisis like this all Torchwood personnel report to the headquarters in London. The program will record it automatically. That includes all offices and active field agents.”

“Like Archie?”

“Who’s Archie?”

“Head of Torchwood Two, Glasgow?”

“Ah, Agent McCrimmon.”

Owen smirked to himself. It was a little weird to listen to Ianto who made Torchwood One sound so normal, with an internal structure like every other big office. Well, for him it must be exactly that, normal. Day in, day out working the same routine, gossiping with colleagues, finding a girlfriend. No, a fiancé. He said she was his fiancé. He wanted to get married.

“Owen?”

“Yes?” he shook himself back to present.

“I asked if you know him personally.”

“Who?”

“Agent McCrimmon.”

“No. Sorry. Never met Archie. We talked on the phone, though.”

“Is he as weird as they say?”

“I didn’t get that impression,” Owen shrugged. “Though Jack also claims he’s strange.”

“So he knows McCrimmon?”

“Sure. He’s been in Scotland several times.”

“I’d have liked that,” Ianto said, trailing off as his voice hitched with suppressed sobs.

“What’s wrong?” Owen gently asked, leaning in over his patient. “Do you hurt? What can I do for you?”

“Nothing,” Ianto rasped. His mouth was dry again and his throat hurt when he swallowed. His stomach hurt, too, but that probably was due to anxiety knotting up his insides. “Or… some more
“Sure,” Owen agreed. “Hey, you just have to ask. You know that, right?”

“Yeah.” He watched Owen retrieve the water bottle, but when he bent forward to help him drink, Ianto stopped him, “I was curious, you know.”

“Huh?”

“About you and your team. There was so much gossip about you lot in Cardiff,” Ianto explained. “I wanted to meet you, just… this isn’t… how… I imagined…”

“Shhh, easy,” Owen murmured when Ianto gasped for breath agitatedly. Comfortingly, he put his hand on his shoulder. “Shhh, you’ll be all right. You’ll see. Easy.”

Right then, Owen could not give him the water. Ianto was crying and that tore on Owen’s nerves. He could physically feel the pressure of taking care of him, but as much as he wanted to help him he could not do much as long as Ianto was stuck in the alien device.

“Jack?” Owen asked over his earpiece. “Jack, where are you?”


“What? I thought you’d be faster. We need you here, Jack! You’ve got to hurry up!”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Owen. I got it the first time you told me about your survivor.”

“He’s not my survivor, Jack,” Owen told him brusquely. “And don’t expect me to apologize. We’re under pressure here. We can’t let this poor bloke be stuck in there forever!”

“You’re repeating yourself, Dr. Harper.”

“C’mon, Jack! Hurry up! We’re on our last legs here!”

“Calm down, Owen. I’m here,” Jack said, pushing through the plastic enclosure of the cubicle.

“That’s not funny,” Owen growled, glaring at Jack.

Wry chuckles coming from behind him made the young doctor frown with irritation. He turned his head and stared with unmasked annoyance at Ianto who fortunately could not see it.

“You have a wicked sense of humour, sir,” Ianto chuckled. He had heard at least Owen’s half of their conversation and easily guessed the second half. He took a morbid pleasure in the exchange.

Jack did not waste any time and stepped up to the other side of the conversion unit where the trapped man could see him. “Hello!”

“Hey,” Ianto moaned. “You took your time, sir.”

“I was busy,” Jack shrugged.

“Great. Thanks that you at least cared enough to come here for a nobody like me,” Ianto snarled in a more sarcastic than angry tone. “Welcome to London.”

Jack smirked. “Sorry. I had to fight some more aliens after the Cybermen were gone. The Cardiff Rift became volatile after their appearance.” He looked at Ianto intently. “I shouldn’t have teased
Owen like that,” he murmured. “That was uncalled for. He needs it from me, but it was unfair toward you.”

“I’ll forgive you if you just get me out of this thing.”

“I’ll do what I can.” Jack reached out and let his fingers thread through Ianto’s dark hair.

Though he had always been curious to meet the man, Ianto had never quite understood all the gossip about Captain Jack Harkness. When he now raised his gaze and looked at Jack, he saw his pale blue eyes and for a brief moment it all became clear. This man, who had long been the subject of an inordinate amount of gossip, even for a place like Torchwood, was special. It was beyond charisma, something that made Jack special in the way that heroes and legends were special, in a way that people would remember through myths and tales passed down, generation after generation, until the facts, and even the man himself, were forgotten, but his deeds were remembered. And somehow, Ianto knew that his path was chosen, that he would be a part of that legend. Now that he had met the man, nothing would ever be the same as before.

Miraculously, that did not scare him. What did scare him, though, was that he also realized that from now on his life would be interwoven with that of Jack Harkness and chills chased down his spine.

Peripherally, he heard Owen say something but the words did not really register in his mind. Then he saw Jack’s lips move as he answered. His blood rushed in his ears during the next moment that stretched creepily.

Watching the scene unfold, Owen became suspicious.

“Don’t you dare make a crack about handsome young men in compromising positions,” he growled.

Just for a fleeting second there, Owen could see a smirk tug at the corners of the captain’s mouth before his expression changed to anger.

“Owen, really,” Jack spat. “What do you think of me?”

“You want an honest answer?” Owen challenged.

Jack huffed at the doctor before he returned his attention to Ianto.

“You know, Ianto,” Jack said cordially. “I can’t say the tales of my exploits have been exaggerated. But I can assure you that I never,” at that he shot a deathly glance at Owen, “would exploit a situation like this.”

“Sure,” Owen muttered to himself.

“Shut it, Owen,” Jack barked. “Ianto is a very attractive young man, but it is just not my way to take advantage of someone who isn’t completely willing and able to consent. You should know that, Dr. Harper.”

Averting his gaze, Owen now looked positively chastened. Something about the captain’s tone had indicated to Ianto that Dr. Harper probably had personal knowledge of his boss’s sexual ethics, but before he could think of an appropriate way to solicit more details, Jack being Jack, was not able to restrain himself and remarked, “It’s a shame you’re stuck in there.”

“I’d be happy to swap places with you,” Ianto deadpanned. “Age before beauty as they say.”
Incredulously, Jack first stared at Ianto then at Owen who smirked. “See, Jack, what I had to put up with for the last eight hours?”

Jack beamed at Ianto. “A clever mind in a beautiful head… makes you just about perfect.”

The captain’s sole intention had been to lighten up the captive’s mood a little before he started to examine the unit and find out why they could not succeed in opening it, but a sudden heartrending sob disillusioned him. Owen’s right, the poor kid’s about to break, he thought and instinctively reached out for him again, this time to caress his left shoulder. Wonder how I’d do if I were trapped in such a position for such a long time.

At the same time, he realized how callous his earlier thoughts during their drive to London had been. In all his urgency to protect the human race from alien tech falling into the wrong hands, he sort of forgot the importance of individual human beings. Now in hindsight, he felt humbled and did not know why he had been angry with Owen in the first place. Seeing how disastrous One’s failure turned out to be, surviving the attack was monumental in itself. And I know how important it is after such an ordeal to have a constant one can rely on after all. So Ianto has every right to have someone by his side who he can count on to look after him, look out for him, listen and talk to him and just be there, constantly, until he is free. His gaze flicked to Owen who pretended to busy himself with medical stuff. And I have no right to be mad at Owen for providing that constant, even though he disobeyed my orders. This was far more important.

Returning his attention to Ianto, he gently reassured him, “Just hang in there a little longer. As I said, I’ll do anything I can to get you out of that thing.”

“I won’t go anywhere,” Ianto replied tearfully with a pained chuckle. “So, what are you gonna do? Owen?”

“Sh,” the young doctor soothed, rubbing Ianto’s right upper arm and shoulder comfortingly. “Jack will find a way.” And he prayed that he was right.

Now Jack was fiddling with a broad leather strap on his left wrist. His brows narrowed as he took in the readings he got.

“Owen, you said the conversion unit jammed?”

“That’s what Ianto said,” Owen replied.

“Can you tell me more about it, Ianto?” Jack queried.

“There’s not much to tell,” Ianto said hoarsely. “The frame moved backwards, saws came out… then it stopped, due to power loss as it seemed. Later when the aliens were gone the power must have come back on, though, the saws began to swirl, but then the machine screeched and stopped.”

“Okay…” Jack returned his attention to his wrist device.

“Owen? Do you still have some water?”

“Yeah…” Owen replied absently, watching Jack.

“Owen! Where’s your bedside manner?” Jack teased.

“Oh, right,” Owen grumbled, turning to Ianto with the bottle. “As if yours is any better.”

“I didn’t claim it was.”
“Then you probably shouldn’t admonish me,” Owen shot back.

“Hey!” Ianto shouted. “The banter was entertaining and distracting at first, but now let’s get back to business, okay?”

“Sure,” Owen nodded and held the bottle so Ianto could drink.

“However easy it might look,” Jack said as if nothing had happened. “It’s not that simple. The machine’s set up with a very complex program that’s operating the conversion.”

Still concentrating on his scans, he frowned deeply.

“What?” Owen blurted out, wishing he could take it back. He needed to radiate confidence rather than scepticism.

Just for a moment, Jack hesitated to discuss what he found in front of Ianto, but one look at the young man made him think better of it.

“The program includes the control over the mechanics of the table. Once a convertee is pushed into the mechanism the clamps will close…”

“I know that!” Ianto wailed, straining against his bonds. Yet again he became agitated, as if he really thought Jack didn’t realize that he, better than anyone else, knew how effectively the unit worked.

Seemingly unfazed, Jack put his hand on Ianto’s shoulder, steadying him. When he felt the tension of his muscles lessen, he continued, “and when the process is completed they will open again.”

“Oh, God!” Ianto cried out with anguish, starting to struggle again. “Fine! Finish the upgrade!” His voice was breaking. “It will only turn me into a Cyberman, but who cares, at least I’ll get out of this thing!”

His hysterical rambling tore Jack’s heart apart. For some unknown reason, he was not able to touch Ianto again. All he could do was stare down at him, see his face contort with only too real fear, and hurt with him.

“I mean, it’s just me,” Ianto rambled on, completely forgetting that the deadly saws were long removed. “Simple office worker, no loss to society…”

“Shhh, kid,” Jack soothed, bending down and cupping both of Ianto’s cheeks with his hands. With mild amusement, he noticed the frown flitting over Ianto’s face at being called kid. Jack knew that reaction and had aimed at it deliberately now. “Shhh, take a deeeeeeep breath, okay? That’s right, breathe again. Let it go slowly…”

Under him Ianto did his best to follow his instructions. The air seemed to burn in his lungs and he shuddered when he exhaled again. The touch of Jack’s hands on his cheeks was unexpected, yet strong, welcome, and warm. His blue eyes radiated compassion as did the small smile that played around his lips.

“Believe me when I say that it would be a terrible loss for me,” Jack told him, his voice carrying a tenderness one would never have expected in the often so harsh or equally often exuberant captain.

For a second, Ianto wanted to object, but he saw no insincerity, no desire, no mischief in the other man’s eyes. This was no innuendo. His words were heartfelt.

Suddenly overwhelmed by the captain’s compassion, Ianto felt fresh tears well up in his eyes. All of
a sudden he felt loved. It was the pure, unconditional love of this man whom he had just met that took his breath away.

“Shhh, it’s okay. I’ll get you out. I promise.”

With that, Jack gave Ianto a peck on his forehead, brushed some tears away and got up again to finish what he had started.

To his infinite surprise, Ianto felt reassured and cared for. His heart still beat fast, but he could take a deep breath and relax to a certain degree again.

“Owen… did you call in paramedics who can take over once we get Ianto out?”

“No,” Owen admitted. “Colonel Mace didn’t want to let paramedics in earlier and when the search was finished Suzie said we shouldn’t let anyone into the tower before you were here.”

“I see,” Jack nodded curtly. “So what are we gonna do with him?”

“There’s a medical ward in the centre of the tower.”

“On thirtieth floor,” Ianto threw in.

“I could treat him there,” Owen suggested. “See what he can handle once he’s out. Ianto offered his help with getting an overview of the surviving personnel.”

“Tosh can do that.”

Owen scowled. Jack did not sound exactly brusque, but he was definitely not happy either.

“Tosh has more important things to do,” the medic replied.

With trepidation, Ianto listened to the men fighting over him and remarked wryly, “Don’t forget to get me out first.”

“We won’t,” Owen declared, glaring at Jack. “I’ll go check on the med ward while Jack takes care of opening the ruddy thing. All right?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Jack?”

“Fine with me,” Jack shrugged, concentrating on his wrist strap again.

“I’ll be right back, Ianto,” Owen said. “Don’t let him give you any shit.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Ianto told him earnestly but with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“I don’t need looking after,” Jack complained half-heartedly as he was not in the mood for more banter.

“Yes, you do,” both Owen and Ianto said. Owen laughed.

“You two seem to be on the same wavelength,” Jack smirked. “Go, Owen. I’ll take good care of him.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, Captain Jack,” Owen teased.
This time, Jack presented him with a salacious smirk. “Always at your service, Dr. Harper.”

“I mean it, keep your hands to yourself.”

“And how shall I get him out then?” Jack challenged with mock indignation.

“You’ll figure it out, Jack,” Owen chuckled and turned to Ianto. “All right. I’ll be right back.”

With a smirk, Jack watched him go. “He’s a good doctor,” he murmured.

“He is.”

Ianto watched Jack as he stood there, his right hand still on his wrist device, staring at the plastic enclosure, seemingly lost in thought.

“Sir?” Ianto asked.

“Huh?” Jack turned his head to look at him. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Jack will do all right,” the captain chuckled. He could see that Ianto was not amused, so he dropped the act, deciding that now was as good a moment as any. “Can I ask you something?”

tbc…
“Sure,” Ianto agreed. “What is it?”

Knowing that his request might upset him, Jack smiled at the trapped young man. “Could you tell me about what happened before the Cybermen appeared while I work on the unit?”

“You mean about things like not going into ghost shift?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry,” Ianto murmured. “Can’t tell you.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Jack snorted with wry amusement. “The way I see it I’m the highest ranking Torchwood officer around so I’m effectively the head of the Institute now. You won’t find a higher authority.”

“Can’t tell you what I don’t know.” With wonder, he watched confusion flit over the captain’s features. “I know we didn’t go into ghost shift, but how am I supposed to know why we didn’t.”

“Well, you were here,” Jack shrugged. “All I’m asking is to hear what preceded the attack.”

“I was in my cubicle at my office,” Ianto told him dryly. Ianto did not like the way Jack shifted his position beside him. He especially disliked the unease he sensed in the captain, which told him that Jack harboured some hidden agenda no matter how reassuring he tried to appear. So he became rather snippy when he continued, “I didn’t notice anything unusual and when I realized that the ghosts did not come at the usual time… who should I have asked? I wouldn’t have gotten an answer anyway. I’m not in the right division and I don’t have the necessary clearance.”

Jack’s expression darkened. “There’s no need to get mad at me, Ianto. I’m asking just because any information, how insignificant it may seem to be, could be very important,” Jack told him.

Rolling his eyes, Ianto grunted, “For the mission or for you?”

“Excuse me?”

“And once I told you what I know you’ll retcon me?”

Taking a deep breath, Jack tried to reign in his temper that was triggered by Ianto’s accusatory tone.

“What gives you that idea?” he huffed. “Retcon shouldn’t be used lightly. As you’re working for Torchwood I see no reason to make you forget anyway.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Jack smirked sourly. “Why, thank you.”

“You know, Torchwood One doesn’t quite operate under the same premise.”
The captain scowled. “You really were afraid we’d erase your memories of the attack?’”

“Not just the attack…. sir.”

Jack was dumbfounded. He knew that the management was more reckless about things like that. Still he did not expect them to retcon an employee to make him forget something that was covered by his signing the Official Secrets Act anyway.

Intently, Ianto watched him. He neither saw nor sensed insincerity or reluctance. Jack was honest about what he said. He could trust him. Should he tell him everything? Maybe not yet.

“So, if you’re asking if I’ve seen the Doctor the answer is no.”

It was all Ianto could do not to laugh at Jack’s shocked expression.

“Really, Captain, ‘His capture or death is Torchwood Edict One’. Why wouldn’t I work out that you wanted to know if he’d been here?”

At once the deep scowl was back in place.

Ianto rolled his eyes. “Look, just because I know our stated mission doesn’t mean I agree with it,” he said. “The Director had a fair number of people brainwashed into her little cult, but some of us were still thinking for ourselves. I have my own opinion about the Doctor… and I can see, so do you.”

“Yeah, I do,” Jack snarled. “What’s yours?”

“I think that he comes to help rather than destroy. Whatever made the Cybermen disappear… I’m sure that it was his doing.”

At that, Jack’s expression softened again. “Yeah, that’s what I think, too.”

“You want to know what happened?” Ianto asked. “So do I. I didn’t see much, because I was caught up in battle and pushed into this ruddy thing here. All I saw was Cybermen and… one of those, what are they called…?”

“Daleks.”

“A Dalek… one of those was right here beside me.” A gasp made his voice hitch when the memory pushed back in his consciousness and he spluttered, “It shot a Cyberman that was about to restart the unit and then… it came to kill me. Suddenly it was gone and a Cyberman flew just past the unit.”

“Easy. Don’t stress yourself.”

“I’m not,” Ianto murmured. “I’m all right. We… could check the CCTV later. See what we can find out about the Doctor’s visit.”

“Yeah.”

Thoughtfully, Jack returned to the readings on his wrist device.

“Jack?”

“Here,” he called back, looking around to see Toshiko come in. “I thought you were busy.”

“I am,” she told him earnestly. “Right now the computer’s processing the data transfer, though, which gives me a welcome break. Thought I’d check up on you.”

“Pleased to meet you, Dr. Sato,” Ianto said and decided at once that he liked her when he saw her step up beside him and smile softly.

“The pleasure’s mine, Ianto,” she replied. “Just call me Tosh.”

“Owen said I could support you by checking out the personnel files and the reports coming in from the field agents. Show me what I can do once I’m out, all right?”

“Sure,” Toshiko agreed with barely concealed surprise.

“Are you really so anxious to get back to work?” Jack chuckled. “Looks like we’ll have to tie you to the bed, huh?”

“Don’t you think I was tied to a bed long enough?” Ianto deadpanned. “How about getting me out of this first?”

Realizing his faux-pas way too late, Jack looked contrite. That didn’t stop him from teasing, though, “Well, what I had in mind is definitely more fun.”

Ianto rolled his eyes. If he had been uncertain before, he now knew for sure that neither the rumours nor Owen’s remarks about Jack’s libido were exaggerated.

“As long as I’m on top.”

Incredulously, Jack beamed at him. “That a promise?”

“No, just me following Owen’s advice not to take any shit from you.”

An expression of shock flit over Jack’s face before he laughed out loud.

“Ianto Jones, you have a wicked tongue!”

“Like that in a man, do you?” Ianto shot back.

As Jack gaped in delight, Toshiko blurted out, “Why, Jack, I don’t think we’ve ever seen you speechless before!”

Astonished by her own boldness she clapped her hand over her mouth. Mild embarrassment coloured her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Ianto muttered with curbed exuberance. “Speech is my only defence at the moment.”

“Well, Jack’s about to change that,” Toshiko gently told him.

“Yes, please,” Ianto murmured. “I’m so sick of being so useless. I need something to do.”

“You’re quite eager to get back to work, aren’t you?” Toshiko teased lightly. “You should take a break, let Owen take care of you and…”

“This break was way too long for my liking,” Ianto cut her short. “All I could do was think. All the horror I’ve seen, knowing that the people beside me were dying, all the people who were killed.” A sob escaped him. “I can’t ignore that. I can’t pretend everything’s all right now. I have to do… something… even if it’s just sorting files. Don’t exclude me. Please.”
“Ianto,” Jack gently said, putting his hand on his shoulder reassuringly. “Let’s take one step at a time. First we’ll get you out, then Owen will give you a once over, and then we’ll see what you can help us with. All right?”

“Talking about it… how’s the getting-me-out-part going?”

“Working on it,” Jack shrugged. “Okay,” he murmured to himself more than to the others as he began tapping commands into the device in his wrist strap. “I need to make it believe that its program is completed. Keep your fingers crossed, kids!”

Clank!

Ianto sucked in a sharp breath with shock as the clamps holding his head lost their grip on him and retracted into the machine’s frame.

Clank! Clank!

A howled sob accompanied the opening of the other clamps. In less than ten seconds Ianto was free. Crying agitatedly with joy and relief, Ianto lay in the frame, his body shuddering with the sudden loss of tension.

He felt the hands that took hold of his shoulders and the arm shoved under his legs, but he could not react in any way. Strong arms lifted him out of the machine and carried him away. Where they went Ianto could not tell. Tears blurred his eyes and he still shuddered involuntarily. Sobs bubbled up out of him in irregular succession.

Once Ianto gathered his senses, he realized that Jack was carrying him while Toshiko walked beside them, holding the IV bags. Ianto tensed when they stopped at the elevators, trying to wriggle out of Jack’s hold.

“No,” Jack firmly said. “Not yet. Relax. Give yourself a break, will you? Just until Owen’s examined you.”

“Hurts,” Ianto whined.

“I know. It’ll be better soon,” Jack assured him. “Relax now. C’mon.”

Ianto tried to do that which made him realize that he was still covered with the blanket Suzie had brought them, but other than that all he wore were his shoes. At once, he stiffened again in Jack’s hold, being self-conscious about his nakedness in the arms of this obviously interested man.

“Give me a break, too,” Jack murmured, seemingly reading Ianto’s mind. “I already told you that I won’t take advantage of the situation.”

Sceptically, Ianto glanced up at him only to see the smile Jack steadfastly directed at the elevator’s doors become somewhat sheepish.

“But forgive me for enjoying holding you, please, Ianto? Will you?”

Reluctantly, Ianto considered that. He’s honest, he realized. About his intention as well as about enjoying this. I think I can trust him. His heart skipped a beat when Jack turned his head to face him. He’s really worried that he’s doing something wrong. God, he looks downright cute. He choked. Hell, did I just think of him as being cute? He doesn’t read minds, does he? Please, don’t let him perceive my thoughts.
Jack appeared to be oblivious, though.

Actually, Ianto was terribly tired but so wound up that he had trouble relaxing in any way. He heard a bing and the doors to the elevator slid open. Jack stepped in.

“Thirtieth floor, right?”

“Hm hmm."

Toshiko pressed the according button and the carriage started to move down.

Surprisingly content, Ianto rested his head against Jack’s shoulder. Slowly but surely, he began to feel comfortable in the captain’s carry. The woollen coat scratched on the raw spots, but more than that he felt Jack’s thumb brush lightly over his skin. He sighed and closed his eyes.

“There you are,” was the next he heard. That was Owen. “Put him down here.”

Where? Ianto wondered as he was lowered onto something cool and soft. An examination table! Lying down hurt, but it was not as bad on here as it was in the conversion unit. Ianto groaned.

“Okay, okay,” Owen muttered beside him. “You can rest soon, Ianto. Just let me have a look at you, okay? Can we do that now?”

Before he could answer, Ianto’s gaze drifted up to Jack and his eyes widened with shock.

“Sir, your coat!”

“What’s wrong with it?” Jack asked.

Clumsily, as his muscles did not work as they were supposed to, he reached up to his head and felt something wet. With horror, he looked at his fingertips that were stained red.


“I can’t tell you if you don’t let me look at it,” Owen grunted, trying in vain to steady the young man. “Will you hold your head still for a moment?”

“Shhh,” Jack soothed, gently putting a hand on Ianto’s forehead. “Easy. It’s not as bad as it seems. Calm down, Ianto.”

“Hmm, that’s what I thought,” Owen murmured as he could finally take a look at the wound.

“What!” Ianto cried out, holding himself rigid but shivering inside. “What is it?”

“It’s from the clamps that held your head,” Jack calmly told him and glanced at Owen who nodded grimly. “Now, I’ll tell you, but don’t freak. All right?”

“Y-yeah,” Ianto agreed shakily, his flailing hand finding and clawing at Jack’s greatcoat.

“There were drills inside the clamps. They pierced the skin…”

“Drills?!” Ianto squeaked in a panic. “What are you tal… Oh, my God! For the helmet? Is it that? What did they do to me?”

“Stay still, Ianto!” Owen complained. “I can’t work like this.”
“Very compassionate, Dr. Harper,” Jack scolded. “Ianto, it’s just superficial. It started to bleed when the drills didn’t press on the wound anymore.”

“You sure?”

Jack looked at Owen who just grunted a confirmation.

“It’s only a flesh wound. You’ll be all right,” Jack murmured, smoothing his thumb over the onset of Ianto’s hair comfortingly. “It’s okay. Just relax. Everything’s all right.”

“No, it’s not,” Ianto whined. Tears stung his eyes that he did not want to let flow. Still a few escaped and ran into the fresh wound, their salt stinging.

“Could you turn your head a little?” Owen snarled, threading his fingers in Ianto’s hair in order to move it for him. “C’mon. Would make working a lot easier.”

“Owen, you’re an insensitive twat,” Jack admonished.

“Hey, you were the one who was in a hurry,” Owen shot back, momentarily looking up from where he leaned over the table to get better access. “And now you’re fussing over him?”

“Just doing what you told me to do.”

“No need to pamper him, Jack. We have to get finished eventually.”

Not for the first time since he was found, Ianto got the impression that the people who were supposed to help him were fighting over him, which confused and annoyed him. He tried to squirm away, but had to realize that he was horribly weak and unable to escape Owen. Then there was Jack who smiled at him so maddeningly, his hand still on Ianto’s forehead, caressing him.

“Shhh. Ignore him, Ianto,” Jack told him, his voice still gentle but with a firm edge. “Focus on me.”

Ianto snorted a laugh.

“What? Am I not more pleasant than Owen’s first aid?”

Ianto’s now familiar eye-roll made Owen laugh, “Jack, it looks like he sees right through you. He’s a clever one, after all.”

Jack pouted.

Owen shook the smirk off his face and returned to his task. Even though he was being careful, his treatment hurt and Ianto tried to escape him again.

“Stop it,” Jack chuckled, gently taking hold of Ianto’s chin. “It’ll only take longer this way. C’mon. Focus on me instead.” It did not really work as Ianto was tense in his hold and squinted at Owen in an attempt to figure out what he was doing. “Hey, kid. Didn’t you just want to tell me when I can take you out for dinner?”

At once, Ianto’s attention was back on Jack.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Awww, c’mon,” Jack smirked at him and quirked his eyebrows. “You know you want to.”

“No, I don’t,” Ianto insisted.
Jack pouted.

“And here I thought that my chances for a date with you rose by… thirty percent after getting you out of that thing.”

Ianto shot him a look that could have pierced a Chula war ship’s hull.

“No.”


The way Ianto quirked his eyebrow was so cute that Jack laughed out loud.

“I really like you, kid!”

This was something that really irritated Ianto so he asked, “Why do you keep calling me kid?”

Jack’s good natured laughter was even more irritating.

“Don’t you worry, Ianto,” Owen chuckled while he finished dressing the wound on Ianto’s right temple. “He calls everyone kid, well, everyone he likes.”

“And if not?”

Jack smirked. “Bastard, idiot, jerk… pick one!”

“You really enjoy this.”

Jack chuckled. “Yep.”

There was no malice in his eyes and features, though, so Ianto could not be seriously angry with him. It was just the way the captain was, exuberant and irrepressible.

“I’d have to be made out of stone not to react to a beautiful man in my arms.” Jack’s smirk took on a lascivious cast. “Especially when he’s naked.”

“Then you better draw as much pleasure out of it as you can,” Ianto teased, “because you won’t get another chance.”

“And here’s me hoping I would get to experience that wicked tongue you were so proud of earlier,” Jack pouted.

“Not even in your dreams,” Ianto swore.

Even as he spoke, Ianto sensed that it was not the entire truth. He saw the captain’s expression change fractionally and knew that this was not just banter anymore. It might have started as that, being the best way Jack knew to distract Ianto from Owen’s ministrations, but now it was more than that. Ianto sensed real interest and by the way Jack was looking at him now, he could tell that it was not interest in his body alone. He had caught the captain’s curiosity.

No lewd remark was forthcoming from Jack and that alone was telling.

Clearing his throat, Owen growled, “Without wanting to disturb your tête-à-tête… could you turn on your side or, even better, on your stomach so I can continue patching you up?”

Once more, Ianto groaned. He did not want to move. He did not want to be poked at again.
“I’ll help you, kid,” Jack murmured and walked around the examination table to get on the other side.

“No,” Ianto moaned and struggled to roll to the right. Without success. Involuntary tears shot into his eyes while pain and rage bubbled up inside him at his inability to do something as simple as turning around.

“Easy, Ianto. Take your time,” Jack murmured tenderly close to his ear. “I know you hurt, but it’ll get better soon.”

It was so strange to be mothered by Jack, a seasoned soldier and head of Torchwood Three, and still it felt perfectly appropriate. Something that Ianto could not explain.

Is he lying down beside me? Ianto wondered as he felt the wool of the greatcoat brush against his skin and he opened his eyes…

…to stare straight into Jack’s, the captain hovering over the examination table, his hands on Ianto’s shoulders, steadying him.

“All right. We’ll do this together, okay?”

“Hm hmm,” Ianto replied tearfully.

Jack reached under Ianto’s left arm to carefully take his shoulder for a better leverage. Accidentally, he touched one of the sore spots, making Ianto groan with pain. “Sorry.”

Ianto grabbed the greatcoat behind Jack’s upper arm and nodded curtly. It was an effort, but he rolled on his right side. Ianto moaned as he stretched in the new position.

“There you go,” Jack praised. “See what you did. Was easier than you thought, right?”

“No.” Ianto’s muscles were burning and he felt how he started to shiver. He moaned again. His whole body was so bloody sore and he knew he could not have turned by himself as he still had trouble to control his limbs after the long time of forced rigidity. Ianto felt terribly weak, stiff and sore, and his arms and legs did not seem to belong to his body at all. It was not that they were asleep, he did not feel pins and needles, but they just did not work.

“Easy, Ianto,” Jack murmured, caressing his cheek. “You’re doing great.”

“Just get it over with,” Ianto snarled. “Oweeeeeeen!”

“Sorry,” Owen muttered when he heard his name extend into a cry of pain. He had carefully taken hold of Ianto’s left lower leg to lift it up and reach for the laces of the shoe to finally get it off. The doctor refused to let go of him now and fumbled the laces open. Then he pulled the shoe off.

Ianto grunted.

“It’s okay, kid,” Jack murmured, slightly shifting his position to draw Ianto’s head closer so that it came to rest on his shoulder. His arm snaked around him and he ruffled his hair affectionately. “Shhh. I know. I know. Easy. Shhh.”

Ianto let himself be comforted. When he felt Owen remove his other shoe, he whimpered softly. Reflexively, he clawed at Jack’s coat. Enveloped by the captain’s arms, he felt strangely safe and secure. His constant murmuring of nonsense was a lulling drone in his ears.
“Ouch!” Owen hissed lowly, and Jack craned his neck to look up at him.

“What?”

Owen was rummaging through his doctor’s case, murmuring to himself, “Shit! There must be… where’s that bloody bottle?” Picking one out, he shook it but it seemed to be empty. “Shit!”

“What?” Jack pushed.

“I ran out of Savlon.”

“And now?”

“Well, this is the med ward, right?” Owen shrugged. “Bet I’ll find some here.”

A whimper escaped Ianto and he dug his fingers harder into the thick wool. His insides churned with the idea of another delay.

“It won’t take long. You’ll see. Owen will be right back.”

Despite Jack’s reassurances, Ianto whimpered with anxiety as well as pain. Holding on to the coat like this put strain on his sore limbs that started to hurt now along with his back.

“Got it!” Owen cheered and returned to Ianto. “Now let’s see…”

“What are you going to do?” Ianto moaned.

“I’ve got to treat the raw spots,” Owen told him dryly. “Your heels are raw as are your ankles and wrists, abraded from repeated struggling against the restraints. You also have pressure sores that need to be washed and…”

“I have what?” Ianto cut him short, his voice breaking with impending panic. “You mean like bedsores? You can die from those!”

“Well,” Owen sighed, “if they’re in the last stage, the flesh open to reveal the bone, you’re right. In your case… you’ll live. They’re not that bad, more like rope burns. You’ll heal in a few days.”

“Will I have to go to hospital?” Ianto queried agitatedly.

“Why? Do you want to?”

“No!”

“Lucky you then,” Owen snickered. “Hospital won’t be necessary.”

Owen’s explanation did nothing to comfort Ianto. Rigid he lay, clinging to Jack for dear life, while the medic treated the sore spots. Every now and then, he whimpered when the woundwash burned on his skin.

“You really don’t do well with doctors,” Owen murmured, patching up the last spot on Ianto’s shoulder. “So… Done.”

“Told you so.”

“Yeah, you did,” Owen agreed.
Jack could not help but notice how tense Ianto still was. While his reassurances helped with keeping his panic at bay, they did little for easing the death grip Ianto had on his coat.

“Hey, kid,” Jack cheered, giving him a peck on the forehead. “All done!”

“Still hurts,” Ianto sobbed. At the same time, he tried to wrap his head around the fact that Jack had kissed him, and that that caused a pleasant glow inside of him.

“I know,” Jack whispered, gently ruffling Ianto’s hair. “It’ll be a little better with every day. You’ll see.”

I shouldn’t feel so content with him, Ianto thought. I’m engaged with Lisa.

Ianto’s train of thought derailed at that point.

Lisa! She’s dead! So is Markham! And Virginia! So many others, all killed by the Cybermen. What right did I have to survive? And what the hell am I doing here, betraying Lisa? How can I even think of enjoying Jack’s caresses?! But I do. Shame on me.

A gasp escaped him.

How could I? I should be the one who died.

It did not remain hidden from Jack that Ianto fought battling emotions. This time neither caresses nor murmured nonsense helped, though. The young Welshman became more agitated by the minute. Jack wondered what else he should do when Ianto finally relaxed. Even though he was obviously fighting it, he drifted off to sleep.

“Ianto?” Jack murmured.

“Don’t bother, Jack,” Owen told him matter of factly. “He won’t hear you.”

“What did you do?”

Owen bristled at the accusatory tone. “He needs the rest, Jack. I just gave him something to relax. He fell asleep on his own.”

Scowling deeply, Jack brushed his hand over Ianto’s arm. He looked so young and vulnerable now.

“They do have beds here, don’t they?” the captain asked.

“Yeah.”

“All right.” Jack straightened awkwardly, as Ianto’s grip on his coat did not lessen despite him being asleep now, and lifted the young man up in his arms. “Let’s make him more comfortable.”

tbc…
“I really don’t understand why you were arguing,” Jack said, as he entered his code into the electronic lock protecting the armoury.

“I wasn’t arguing,” Owen grumbled. “I was just asking to be sure, because you were so intent on getting us back to work before.”

“Right.” As the door unlocked and swished open, Jack stepped in, the medic right on his heels, running into him when the captain abruptly pivoted around. “But you wouldn’t leave Ianto alone either, Owen, would you?”

“True,” Owen huffed, “but I can still be surprised that you insisted on Tosh staying with him.”

“He’s been through enough. We don’t have to add to his torment by leaving him to wake up to an empty med ward.”

Without waiting for an answer this time, Jack returned his attention to the rows of stored weapons and ammunition.

Rolling his eyes, Owen muttered to himself, “As if that had anything to do with it.”

“You can’t let it slide, can you?” Jack chuckled.

Silently, Owen cursed. Why did he always forget how good the captain’s hearing was?

Jack could not help himself but tease, “If I didn’t know better I’d think you’re jealous.”

“Keep dreaming,” Owen spat.

“Oh, how gorgeous those dreams are…”

Deciding that it was better to ignore the lewd comment, Owen queried, “So what now?”

“Dreaming’s allowed, isn’t it?” Jack said to himself, his amusement carrying in his voice. He entered a row between the shelves, having a closer look at the stored weapons. “Those were for field use.”

“Really?” Owen said incredulously, realizing only now how extensive the armoury was. Both shelves were filled with two rows of machine guns. On the other side of the centre aisle was a similar row that was empty.

“Yeah… for the security officers,” Jack replied absently, taking a gun and weighing it in his hand. “They carried them on regular duty.”

“Fat lot of good they were against the Cybermen,” Owen grunted.

Snorting derisively, Jack put the gun back in its place.

“Leaving the breach alone would’ve been helpful,” he pressed through gritted teeth and squeezed past Owen. Activating his wrist band, he slowly went down the centre aisle. At the fifth row, he
turned right to examine the weapons there.

“What the hell…?”

“What did you find?”

Walking down the row, letting his hand trail along the board, Jack muttered, “Two shelves… I can’t believe it…”

Thoughtfully massaging his chin with thumb and knuckle of his right hand, Owen stood beside Jack, wondering why he was so fascinated, and kind of upset, by a couple of guns.

“These guns… that’s impossible. They shouldn’t have such weapons.”

“Why? What are they?”

“Particle guns. They shouldn’t have particle guns. They’re way ahead of their time…” Jack trailed off, at a loss to explain. He could not tell Owen more about the weapons without giving away why he knew so much. Thankfully the medic did not ask. “We shouldn’t leave them for UNIT, but we can’t spirit them away either,” he thought aloud. “I should have a word with the Brigadier.”

This time it was Owen who took a gun to examine it closer. Turning it in his hand, he tried to figure it out.

“How does it work?”

“Hey! Put it back!” Jack reprimanded him brusquely.

“Don’t panic. I don’t plan to vaporise you.”

“Well…” Jack groaned, rushing to grab the gun on the other end and removing it from Owen, “then you shouldn’t play around with it, especially not in that direction.”

“Keep teasing me and I might change my mind,” Owen grunted, releasing the gun from his hold. Jack put the weapon back on the shelf.

“Let’s check out the rest of their weaponry,” he said. “Hope there won’t be any more surprises.”

Actually there was and so Owen found himself carefully packing inconspicuous items into wooden crates. Jack would not tell him what they were and strolled off, intent on searching another room for further bombshells.

Once out of Owen’s sight, Jack leaned against the wall, closing his eyes, breathing consciously. While the air rushed in and out of his lungs, Jack tried to empty his mind. Since the moment he knew that the Doctor was in London, he had been in an uproar. He could keep his emotions locked inside as long as he was busy dealing with the volatile rift, but as soon as he was confined to the Hub by the lockdown, his mind started to reel. It still amazed him that he had slept for as long as he did. And pounding Ydris into the mattress only helped so much with distracting him from the whole debacle.

Now Ianto has confirmed that the Doctor was here. Well, I didn’t really need any more confirmation. Still, it makes it more real. I missed him, by a hair’s breadth I missed him. I can’t believe I missed him!

Ianto. He knows more than he’s letting on. He’s interesting. And pretty. He grinned to himself. And his voice. It’s unusually deep for his age. Love those Welsh vowels. God, I’ve gone native.
The latter elicited a wry chuckle. Banging his head against the wall, Jack shook himself back to reality. *I don’t have time for this.*

Pulling himself together, he began his search.

xXx

Waking up slowly, Ianto marvelled at how comfortable he was. Opening his eyes was difficult as he was not awake enough yet. Lying prone on a soft mattress with clean sheets and fluffy covers tucked over him, Ianto felt as content as he could be. Still there was something odd and a moment later, he realized what it was. His head rested on something woollen that was bunched up on his right upper arm. Feeling at ease at that moment, he did not bother exploring it further and drifted off to a light sleep again.

When he woke up a little while later, Ianto wondered why it felt so special that he was, in fact, content. Memory set in and with it his insides churned. Still, he was happy to see that nothing had changed. It was real. He was finally free. The wool was scratchy. It smelled as well, and not pleasantly.

*What is it?*

Shifting his position in order to lift his head reminded him of the abrasions he had suffered. While his muscles were not as sore anymore, his back and joints still hurt from repeated struggling. Pressing his eyes shut, Ianto sucked in a sharp breath, held it, and let it go slowly. Carefully, he readjusted his position. Looking down, he found his suspicion confirmed: He slept on Captain Harkness’s greatcoat.

“Jack?”

*Jack? What am I thinking calling him by first name? Well, he told me to, but still.*

No response.

*They left me alone!*

Turning his head was an effort. In a chair beside the bed Toshiko Sato slept with arms and head on the small table in front of her, almost burying her laptop.

“Dr. Sato?”

When she did not react, Ianto tried it a bit louder, “Dr. Sato!”

She finally stirred. Slowly, she lifted her head and stretched her neck against the kinks. Rolling her shoulders, she straightened in the chair.

“Ianto. Sorry I fell asleep. Do you need something?”

Actually surprised by her question, he needed a moment to consider that.

“Something to drink would be nice, ma’am” he finally conceded. “Where’s Owen?”

“Last time I heard from them they wanted to go to the armoury. And please, call me Tosh.”
Accepting that, Ianto nodded.

“Why do I have the captain’s coat?”

At that, Toshiko had to suppress a chuckle. She did not want to appear like she was making fun of their patient. So she said as earnestly as she could manage, “Because you wouldn’t let go of him.”

“Oh.”

Ianto felt his cheeks heat up with embarrassment and he reflexively pulled the covers further up. Could it get any worse? Obviously, yes.

“Don’t worry, Ianto,” Toshiko said gently. “You were asleep. It was a reflex.”

The young Welshman did not look convinced, chewed rather sheepishly on his bottom lip.

“Here.” Smiling encouragingly, Toshiko held out a water bottle to him.

With a suppressed groan, Ianto propped himself up on his right elbow and accepted the bottle that already was unscrewed. Sipping at the water, he relished its freshness. Drinking also allowed him to back out of the conversation.

What conversation? I didn’t contribute much lately.

He could not hide behind the bottle forever, though, so he let his gaze drift to the laptop and asked, “What are you working on?” To his infinite surprise, Toshiko flushed a faint red. Probably because she fell asleep as well.

“I was about to go through the personnel files to get a better overview of the survivors.”

“Did you already check on the crisis reports?”

“Crisis reports?”

Ianto nodded and pushed the bottle in Toshiko’s hand. “Yeah. After a crisis, all Torchwood personnel reports to the headquarters.”

“And a worldwide invasion by Cybermen definitely qualifies as a crisis.”

“Well,” Ianto grunted as he shoved off the cover and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, “as soon as a situation warrants the classification of a level B or A threat, all offices and agents automatically receive a warning. You must have gotten one when the headquarters went into alert.”

“I… don’t think so,” Toshiko murmured, astonished by Ianto’s explanation. She watched his efforts to stand up, and tried to curb his enthusiasm with chiding gently, “Hey, what are you doing? You should stay in bed.”

“I want to help,” Ianto declared. “Why didn’t you get the alert? It went to everyone in Torchwood.”

Taking him by the shoulders, Toshiko tried to urge him back into bed.

“I don’t know, Ianto. Maybe we just were not aware as our Hub was under attack…”

“Your base was under attack?” Ianto called out.

“Yes,” Toshiko confirmed. “We had ghosts right down in our base, so the Cybermen could walk
right in once the passage opened.”

“Oh, my God. Owen didn’t tell me. That’s horrible.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Toshiko had to chuckle at how shocked Ianto was by the revelation given the fact that Torchwood Tower was overrun by Cybermen at the same time. Then she noticed what Ianto had forgotten about his eagerness to get to the computer.

“Ianto, you should really get back to bed,” she murmured, awkwardly reaching for the covers and looking the younger man straight in the eye in order not to glance anywhere else.

“I’m not an invalid. I can help… if you let me.”

“Um… I’ll think about it if you wait a moment,” Toshiko assured him as she pulled the blankets across his lap.

Seeing her obvious discomfort made Ianto aware of his nudity and he quickly grabbed the bedding from her to cover himself only to get tangled up with the tube of his IV.

“Can’t we get this off?” he complained as she headed for a cupboard. “The bags are empty by now anyway.”

From where she went through the drawers, Toshiko followed his gaze to the IV bags.

“Yeah, we can remove the tube from the port,” she agreed. Seeing his disappointment, she explained, “I don’t want to do it wrong, Ianto. We should leave removing the catheter to Owen.”

After some more rummaging, she returned to the bed, holding up the hospital gown she had found. Ianto rolled his eyes but held out his hand for her to remove the tube. Then he slipped on the gown and wrinkled his nose at the fact that no wrapping it around his body could change the fact that it was open on the back. Scowling, he reached for the greatcoat.

“Better,” he declared as he closed the coat’s belt around the wide shirt. “There’s a gym on the floor right above. How about you go and see if you can find me some clothes and I’ll check on the reports?”

Toshiko appeared quite sceptical.

“I won’t ruin your notebook,” Ianto smiled reassuringly. “Just get me into One’s system. I know that inside out. Well, the part I have the clearance for.”

For another moment, Toshiko hesitated before she stepped aside to allow him to sit down in her seat. Leaning in from beside him, she reactivated the computer and pulled up the Institute’s database.

“I’m already logged in,” she said. “You should be able to get it all.”

Curiously, Ianto glanced up at her, but he just smiled and said, “Thanks.”

xXx

“What the hell…? Why aren’t you in bed?”

Being lost in thought, Ianto did not even notice Owen’s return to the med ward. Blankly, he stared at the monitor.
“Ianto? What are you doing up?” Owen admonished. “You should rest.”

“I’ve had enough rest,” Ianto replied tonelessly. “I’m sick of being useless. Toshiko understands that.”

“Oh, and I don’t?” Owen huffed.

“I didn’t say that,” Ianto sighed, still not looking at the medic. “You just act like you don’t.”

Snorting derisively, Owen dropped on the edge of the bed. “So what are you doing?”

“I checked on the crisis reports and compared the list UNIT compiled with Torchwood’s… labour pool…” He trailed off as the words caught in his throat.

Suspiciously, Owen watched him. In his opinion, Ianto did not look good. He should not be working, no matter how easy a task appeared to be. Secretly, he cursed Toshiko for giving in to Ianto’s request. There was a reason why he did not want Ianto to take part in the operation that had nothing to do with his physical state, and it looked like the young Welshman just found it.

“Six.”

“Come again?” Owen prodded as Ianto had spoken so lowly that he hardly heard it.

“Six,” Ianto repeated not much louder, his voice hoarse with emotion.

It was not hard for Owen to guess what Ianto meant and he had not expected a lot of survivors, but the number Ianto told him now still astonished him.

“That can’t be right,” the medic argued, thinking of the survivors currently waiting in the Millennium Dome. “How many people worked here?”

“Eight-hundred and twenty-three.”

“Bloody hell!” it escaped Owen and his eyes grew wide. He knew One was big, but not that there were so many employees. “See, that can’t be right. Certainly more agents will have to send in their reports and UNIT treated survivors who escaped the tower down at the triage or send them to hospital. I’m sure there’ll be more than six.”

“I don’t know,” Ianto said miserably. “Agent McCrimmon sent his report. I’ve got that and five others who were not here when the Cybermen attacked…”

“And anyone else could not report yet,” Owen firmly said. He felt the urge to curse but opted for reassuring his patient. “I know you don’t want to hear that, but we probably won’t know how many of Torchwood really survived for several days, if not weeks, to come.” He hesitated to mention the fully and partially converted victims. Some might never be found while others would have to be identified by DNA analysis.

“They might be unable to report, wounded or dealing with other matters,” Ianto tonelessly said, “like Jack was dealing with the Rift.”

“Yes,” Owen steadfastly agreed. “You’ll see, there’re more than just six survivors.” That would be outrageous.

Both men sat in silence until footsteps made them look around to see Toshiko coming in, carrying a bundle.
“What did I miss?” This time, Ianto did not answer, just kept staring at the screen. “Ianto?”

“He made a list of survivors,” Owen explained.

“Oh?” Toshiko was stunned. “But that can’t be representative yet, right? It’ll take days until we’ll know for sure.”

“Right,” Owen stated. “I already told Ianto that there will be more than six Torchwood employees who survived the invasion.”

“Six?” Toshiko’s eyes widened and she rushed to her computer, pushed the bundle in Ianto’s lap and turned the laptop to her. “That’s the number you got?” She scrolled the list up and down and looked at the cross references. Even though she knew that this could not be the final number, the colour drained from her face and she whispered, “Oh, my God. I knew they were in the centre of the storm, so to speak, but this…”

“Guess I can count myself lucky,” Ianto murmured.

At once, Owen was alert again as he heard a trace of guilt lace Ianto’s voice. “Not your fault.”

“I know,” Ianto said and tonelessly continued, “While I was trapped… I heard the others scream. I talked with them… then they died. For a while, I thought I was the only survivor.” A dry and bitter laugh escaped him. “Last man on earth.”

“Oh, Ianto, I’m sorry,” Toshiko murmured.

A sharp remark was on the tip of Ianto’s tongue, but he bit it back to ask, “What did you find?”

“A track suit. Took me some time to find briefs, but there are trainers in the bundle. I thought they would be more comfortable than your shoes.”

“Probably,” Ianto murmured, tentatively rotating his feet to see how sore he still was.

“I still think you should go back to bed,” Owen declared.

“Noted,” Ianto said and held out his hand toward the medic. “Now remove the IV port, please.”

“You know, Ianto,” Jack cheerfully cut in as he strode in, “I’d love to get you into bed as well.” His grin testified to his vivid imagination. “But I have to admit that you look adorable in that hospital gown. So… if he insists, Owen, do as he asks.”

“Hey, guys, I am the doctor,” Owen complained.

“That’s why I’m asking you instead of pulling it out myself,” Ianto deadpanned. “Now, will I die of old age before you do it or…”

Grimacing at his patient, Owen got up from the bed and gestured Ianto to take his place. Then he went to get an antiseptic.

“What did you find?” Toshiko asked, nodding at the two oversized round handles Jack carried in both hands and that reminded her of curling stones.

“Oh, these,” Jack grinned broadly. “You’ll love these.” Putting one on the floor, he sat the other on the top of a table and pressed a button on the handle. There was a low humming sound as the device activated and then Jack lifted up the table with a single hand.
“That why you wanted to go back up to the breach chamber?” Owen grunted, setting to work on Ianto.

“Yep. They cancel a subject’s mass. Helps us getting our stuff to the trucks.”

“Great,” Owen huffed. “And here I thought UNIT would be left some work, too.”

“They’ll have enough to do dealing with the rest,” Jack told him and put the table back down. “I just meant that we can move everything we don’t want them to lay hand on by ourselves.”

“I’m so looking forward to it,” Owen grunted and applied a plaster to the back of Ianto’s hand. “So. Finished.”

“Thanks. And thank you, Tosh, for the clothes.”

“No problem.”

Leaning against a cupboard with a wide smirk, Jack threw in, “I love the look you’re wearing right now.”

“Oh, really?” Ianto teased. “You’re just saying that because I used the belt of your coat.”

“No, I’m saying that because it’s showing off your legs.” A salacious grin cracked his features as his gaze rose up from Ianto’s legs to meet his gaze. “You’re looking delectable.”

To his own surprise, Ianto felt his cheeks heat up and wondered if he actually blushed. Oh, shit, judging by Jack’s predatory expression I did. At the same time, he realized that he better not turned his back on Jack as long as he just wore the hospital gown.

“I love the coat,” Ianto said, subconsciously brushing his hand over one end of the belt. “But it has suffered a lot recently. It will need dry cleaning. Anyway, the track suit will be quite practical right now.”

He saw Jack’s face fall which reminded Ianto that the coat was not the only one who had suffered in the wake of the invasion.

“The track suit might be a bit warm in bed,” Owen snarled.

Ianto grimaced. “Probably, but I’m not going back to bed.”

“Too bad,” Jack snickered.

“I’ll get dressed now, then you can tell me what I can do to help.”

“All right,” Jack agreed, still smiling but without a teasing tone this time.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Jack.” Obviously, Owen was not happy with the captain’s decision. “Ianto needs to recover.”

“That’s Ianto’s decision,” Jack told him.

“And you think he can make that decision?” Owen snapped. “He’s traumatized. He belongs in bed not at a desk.”

Lightly slapping the back of Owen’s head, Ianto said, “He is standing right beside you and he will slap you silly for any more comments like that.”
“I really like you, kid,” Jack cheered. “Jump into the clothes and we’re ready to go.”

Grabbing the bundle, Ianto retreated to the bathroom.

Watching him go, Jack noticed with disappointment that the belt held the gown firmly in place without offering as much as a glimpse at Ianto’s presumably perfect butt if his legs were any indication.

Pouting, Owen dropped onto the bed. “Still don’t like it.”

“Would you prefer leaving him behind to sneak off on his own and get into more trouble than he will if he comes along with us?” Toshiko prodded.

Owen shook his head.

“We’ll keep an eye on him,” Jack declared, hopping backwards to sit onto the cupboard.

“Oh, that’s reassuring,” Owen huffed.

tbc…
Torchwood tower

About two hours later, Jack was thoroughly convinced that Ianto did not promise too much when he said that he would save them time. Before they even knew it, he took over the work on the computer, which enabled Toshiko to actively support the team. He also got an earpiece to stay in touch with the team while they went to search for whatever they did not want to fall into UNIT’s hands.

At first, Ianto was very busy, but in the end, he just followed the movements of the team members. Being connected with the internal surveillance was interesting. Ianto had not been aware that it was so… pervasive. Of course, he had known that the security was immense, but in retrospect, he felt that his superiors had been spying on him. The profound invasion of his privacy almost made him want to find a place to hide and the idea that the Cybermen possibly infiltrated this security system made his stomach churn.

I should ask Toshiko about all those extras, Ianto thought. I seriously doubt that the people subjected to the external surveillance knew that they were being watched.

On second thought, he probably did not want to know more. Besides, it was likely that Torchwood One would be closed for good and then it did not matter anymore anyway.

I wonder if Three does this, too. Probably not. They've been renegades since Harkness took over.

Ianto really would like to know more about the back stories of Captain Jack Harkness and Torchwood Three. It would be easy to pull up the respective files on the computer, but Ianto shied back from it, feeling like he was no better than One’s management if he did that.

Now that Ianto was not quite so busy anymore, he had more time to think and when he pushed the thoughts of Jack and Three aside, other, heavier, subjects returned to him.

Nobody said what’ll happen to the bodies.

One thing seemed to be sure, though, and that was that Three would not have anything to do with it. The cleanup beyond seizing artefacts, files, and technology would be UNIT’s task.

Will they get a proper funeral?

Somehow, Ianto doubted it.

I have to find Lisa!

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, he jumped up and went to search for his fiancé. He neither hesitated nor considered informing the team about his intention. All he knew right then was that he had to find the woman he loved and make sure that she was treated with respect and care.

Where to start? Upstairs. She was still there after her… upgrade. He choked. She could still be around the conversion units.

Chills ran down Ianto’s spine at the idea of returning to the place where he had spent seemingly endless hours trapped.
But the Cybermen are gone. The conversion units alone can’t do anything to me.

The lift carried Ianto back up to the forty-ninth floor. Stepping out of the carriage, the young Welshman took a deep breath. The smells assaulting his nose brought flashbacks to his mind and he hesitated to advance further.

Pull yourself together, Ianto. You owe this to Lisa.

Steeling himself, he strode down the corridor to start his search.

xXx

Toshiko was the first who noticed that Ianto did not answer his comm. and of course, Owen picked up on the fact as well.

“I’m closer to the med ward,” Jack told him. “I’ll check on him.”

“He might need medical assistance,” Owen countered.

For a moment, Jack mulled over that before he agreed to meet Owen there. It was not just his empathy that made him worry for the young Welshman but also his responsibility as their leader. He was in command and he loathed the idea of losing Ianto now that they finally got him out of his predicament.

“You shouldn’t have allowed him to help, least of all stay here on his own,” the medic ranted as he strode into the room where Jack already stood beside Ianto’s vacated chair.

“Maybe he just went to the bathroom,” Jack suggested.

“He could’ve told us so!”

Without another word, Jack turned around and checked the bathroom out. Nobody was there.

“Maybe he’s having a flashback and went looking for a safe place to hide,” Owen thought out loud. “Great, now we’ll have to search for him. As if we didn’t have enough to do already.”

“Hey, what kind of work ethic is that, Doctor?” Jack teased.

“For your information… I was the one who wanted to stuff him in bed and leave him there,” Owen grumped.

Jack smirked.

“He can’t be far away. You go right, I’ll go left.”

Disliking the joyful tone of the captain’s voice, Owen snarled, “Jack, this isn’t foreplay, this is serious.”

“I know we’re not playing hide and seek, Owen,” Jack replied. “We’ll find him.”

“Better sooner than later.” Owen shook his head. “Maybe I should ask UNIT if they’ve seen him downstairs? Who’s to say he didn’t just leave?”
Scowling, Jack let his view drift around the room. He did not believe that Ianto had left the building, he saw no reason why he should do that. As eager as Ianto had been to support them it had to be something important that made him leave so suddenly and without a message.

*Or has something taken him?* Inwardly, Jack cringed. *No. Nothing’s in here. UNIT made sure of that. He must’ve left on his own accord. Just why?*

“Ianto?” Owen called out and started his search by looking into a closet. “Ianto!”

“Keep searching here,” Jack told him as he just got an idea where the Welshman might have gone. “I’ll let you know if I find him first.”

Grunting something unintelligible that was probably heavily salted with profanity, Owen shooed him out.

xXx

*I probably shouldn’t be ignoring the others’ calls,* Ianto mused as he stalked down a corridor between plastic curtained cubicles and fumbled with the earpiece in his pocket. *But would they allow me to lay Lisa to rest with the dignity she deserves? She was already converted after all.*

Tears blurred his sight.

*I owe it to her to give her at least a decent funeral. Nobody should’ve died like this. They all ought to have that honour. Maybe I should try and make them see that. Maybe they’ll let the victims’ families have at least the human remains to be buried.*

Ianto knew it was unlikely. What he did not know yet was how to get Lisa out of the tower when he found her. Judging by what Owen had told him Torchwood Three was not the only one on site right now. UNIT guarded the entrances and the plaza and would have soldiers go through all storeys and recover the bodies as soon as Torchwood gave them the thumbs up. How was he supposed to get past them?

*I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.*

Once more, Ianto’s insides constricted when he checked on just another cubicle. This time, he found a body and goosebumps settled on his back when he took in the sight of the petiteblonde who was trapped in the machine. Some of the instruments stuck in her body, one of the saws being about to separate her leg.

Despite his horror, Ianto approached the conversion unit to have a closer look at the woman.

*The tattoo on her ankle! This is Virginia!*

His joy of having found the woman who kept him company during his entrapment was quickly tainted by the realization of how much more she must have suffered before death relieved her.

*This is worse than I imagined. I didn’t want her to go, but now I’m glad that she didn’t have to suffer anymore.*

Trying to ignore the sight of the instruments, Ianto had a closer look at her features. He did not think
that he met her before. Judging just by her face, it looked as if she was asleep and Ianto was glad that her expression, though not peaceful, revealed nothing of the torture she had to endure.

Tears were running freely when Ianto reached out to brush his fingers gently along her cheek.

“Goodbye, Virginia. Thank you.”

His promise came back to his mind. He had given her his word that he would inform her mother and make sure that her ashes were scattered in the Highlands. Now Ianto realized that he could not keep it. There was no way that he could get her out of this unit and out of the tower unnoticed. After a moment’s internal debate, Ianto reached for the earpiece to put it back on and call for Jack.

When he was about to activate it, he changed his mind. His gaze drifted back to Virginia. Maybe he should try it nevertheless?

Tears brimmed his eyes when he took in her mutilated body. There were augmented parts and the saw stuck in her flesh where it had been about to prepare her for another artificial limb. His heart ached and he yearned to make it up to her somehow.

“I wish I could make it better, but… there isn’t anything that… could help.” A sob escaped him. “At least you don’t have to suffer anymore.”

Torn between duty and his obligation to Lisa and Virginia, Ianto contemplated if he should not go and find his fiancé before he contacted Jack. It would be easier to argue with the captain when he could show him her body.

“Would that really make a difference?”

It was then that he felt watched and he steeled himself for the dressing down that was certain to come.

xXx

Reaching the forty-ninth floor, Jack felt his hunch intensify. No trace of Ianto was to be seen, but still Jack could have sworn that he was there, somewhere among the Cybertech. For a moment, Jack hesitated but then he strode into the curtained off area.

When he first came here, he had been intent to get to Owen and tell him off for not leaving the survivor to some paramedics’ care. So he quickly went past the other cubicles to find the one where Ianto was trapped. Entering the situation, his anger evaporated.

At first sight, Jack realized why Owen had insisted on staying with the survivor. This was not about disobedience. The medic had done it because he saw the inadequacy of the paramedics who were unfamiliar with the Institute. Owen simply was better suited for caring for the man trapped in the alien machine. He had done it out of instinct and Jack could not be mad at him for that.

Now, Jack took a closer look at his surroundings. If he had thought that the attack at their Hub had been bad, he now realized that it could have been worse. Much worse.

Now where’s Ianto?
Automatically, Jack went straight to the cubicle where Ianto had been stuck, but found it to be empty.

*But he must be somewhere around here. I'm pretty certain he is.*

Proceeding through a few more cubicles, Jack got to another corridor and turned in the direction from where he heard voices.

*No, only one voice. Ianto’s.*

What he saw when he approached the cubicle and peeked through a gap in the plastic enclosure made his heart clench. Ianto was standing beside a conversion unit. The female body was mutilated and partially augmented with Cyberparts or at least the unit had started to add them. The sight reminded Jack of the fate they had barely escaped and his insides constricted painfully.

“Would that really make a difference?”

Jack choked down a lump in his throat. Even though he did not know the woman, grief tightened his chest. He saw Ianto tense and knew he had noticed him. Instead of addressing the Welshman, Jack tapped at his comm.

“Owen? I found him,” Jack relayed. “You can return to the archives. No, he’s all right. I’ll talk to him, you can be sure of that.” Then Jack deactivated his comm. “Ianto, what are you doing here?”

“I… um…”

“Ianto, I’m not mad at you. We were worried, though. Why did you just run away?”

“I…” Sheepishly, Ianto shifted his weight. “I wanted to find Lisa. I… wanted to know where she is… Make sure she’ll get a proper funeral.” Out of tear-brimming eyes, he looked around at Jack. “She’ll get a proper funeral, right?”

As much as Jack wanted to agree, he knew that he could not do that.

“I know that you have to make sure that no Cybertech can possibly endanger us,” Ianto said, sounding choked, “but… you could separate the tech from the bodies… leave the bodies for the families to bury.”

Biting his bottom lip, Jack searched for words. Actually, he had no idea yet of what lay ahead of them. His priority right now was to deal with the immediate problems. Whatever came next was totally beyond him.

“Jack, we owe it to them.”

Of course, Jack understood his obligation and told him so, “I know why you’re feeling that way, but I’m not sure if it will be possible.” Seeing the pleading look full of grief, Jack added, “I can’t promise, Ianto, but I’ll do my best to make it happen.”

Ianto eyed him sceptically. He wanted to believe Jack, but knowing Torchwood, he could not help but doubt that the bodies would actually be released.

“I’m sorry that I ran away without a word, but as soon as I thought of Lisa it was such a pressing feeling… I just had to…”

“It’s okay, Ianto,” Jack said, placing a hand reassuringly on his shoulder. “But next time tell us,
Okay. We can work it out together.”

Slowly, Ianto nodded.

“I think I found Virginia.” He looked at the woman trapped in the conversion unit. “I’ve never met her before. We talked while we were trapped and... She was... The conversion, it had started and... Sh-she died.”

Squeezing Ianto’s shoulder comfortingly was all Jack could come up with. He felt Ianto squirm and loosened his grip.

“She... was a big help for me,” Ianto tonelessly said, caressing her cheek.

Jack watched with mixed emotions as Ianto’s fingers trailed over the skin, right along the edge of the metal helmet.

“I’m so sorry that I couldn’t help you,” Ianto whispered. “I’ll do whatever is in my power to fulfil your wishes.” Then he leaned forward and tenderly kissed her forehead.

Jack was stunned by the emotional display.

“What were her wishes?” he softly asked.

When Ianto turned his gaze to Jack it was stern and his voice firm when he said, “She wanted to be cremated so I could scatter her ashes in the Highlands.” Then he added with determination. “And I intend to do that.”

A chill ran down Jack’s spine as he heard that, closely followed by a wave of pride that washed over him.

*I certainly don’t want to be on the wrong side of Ianto Jones’s wrath.*

With a strong sense of determination, Jack decided that he would talk with the Brigadier. Together, they should find a way to ensure that all victims of the Cyberinvasion would receive a proper funeral.

xXx

Once Jack had imprinted on Ianto that he should tell him whatever came to his mind instead of running off on his own, he accompanied him back to the med ward where Toshiko had set up base with her laptop. When they entered, he sensed the Welshman’s discomfort. After a moment’s thought, Jack decided to move the base to the store room downstairs where they left all the stuff they were going to take back to Cardiff. From there, Jack resumed his search for dangerous or valuable artefacts.

*Was Owen right when he said Ianto shouldn’t go back to work yet? Probably. He barely survived the invasion and lost his fiancé. On the other hand, he was stuck for a long time and consumed by survivor’s guilt, so he’s feeling edgy. It would be a shame not to accept his help as long as he’s offering. There’s really too much here for just the four of us to handle. I refuse to let UNIT in until we’ve been through all of it. I want to know what we’re leaving to them.*

In order to figure that out, he was in one of the labs, examining the technology and scanning what he
could not identify with his wrist strap. Thankfully, he did not find much that he did not expect to find. Most of what he came across could be trusted to UNIT.

He crossed the office between the labs when his cursory glance slid over the desks and happened to come to rest on a terrarium on a shelf. As much as he could tell, the occupant was just a common lizard, but the coral sitting in the centre of the artificial habitat caught his eye. Something about it was not common at all and he went to have a closer look.

The coral was neither big nor especially pretty. It did not have the many branches most corals developed yet. Still it appeared to be special, which might have been the reason why it was put up as the focus point of the arrangement.

Jack lifted the glass atop the terrarium and peered inside. The lizard vanished beneath a root when he reached in and carefully touched the coral with a fingertip.

The tiniest sense of a presence made him shy back.

That can’t be! Can it?

Once more, Jack reached in and gently took the coral by the stem to lift it up. A faint hum reverberated though him, when he held the coral in hands.

I can’t believe it! Where can I put her?

With absolute care, Jack sat the coral down on a desk and looked around the office in search for something he could use for transport. He found a carton and pulled several paper towels out of the box above the washbasin in the neighbouring lab. Crumpling the tissues up, he used them to cushion the carton.

Reverently, he then placed the coral in its soft bed.

“That’ll do for the trip to Cardiff, sweetie,” Jack murmured and smiled softly at the small being. “When you’re grown up you’ll have the most amazing adventures yourself. Oh, the places we’ll go.”

A last time, he caressed the coral before he placed the lid on the box and took it downstairs to ask Ianto to keep an eye on it while they finished their search.

tbc…
Ianto stood at the window and looked down at the city of London. Seeing the metropolis below put the recent events in a new perspective.

*Looks so ruddy normal, as if nothing out of the ordinary happened.* Ianto sighed. *We’re back to normal, too, cleaning up after Torchwood One. I’m exhausted, but at least it keeps me busy. The sun’s coming up already.*

In the distance, the egg-shaped façade of 30 St. Mary Axe glistened in the first morning light.

The Gherkin, Ianto involuntarily chuckled. *I never liked that nickname.*

“Stop brooding.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Ianto saw Jack step up beside him.

“I’m not brooding, I’m thinking,” he replied. “There’s a difference.”

“Same difference if you ask me.”

Ianto gave the captain an assessing glance. “I’ll remind you, you said that.”

At that Jack chuckled. “I see. So you plan to stick with us?”

Ianto did not answer. He did not know how. So far, he was too much in an uproar, no matter how serene he might appear. This was not a time to make decisions.

Beside him, Jack took a deep breath, straightening, and sagging a little when he released the air in an audible rush.

“You’ve done a great job so far,” Jack stated. “Takes some courage to pull yourself together like this.”

Right now, Ianto did not even know what to say to that compliment. He felt so torn around the edges. There had to be something that could restore his confidence but he could not see what it might be.

“I wasn’t any help.”

“Oh, yes, you were,” Jack objected. “Owen wouldn’t admit it, but ask Tosh. She said you saved us a lot of time.”


Eyeing Ianto closely, Jack suppressed a sigh, knowing that the young man had to sort this out on his own.
“I should have done something to prevent this,” Ianto said tonelessly. “The signs were there but nobody did anything. There must have been something I could have done.”

“You’re just a junior researcher,” Jack stated plainly. “How could you expect to prevent an alien invasion?”

Ianto snorted. “You know, Lisa said almost the same when we tried to escape the tower.”

“She was right.”

“No, she wasn’t,” Ianto grunted. “I wasn’t the only one who had his doubts about those ghosts being a blessing for humanity. Alone, I couldn’t have stood up to Hartman, but I could’ve found others, convinced them…” He choked. “It’s not right to say that there wasn’t enough time. There was time…”

Once more, he trailed off as memories surfaced. Putting his palms against the window, he leaned his forehead against the cool glass. For some odd reason the sensation triggered his imagination and chills chased down his spine.

“Lisa and I were caught,” Ianto gasped. “She was led into the conversion unit right before me and… I…”

As he had a vivid imagination as well, Jack did not need to hear what had happened and he wished Ianto would not torture himself by trying to tell him.

“She… What must it be like? Jack? Do you have any idea?”

A shudder passed the captain and he could not think of anything but to put a hand reassuringly on the young Welshman’s back.

“What’s left of you when you’re turned into a Cyberman? Do you know what happens? Remember who you are?”

This time, Jack felt compelled to answer, even though he could offer little comfort.

“I don’t know, Ianto.”

Renewed shudders coursed through the young man.

“Toward the end they didn’t produce Cybermen,” Ianto whispered.

Now Jack was confused. “What do you mean?”

“Not properly, I mean, well, whatever may be called proper. It’s… they were still partially human. The conversion augmented cybernetics into the body, but there was not a complete armour. There was skin left.” Ianto’s voice almost gave out but he had to continue, speaking faster with every word, “I saw her again… Jack… what was left of her. There was the horrible helmet but also her face and… her eyes. They were… empty. It wasn’t Lisa. It just was a shell. It looked like her, but…”

“Shhh.”

Tears stung Ianto’s eyes.

“She was already gone.” A sob caught in his throat. “Jack? She’s dead.”

Jack did not know what to do but pull Ianto off the window and against his chest, wrapping his arms
around the weeping man and holding him tight. He could not remember if Owen had told him about upgraded hybrids, but he knew that Cybermen did use different kinds of conversion, depending on what they needed. His desperate wish to comfort Ianto made Jack utter the first thing that came to his mind.

“You don’t have to remember this. I can help you…”

“No!” Ianto fiercely declared, pushing himself back and out of the captain’s embrace. “I don’t want to forget! I must not forget! That’s the worst that can happen!”

“I didn’t mean to…” Jack helplessly tried to explain, but Ianto cut him short.

“I won’t take Retcon!” he screamed. “Someone has to remember! We must not forget the mistakes we made! We always forget… and make the same mistakes twice, or make it even worse.” His voice dropped and his shoulders sagged. “Lisa, and Virginia, and Dr. Markham, they all deserve to be remembered.”

“Yes.”

Jack’s simple statement momentarily stopped Ianto’s tirade.

“I didn’t mean that you should forget them, Ianto,” Jack finally explained. “Retcon can do more than that if you know how.”

“Alter memories?”

“Yes,” Jack nodded. “It’s more elaborate than just erasing the memories, but it’s possible.”

“Hm.” Ianto did not look convinced. “No matter what the reason is, I don’t like the idea of taking someone’s memories at all.”

Jack shrugged. “Well, I do use Retcon… because it’s necessary. When the rift went mad after the invasion we needed help to deal with it, so I recruited two police constables. When we released them from our service I had to make them forget.”

“Why?”

Jack looked stunned. “Well, I can’t let them run around and tell everyone that they’ve worked as temps for an organisation that’s guarding a rift in time and space that runs right through Cardiff, can I?”

“You could have them sign the Official Secrets Act.”

Scowling deeply, Jack mulled over that for a moment until he finally dismissed the idea, “Don’t want them to slip up.”

“What about witnesses?”

“Happens every now and then,” Jack shrugged. “We prefer to just let them go as long as they don’t pose the threat of exposure, but sometimes we’re left no choice but to take their memories.”

“I don’t like the idea,” Ianto insisted.

“It’s not like we’re taking weeks or months worth of their memory,” Jack explained. “That would be cruel.” A shudder coursed through him at that thought.
Beside him, Ianto sensed his discomfort and wondered what the reason might be. It felt like the captain had personal experiences.

“Most times it’s a light dose, erasing some hours or probably days,” Jack continued. “It’s like a huge hangover.”

“I understand why it’s necessary,” Ianto admitted, “but I still don’t like it.”

“Okay,” Jack nodded, eyeing the young man intently. He sensed an opportunity to get to know him better, so out of a whim he asked, “Could you do it if you believed it to be necessary?”

“Giving someone Retcon? What situation are we talking about?”

Smiling at Ianto being wary of answering prematurely, Jack elaborated, “Take the civilians who were caught up in the battle for example. They escaped the Cybermen and the tower and are traumatized. Giving them Retcon would prevent them from going public and, more importantly, save them from suffering PTSD or similar after-effects. Would you do it?”

xXx

Cardiff

When he woke up, the first thing Ydris noticed was that he lay on his back with his legs elevated. It was not uncomfortable, just odd. Why was he not in bed?

*Did I fall asleep on the couch? Looks like that.*

Opening his eyes, he stared at a white ceiling and an unfamiliar lamp.

*I’m not home. That’s why.*

The question was where he was if he was not home. So far, he did not remember. His best guess was that he got drunk and crashed at a friend’s place.

Someone groaned beside him and Ydris turned his head to see who he had partied with. It was a young man who was still fast asleep. Mysteriously, he had no hair. Propping himself up on his elbow first, Ydris turned and sat up. The man lay on the floor, clutching to a bundled up blanket that he slept on. To his right, a young dark haired woman slouched in an easy chair, snoring softly.

*Gwen.*

Bottles and bags of chips and sweets, mostly empty, on the coffee table and floor indicated a wild party, but something did not sit right.

*We didn’t have a party,* Ydris thought. *That’s not what happened. We were at… His train of thought derailed when he could not grasp the idea. Mermaid Quay. Yes, we were at the bay. Or better, below. That’s where the giant octopus dragged me and Jack.*

“Jack.”
With a rush, Ydris’s memories returned.

This must be Andy’s flat, he contemplated. I doubt that Jack would’ve dropped us off at Gwen’s place as she has a boyfriend. He said it was an amnesia drug that he gave us. I wonder if the others will really forget.

“Gwen?” he called out when she stirred. “Gwen, wake up!”

“Huh?”

The police constable was still heavy-eyed when she turned to him. Slowly, her gaze focused on him and her eyes widened fractionally.

“Who are you?” Gwen asked.

Inwardly, Ydris had to smirk. It was amazing to see her confusion. She really did not seem to remember him.

“Well, I’m Ydris,” he said. “We met last night at the pub.”

“Oh, really?” she prodded, sitting up and stretching her sore limbs.

“Yeah. We won the pub quiz together. Don’t you remember?”

“Um…” Brushing her hair out of her face, she let her view drift through the living room. She scowled at the chaos on the coffee table and her partner sleeping on the floor. “No, I don’t.”

“Guess the victory party was too much for you, huh?” Ydris chuckled and watched how she awkwardly bent down to Andy and nudged his shoulder.

“Andy?”

He stirred and grunted something unintelligible, shooing her hand away with a rather unsighted sweep of his arm.

“Andy!” she groaned. “Andy, wake up. C’mon.”

“Maybe I should make coffee,” Ydris offered.

“Coffee sounds great,” Gwen moaned and stifled a yawn. “God, I feel as if I didn’t sleep at all.”

Getting up from the couch, Ydris made his way over Andy to the small kitchen where he did not need to search long to find what he needed. He filled the machine with coffee grounds and water and switched it on.

“Feeling a little better?” he asked as he returned.

“Not really,” Gwen moaned, resting her elbows on her knees and massaging her temples.

By now, Andy was halfway awake and struggling to get up onto the couch.

“Hey!” he piped up. “Who the hell are you?”

Ydris had to bite his lip in order not to laugh.

“I’m Ydris. Don’t tell me you don’t remember either.”
“Should I?” Andy asked back. “What should I remember?”

“He said we won a pub quiz together,” Gwen explained. “I don’t remember going to the pub, though.”

Andy looked around the room. “This doesn’t look like we were at a pub.”

“Well, we were there first,” Ydris explained. “Then we ended up here.”

Still suspicious, Andy demanded to know, “Which pub was it?”

“Sorry, that’s a detail that I don’t remember.”

“I tend not to believe that if you remember everything else,” Andy scoffed.

“I didn’t claim to remember everything,” Ydris shrugged and leaned against the window sill, “but I obviously recall more than you do.” He smirked. “Like the barrel of beer that we won and shared to celebrate our victory.”

Andy groaned and sagged between the cushions. “I still don’t remember a pub quiz.”

“Neither do I,” Gwen sighed.

“So you don’t remember Jack either?” Ydris prodded. Now he was curious. Will the name trigger something?

“Jack?” she scowled. “Who’s Jack?”

“You really need that coffee,” Ydris chuckled, “if you don’t remember the gorgeous man you were flirting with the whole evening.”

“Flirting?” Andy smirked. “With someone other than Rhys?”

Gwen blushed a fiery red. “I didn’t flirt… did I?”

“You did,” Ydris teased.

“What did he look like?” Andy queried, grinning at Gwen. “I mean, if you say he was gorgeous…”


“I’m starting to regret that I don’t remember,” Gwen murmured.

Andy laughed. “Shall I tell Rhys?”

“Don’t you dare!” Gwen frayed. “Besides, what do you want to tell him if you don’t remember either?”

“Point taken.”

“I think the coffee’s ready,” Ydris declared and went to get the thermos. He found mugs and brought everything to the coffee table where he poured himself some coffee.

“Our saviour,” Gwen moaned and filled her mug. “Thank you, um…”

“Ydris.”
“Yeah, Ydris. Thanks.” She took a big gulp and grimaced as it was not just strong but quite hot as well. For a while, they just sat and nursed their drinks.

“Well, I’ll go for breakfast,” Ydris declared and put his empty mug on the table. “See you.”

And with that he was gone, leaving the still confused constables behind.

“Did he say he’d bring back breakfast or did he just go to have breakfast himself?” Gwen mumbled around her mug.

“I don’t think he’ll come back,” Andy shrugged.

“Yes?”

Andy grimaced. “Waking up here with two constables obviously too drunk to remember who you are after an apparently awkward night?” he mused aloud. “I’d vanish, too.”

Gwen had to admit that her partner was right, though she rather got the impression that the night was quite comfortable. It was just the morning after that got awkward. There was no sense in brooding either, and she had to go home to Rhys anyway.

xXx

Torchwood tower

For a moment, Ianto mulled over Jack’s question.

“I wouldn’t have a problem with it if they would consent,” he finally said.

“Consent?” Jack appeared to be honestly confused. “How should they consent?”

Realizing the truth, Ianto accused, “Well, exactly that’s the problem... you never ask for consent, do you? You just retcon them with the first cup of coffee or glass of water you find.”

Jack snorted with amusement.

“How many do you think would consent if we asked them?” he challenged.

Ianto shrugged. “Maybe two out of a hundred?”

“Exactly.”

Thoughtfully, Ianto fell silent.

“And as the other ninety-eight won’t sign the Official Secrets Act, we need to take other measures,” Jack explained.

“I already said that I understand it, Jack. That doesn’t mean that I like it.”

Smirking, Jack softly teased, “You still haven’t answered my question.”
Subconsciously straightening, Ianto told him, “If you’re asking my opinion the answer is no.” Seeing that Jack was about to argue, he quickly held up his hand. “If you’re asking me to do it as my superior the answer is yes.”

It was all Jack could do to keep his expression in check. The seriousness Ianto had spoken with stunned him. Even though he just wore a track suit and looked a bit battered after his captivity, he exuded an aura of dignity that Jack could only explain with natural charisma. It was different from the charisma he himself had, but it was clearly there.

_He doesn’t cease to amaze me. Unusual. Welcome. Thrilling. I don’t want to lose him. He started. I don’t want what? I hardly know him! That’s weird. No, it isn’t. I want to get to know him better. And I won’t if he doesn’t come with us._

With the realization came the determination. By a hair’s breadth, he would have blurted out an order to accompany them to Cardiff when he noticed that that would be a tactical mistake.

“Impressive.”

“Excuse me?”

Inching closer to Ianto, Jack leaned forward and murmured with a seductive edge, “You… are… impressive.”

Ianto tensed but stood his ground. “I’m what?”

“Impressive,” Jack purred, close to Ianto’s face.

“No, I’m not,” Ianto shook his head. Even though he did not back off, he still leaned a bit back. Jack’s distance was a bit too short for his liking. _Then why’s my skin tingling?_

“Do you feel uncomfortable in my presence?” Jack asked, granting the Welshman more space.

“No. I… feel irritated.” _Somewhat confused. I really shouldn’t feel that attracted to him._

Leaning against the window with his back and crossing his arms over his chest, Jack studied Ianto. _I shouldn’t interpret too much into his share of flirting, the logical part of his self argued, but it would be a shame to waste the opportunity, given the chance something wonderful could happen. Before he even knew it, he had made up his mind and asked, “Do you feel like being irritated some more?”_

“Excuse me?”

Jack marvelled at Ianto’s confused expression. It made him look so cute.

“Will you come to work for me?” Jack elaborated. “Help us incorporate everything we bring from One into our archive?”

Ianto scowled. “You want me to come to Cardiff?”

A low chuckle escaped Jack. “Well, last time I checked that was where our base is.” He could not quite interpret the young man’s expression. It looked like he had sucked on a lemon. Jack was confused. “What did I do wrong?”


“You look like a beaten puppy.”
At that Ianto grimaced. “Cardiff’s around the corner from Newport.”

“And?”

Ianto rolled his eyes. How should he tell this man that he had worked too hard for too long to go back to Cardiff, right back where he started?

“Hey, we’re talking about a week or so,” Jack shrugged. “Adding the new items to the archives won’t take forever, will it?”

“No.”

“So… will you?” Jack prodded, smiling at Ianto hopefully. “Would give you the opportunity to think things through, see what you want to do, where to go next. What do you say?”

Actually there was no reason to decline the request, but right then, Ianto felt unable to cope with the decision.

“Do you need time to think?” Jack queried, unable to hide a note of disappointment. “You were so eager to get something to do earlier that I thought it was a good idea.”

Ianto looked undecided.

“I… don’t know. Yes, I needed something to do, but… going with you…” He squirmed a little. “That’s unexpected and I’m not sure if it’s a good idea. I mean, there just was this invasion, all those Cybermen and…” And I’m starting to babble, he admonished himself. Focus.

His gaze fell on Jack and how he looked at him with a peculiar mix of insecurity and eagerness and he felt his resolve crumble.

“Yes.”

A ridiculously broad grin cracked Jack’s features.

“Hey, that’s not a date!”

Jack laughed. “I know!”

“Then why are you grinning so madly?” Ianto pushed.

“Can’t help it,” Jack murmured. He had a good idea of how to put that week to use. Repeatedly, he brushed his hands over his face, only to look at Ianto with an expression that bordered on a sheepish pout. “Better?”

Ianto could not help himself. At first, he did not want to give in and he grimaced as he tried to suppress his amusement, but then he just had to laugh.

“You’re impossible,” he gasped, making Jack grin again. The sight went right to his heart and all of a sudden, he choked on fresh memories of Lisa, pushed into his mind by his subconscious.

“What’s wrong?” Jack demanded to know, anxious at once at the sight of tears. He tried to take the Welshman by the shoulders to steady him, but Ianto backed off.

“It’s… too early,” Ianto moaned.

Realizing his slip-up, Jack murmured, “Your fiancé.”
Ianto nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

Swallowing his grief, Ianto returned his attention to Jack. His sober tone placated him and the captain looked earnest enough to be honest. Carefully, Ianto allowed himself to sense him and felt concern.

“I didn’t mean to…”

“I know,” Ianto stopped him.

That effectively silenced Jack.

Neither of them felt compelled to break the silence. They just held each other’s view, content with the mutual understanding.

They still had not moved again, when Owen came in.

“Jack? We’re done loading.”

“Good, Owen. Go ahead. I’m coming.”

Owen nodded and turned on his heels.

When he was gone, Ianto asked, “You are coming? What about me?”

Jack could not help the leer that cracked his features. “Later, Ianto…” he drawled before he chuckled at the Welshman’s sceptical expression and said, “You should stay with UNIT until we’re ready to leave.”

“You’re about to go into Secure Archives, right?”

“Yep,” Jack confirmed. “Well, if they didn’t lock me out as well that is.”

Gravely, Ianto nodded. “Then I’ll need a gun.”

“Why would you need a gun?” Jack dismissed Ianto’s statement with a chuckle.

“Because I won’t go in there without protection.”

“You won’t need a gun because you won’t go with us,” Jack declared steadfastly as he finally realized that Ianto was serious.

“Oh, yes, I will,” Ianto stated.

“No, you won’t.”

“Oh, I will,” Ianto insisted with a devilish smirk. “Unless you have the master code?”

Jack could not help but feel his features derail, his mouth hanging open. This man really did not cease to amaze him.


There was nothing flirtatious about his tone, but still his fingertips seared Jack’s skin when he brushed them along his cheek bone to close his mouth.
tbc…
“And you have it?” Jack challenged. “Stop kidding!”

Ianto refused to reply and strode toward the elevator.

“Aw, c’mon, admit it,” Jack prodded, following right in his wake. “You don’t have the code, do you?”

Pressing the button for the elevator, Ianto just shrugged.

“You’re a junior researcher! You can’t have that code!”

If Jack thought he could make Ianto talk with teasing him, he was mistaken. The young man just kept waiting until the carriage arrived. He was the first who stepped in with Jack following close behind. When Ianto turned to choose the storey, he bounced against the captain’s chest as Jack was also reaching for the controls. Both smirked sheepishly and ran into each other again with a second attempt at the buttons. Playfully backing Ianto against the wall, Jack closed the doors.

It was all Ianto could do not to gasp. Even if unintentional Jack’s proximity was intimidating and electrifying at the same time. The captain had something predatory. Taking a deep breath, Ianto tried to calm himself, but it did not have the desired effect. On the contrary, he felt himself tingling in places that threatened to rob him of his common sense. His heart skipped a beat and his breathing accelerated.

_This is not good for my self-control_, Ianto thought.

Inching just a bit closer, Jack quizzically murmured, “Mmm, will you tell me, or should I snog it out of you?”

For a few seconds, Ianto remained uncertain if Jack would actually give it a try, but then the captain backed off easily and pushed the button for sublevel eight.

The skin on Ianto’s head prickled with excitement and his heart beat like a drum. _Why did he stop? Huh? What the hell am I thinking? I’m disappointed? Because he didn’t harass me?_”

“It was worth a try.”

Jack knew that he had to tread carefully. _I need to give him time. I must not give in to my desire, but his presence is making that hard. Self-control, Jack Harkness. You usually have that in spades even if you choose not to exercise it._ He glanced at Ianto who seemed to have to compose himself. _Should I apologize? Would an apology even help, or would it just make him more uncomfortable?_

Nonchalantly, Jack leaned against the other wall, his greatcoat pushed back behind his arms as he hooked his hands on his belt. A smile still played around his lips, but it was not predatory anymore.

“You win, Ianto Jones. But you _will_ tell me once we get to the entrance.”

Ianto huffed.
“How else do you expect to get in?”

Jack’s eyes widened. Choosing to counter with amusement, he blurted out with a wry snort, “What else do you think you know that I don’t?”

“A few addresses,” Ianto said.

“Addresses?”

Ianto smirked at Jack’s confusion. “The archives weren’t big enough.” Seeing Jack scowl, he elaborated, “Some things just are too big to store them here. I think they even had to build the tower around the ship they have downstairs.”

“Ship? I haven’t seen a ship yet.”

“Because you went straight to my aid,” Ianto murmured. “I appreciate that.”

“Well, not that straight,” Jack shrugged. “I talked with the Brigadier first.” Thoughtfully, he grimaced. “And I think that they probably dismantled the ship for transport and put it back together.”

“Probably.”

Jack was startled by the way Ianto shrugged it off. Maybe he’s just too tired, he contemplated and had to suppress a yawn. I am. Suzie, Tosh, and Owen are as well. We all are. Nobody has slept or had much rest since the Cyberinvasion. He had not taken his eyes off the Welshman, but his view on him changed. All of a sudden, he realized how young and vulnerable he looked.

And still someone has trusted him with those secrets! I don’t know much about Ianto Jones, but I do know that he’s honest with me. His position as researcher couldn’t have given him clearance to get that information. But he’s not lying to me. So how did he get the master code for the secure archives?

Turning a switch on the control board, Jack stopped the carriage between the second and first floor.

“Ianto, who trusted you with that information?”

Ianto sighed. He looked weary.

“There wasn’t much to trust,” he said. “The tower was overrun by Cybermen. He gave me the information and told me to hide and wait for an opportunity to escape. He didn’t really have a choice.”

“Who?”

“Dr. Markham, my supervisor in InfRet.”

Jack’s interest was piqued and a chill raced down his spine. He felt like he was about to find out something important.

“He almost died for nothing,” Ianto suddenly whined, turning away from Jack. “I couldn’t escape. It was hopeless. If it wouldn’t have been for the Doctor…”

The sentence died in his throat.

“Shhh.”
Comfortingly, Jack wrapped his arms around Ianto’s shivering form from behind. He could not help but gently breathe a kiss on the dark curls.

“I know it hurts,” Jack murmured close to Ianto’s ear. “We all feel survivor’s guilt. Nobody knows why some of us survived while others didn’t.”

“Do you really?” Ianto choked.

“Do I what?”

“Feel guilt because you survived.”

Taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly, Jack held onto Ianto a little stronger before he murmured, “Of course I do.”

“Even though you’ll outlive us all?”

Now the air caught in Jack’s lungs. *How many damn secrets does he know about?*

“Yes,” he admitted. “Probably even more so.”

Ianto nodded. “Will it get better?”

Taking him by the shoulders, Jack turned Ianto around. Carefully, he took his chin to lift it up to face him.

“It’ll take time, but it will get better.”

“She tried to save me,” Ianto sobbed, unable to help himself. Tears burned in his eyes. “She attacked the Cybermen to give me a chance to escape. She stepped in and let herself be upgraded first!”

Jack felt chills on his back, hearing this.

“She bought me the time that would save me in the end,” the Welshman whined, desperately trying to reign in his emotions. “I miss her already.”

“Ianto. One step after the other, Ianto. Don’t force it.”

Ianto made a dismissive sound.

“No, Ianto,” Jack rushed to assure him. “I just wanted to offer you a way out. I don’t want you to think you’d have to prove anything.” Feeling Ianto squirm, Jack backed off a little to look at him. “Ianto.” He waited, but the young man would not meet his eyes. “Ianto. C’mon, look at me.”

With a resigned sigh, Ianto faced him.
“I agreed to let you go in with us, Ianto. Not just because you’re trying to extort me, but because I think that you earned it. Just be honest with me… and especially with yourself and ask yourself if you’re really ready to do it.”

Feeling obliged to do so, Ianto remained silent for a moment, but he did not really think about the question. He did not want to be left out, especially not if he was supposed to stay with UNIT for as long as the team needed to explore the Secure Archives. He did not want to endanger anyone either, but he did not think that he would. Yes, he was tired, but as Jack already had pointed out, he was not the only one. He knew, he could do this and he was determined to accompany the team.

“I am sure,” Ianto finally declared. “Do I get a weapon now?”

Jack smirked at his resolve. “Yes, I think you earned it.” He turned to restart the elevator.

“Wait.”

Astonished, Jack focused on Ianto again.

Another secret you want to share with me? he wondered. You’re a well of surprises.

Chewing on his bottom lip, Ianto struggled with committing the information.

“Before he ordered me to hide, Dr. Markham told me to go to you.”

“He did?”

“Yes.” Now Ianto met his gaze. “He was your informant.”

Now that explains a lot.

“He made me promise to tell nobody about this except you…” Ianto paused. “But that’s not the reason why I told you that I have the code.”

“No?”

“I believe that we can trust you, that you can, indeed, make a difference. You won’t prove me wrong, will you?”

Just for a second, Jack was tempted to dismiss the challenge with a laugh and a quip about distrustful Welshmen, but just as quickly, he realized that that was out of place. Holding Ianto’s firm gaze, he told him, “I don’t intend to.”

Calmly, Ianto nodded. “Well, let’s go then.”

xXx

“What took you so long?” Owen greeted them when they arrived on sublevel eight. “We were done loading ages ago. And what the hell’s Ianto doing here?”

“He’s coming with us,” Jack declared and strode right to the armoury.

“You’re kidding, right?” Owen huffed.
“No.”

Jack vanished into the adjacent room and Owen glowered at Ianto. “What did you do in that elevator? Give him a blowjob?”

“Why?” Ianto quipped, “Are you jealous?”

“We can’t babysit you when we’re going in. We’ve got a job to do.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Sure you can,” Owen taunted. “That’s why…”

“It’s very important for your future that you don’t finish that sentence,” Jack cut in.

“No, Jack. Let him,” Ianto said. “That’s why I ended up in that conversion unit? Is that what you wanted to say?”

Gritting his teeth, Owen chose not to answer.

“There were a lot of men better trained in combat than I am,” Ianto calmly told him. “And they’re all dead. I can’t take credit for my survival. It was sheer luck that the unit jammed. I may not be trained for the field, but I know what I can dare to do. You won’t need to babysit me.”

Furtively, Jack watched the exchange, noticing with astonishment and a clandestine joy how Ianto managed to put the medic in his place.

However, Ianto’s victory was short-lived as Owen grunted, “Good. Because I won’t.”

“Fine.”

“Great!” Jack beamed at them. “Now that that’s settled, kids… Ianto, here’s your gun and ammunition.”

Accepting the weapon with a grim expression, Ianto realized that he did not know where to put the gun. While Jack carried his Webley in a holster it looked to Ianto as if Owen had stuffed his Glock in his waistband. Scowling, Ianto shoved the clips in his trouser pockets and loaded the weapon to keep the SIG in his hand. “Don’t you have a holster?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jack distractedly rushed to say, hastily pulling a mesh holster out of his greatcoat pocket. “Safety’s important.”

“I know,” Ianto stated, taking the holster and clipping it to his waistband. “Thanks.”

Owen stood beside them, pouting and tapping his foot impatiently.

“Jack, Suzie wants to show you something before we go to the archives,” the medic grunted.

“What is it?”

Owen grimaced. “If we knew we wouldn’t have to ask you.”

Chuckling, Jack followed the disgruntled medic to the stairs. Looking over his shoulder, he called to Ianto, “Are you coming?”

So the Welshman rushed to catch up to them. On the next sublevel, Owen led them to a huge room
where they met Toshiko and Suzie at the entrance.

“Why am I not surprised?” Suzie muttered, rolling her eyes at the sight of Ianto.

“Stuff it,” Jack commanded. “I’m fed up with it. Another comment like that and whoever said it will be on vault duty for two weeks.”

Zipping his lips shut, Owen turned his back on the group. Suzie looked unapologetic but remained silent. Only Toshiko seemed to be unfazed.

*Probably because she’s just not the type for rude comments, Ianto thought. She appears to be too clever to bother with cheap quips.*

“What’s that?” Ianto asked upon spotting the giant sphere hovering near the back wall.

Taking a look at it, Jack scowled. “No idea.”

Slowly, he ventured into the hall, carefully approaching a dark figure on the ground. The team stayed close by the door, waiting for any signal from him. Jack, though, just stood beside the body for a moment, looking down at it with a hardening expression. Then his gaze drifted to the open sphere.

“I have no idea what it is,” he said, “but I think we just found out where the Daleks came from.”

“You mean they were in there?” Suzie asked.

Jack nodded. “Could be sort of a vessel.”

“A vessel?” Toshiko prodded, advancing toward the sphere. “But how would you navigate it? There’s nothing on it, no helms, no drive…”

“Doesn’t look as if anything’s inside either,” Ianto said, craning his neck.

“Exactly,” Jack snapped. “It’s empty. So let’s not waste time with it.”

Sparing neither the body nor the sphere any more attention, Jack strode to the exit. Lacking arguments, the team trailed behind. Letting his view drift a last time around the lab, Ianto followed them. The others were already on the stairs down to sublevel ten when he caught up to them.

“I wonder what they keep in Secure Archives,” Suzie mused aloud. “What can be worse than giant flesh eating plants and man-sized predators that can leave scratches in elevator doors?”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Jack stated flatly.

Approaching the entrance to the Secure Archives, they noted that it appeared to be still tightly locked.

“Is it possible that there was a security breach already?” Ianto asked.

“Other than Cybermen invading the tower?” Owen quipped.

“Other than that, yeah,” Ianto told him wryly. “Because the predators you were describing should have been in creature containment in the Secure Archives.”

“Oh, really?” Suzie queried.

“Yeah.”
Owen huffed. “You know, Ianto. I do like you, but I can’t help but think that you’re bragging. You don’t have the clearance for that information.”

“Do you really want to argue about that again?” Ianto groaned and, imitating Tracey’s high-pitched chatter, continued, “You won’t believe what Collin has told me! The gift they got from the other institute are animals. They’re keeping them down in the creature containment at Secure Archives.”

Toshiko chuckled.

“All right, kids. Can we quit picking on Ianto?” Jack snarled.


“You’re bent on doing vault duty, right, Owen?” Jack replied, smirking predatorily at the medic.

Ianto was uncomfortable with the exchange. He neither liked Owen’s teasing nor Jack’s defence. On the other hand, though, it offered him some insight in their relationship that was quite different than that between Torchwood One’s employees. Now he could see why Owen had been so amused about Ianto’s worries about Jack’s reaction when Owen had put Colonel Mace in his place. Imagining Jack buying Owen a beer for his recalcitrance did not appear that unrealistic anymore.

“Well, then, Jack,” Owen said with a touch of a challenge in his tone as he leaned against the wall. “Let’s see if you can open it.”

“Do you think maybe you could back me up instead of supporting the wall?” Jack asked teasingly. “You know, since we have no idea what’s on the other side of this door.”

Smirking, Owen pushed himself off the wall and stepped up beside the captain, mock saluting, “Aye, aye, sir.”

Stepping in front of the controls beside the door, Jack leaned in for the biometric scan. It took a moment to process before the message *access denied* appeared on the screen.

Owen chuckled.

“Looks like Hartman did a good job shutting us out.”

“Very funny,” Jack grunted. “Maybe she should’ve had a more cautious eye on her own ranks.”


Smiling mysteriously at his second in command, Jack stepped back and turned around, gesturing their new team member to take his turn. “Ianto?”

Awkwardly, the young Welshman went to the console, infinitely conscious of the looks accompanying him. Certainly the others wondered why Jack deferred to him.

Taking a deep breath, Ianto recalled what Markham had given him and entered the code.

tbc…
“Blimey!” Owen called out as he watched how Ianto first typed in a short row of numbers that resulted in a panel sliding open to reveal a keyboard and then entered a seemingly endless code into the system. “Are you sure you’re not making it worse?”

“I’ve got good memory,” Ianto replied with obvious unease. Knowing the code did not make him feel special. He would have preferred to see his superior getting them access to the Secure Archives.

“How can you memorize a code like that?” Suzie wanted to know.

Her question made Ianto even more uncomfortable. “I… read it,” he tried to explain. “I…”

“You’ve got eidetic memory,” Owen beat Ianto to it.

“Yeah,” Ianto grudgingly agreed. He typed in a few more figures and hit enter.

“But where did you read it?” Suzie prodded. “I mean, that code’s not lying around for everyone to see.”

“My superior stole it,” Ianto snarled and forcefully pushed back, out of her vicinity. “For Captain Harkness.”

They could hear the computer hum as it processed the information and then the door unlocked.

Suzie hissed through her teeth while Toshiko abstained from any audible reaction. Jack, however, beamed at Ianto and breathed a kiss on his temple in passing.

Holding his Webley in hand, the captain advanced into the Secure Archives.

At first all they saw were corridors. Some doors led to offices which they were not interested in. Others led to laboratories. To Owen’s chagrin none of them was of a medical nature. Whatever Torchwood One had worked on down here had to do with new technologies.

“Do you have any idea what that equipment was used for?” Ianto asked.

“Oh, yes,” Toshiko nodded. “And when we’re through with the archives we should take at least the stellaratomic counter with us.”

“The what?”

“It’s this one,” Toshiko indicated a device propped up in a rack on the counter.

“Looks like an iron.”

Toshiko chuckled. “Well, you can’t iron your laundry with it, but it could tell you if your clothes have travelled through space or not.”

Taking scans with his wrist device, Jack stepped up beside them, examining the machine right beside the counter. It looked like a refrigerator with openings for plugs in the front door that certainly had
nothing to do with cooling milk and vegetables.

“Wow, this is…”

“This is what, Jack?” Toshiko prodded.

Shaking his head with incredulity, Jack murmured, “It’s so…”

“So what?”

“Outdated.”

Ianto chuckled. “What is it?”

“It’s a temporal-spatial stability monitor,” Jack told them with wonder. “I have never seen such an old one. It’s amazing.”

“What does it do?” Ianto queried.

“It’s monitoring fluctuations in the stability of space and time,” Toshiko explained in Jack’s stead.

“Yeah, we have one in Cardiff,” Jack added. “Goes together with the Rift manipulator. Okay. Nothing else interesting here. Let’s see where Owen and Suzie went.”

They found them in the next room, Suzie examining a glass or acrylic box containing a transparent pillow with a blue mass inside. Wires went into the pillow on one side and came out on the other. Both sets were connected with a computing system.

“Tosh! Look at this,” she said. “This seems to be organic!”

“Organic?” Leaning in, Toshiko had a closer look at the blue mass and saw that it enclosed tiny crystals that seemed to form an inner structure. “What do you think it is?” Following the wires with her gaze, she tried to make the connection. “Hm, looks like they tried to use them for data processing. That’s interesting. Jack?”

“I think you’re right. If my assumption is correct this pack would raise the processing power considerably.”

“Can we take it with us?” Toshiko asked.

Jack did not answer at once. Instead, he opened one of the airtight lockers to reveal a whole set of packs.

“Lucky guess,” he snickered. “Yeah, I think we could take those. Put them on the list, Tosh.”

“Oh, I won’t forget them,” Toshiko said with clear eagerness lacing her voice. She was already thinking about how she could enhance their computer system with them and had to force herself to bear in mind that she should conduct tests of her own before she tried to integrate the new technology. Is it technology if it’s organic? she wondered. And could Owen breed more of them? 

Returning to the present from her musings, Toshiko realized that she was alone in the lab and hurried to catch up to the team.

“I wonder where the workers are,” Owen said. “You think they evacuated when the alert was issued?”
“Most likely,” Suzie replied.

“I wonder if Cybermen were in here as well,” the medic wondered.

“So far there’s no indication of an intrusion,” Jack told him. “But we can’t exclude it either. As four of them materialized inside our Hub it’s not impossible that they got in here as well.”

“Let’s hope then that none of them got stuck in the locked archives when the rest of them were sucked back into the breach,” Toshiko threw in.

Stopping in mid-walk, her team mates glared at her.

“Not funny, Tosh,” Owen growled.

“Not meant to be,” she replied. “Jack’s still here. As long as not proven otherwise, we should assume that a Cyberman or two could still be here.”

“I don’t like your way of thinking,” Suzie huffed.

“I do,” Jack cut the discussion short. “Tosh is right. I shouldn’t be here. I should be wherever the Cybermen returned to. I don’t know why the breach could close before I arrived there, and I’m grateful that it did, but it presents a possibility that we shouldn’t underestimate.” Secretly, he swore never to tell them about the reapers.

Owen wrinkled his nose.

“Tosh, didn’t you say that the radiation on Jack is slightly different from that of the breach?”

Gaping at him, Toshiko said, “Yes, I did.”

“Well, couldn’t that be the reason why Jack’s flight was interrupted?” Owen demanded to know. “That it was similar enough to pull him up but different enough to leave him behind?”

Toshiko’s astonishment changed to a mad grin. “Yep.”

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because…” she said, pausing to heighten the tension, “you actually listened to what I was saying for once.”

“Oh,” Owen snorted. “Well, don’t get used to it.”

Jack smirked at the exchange and continued down the hall. At each door, he took scans with his wrist device, which helped him to decide whether the office or lab was worth further exploration. As soon as he entered a room, the two female scientists were right on his heels while Owen showed not quite as much interest.

“You’re looking for something medical, right?” Ianto asked.

“Yeah, but they had the med ward and related labs upstairs. I don’t think that there’ll be much down here.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Ianto directed his attention at the group in the lab where Jack studied the content of a metal suitcase.

“What is it, Jack?” Suzie just asked.
“Something really useful,” he replied. Favoring Toshiko with a broad grin he said, “You… will have a blast with it. Once you manage to replace the missing interface, it’ll be invaluable for recon. Maybe Owen can give you a hand, too.”

“Why?” Owen cut in. “What is it?”

“It’s Chula tech,” Jack explained, beaming at his team members in turns. “With those lenses… Oh, you can do incredible things with those…” As he recalled all kinds of possibilities, Jack’s eyes rolled up and closed while a dreamy smile played around his lips.

“Too much information, Jack,” Owen groaned.

“Spoilsport,” Jack pouted. “But seriously, those lenses allow extensive yet inconspicuous surveillance.”

“How?” Toshiko queried, feeling as if she missed something obvious.

“Well, they’re used just like contact lenses, with the slight difference that everything the wearer sees can be transmitted.”

“You mean to say that those tiny things are cameras?” Suzie asked.

“Yep. Simply put, but yes.”

“That’s great,” Toshiko smiled. “How long do they work?”

At that, Jack smirked broadly. “As long as you want. They get their energy from the body heat.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“That’s incredible!”

“I told you so,” Jack chuckled. “And the best is, they also transmit sound.”

“Sound? How?”

“Well,” Jack shrugged, closing the suitcase and snapping it shut, “that’s something we should talk about when we’re back in Cardiff.”

Obvious disappointment appeared on Toshiko’s features when she received the suitcase from Jack. She took it without arguing, though, knowing that this was neither the time nor the place.

“I’d like to check on the offices again and see if I can find any research notes,” Toshiko said. “They could help me with figuring out the lenses or working with the organic packs.”

“You’ll get that opportunity, Tosh,” Jack assured her. “Now let’s get finished, so we can get out of here.”

“All right.”

Together, they continued their search without further interruptions. They were ready to proceed on the next sublevel where they noticed at once that its purpose was different.

“Another archive,” Suzie stated. “Looks like it takes up the whole storey.”
“Yeah,” Jack murmured and took his scans. “All kinds of alien artefacts here… and even more files.” His gaze drifted to Ianto who slightly shrugged as he had no idea what might be stored. “Why don’t you go back upstairs, collect what you need, and take it to our truck?” he turned to Toshiko. “Suzie, Owen, go with her. We’ll meet here when you’re done.”

“What about you?” Suzie wanted to know.

“I need to have a look at the artefacts,” Jack told her. Among other things. “That will take some time. You can get finished upstairs while we’re at it.”


Rolling her eyes, Suzie went ahead with her colleagues trailing behind.

Jack still stood, watching the hall, when they were long gone. Ianto clearing his throat finally made him look around to find the young man at the desk.

“What are you doing?” Jack asked, seeing that the computer was already running.

“Searching for something,” Ianto remarked dryly.

“Oh?”

“Your file, sir.”

“Oh!”

With renewed curiosity, Jack strolled over and sat on top of the desk, leaning over to see what Ianto was doing. It brought him close enough to make Ianto scowl. Retreating just an inch saw the young man relax again.

Careful, Jack Harkness, he told himself. He’s still affected by his ordeal. I’ll get a chance later when he’s in Cardiff.

“Found it?”

“I think so,” Ianto nodded. “I’ll get it for you. You check whatever you need to check.”

A winning smile cracked Jack’s features.

“Thank you, Ianto.”

“No problem.”

Crossing his legs, Jack supported himself with both hands on the tabletop and looked around the small office suite at the entrance to the archive. Ianto got up and moved around the desk to go and find the files when he noticed Jack’s dreamy expression. Curiously and a little confused, he stopped, staring at him.

“I love offices,” Jack shrugged and grinned. “They’re exotic.”

“Offices are exotic?” Ianto asked incredulously.

“Yep.”

“You’re really one of a kind,” Ianto said, shaking his head.
“Thanks,” Jack beamed and hopped off the table. “Okay, I’ll go this way.”

“And I’ll go that way.”

Wandering between the shelves, examining the artefacts with his wrist device, Jack kept glancing through the rows at the young Welshman. Whenever he managed to peek at him a smile flashed across his features. Something stirred inside him that he could not name, but he did know that it was not his salacious nature.

*Why do I want to hug him so desperately?* Jack wondered and shook his head to chase the pink cloud away. *Gotta concentrate on the task at hand.*

Still he kept an eye on Ianto’s whereabouts and remained in his vicinity in order to make sure that he would notice a threat in time to keep him safe. Naturally, Ianto was finished earlier than he was, so Jack knew for sure where Ianto was once he was done, at the desk near the entrance. That did not keep him from sneaking a peek every now and then.

Only now, with a view from the distance, Jack noticed how lean and haggard looking the track suit made Ianto look as it certainly belonged to a much sturdier man. It fit in length, but was too wide for the young Welshman’s slender form. The unruly hair and a shadow of a beard just added to the impression.

*He’s so young. So vulnerable. Yet strong and courageous. He doesn’t look like it, but it’s there. Even though he probably doesn’t think of himself like that.*

It was then that Jack caught himself staring.

*Did he notice?*

Apparently, Ianto was oblivious. He was back at the computer now, scrolling through a file.

*What are you searching for now?*

As tempted as he was to stroll over to him and find out, Jack forced himself to resume his work. At the end of the row he paused and took a deep breath.

*It’s incredible what they have down here. Quite a lot of junk! They either did not care what they put here or they truly had no idea. Got to see if there’s still something important hiding among the trash.*

With the best intentions, he started on the next shelf, until his subconscious forced him to check on Ianto and see that he was not where he had last seen him.

*Where is he?*

His heart skipped a beat and he started.

*What the hell?*

Confusion tried to take hold and he shook his head to clear it.

*Jack Harkness! Pull yourself together! What’s the matter with you?*

Once more, he shook his head.

*Maybe I should rethink hiring Ianto. What will happen if he came to Cardiff? Would it change the balance of the team? He frowned. It would certainly change my balance. Am I really that affected by*
him? Why?

Trying to figure out why he was so smitten with the young man, Jack recalled how he first met Ianto Jones. When he had arrived what Owen clearly thought had been true: the stuck victim was nothing but an inconvenience for him. He had other things on his mind like handling UNIT and determining what they should not leave behind for the other agency.

When did that change?

Now that he thought about it, he realized that it had happened in just a second when he had turned his full attention to Ianto. There was something about him that tickled not just his libido but triggered his protectiveness as well.

That’s not the best combination, Jack, he scolded himself. I’ve been interested in fellow agents before, but that never affected my duties. Well, almost never. I wouldn’t allow it to endanger a mission, though. That could prove to be fatal. Is that different with Ianto Jones? No. I don’t think so. Must be because I just met him. He’s intriguing, yes. Interesting, especially as he’s someone new to explore. I’m interested in Ydris as well. Ydris.

A smirk played around his lips.

Fond memories that we made. A shame that we can’t repeat it. Maybe I should arrange a chance encounter with him, see what will happen.

Well, I was debating Ianto, not Ydris. Can I work with him? Yes, I can. He won’t be in the field anyway. He’ll work in the archives. And it will be only temporary. He’ll leave once the items from One are incorporated. I’ll use that time to get to know him better and flirt with him. That really would be a stroke of bad luck if I couldn’t charm him into my bed. Oh, those possibilities. I’d really love to…

“Are you finished?”

Even though the captain had appeared to be lost in thought, Ianto was surprised to see him start when he addressed him. And there was something else.

Embarrassment probably is most adequate to name it. He appears to be flustered. And is that a blush?

“Ianto!”

“Yes, that’s my name, sir,” Ianto could not help but tease.

“Sorry, I was lost in thought.”

“I noticed.”

“Well, I was thinking…”

“If it had anything to do with me and your coat I don’t want to know,” Ianto cut him short.

“Um, no,” Jack all but croaked. This time, his blush was more obvious.

“Your fantasies about harassment are none of my business either,” Ianto flatly said. “Did you make progress?”

“Well, um… Actually… no, there are a few shelves left.”
“Then you better keep going,” Ianto suggested.

“Ah, yes. I should.” He turned to the right only to turn back to Ianto abruptly. Did he just give me an order? Then he noticed that Ianto carried something. “What do you have there?”

“This?” he held up a folder. “Just another file I collected for you.”

“What is it?”

“The references to your case files. We’ll need more than a bag to transport them all if you want to keep them.”

Jack scowled and snatched the folder from Ianto’s hand.

“My case files? Those should be in Cardiff. These must be copies.” He leafed through the papers and his scowl deepened when he realized that there might be additional information as well.

“We could also destroy them,” Ianto said.

“No,” Jack murmured, slowly getting over his shock. “It would take too long to go through the files here and I don’t want to destroy anything that might become relevant later. We should take them with us.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll arrange that.”

When Ianto pulled the folder out of his hands, Jack looked at him with wonder. Unimpressed, Ianto pivoted around to return to the desk.

That’s One’s conditioning showing. They’re so much more professional. Inwardly, Jack cringed. The whole structure was much tighter organized. There’s quite a difference in culture between One and Three.

Finally pulling himself together, Jack continued his search that did not turn up extraordinary items. Still, he decided to take two more things with them and packed them into a box that he carried to the office suite where he put it on the desk Ianto was working at.

“Finished now?” the young man asked with the hint of a smirk.

“Yes,” Jack confirmed. “What are you still working on?”

“Making sure that we don’t miss files that refer to the branch in Cardiff,” Ianto explained.

“You’re pretty thorough,” Jack praised.

“Better safe than sorry, right?”

“True.”

Ianto was typing something, then he looked up at Jack. “Shall I show Toshiko what I found before I delete it?”

“Why? What did you find?”

“I mean the references to and the digital copies of your files,” Ianto explained. “I assume that you don’t want to leave them in the system for UNIT?”
“No,” Jack shook his head. “And yes, talk with Tosh about it.”

As if on cue, they heard steps approach and a moment later, the three Torchwood agents appeared in the entrance.

“Ready to proceed?” Suzie asked.

“We’re almost done here,” Ianto told her before Jack could. “Toshiko, could you have a look at this?”

“Sure.”

She stepped around the desk to get behind Ianto and see what he was working on, asking, “Is this another system?”

“No,” Ianto shook his head. “But you can’t access it from outside the Secure Archives.”

“It recognizes the terminals then. Great,” she huffed. “Oh!” She bent forward to have a better look.

“Tosh,” Jack said, “Can you transfer the data before you erase it?”

“Yes… Ianto, could we switch places, please?”

“Sure,” he replied, getting up in a fluid motion that caught Jack’s attention at once. Toshiko sat down and started typing while Ianto chose to ignore the captain and concentrate on what the computer expert was doing instead.

“Do we have to wait until Tosh is done?” Owen grumbled. “We should get started on the next storey. Tosh and Ianto can catch up on us.”

Jack made a quick decision. “Go ahead, Owen. I’ll stay with Tosh and Ianto. We’ll be done in a few minutes.”

“All right,” Owen confirmed, but it was Suzie again who went ahead.

“What did you do with the files?” Jack turned to Ianto.

“You didn’t notice?” the young man smirked. “I thought you were watching me the whole time.”

It was all Jack could do not to gape at the Welshman. “No, I didn’t notice.”

“Suzie was here earlier and I asked her to take them upstairs. She and Owen took them to the lorry while Toshiko wrapped things up at the labs.”

“They did?” Jack asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

A broad grin cracked Jack’s features.

“Ianto Jones, you’re working miracles!”


“Which can work miracles,” Toshiko cut in without interrupting her work.

Chuckling, Jack leaned over the tabletop to Ianto to murmur, “Maybe you should introduce that as a
team practice whilst you’re in Cardiff.”

“Introduce what?”

“Politeness,” Jack smirked.

“Can’t hurt if the boss treats his subordinates politely,” Toshiko remarked, keeping an admirably stoic face.

“Hey!” Jack called out, “I am polite!”

“Perhaps in your frame of reference you are,” Toshiko said, glancing sideways up at him with a growing smirk.

Just for a few seconds, Jack pouted at her before his expression changed to a smirk as well. He was enjoying the banter. It was proof to him that they worked well together and he felt the warmth of pride spread inside him.

“Ok, I’m done,” Toshiko declared, getting up. “Let’s go.”

Neither of them needed to be told twice. It was right when they entered the staircase that Owen called out for Jack on their ear comms.

“Owen! What’s wrong?” He listened, his tension rising, and commanded, “C’mon!” as he started to run down the stairs. Upon entering the next sublevel, he held his Webley in hand and the others had drawn their weapons as well.

“Owen!” Jack shouted when he spotted the medic. “Did you see a creature?”

“No, Jack,” Owen replied. “I just found… remains.”

Stepping aside, he revealed bodies lying in the hall. None of the team looked closer at them as they were badly mutilated.

“One thing’s for sure,” Owen murmured. “They were not killed by Cybermen.”

“I assume that creatures escaped when the power shut down,” Suzie said.

“Could be,” Jack agreed. “Any indication that something’s down here?”

“Can’t tell, Jack,” Owen shrugged. “Can’t rule it out either.”

“Could have been the predators that attacked us up in the tower,” Suzie suggested. “They could have gotten that far by the time we went in.”

“In that case they’re dead.”

“Are they?” Suzie queried. “Does anyone know how many there were? Ianto?”

“I’m not sure,” he had to admit. “I heard that the gift they got was pregnant, but I’m not sure if the number of young that was rumoured was correct. They mentioned four, but we shouldn’t rely on it.”

“All right, kids. Stay alert,” Jack ordered. “Where exactly are we?”

Grimly, Jack nodded. “Let’s search the storey. Make sure there are no creatures left. Ianto? You’re with me.”

“Sir?”

“Second thoughts?”

Ianto shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Well, let’s go.”

At a t-junction they split up. Ianto turned right, staying close behind Jack. Holding a gun did not make him feel any safer. Being with Jack qualified as security rather more than relying on his own abilities. Ianto knew how to use a weapon, but he had no experience with active field work. Despite his brave reply a moment ago, he definitely harboured second thoughts. Worse than admitting it to himself and facing it, though, was the idea of losing face with Jack… or Owen.

So he stalked down the hall, staying as close to Jack as he dared. That way, he almost bumped into him when Jack suddenly stopped.

“What did you say, Owen? Rubble?” He paused. “I see. We’ll be right there… Yes? All right. Then we’ll keep going. Tell me if you need help.”

“What happened?” Ianto wanted to know.

“One of the adjacent labs is partially destroyed,” Jack told him. “Owen said they could hear someone call out from below the rubble.”

“We should help them.”

Jack shook his head. “The three of them should be able to deal with it. Otherwise they’ll call again. We should make sure that they can’t be taken by surprise by a creature.”

Ianto choked. “If you say so.”

Eyeing him intently, Jack said, “Do you want to join them? I can continue the search on my own.”

“No,” Ianto denied the offer and grabbed his gun tighter. “Let’s go.”

Smiling encouragingly at him, Jack withstood the urge to ruffle Ianto’s hair. Then he turned to advance further into the facility. So far, they did not find any creatures. Instead, they searched offices, maintenance storage, tech rooms. The latter kept the machinery running that supplied the cages with the right temperature or humidity. The next room they checked turned out to be a kitchen.

“I wonder what they were keeping here,” Jack murmured. “Looks like a zoo kitchen.”

“Probably is,” Ianto shrugged, watching some crickets in a terrarium. There also were boxes with mealworms and cages with mice.

“Come.”

At the end of the hall, they stopped in front of an airlock, weapons raised. Both men knew for a fact that it was not a good sign that both doors were gaping wide open.

Gulping down his anxiety, Ianto followed Jack in. They did not get far when the captain stopped in
front of a cage, looking sadly at the creature inside.

“A blowfish?” Ianto asked and saw Jack nod. “I only know them from pictures.”

“We have to deal with them every now and then,” Jack told him. “We won’t be able to help this one, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we don’t just shoot them on sight anymore,” Jack shrugged. “But we can’t take this one with us. We’ve got enough on our hands already. UNIT will have to organize its transport and accommodation at the settlement.”

A scraping sound made them look around, bringing up their guns.

“What was that?” Ianto queried nervously.

“I don’t know any more than you do.” Jack tapped at his earpiece. “Owen? Maybe we found something. How far are you?” He paused. “Not yet? Well, join us as soon as you can.” Then he turned to Ianto. “Wait here.”

“Wait?” Ianto gasped. “Shouldn’t we stay together?”

“Well, you could also leave and close the airlock.”

“And lock you in with whatever is in here?” the Welshman croaked. “No way.”

Reassuringly, Jack put one hand on Ianto’s upper arm. “Ianto, it’s okay. I’ve been in worse situations.”

Right then, they heard the sound again. Louder this time.

Ianto swallowed dryly. “I’ll stay.”

“Then you’ll stay right here. Let me see what it is. I can deal with it.”

Ianto did not look convinced.

“If not you can still lock me in. In fact, don’t come after me. Get out and get the others.”

Ianto did not look happy either.

Patting Ianto’s shoulder, Jack turned to explore the source of the sounds. Ianto saw him approach a junction, look to the right and disappear around the corner to the left. He waited for any sign of the captain, his weapon at the ready, prepared to shoot if something should come and lunge at him.

“Arghhhhhhh!”

Jack’s scream sent chills down Ianto’s spine.

tbc…
Entangled

Torchwood tower

For just a second, Ianto was frozen with horror.

Then he did exactly what Jack had told him not to do.

He ran, just in the same direction as Jack who was still screaming madly. When he skidded around the corner, he saw Jack a few yards down the corridor, struggling against something he could not see. From ventilation shafts and the cover over the fluorescent tubes under the ceiling numerous little creatures streamed out and down onto Jack who squirmed and squeaked, desperately trying to brush off the animals. With both hands, he ruffled his hair, wriggling in a hold Ianto still could not determine. Only when a laggard slid down toward him did Ianto realize that Jack was trapped in a giant spider’s web.

All of a sudden recognition hit and Ianto had to fight the urge to laugh. Now that he could identify the small creatures that he knew from Torchwood’s extensive database, he could hardly contain his amusement as he could not imagine that the beings that were known to be harmless had hurt the captain in any way.


“Do they hurt?” Ianto called back with barely suppressed hilarity. Maybe they’re poisonous and it wasn’t mentioned in the database? No, don’t think they are. They’re just crawling on him. He was reluctant to shoot at the tiny beings, especially as he could instead hit the captain who was squirming frantically as much as the web allowed. “Jack? Answer me, for God’s sake! Are you all ri…?”

“Take ’em awayyyy! Pleeease!” Jack’s howl interrupted him.

“You don’t happen to be arachnophobic?” Ianto teased, watching one of the creatures that had left the group still crawling all over Jack and scuttled towards him on eight spindly legs. Its body was round and furry and one could actually believe that it was in fact a big spider if it was not for a thin tail and a mouse-like head. Squatting down, Ianto held out his hand in order to intercept the creature.

It stopped, its nose twitching. Tilting its head, it looked up at him and scurried up on Ianto’s hand. Standing up, Ianto turned his arm in order to let it run back from his forearm to his hand. He smirked with delight when it returned and settled in his palm. With its legs pulled close to its body, it looked like a cute fur ball.

“Iantooooo!” Jack howled again. “Heeeelp!”

Actually, Ianto was surprised that the captain did not alarm the rest of the team yet when he noticed that the earpiece had dropped and lay at Jack’s feet.

“There’s no need to panic, Jack,” Ianto told him, holding out the little being to him. “Here! They’re so cute!”
“No! They’re not!” Jack whined, squirming even more and managing to pull away from the web that held him. Breaking out on the other side of the silk net, his momentum made him stumble and he crashed on the tiles. A few of the creatures jumped off him and back into the web, starting to repair it, while others dropped to the floor and scurried to the walls. Searching Ianto’s gaze now, Jack looked crestfallen. “Ianto, you’re cruel! Why didn’t you help me?”

“Didn’t think it was necessary,” Ianto chuckled and picked up the earpiece. Then he held his hand to the web, watching the animal leave his hand and climb the silk thread.

“Thank you,” Jack muttered, shuddering. “Gah! I hate those spidery mouse things!”

“Spidery mouse things? You know what they are?”

“Spindly legged creepy crawlers!” Jack spat. “That’s what they are! They’re… disgusting!”

Ianto was about to argue when all the little spidery beings flit along the threads and vanished in their hideaways. Confused, Ianto looked at Jack who shrugged.

“The farther away the better,” the captain huffed.

It was then that they heard the scraping sound again.

“J-jack…?” Ianto rasped.

The captain did not need to turn around to know that something was behind him. Ianto’s pale face and widened eyes were a dead giveaway. The Welshman’s lips started to tremble when he tried to get to grips with what he watched stalking towards Jack who was still on the ground. The gun in its holster seemed to be miles away.

Clicking sounds from behind told Jack that the creature was not far away. Closing his fingers tight around his Webley, he slowly turned his head, but even squinting, he could not see the threat.

“C-ceiling,” Ianto croaked.

Jack’s gaze drifted upwards to find an ugly beast clawing at the ceiling panels. It was jet black with a snout filled with razor sharp teeth. Jack choked when he recognized the predator from Owen’s description. It emitted more clicking sounds.

_Ianto! I’ve got to stop it!_

Bringing around his gun, Jack fired, but he was not fast enough. The predator was on him with a single powerful jump, digging its claws in Jack’s flesh.

Screams of agony shattered the tense silence that died away as quickly as they erupted.

Paralyzed with shock, Ianto stood and could not even breathe. Forcing his arm to move, he slowly reached for the gun and unholstered it. He had no idea if the bullets would do any good, but he knew for sure that running was not an option. It would catch up on him even before he made a single step.

_Shit! What shall I do? Shooting it might make it angry and even more dangerous, like a rhinoceros or a bear. Why did I have to insist on accompanying them? I could be safe at a hospital or home in my own bed by now! Oh, dear!_

Ianto could not read the creature at all. It just stood and watched him in return or listened intently. Ianto stood as well and put all the strength he had left into raising his weapon arm to aim at the
predator that could attack any second now.

It jumped.

Gasping with shock, Ianto flinched back an inch, but finally brought the gun up.

Breathing heavily, his eyes almost popping out of their sockets, Ianto was now frozen in place, staring at the creature with disbelief as it appeared to be frozen as well. In mid-jump it hung in the threads that had held Jack before.

It screamed in such a high tone that Ianto cringed.

Movement behind it caught his attention. Jack’s body jerked as he revived. For a few seconds, Ianto was distracted enough not to notice that the predator cut through some threads with its claws.

When it screamed again, Ianto refocused with new resolve, aimed, and pulled the trigger, sending three bullets in quick succession directly in the centre of the skull where an orifice offered a perfect target.

It sagged and lay still.

Ianto released a breath he did not know he had been holding. From behind, he heard footsteps and a moment later, Owen was by his side.

“You’d never be able to do field work, huh?” Owen grunted as he moved past Ianto and to the fallen creature, still pointing his gun at the predator. “Who are you kidding?”

“Nobody,” Ianto murmured. “I’m scared shitless… and I could throw up.”

“Um, not in this direction,” Owen replied and pointed away from himself.

Groaning, Jack was scrambling to his feet.

“Ianto Jones!” he bellowed with evident pride and admiration that obviously was enough to make him forget about the loathed animals as he squeezed through the web, climbing over the dead creature to get to Ianto. “That was brilliant! I just have to kiss you.”

The shocked look Ianto shot at him literally stopped Jack in mid-run, his arms spread wide, a mere yard away from the young Welshman. Sheepishly, he smiled at Ianto, tentatively asking, “A hug?”

Ianto’s face was a mask of indecision. Finally, he offered Jack an equally tentative nod.

A look of triumph on his features, Jack stepped forward and carefully wrapped his arms around the younger man. Despite the smug impression Jack outwardly gave, Ianto sensed genuine gratitude and, weirdly, adoration in him.

Where Ianto was concerned, he felt rather awkward in Jack’s embrace. The captain’s need for physical contact stunned him as much as it disconcerted him. Suddenly a wave of nausea swept over him, the loss of tension after the attack turning Ianto’s legs into jelly, and he sagged in the hold.

“Whoa!” Jack called out anxiously, grabbing him tighter. “I got you, Ianto. Sit down. Come on.” Awkwardly, Jack managed to turn the trembling man around a bit and with his back sliding down the wall he carefully guided Ianto to sit on the ground. “Breathe,” he commanded when he sensed that the young man held his breath.

“Sick,” Ianto croaked.
“Shhh. It’s okay,” Jack murmured, wrapping one arm around him from behind to pull him against his chest while he soothingly brushed his hand over Ianto’s forehead repeatedly. “Breathe. C’mon. In, out, in… Bit better?” he asked when Ianto settled against him more heavily. Affectionately, he ruffled his hair. “A bit too much excitement, huh?”

Ianto made an affirmative sound.

“But you were brilliant.”

This time, Ianto did not reply. So Jack was content sitting with him, holding him, feeling him breathe consciously. Secretly, he was glad that he could just sit for a moment and do nothing but sit. After his latest resurrection, he felt queasy himself and relished whatever time for recuperation he could get.

“Is it one of the creatures you were talking about?” he asked Owen who still stood over the carcass.

“Yep.”

Hurried footsteps made them both look around to where the ladies came around the corner. Suzie was first and gasped, lifting her gun, when she saw the predator’s remains.

“It’s dead, Suzie,” Owen told her, finally holstering his weapon. “The newbie shot it.”

“You sure?”

“That he shot it or that it’s dead?”

“Prat!”

Owen chuckled.

“So, are you sure it’s dead, Owen?” Toshiko prodded, carefully positioning herself between the creature and a third woman.

“Yes, I am.”

“Thank goodness,” Toshiko sighed. “It looks vicious.”

“Yeah,” Owen grunted. “A weevil’s a friendly housepet in comparison.”

From behind Toshiko the tall, willowy blonde peeked over the other woman’s head at the scene in the corridor. Her green and brown speckled eyes were wide with fear.

Jack eyed her with curiosity.

“We dug her out of the rubble,” Owen said by way of explanation. “The entrance was blocked by debris.”

“She’s Torchwood,” Suzie added but grimaced at the dead predator. “I hope this was the last one.”

“There were five,” the rescued woman cut in.

Quickly doing the math, Suzie stated, “Then we got them all.”

“Did you catch the others?”

“No, they’re dead.”
“What? Why did you kill them? They’re invaluable property!”

“Ah, well,” Owen snarled, “when it comes down to us or them… I prefer it be them.”

Intent on arguing, the woman turned to Jack as the others had referred to him as leader of the group and…

“Ianto!” she called out when she spotted him beside the captain. Rushing to him, she squatted down and threw her arms around him. Stunned, Ianto let it happen for a few seconds before he pushed her back to stare at her with mixed emotions and little recognition. Most of her hair had come loose from a former bun and her clothes were dirty and in places torn from the rubble from which the others had freed her. Curiously it was not her deranged appearance that caught Ianto’s attention, but that her unfortunately shaped glasses were missing.

“You should wear contacts.”

Completely taken by surprise, she muttered, “What?”

“I’ve never seen you with your hair down,” he murmured. “Looks great.”

Tears shot into her eyes. “Oh, Ianto, you’re making fun of me! I must look horrible!”

“No, Carlie, just natural.”

Another sob escaped her at that.

“You know each other?” Jack asked, poking Ianto’s side. “Don’t you want to introduce us?”

Ianto still appeared slightly befuddled, but he recalled his manners, “Ah, well… Jack, this is Carlie Roberts. Carlie, Captain Jack Harkness.”

“Oh!” Carlie sat back on her haunches, reaching up to try brush the tears off her face and get her hair in order, but the strands kept escaping her fingers. A faint blush coloured her cheeks when she finally extended her hand to greet Jack, “Captain Harkness.”

“Don’t stress yourself, Carlie,” Jack smiled and shook her hand. “Just call me Jack.”

“No, sir. That’s not appropriate.”

“Ianto, are you two related?” Jack snickered.

“No.”

Sensing the Welshman squirm uncomfortably, Jack decided not to push the matter.

Carlie sniffed. “Ianto, how long was I stuck down here? Felt like forever.”

“It’s Thursday,” Ianto said.

“Thursday? Oh dear! I’ll have to report to Dr. Kava. He’ll be mad at me for not finishing the examination of the meteorites found in the Baltic Sea…”

“Carlie,” Jack interrupted her. “There will be time for that later.”

“No! It’s important. I should get back to the lab…”
“No,” Jack said, catching one of her wrists as she started to gesture animatedly. “There’s no need to hurry. First we’ll have to debrief you. Take your time.”


Ianto choked. He did not know what he should say so he settled on, “There’s been an invasion. A lot has happened.”

“I don’t understand. An invasion?”

“It all started with the ghost shifts,” Ianto explained. “They were intruders… looking for a way through, and… we opened the door for them.”

“The tower was infiltrated,” Jack explained. “A lot of people died. Torchwood One is destroyed.”


“No particular reason,” Jack told her. “Because they could.”

“Oh, my God!” she shrieked as what he said sank in and she slapped her hand over her mouth. “I never noticed a thing! Just that the predators escaped. I could hear them scratching at the debris and make their echo sounds.” Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. “How could the tower be destroyed? We’re Torchwood. We eliminated the Sycorax. How could anyone…”

“All right, that’s enough,” Jack said, awkwardly leaning forward to try and stop her. “Owen?”

“Yeah, right,” the medic muttered absently as he examined the predator, but he got up anyway.

“…destroy the tower. It’s impregnable, it’s the height of security. There is nowhere in the world more defensible… I... I don’t believe you.”

Owen took her shoulders and firmly pulled her up. “I’ll take you to triage,” he told her. “Come on, love.”

“I don’t believe you. Torchwood’s not destroyed. It can’t be destroyed. It’s impossible… Oh!” Twisting in Owen’s hold, she turned back to Ianto. “How’s Lisa?”

Even though Ianto did his best to remain composed, Jack felt him shudder again. The grief just was too fresh.

“She’s dead,” Ianto rasped.

“Oh, my God! Ianto! I’m sorry!”

She was about to rush back to him, but Owen kept a firm hold on her and Ianto was relieved when the doctor steered her around the corner and out of sight. His breath hitched in his chest. It was an effort to breathe, which made him testy and he tried to shake off the soothing hands on his shoulders.

“Shhhhh. Easy,” Jack murmured, lightly rubbing circles on Ianto’s still sore back. Seeing him flinch, he put his hand on his upper arm instead. “Don’t hyperventilate. Relax. C’mon.” Still Ianto rather gasped in the shallow breaths he took. Jack knew there was nothing he could do but to be there for him and offer his comfort. Carefully, he nudged him to get closer to him again, until he leaned back in.

“Yeah, that’s it. Breathe in. Breathe out… Very good.”
Jack smiled to himself when Ianto closed his eyes and put his head on Jack’s shoulder. Hoping to provide further comfort, Jack kept murmuring to him.

“Jack?” Suzie tentatively said and when he looked up at her, she asked, “What next?”

Good question.

Both Toshiko and Suzie were leaning with their backs against the wall, just Toshiko sat down on the floor while Suzie remained standing. Judging by her stance, Jack suspected that his second in command did not dare to sit down for fear of nodding off. While Jack and Toshiko had had at least some rest during the Hub’s lockdown, Owen and Suzie were on duty since Tuesday, more than forty-eight hours ago.

Two days. No wonder they’re beat. And Ianto desperately needs to get out of here. He sighed. I can’t do without all three of them, though. Owen should stay. Of the three of them he looks best. He’s probably taking those pills again. I should have an earnest word with him about that.

“Toshiko, do you have your PDA?” Jack asked.

“Sure.”

“Where’s the nearest hotel?”

Suzie stared at him with mild astonishment. “Now’s not the time, Jack.”

“Now’s exactly the time,” he replied, even though he recognized the jibe for what it was. “Get yourself a room there and take Ianto with you.”

“Jack, I don’t think…”

“No, Suzie. That’s an order. Toshiko and I slept for a few hours during the lockdown. You need your rest. We can finish up here without you.”

“But, Jack…”

“Suzie!” he snapped. “Stop arguing. Someone needs to drive back home, and I don’t want to see you behind the steering wheel without being rested.”

“Well, when you put it that way…” she groaned.

“You see my point. Tosh?”

“There’s a Marriott on West India Quay,” she told him. “I could get them a suite.”

“Do that.”

Leaning his head against the wall, Jack allowed himself a moment of rest as well. A small smile flit over his features when he watched Toshiko make the reservation over her PDA. Ianto moved a little, his head now nestling into the curve of Jack’s neck, which made Jack smile again. Enjoying the warmth of the Welshman’s body against his own, he closed his eyes.

A moment of bliss. How come I’m feeling so content? Right here with a predator’s carcass and, a shiver ran down his spine, spidery mouse things close by. Can’t be that I’ve died, again, can it? Exhaustion? Opening his eyes he squinted at the young man in his arms. Having Ianto so close to me?
A sigh escaped him and his eyes fell closed again.

*Mmm, I want to go to the hotel, too.*

“All right, I couldn’t get a suite as those are fully booked, but a two-bed room is booked in your name, Suzie,” Toshiko declared. “You have your covert business credit card?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then you shouldn’t waste any time,” Jack said. He loathed to disturb the young Welshman, but he could not stay here indefinitely. “Ianto?”

“Awake, sir,” he mumbled. “Just don’t want to move.”


“Sounds lovely. Can someone beam me there?”

That elicited good-natured laughter from Jack and Toshiko. Suzie rolled her eyes instead.

“Suzie, I’ll give you a call when we’re finished here,” Jack said. “No idea how long it’ll take, though. I’ll have to talk with the Brig when we’re done as well. So you should have plenty of time.” Turning to Ianto, he murmured, “I can’t beam you, but if you let me get up I’ll give you a hand.”

“Which is appreciated.”

Leaning forward, Ianto allowed Jack to stand, then he accepted his hand to pull himself up. For a few seconds, he was unstable on his feet, but then he found his equilibrium and let go of Jack.

“What about the remaining creatures?” Ianto asked.

“UNIT will have to deal with them,” Jack said. “We can’t take them all with us. Who would take care of them? We’re too busy guarding the Rift.”

Ianto nodded, feeling dread at the thought that UNIT might deal with them the way Mace had wanted to deal with him when he still was stuck in the conversion unit, his fate being uncertain as the machine could have restarted.

“Do you have any influence on what happens to them?”

Jack shrugged. “I can talk with the Brig about it, but what they’ll do in the end is taken out of my hands.”

“Thanks for trying,” Ianto said. “I’d hate to see them die just because they’re alien. They’re not a threat.”

Realizing which creatures Ianto was talking about, Jack shuddered.

“All right, Ianto,” Suzie said, pushing herself off the wall. “Let’s go.”

“We should stay,” Ianto said. “Five will get finished faster than three.”

“And it’ll take twice as long when half of the team is overtired,” Jack told him brusquely. “You’ll go with Suzie. I’ll give you a call when we’re done.”

Apparently torn, Ianto shifted his weight from one foot to the other.
“Ianto?” Jack gently asked. “What’s bothering you?”

“Don’t know,” Ianto said, but Jack saw through the lie easily.

“Ianto,” he murmured, carefully taking him by the upper arm. “You’re part of the team. We won’t leave you out.”

“I didn’t think...”

“Yes, you did,” Jack softly told him. “And that’s okay. You have the right to be suspicious. The Institute let you down. I was being honest when I said that we’ll need help. You won’t be on your own. You’ll have a place to go, and we’ll take care of you.”

At that Ianto choked. Jack told him the truth. He could see it in his eyes as clearly as he could sense it, and for the second time since he had met him, Ianto felt the resounding charisma of this extraordinary man that made him feel like he was catching a glimpse at the future, a future where his life was entwined with the captain’s. The idea chased a chill down his spine.

Carefully, Jack gave Ianto’s arm a light reassuring squeeze before he nodded at Suzie who was already waiting at the corridor leading out.

“Thank you, Toshiko,” Ianto said.

“No problem,” she replied with a brief smile, just glancing up from her PDA for a second.

With an insecure smile, Ianto looked at Jack who nudged him along encouragingly. So Ianto went to Suzie and followed her out of creature containment, to the elevator, and finally outside the tower.

Surprised, Ianto looked up at the grey sky. When he and Jack had been watching the sunrise from the forty-ninth floor, the weather had been good, but now it was showery. Still he stopped for a moment, just standing and letting the rain wet his face. It was weird how much he was enjoying the drizzle and the breeze washing over him.

*It’s good to be outside. Considering that I already thought I’d never get out of the tower again. It actually is amazing to feel the weather on my skin and smell the damp city.*

“Ianto!”

Turning to the voice, Ianto saw Owen hurry toward him.

“Good that I caught you,” the medic gasped, when he reached him. “That fireman, Jeffreys, just called when I arrived at the triage with Carlie… She’ll be okay, by the way… So Jeffreys told me that his colleague got through surgery all right. He’s in ICU now but it looks like he’s going to pull through. Jeffreys promised to call again when he knows more.”

Sighing a breath of relief, Ianto said, “That’s good news.”

“Yeah… Thought you’d want to know.”

Ianto snorted with wry amusement at the understatement.

“So what are you two up to?” Owen wanted to know.

“Jack told us to take a break,” Suzie told him.

“Oh.”
“While we’re going to the Marriott he expects you back at the archives as soon as you’re free, though,” Suzie ruined Owen’s illusions.

“Now why am I not surprised?” Owen huffed. “Oh, well. Won’t take that long anymore.”

“If you say so.”

“Well, one can dream, right?” the medic shrugged and fumbled something out of his jeans pocket, thumbing the lid off and sliding a tiny pill into his hand that he popped in his mouth.

“Owen, you know you shouldn’t do that,” Suzie reprimanded him.

Shrugging lopsidedly, he remarked, “Unusual circumstances call for unusual measures. It’s not like I’m using constantly.”

“If Jack knew…”

“So who’d tell him?” Owen challenged. “It’s not addictive anyway.”

Suzie snorted her disapproval. “Do what you want, Owen. Just don’t mix it up with your retcon.”

His features derailing, Owen held up the plastic bottle to check, only to glare at Suzie next.

Ianto chuckled.

“Not funny!” Owen complained.

Smirking broadly, Ianto nodded.

“Ha ha. Go. Run to your hotel,” Owen barked. “Just get out of my sight.” And he stormed off, back into the tower.

“We should go,” Suzie said, glancing at Colonel Mace who was approaching them now, fuming.

“Agent Costello!” he called. “Agent Costello, wait!”

“I don’t think I will,” she told him sternly, prepared to just leave him standing.

Glancing at Ianto with a mix of curiosity and disdain, the colonel turned to Suzie again, “Agent Costello, tell me what is going on inside. You can’t keep us out of…”

“Yes, we can,” Suzie interrupted him.

Doing his best to appear disinterested, Ianto watched the exchange.

“Captain Harkness has no authority over…”

“Well, Brigadier General Lethbridge-Stewart does think differently about that, doesn’t he?” Suzie challenged. “If you’ll excuse us now. We’ve got work to do.”

“Agent Costello, I will…”

“No, you won’t,” she chirped, already on her way again.

Following her example, Ianto did not spare Mace another glance and kept up with her long strides as best as he could.
tbc…
“Did you see what made that web?” Toshiko asked casually.

“Um, yeah,” Jack said, just glancing at the silk structure that had held him earlier. “Spidery mouse things.”

“Spidery what?”

“Mouse things,” Jack told her. “Unless someone finds a better name.”

Toshiko shrugged. “As I didn’t see them I have no suggestion.”

“We shouldn’t waste our time with those creatures,” Jack barked. “I want to get out of here. UNIT can deal with the carcass. Let’s search the last sublevels and head home.”

Surprised by his harsh tone, Toshiko paused in her examination of the web. Her scientific curiosity made her more patient about exploring the unknown.

He’s been under a lot of pressure, she thought. Even though he told me he was all right, I can see that he isn’t. There’s fresh blood on his shirt. He must be injured, but he wouldn’t let anyone help him. If I asked, he’d claim it was just a scratch. It probably is, but I don’t dare to ask.

Jack could sense her anxiety but he was not even tempted to talk to her. If anything, he felt the urge to separate himself even more. In his opinion, he was protecting his team. And honestly, he felt better if he could keep his secrets secret.

Ianto understands that. He did not ask any questions. He just found the files, put them together and forgot that they existed. He actually didn’t ask much at all. I probably don’t want to know what Owen told him about us while he was still stuck.

And as if Jack’s thoughts had summoned him, Owen appeared.

“Jack, what are we going to do with survivors like Carlie?”

“She’s Torchwood,” Jack shrugged. “She’s bound to confidentiality by her contract.”

“What about the civilians drawn into the battle?”

Turning away from the web, looking down the corridor past Owen, Jack contemplated the question. If he was honest there was only one logical choice.

“Retcon.”

Nodding gravely, Owen walked over to Toshiko. Now Jack followed him with his eyes, taking in his grim features and the brusque way he moved. The medic was mad at him, but Jack could not tell why.

“Owen, what’s wrong?”
Tersely, the medic spun around to glare at Jack. “What did you agree on with the Brigadier?”

That question surprised Jack. All he could do was mutter a puzzled, “Why?”

Owen rolled his eyes.

“Because… when I brought Carlie to the triage I heard them argue. I don’t think that UNIT will stay off our back for much longer.”

“We’re almost done here,” Jack shrugged. “That shouldn’t be a problem, then.”

“No problem?” Owen growled. “They sounded as if they were about to declare war on us.”

“They won’t.”

Owen looked far from convinced. “No offence, Jack, but what makes you so sure?”

Smirking sourly, Jack focused on him when he said, “You think my outside the government, beyond the police line is idle talk? Mace can bluster as much as he likes. I am the one in charge here, nobody else.”

“Maybe you should talk with them again,” Owen suggested. “Save us further arguments.”

“I’m not gonna waste my time,” Jack stated flatly. With a swinging gesture as if he would invite them for a dance, he said, “The next sublevel’s waiting. Shall we?”

xXx

**Marriot Hotel**

Upon entering their room, Ianto released a sigh. It was neither the biggest room nor the most luxurious one the Marriot had to offer, but he did not care as long as there were two beds. In Ianto’s opinion that was enough to qualify as heaven right now. He wished for clothes to change into, but actually he was so exhausted that he hardly considered taking a shower. Still he could not fail to notice that Suzie kept her distance from him. He thought about asking what was wrong, but bent down to open his shoes instead. A moan escaped him when he reached for the laces. He was horribly sore.

Removing her shoes as well, Suzie sat down on the edge of the bed. Turning sideways, she plumped up her pillow before she dropped on top of the covers and swung her legs up. She did not say a thing, just closed her eyes instead.

“Suzie?”

Her sole reply was a grunt.

“Are you mad at me?”

“I’m tired,” she told him without opening her eyes. “I want to sleep.”
“But something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“It will be if you don’t stop pestering me,” she grunted.

Scowling, Ianto sat on his bed as well and finally took off his shoes. Then he pushed the covers back and stretched out on the sheets. Gingerly, he moved until he found a position on his side where he did not hurt that much. Still the matter would not leave him rest.

“What did I do wrong?”

Clearly exasperated, Suzie groaned.

“I don’t know,” she huffed, propping herself up on one elbow to glare at him. “What did you do anyway?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”


“Nothing.”

Ianto could not see the problem. Only about half a day had passed since he had met Jack and nothing had happened that would qualify to trigger such hostile behaviour.

“Ohhh, no,” she drawled, still piercing him with a death glare. “You must have done something.”

“If I did I really don’t know what you mean,” Ianto told her, feeling rather helpless and intimidated by her fierce stare.

“You’re part of the team?” she snarled aggressively as she recited Jack’s earlier words to him. “You’ll have a place to go to? We’ll take care of you?” Angrily, she shook her head. “I probably don’t want to know what exactly you’ve done, but I tell you… don’t do it again.”

“Do what?”

“Whatever you did to twist Jack around your little finger,” she huffed.

Now Ianto was thoroughly confused. He tried to remember what he might have done. If anything, Jack had been the one constantly hitting on him, and Ianto did not believe that the captain needed a special reason to do so. Maybe it’s that? Owen made such a quip, about me giving Jack a blowjob in the elevator to make him agree to me joining the team for the search in the Archives. Does she think I did Jack a sexual favour for his cooperation?

“We didn’t do anything,” Ianto told her flatly. “Contrary to what you seem to believe, Jack wouldn’t take advantage like this. What I did do, though, was earn his trust.”

At that, Suzie looked positively shocked, only to erupt in bitter laughter.


Ianto scowled deeply, knowing for a fact that that was not true. His rudimentary empathy was untrained and he did not really like using it either, but knowing next to nothing about the people who had helped him, he had allowed himself to fleetingly sense their emotions to get a better sense of the team dynamics and to judge how he could possibly fit in. Whenever Jack talked about his team members, Ianto had felt pride and reliance emanating from the captain. Ianto believed that Jack certainly was a man who did not trust easily, but he did know that Jack trusted Suzie, Toshiko,
Owen, and, as Ianto had noticed just before they had left, the Brigadier.

“Now you don’t know what to say, do you?” Suzie taunted.

“Whatever I said, you wouldn’t believe me anyway,” Ianto sighed, closing his eyes. He really was horribly tired.

“Right. I wouldn’t,” Suzie snapped and slumped back on the bed.

Not a minute later both of them were fast asleep.

xXx

A few hours later, Jack stepped out of the elevator to be confronted with Colonel Mace and a handful of UNIT soldiers. The Colonel looked all but pleased and stepped sideways into Jack’s path when the captain tried to pass him.

“Right in time,” Mace snarled.

“What do you want?”

“We’re going back in,” Mace told him darkly. “So get out of here. UNIT’s taking over.”

“You’re not taking over anything before I tell you to,” Jack snapped. “Get out of my way.”

“So you can stash away what is rightfully ours?” Mace challenged. “Or to enable the next alien race to invade us?”

Taking another step forward, Jack got into the colonel’s face, his blue eyes burning with fury.

“Nothing here is yours unless we’re leaving it to you,” Jack told him deceivingly calmly. “What happened was not our doing. My team is here to make sure that nothing in the tower can further endanger anyone.”

Mace sneered, “And still you need our help.”

Glar ing at Mace, Jack icily said, “Yes. Regular army soldiers are not trained for a mission like this, UNIT soldiers are.”

“Exactly,” Mace replied easily. “That’s why UNIT should’ve been in charge from the very start.”

Hearing this, Jack was about to explode. How could this arrogant bastard presume to lay claim on the tower? Especially as the formalities were already arranged with the Brigadier. Even more so as Mace had been present when they were arranged.

Mace on the other hand harboured similar feelings for the man whom he believed to be a freak of nature who stood between him and finally taking control of the building and eliminating any threat left. In his opinion this abomination was Torchwood personified and should not be allowed to control anything, let alone the Institute, and he did not plan to cooperate with Jack.

“Colonel, you have no authority over me or Torchwood,” Jack plainly stated, surprising himself with reigning in his rage. “UNIT is here as a courtesy to us, providing administrative assistance.”
“Yeah,” Mace snorted derisively. “Because you don’t have the manpower.”

“Right,” Jack conceded, suspicious at the colonel’s tone, but intent on not letting this argument get out of control. He knew there was just his own team left and he appreciated UNIT’s help, but this was starting to really annoy him.

“As the Institute brought this down on us you should have the decency to step aside and let us deal with it.”

Clenching his teeth, Jack glared at Mace, his fists balling up and the muscles on his neck becoming more prominent.

“UNIT lost several good men during the attack and nobody knows how many people were killed worldwide. Don’t tell me you’re able to take care of it with just the four of…”

Mace was cut off by Jack grasping the lapels of his uniform, jerking him around and shoving him against the wall beside the elevator.

“You have the balls to blame your losses on me?” Jack screamed. “How many did UNIT lose? Here in London? Twenty-eight!” In his anguish he did not care about the weapons now trained on him. He was furious and shaking with grief. “Twenty-eight, Colonel! We don’t have exact figures yet, but so far that’s more than thrice the number of Torchwood employees who survived! A handful of people out of eight hundred twenty-three! The rest, killed or upgraded! So don’t you dare tell me about loss!”

Out of widened eyes, Mace stared at Jack, his distorted features, narrowed eyes, and bared teeth, too shocked to struggle or defend himself verbally.

Breathing heavily, Jack fought for his composure before he dangerously lowly added, “You are here because most of our personnel are dead in the tower. I thought you would understand that.”

When Mace still did not answer, Jack thumped the colonel’s chest in frustration. Being ignored enraged him even more, but he just was too ruddy tired.

“You’re responsible for the security of the whole nation,” Jack groaned. “Why don’t you go back to your desk and care about that?”

“Jack?”

Glad to have someone else to focus on, Jack turned around to the Brigadier and left Mace standing, striding toward the main entrance.

“My team’s at the loading dock,” Jack told the Brigadier as he walked past him. “The tower is yours.”

Nodding curtly at Mace as a sign to go ahead, the Brigadier followed Jack outside.

“That bastard!” Jack exclaimed when they had enough distance from the tower. “How could he…”

“Jack,” the Brigadier murmured. “It’s been two long days. The extreme stress of the situation’s weighing on everyone.”

“If it had been just the past two days, Alistair, that would be one thing, but we’ve butted heads before,” Jack complained. “That man is… he’s a…”
“He’s good with the men and a clever strategist, but he doesn’t like losing anymore than you do, Jack. You should understand that.” Whispering quietly, he added to himself, “He’s still a prat, though.”

Jack just blinked at the Brigadier. Then he snorted. Then he began to laugh. He laughed until tears squeezed from his eyes. Prat. It was such a childish word. Such a simple word. And it perfectly articulated every complaint he had ever had about the colonel. He would never look at the man the same way again. With that one word, prat, the Brigadier had taken away any power Mace had ever held over Captain Jack Harkness. The colonel would never be able to push Jack’s buttons again.

“Thank you, Alistair,” Jack gasped, when he finally caught his breath. “You’ll never know how badly I needed to hear someone say that.”

Instead of a reply, the Brigadier just nodded. Seeing Jack’s gaze drift up the tower with an expression of pained longing, he said, “You missed him.”

For a second, Jack thought he was asked if he missed the Doctor and giving it a moment’s consideration, he chose to misunderstand on purpose, saying, “Terribly.”

“He’s an extraordinary man.”

“He is.” Biting his bottom lip, Jack strolled further away from the tower, making sure they could not be overheard, and the Brigadier went with him. “There are so many questions left unanswered.”

“You did not leave him deliberately?” The question was out before he could think about it. Jack never had explained how he happened to end up on earth or when he did. This seemed to be a good opportunity, so the Brigadier grasped it.

Jack shook his head. “No. We… were separated in battle.”

“I see.”

Actually, the Brigadier saw more than just that. Besides seeing his old suspicion confirmed, he knew Jack told only part of the truth. Knowing that something had happened to the captain that had changed his life to a permanent state, the Brigadier deduced easily that Jack’s questions concerned his immortality.

“I believe that everything happens with a good reason.”

“Oh, really?” Jack huffed, regretting it at once. He did not want to vent his frustration on his friend. The Brigadier, though, remained unfazed. “Yes. And at the appropriate time.”

Scowling deeply, Jack tried to see reason in this argument.

“Jack,” the Brigadier gently said, “you’ll get your answers.”

“When?”

“When you are ready.”

“I am ready!” Jack frayed. “I’ve been ready for years! I… I don’t know…”

Seeing his distress, the Brigadier put a hand on Jack’s shoulder.

“You don’t know how to move on?” he guessed and felt Jack shudder. “That happens to all of us,
Jack. That’s part of being human.”

Jack grimaced, his lips quivering, when he searched for words to express what was agitating him.

“I believe that you have found your purpose,” the Brigadier told him. “It’s up to you now to accept that you’re here for a reason.” The irony of him counselling a man old enough to be his grandfather was not lost on the Brigadier, but for as long as he had known Jack Harkness, he had always been the frightened young man who had been left behind.

“What reason would that be?” Jack all but whined.

“Maybe you should ask yourself why destiny put control over Torchwood into your hands, Jack.”

“Not much left of it.”

“I know, but what is left is the best of it.”

“Oh, really?” Jack huffed.

The Brigadier nodded. “Yes, Jack. You have a fine team, and I’m glad that you lost nobody in the attack.”

“Well, uh, thanks, um… thanks.”

His embarrassment surprised the Brigadier. Usually, Captain Jack Harkness was not the type for modesty, on the contrary. Forwardness and exuberance were what he expected of Jack. Seeing him this lost astonished the Brigadier.

“They also did a great job searching the tower. They’re thorough and passionate.” A small smirk cracked his features. “And loyal. They were predestined to butt heads with Colonel Mace.”

_The prat_, Jack remembered and had to bite back a chuckle. Suddenly, he felt terribly tired. Before he could even think about it, he swayed, squatted and sat on the ground.

“Jack? Are you all right?”

“Y-yeah,” he muttered. “I… just need a moment.”

“As I said… two long days,” the Brigadier sighed, squatting down beside Jack. Lowering his voice he asked, “How often?”

Taking a deep, calming breath, Jack shook his head. Alistair knew. For once it felt good not having to hide that part of himself. He had actually lost count. “Too often.”

Nodding his understanding, the Brigadier said, “I heard something about Cybermen in the Cardiff Hub.”

“Oh? Who told you that?”

“Does it matter?” the Brigadier shrugged.

“It does matter!” Jack frayed. “So who was it?”

“One of your team mentioned it in passing,” the Brigadier calmly told him. “While they were searching the tower. Is it true?”
Biting the inside of his cheek, Jack nodded grimly. “And before you ask… Ghosts everywhere on earth? Ghosts inside our base? Of course we noticed. Of course we examined the phenomenon. Of course we ran into a dead end.”

“Hartman?”

“Guessing right,” Jack snorted wryly. Awkwardly, he got up from the ground. The pavement was uncomfortably wet from the earlier drizzle. Clear agony lacing his voice, he groaned, “My hands were tied. If I’d have known… I would have…”

A hand on his arm stopped him.

“I know.”

Looking right into his friend’s eyes, Jack could see his compassion. For some reason, he felt like Alistair actually understood his pain. How that was possible, he could not determine, but seeing someone care relieved some of his pain and kindled new aches at the same time.

“Jack, I don’t want to know what kind of power the Institute held over you, but I can tell you that I never liked to see their attitude toward you.”


“As if they owned you, Jack. Like they considered you to be their property.”

Jack choked, wondering how much his friend might really know.

“Even as a Brigadier General I was not in the position to change anything about it,” the Brigadier said before Jack got a chance to speak. “You know only too well that we have no authority over Torchwood… you even reminded Mace of that fact.” Watching Jack closely, he continued. “Do you know how I got into this position?”

“Hard work?” Jack guessed.

“Yes, that, too,” the Brigadier chuckled with little amusement. “No, what I mean is that I keep other people’s secrets.”

Jack nodded.

“You need to learn how to be diplomatic, how to follow the official line.”

“I can be diplomatic!” Jack pouted.

“Oh, you know how to be charming, Jack,” the Brigadier told him with mild amusement. “Just don’t be too charming, you know. You need to find the right balance when you officially claim charge of Torchwood.”

Jack’s pout vanished quickly to be replaced by confusion. “What do you mean? Claim the leadership? I don’t want to be director of Torchwood. I can’t rebuild One. I don’t want to!”

The Brigadier had to suppress his chuckles at Jack sounding like a stubborn child. If their conversation had not been that earnest, he would have laughed out loud. As it was, though, he smiled compassionately at his friend.

“They have no power over you anymore, Jack. You are free.”
Just for a second, the Brigadier thought Jack was about to bolt. “You need to decide what you want to do with your freedom,” he said calmly.

“I can’t take over the leadership, Alistair,” Jack groaned. “I don’t know how…”

“You do, Jack,” he assured him. “You assumed the leadership quite naturally when no one was left to lead.”

“We were in a crisis!”

“Yes. And?”

With rising agitation, Jack shook his head. “I just commanded my own team. All I did was become the *arrogant bastard* that everyone loves to call me.”

Now the Brigadier really could not help his chuckles. “You’re going to have to perfect those skills.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, Jack. If you want to keep your team you will.”

Opening his mouth to argue, Jack froze a second later, knowing that the Brigadier was right. Lowering his gaze, he grimaced. “Someone has to guard the Rift.”

The Brigadier nodded and patted his arm encouragingly. When Jack met his eyes again, he said, “You know what to do, Jack. Now you have to do it.”

All Jack could do was stare at his friend in wonder and nod slightly. For the first time it occurred to him how weird this conversation was. His grimace becoming somewhat sheepish, he looked up at the sky.

“Thinking about what the Doctor would expect you to do is a good start,” the Brigadier said. “You won’t disappoint him.”

“Really? How do you know that?”

At that the Brigadier smiled.

“You didn’t disappoint me.”

tbc…

*Free! *
Stepping in, Jack quickly looked around the hotel room. A smile cracked his tired features at the sight of his sleeping Torchwood agents.

_Not so fast, Jack!_ he reprimanded himself. _Ianto’s not your agent. He belongs to One. Though, there’s no difference anymore, right? If I’m in charge of the whole Institute he is one of my agents._

Pushing the thought aside, Jack went to the left bed to wake his second in command.

“Suzie?” Gently prodding her shoulder, he said a bit louder, “Suzie.”

“Hmm?”

Sleepily, she turned onto her side.

“Suzie. Wake up.”

“What?” Forcing her eyes open, she glanced up and started when she recognized Jack. “Whoa! You said you’d call!”

“Yeah… Well, I didn’t.”

“Obviously.” Groaning, she stretched her tired limbs. “Ugh, how late is it?”

“Some time after three.”

“Three in the afternoon?” she prodded.

“Yeah.”

Nodding, she swung her legs over the edge and stretched again. “Give me five minutes and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Don’t rush it,” Jack said, stepping aside. “We’ll meet at the restaurant first.”

“Restaurant?”

Jack nodded.

Her gaze drifting to the other bed, Suzie asked, “What about Ianto? You said he’s part of the team.”

Noticing her accusatory tone, Jack frowned. “Yes, I did.”

“What exactly did you mean?”
“I asked him to help us incorporate the artefacts and files we took into our archives,” Jack explained. “He’ll come to Cardiff for about a week.”

“I see.”

She turned around so abruptly that Jack wondered if she was actually mad at him.

“Suzie?”

Spinning back to face him, she spat, “Jack, you’re the boss, you make the decisions. I’d just have liked you to mention it to me before everyone else knows.”

*Oh!* Jack was genuinely surprised. Those were things he usually did not think about, because he did not need to. *Or maybe I’d need to but no one ever complained.* Looking down at Ianto, he said, “I asked him on the spur of the moment.”

“Impulsive as always,” Suzie snorted and vanished in the bathroom.

“What’s wrong with that?” he called after her. Hearing the covers rustle from behind, Jack turned back to Ianto. “Hey.”

Blinking, Ianto glanced up at Jack. “Hey.” When he stretched reflexively, he groaned.

“How are you, Ianto?”

Moaning softly, Ianto turned his head, seeing that Suzie was gone. He was about to ask Jack where she was when he heard sounds from the bathroom. Sinking back on the pillow, he groaned again.

“Don’t know why I turned onto my back.”

“The sores?”

“Yeah,” Ianto moaned, trying to roll onto his side.

“Shall I kiss it better?” Jack suggested innocently.

Grimacing at Jack, Ianto huffed, “You wish.”

Chuckling, Jack squatted beside the bed to be at eye level with Ianto. He loved his wit and humour.

“Is our deal still in force?” Jack asked.

“About updating your archives?”

“Yes.”

“Sure,” Ianto confirmed.

“Good,” Jack smiled and had to withstand the urge to brush aside a dark strand of hair that curled on Ianto’s forehead. “I already told Suzie that we’ll meet at the restaurant for a late lunch when you’re ready.”

“You want to scare away the other guests?” Ianto queried, looking Jack over, “Or will you retcon them when we leave?”

Jack laughed.
“You mean our ruined clothes? We’ll have a room for ourselves.”

“Good.” Moving awkwardly, Ianto sat up on the edge of the bed. “Food is a great idea. I’m starving.”

“Yeah… Owen told me to order something light for you, though.”

Smirking with wry amusement, Ianto said, “That’s all right, Jack. You’ll order fresh fruit and porridge for me and I’ll eat your pancakes.”

Laughing out loud, Jack patted Ianto’s thigh. “You’re brilliant.”

Ianto smiled tiredly.

“Do you really want pancakes?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll get pancakes. With syrup and blueberries… or strawberries.”

“Strawberries sound great. If they have any.”

“I’ll get you your strawberries,” Jack declared. “If it’s the last thing I do.”

Chuckling lowly, Ianto said, “Syrup will do all right, Jack.”

“Okay. We’ll meet downstairs then.”

“Yeah. We’ll be there in a few minutes,” Ianto assured him.

“Good.” Jack got up and started for the door. Stopping at the bathroom door, he called, “Suzie? What shall I order for you?”

After a moment of thinking, she replied, “Salad with roast chicken would be great!”

“Your wish is my command, m’lady.”

The door opened and Suzie appeared, swinging a towel at him. “Get lost.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Jack mock saluted and ran for the door when she swung at him again.

When the door closed behind Jack, Suzie’s angry features changed to a smile.

“Are you finished in the bathroom?” Ianto asked.

“Yes,” Suzie replied. “It’s all yours.”

“Thanks.”

Getting up from the bed was awkward. For just a second there, Ianto wondered how he was supposed to get to the bathroom as he was horribly stiff. Slowly, he made his way across the room.

“Hey, Jones!” Suzie called out when he was about to vanish in the bathroom. “I’m sorry for, um… what I said earlier…”

“It’s okay,” he warded off. “Let’s write it off to sleep deprivation.”
Offering him a small smile, Suzie said, “Go. I’ll wait.”

xXx

When Suzie and Ianto entered the hotel restaurant a waitress hurried up to them and showed them to an adjacent room where they met the rest of the team. When Jack spotted Ianto, he left his place beside Toshiko to move to the head of the table, gesturing Ianto to sit down. Suzie settled down beside Owen.

Seeing the small stack of pancakes that now sat in front of him, Ianto chuckled. *Jack’s true to his word.* Grinning, he reached for his cutlery and dug in. *Delicious!*

“Hey!” Owen grunted around his steak, “You won’t have those pancakes!”

“Oh, really?” Ianto smirked, picking up two pieces on his fork. “How do you plan to stop me?”

“Jack, you shouldn’t encourage him,” Owen growled.

“I didn’t,” Jack pouted.

“You should know better! Shame on you, Captain Harkness!” Owen huffed. “I’ll blame you when he gets sick.”

Ianto snickered at the exchange.

“It was Ianto’s decision!” Jack defended himself.

“Owen!” Ianto mingled in when the medic took a breath to prepare for another tirade. “Stop pestering Jack. If he hadn’t done it I’d have ordered them myself… and I’ll eat them, too, no matter what you say.”

“You’ll remember my words when…”

“Owen!” Suzie cut in. “Enough is enough! It’s not your fault if he gets sick! Now, maybe you could stop complaining and do something productive instead like giving an overview of what you did before you left the tower?”

“What’s to tell?” Owen snorted. “We searched three more sublevels without further incident, packed up, and transported what we gathered at Secure Archives to the truck. End of story.”

“Where’s the truck now?” Suzie asked.

“Still at the tower,” Toshiko told her matter of factly. “When we were done loading, we controlled the content again and sealed it before we left.”

“And I went to retcon the civilian witnesses,” Jack added. “I also talked with the Brigadier. UNIT will take care of the cleanup for us, so we can go back to Cardiff now.”

“We’ll have enough to clean up there,” Toshiko sighed.

“Like the hole in the roof,” Suzie nodded.
“Yeah… among other things.”

“All of that can wait,” Jack declared, putting his glass of water down with a thump. “Once we’re back I want you to go home and get your well earned rest.”

“How long?” Owen teased. “Until tomorrow morning?”

“I don’t want to see you again before Monday,” Jack said. “Unless the Rift is throwing something big at us that I can’t handle on my own.”

“Woohoo! Sounds like vacation!” Owen cheered.

“I’ll come in to help, Jack,” Toshiko said. “You can’t deal with the Rift alone.”

“No, Tosh,” Jack shook his head. “I meant what I said. You have the whole weekend off.”

“But…”

“No buts, Tosh. I dealt with the Rift on my own for years. I’ll manage a few days.”

Chewing pointedly, Owen mumbled, “Don’t argue. It’s the closest we’ve got to a vacation for ages.”

“You never asked for one.”

“I’ll change that,” the medic vowed.

Chuckling, Jack leaned back in his chair. “Suzie, I’d like you to drive the SUV back.”

“Okay.”

“Owen, you’ll be on the truck with me. And Tosh, you’ll take Ianto home?”

“Of course, Jack,” she agreed readily.

“That’s great, Tosh. He’ll need to collect some things.”

Ianto released a breath he did not know he had been holding. For a moment, he had thought that he would be left behind after all. Now, he returned his attention to his pancakes. They were delicious, but even though he would have loved to devour them all he felt that that was not the best idea. Feeling regret at having to leave them, he took two more bites before he shoved the plate aside.

“Anyone want the rest of my pancakes?” he asked. “I didn’t touch the last two.”

“Sure!” Jack jumped at the opportunity.

As nobody else claimed them, Ianto pushed the plate toward Jack.

“I told you so,” Owen grunted.

“No, you didn’t,” Ianto shot back. “In contrary to what you’ve predicted, I avoided getting sick because I know when to stop eating.”

“Hey, kids!” Jack threw in. “Will you stop fighting?”

“I’m not fighting,” Ianto declared. “I just made a point.”

Owen scoffed.
“Jack, what about Torchwood One?” Ianto asked.

“What about it?”

“Well, you said that UNIT will clean up the tower,” Ianto said, “but what about the Institute itself?”

Realizing what Ianto was asking about now, Jack told him, “No decision was made yet, but I doubt that it will be rebuilt, actually.”

“So… once I’m done with your archives I’ll have to search for a new job?”

“Don’t worry about that now,” Jack said. “As I said, no decision was made yet.”

Nodding, Ianto accepted his answer, but a nagging worry still remained. They finished their meal over small talk and once they were done they left the hotel to get their respective cars for the trip back to Cardiff.

xXx

Standing in his living room, Ianto looked around with a peculiar feeling. It felt oddly strange. When he and Lisa had moved in together their households fused while unpacking and arranging furniture and bits and pieces. Now Ianto let his view drift through the room and realized how much Lisa had influenced the decoration. A few framed pictures and the shelf with his book collection were about as much as Ianto had contributed.

“This has a female touch,” Toshiko murmured. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” he replied, feeling the words catch in his throat. “It’s so strange. It doesn’t really feel like she’s dead, but still I miss her horribly already.”

At a loss for what to say, Toshiko just nodded. Furtively, she watched him while pretending to study the book shelf.

“Did you decide what to do yet?” she asked.

“Ummm…”

Actually, Ianto still was not sure. Jack had suggested that he stayed home for the weekend and would come to Cardiff by train on Sunday evening to join them on Monday morning. That would allow Ianto time to arrange things, but it would also leave him with too much time to brood. So he seriously considered Owen’s offer to stay with him. Of course, he would find a hotel or a room to let for the time he would work at Torchwood Three, but it would be good if he could do that on-site.

But what will I do in Cardiff the whole weekend? Three days. I can’t stay at Owen’s the whole time. He took a deep breath. I could go and visit Mam and Rhi.

His insides constricted at that thought. While he yearned to see his family, he also feared their meeting. They had not enjoyed the best relationship since he had left for London.

“Is this a first edition?” Toshiko suddenly asked.

“Huh?” Looking at the book she was indicating, he shook his head. “I wish it was. I can’t afford first
“Your collection’s almost complete,” she smiled.

“I have all the classics, but I don’t care that much for the new Bond novels. I’d like to have them all on DVD, though.”

Nodding her understanding, Toshiko said, “Yeah, I’m collecting…” she chuckled with slight embarrassment, “eggcups.”

“Oh!” Ianto smirked. “How did that happen?”

“I… don’t know,” Toshiko chuckled with real amusement now. “I just do.”

“Will you show me?”

His request sounded so honest and innocent that she could not refuse. “Sure. Remind me, I forget things like that when I’m busy.”

“Oh, I know that feeling,” Ianto assured her. “Depending on how busy I’ll be incorporating the materials from One into your archives, I might forget as well.”

“Hm, then we should take a note,” Toshiko suggested and pretended to get out her calendar to select a date. “When would you like to come and see my collection?”

Ianto laughed.

It sounds out of place, he thought ruefully and fell silent. Lisa is dead. I shouldn’t laugh. At the same time it felt weirdly natural, which confused Ianto no end. I can’t stay here. I’d go mad! Where’s the suitcase?

He forgot about the suitcase and darted into the bathroom instead. There he leaned on the open toilet, coughing, fearing that with every breath he gasped in he would get even sicker. Thankfully the pancakes stayed down. It was not the food that made him choke but his emotional uproar.

“Ianto?” he heard Toshiko’s anxious voice from behind. “Can I help? Should I call Owen?”

“No!” he croaked. “Don’t.” Several times he gasped for breath between coughs. “I’ll be all right… Just… a minute.”

“Ianto, you don’t look all right,” she said worriedly and ventured awkwardly inside to stand beside him. “What can I do?”

“There’s… I… I’ll be…”

Ianto’s voice wavered. Looking into the bowl of the toilet did not help calming his stomach. Chills ran down his back and he started to tremble.

“Ianto?” Toshiko called out with renewed anxiety. “Ianto!”

Wrapping her arms around him, she tried to support him when sobs bubbled out of him, his legs buckled and he collapsed in front of the toilet. Incapable of keeping him upright they both ended up on the floor where they sat, Ianto cradled in her embrace. Overwhelmed by everything that had happened, he submitted himself to her soothing when she guided him down to rest his head in her lap. Continuing to murmur nonsense to him, she held and caressed him while he was crying.
After dropping Owen off and parking the truck at the secret loading dock, Jack entered their base through the vaults. The first thing he became aware of even before he entered the centre Hub was the stench.

_The Octopus_, he remembered. _I've got to get rid of the carcass as soon as possible._

Ignoring the remains for now, Jack went straight to his office. Shards of glass that scattered the floor and some of the furniture made it painfully obvious that he did not know how that had happened.

_Must have been the octopus._ Looking out through the destroyed window, he checked on what else the giant creature had smashed. _Owen’s workstation. That must have made Tosh’s heart bleed. At least Mainframe did not suffer._

Heaving a sigh, he brushed two shards off his office chair. He was about to sit down when the phone rang.

_Crap!_

“Yes?” he answered the call. “Ellis!” he greeted cheerfully, even though he could not say that he was happy to hear from Chief Superintendent Cadwallader. His mood sagged even more as he listened. “I don’t know what you’re complaining about. They’re both in one piece, right?” he queried. “No, Chief. Nothing happened to them. They were all right when I dropped them off at home.”

With fading patience, Jack listened to Cadwallader expressing his worry about his constables. “No, Ellis. Maybe they were so relieved to be off duty that they drank a pint too much.” Another, even more vociferous complaint made Jack’s ears ring. “If he was drunk enough, maybe he did it on a dare! Otherwise, I don’t know. Check the local spas. If anyone gave your PC a full body wax, I am sure it will show up on their receipts.” Another query about their wellbeing followed. “I’m sure they’re all right.” Another mention of the officers’ amnesia. “Sorry, Ellis. Can’t help you.”

Thankfully, he could finish the call then. Right at that moment, Jack felt like pulling the plug out of the phone. Instead of sinking into his chair, he climbed down the ladder to the room under his office. There nothing had changed.

Jack sighed and bent down to open and remove his shoes. His coat dropped on the chair, followed by his braces. Heavily he sat down on the bed and fell backwards onto the cover.

_Should I contact Tosh? Suzie called me when she left the SUV at the garage to head home. No, Tosh will call as well. She always does._

Closing his eyes, Jack concentrated on just breathing for a minute or so.

_I wonder if Ianto decided to come to Cardiff straight away. When we parted he appeared less determined. I could call, but I shouldn’t push too much._

Cadwallader’s call still fresh in his memory made him recall the conversation about retcon that he had with Ianto. It led to his spontaneous question if Ianto would temporarily join the team. Back then it seemed to be a great idea, but now he questioned his decision.
Maybe even the simple question was too much. Ianto must be traumatized by the battle and his captivity in the conversion unit. He was exhausted as well. And still he managed to pull himself together and work with us. His strength was what impressed me. Together with his intelligence and quick-wittedness.

But I never spared a thought to Ianto’s wellbeing. What is good for him? Is it good to tear him out of his familiar environment? Is it good to force him to relive his trauma by making him work with the artefacts from One? Is it good for him to be stuck with the remains of the organisation that is responsible for his fiancé’s death and that almost got him killed?

Why did I want him to work for me anyway? That he knows One’s system inside out is only one of the reasons and just a paltry excuse.

Jack rubbed his forehead to soothe the headache that throbbed against it.

If it was just due to carnal attraction I could’ve kept Ydris as well, Jack admonished himself. Back then, I didn’t know that we would bring in that much from One, though. And Ydris doesn’t know Torchwood, Ianto does.

They both are quite handsome with expressive eyes, he smirked to himself. Ydris’s green, Ianto’s blue. Mmmm, but I do love Ianto’s voice. It’s so deep.

‘You wish.’

Jack chuckled at the memory.

Gorgeous and brilliant.

He sighed and tried to relax enough to finally fall asleep. Despite his usual bragging about not sleeping, he did very well need sleep.

Despite the trauma Ianto must have fallen asleep due to sheer exhaustion. But then, how much did he really see of the destruction? And of the dead? Once he was free, Owen kept him away from places where he might be confronted with killed colleagues.

As far as I know, Ianto was taken straight to the conversion unit when he was caught by the Cybermen. He saw his superior being deleted, though, and even though he did not have to watch it, he knew that his fiancé was converted into a Cyberman. Didn’t he say that he saw her again after the transformation? When he was already stuck in the thing?

It’s a miracle that he survived. So many dead. More than ninety-five percent of Torchwood personnel exterminated by Cybermen and Daleks. And still it could have been so much worse.

All of a sudden another thought came to his mind.

Wait a moment! Didn’t Ianto say that his fiancé was converted in the very same unit he was then stuck in? What the hell must that do to his mind? I shouldn’t drag him deeper into Torchwood. He should have counselling instead.

The other survivors also have to deal with traumatic experiences. Someone should make sure they’re being taken care of.

That thought made him cringe.

That someone’s me! it hit him. As new director of Torchwood they’re my responsibility.
A burden he neither liked nor wanted.

*I can’t do that! I don’t know how!*

Suddenly, his stomach felt like it had turned to a lump of lead. From one second to the other the walls seemed to close in on him, making it hard to breathe. Feeling half-suffocated, Jack jumped out of the bed, starting to pace. Realizing quickly that that did not help, he climbed up the ladder.

Seeing the broken windows of his office made things worse.

*I have to get out of here!*

Even the Hub seemed to shrink on him. Upon leaving the office, Jack was confronted with the carcass of the octopus again, the sight and the stench reminding him of what had happened.

*Air!*

Unable to breathe, Jack staggered and just made it far enough to sink down on the sofa in the rec area. There he lay, trying to slow his heartbeat and to regain control over his lungs. Every fibre in his body yearned to run.

*Flee the Hub.*

*Flee the city.*

*Flee this planet.*

But there was nowhere to go. And no way to get there with his vortex manipulator still burnt out.

*The only one who could take me is the Doctor. And he’s already left me behind again.*

Jack’s heart ached with the realization. His whole being longed for the life he had known before the game station. Before he became this monstrosity. Before he got stranded in this god-forsaken time.

Images of happier times aboard the TARDIS came to his mind. Rose dancing around the console room with delight at the prospect of visiting another extraordinary world. The Doctor rummaging around in the bowels of the ship, trying to fix some circuit. The TARDIS herself murmuring in his mind.

A sob bubbled up and he was glad that nobody could see him grimace at his heartache. His restless nature revolted against staying put in the same place for an indefinite amount of time. Even if he travelled the world, this planet would be too small for him. He did not belong here and the bitter truth gnawed at him from the inside.

*But I’m free!* Jack reminded himself, brushing his tears away with the sleeve of his shirt. *Finally! I’m free to go wherever I like!*

With renewed energy, he pushed himself up from the sofa and strode to his office to grab some stuff only to realize that there was very little that belonged to him.

*I still have nowhere to go.*

Erratically, Jack swivelled around and stormed out, stopping dead in his tracks between the workstations. He still felt trapped.

Looking around frantically for a line of flight, his gaze fell upon the frame around the monitors on
Toshiko’s workstation where she had pasted some photos. Suzie and Owen bent over a piece of alien tech, laughing. Toshiko, deeply engrossed in her work. A snapshot of himself, playing basketball with Owen.

The sight of the photos evoked another flood of emotions, but of another kind. Having selected them for his team, he cared for them as much as he cared for Rose and the Doctor. They needed him. He had a responsibility.

This was a burden he carried with good grace.

*Someone has to guard the Rift*, he recalled his words to the Brigadier.

Jack sighed.

*Besides, the Doctor would be disappointed in me for just running off.*

Once more, he heaved a sigh.

*On Monday they’ll be back. Somehow I’ll manage until then.*

Jack did not exactly come to peace with his destiny, but at least staying became more bearable.

xXx

Ianto loved Toshiko because the situation never turned awkward between them. After his embarrassing breakdown in the bathroom, she simply reassured herself that he would be all right and left him to his own devices in order to make himself more presentable again. When he went to the bedroom, she just sat down on the couch with a magazine from the coffee table. Ianto selected some clothes and returned to the bathroom.

Washing himself was a bit tricky, but he managed and got dressed. It was such a relief to finally feel clean again!

Upon crossing the living room, he found Toshiko sleeping. So he tried to be silent when he packed a suitcase with clothes and a few other things he might need. One of his favourite books also vanished between socks and shirts, the rest would go into a backpack. Once he was ready to leave, he carefully nudged Toshiko’s shoulder.

“Tosh?”

“Hmmm?” She blinked and sat up straighter, yawning heartily.

“I could drive,” Ianto offered.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll drive,” Toshiko murmured and scooted forward in her seat. “Just a moment.”

“Would you like a coffee?”

“Coffee would be wonderful,” she smiled at him gratefully. Only then she realized that he had changed into casual clothes and eyed him appreciatively.

“Something wrong?” he asked.
“No,” she assured him. “Everything’s fine.”

“All right. I’ll make the coffee,” Ianto said and vanished in the kitchen.

Brewing the beverage did not take long and they sat in silence and nursed their drinks. Setting her empty mug down, Toshiko declared that they should go. Ianto took his luggage and followed close behind her. At the door, he stopped and looked around the flat for a last time. Leaving it now, he felt that one part of his life was completed while another was about to begin.

Sighing, Ianto closed the door and locked it before he followed Toshiko to her car where she just finished her call to Jack.

A few kilometres later, though, Ianto repeated his offer that Toshiko gratefully accepted this time. While she slept in the passenger’s seat, Ianto let his mind wander. He only woke her again when he entered Cardiff, asking where he had to drive to now. They arrived at Owen’s place about 11 pm, but he still admitted them relatively quickly, clad only in worn jeans. As they entered, Owen eyed Ianto critically.

“Looking good,” the medic commented on his way to the kitchenette. “How do you feel?”

“I’m fine,” Ianto assured him.

“Tell me if that changes,” Owen said, pouring himself a scotch. Holding up the bottle he asked, “Tosh? Like a drink?”

“No, thanks. All I want is a good night’s sleep.” She turned to Ianto who appeared a little lost, standing in the middle of the loft. “You’ll be all right?”

“Sure,” he nodded. “Thank you.”

Sensing that he meant more than just the lift to Cardiff, she smiled at him. “No problem. See you.”

“Night, Tosh!” Owen called distractedly as he dropped on the sofa while she let herself out.

“Nice place,” Ianto commented.

“Thanks,” Owen grunted. “Don’t just stand there. There’s the bathroom,” he gestured in the right direction.

Instead Ianto went to the living area to sit on the couch across from Owen’s.

“You belong in bed,” the medic scoffed, obviously unhappy with the company.

“You could have told me earlier if you don’t want me here. I’d have stayed in London until Sunday.”

“That’s not… I’m in doctor mode.”

“Well, in that case you should stop drinking,” Ianto brushed off the half-apology.

“Hey!” Owen snapped. “Who’s the doctor?”

“You are, so you should know better.”

Huffing his discontentment, Owen downed the rest of his scotch before he put the glass on the coffee table with a clonk.
“Get in bed!” Owen commanded.

“Only if you go, too,” Ianto said. “And I’ll take the couch.”

“The hell you will,” Owen frayed. “You’ll take the bed!”

For a moment they just glared at each other until Ianto asked a question out of the blue.

“Did you burn it?”

“Burn what?” Confusion wrinkled Owen’s forehead.

“Your sweatshirt.”


“That’s not what I meant, Owen,” Ianto told him gravely.

“Then what the hell are you talking about?”

“Ghosts, Owen,” Ianto snorted. “Ghosts on your sweatshirt. It was hard not to see that you were caught by the hype around them.”

“Oh, that!” Owen smirked devilishly. “Just loved the take on the scene.” Dropping his voice, he tried to imitate Bogart, “Here’s looking at you, kid.”

Ianto still scowled.

Realizing that something was not right, Owen asked with honest concern, “Did that really bother you that much? You could’ve said something.”

“No,” Ianto said, regretting that he had brought up the subject. “At first it was too dark to see it and when the lights came on I… you were so supportive that it became irrelevant.”

“There’s still something,” Owen prodded. “What is it?”

At that, Ianto squirmed a little, declaring somewhat sheepishly, “Didn’t want to mention it because I didn’t want to scare you away.”

“Oh! You needn’t worry about that.”

“Well, now I know,” Ianto agreed, “but… there… was a couple. They said, they’d send help, but… nobody came.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Ianto tried to shrug it off. “Maybe they never made it out of the tower. And if they did, they probably were too scared to… tell… anyone.”

Owen clearly heard his voice trail off and knew that he should not allow him to brood about this, so he grasped the first idea he had and asked, “Do you play rugby?”

Incredulously, Ianto stared at him. “Do I look like I’d play?”

“No, but… it’s Welsh national sport. You are Welsh. So…”
Despite his sour mood, Ianto had to chuckle.

“That’s an incorrect syllogism, Owen,” he chortled.

“A what?”

“Implying a wrong conclusion, like: All Weevils have fangs. Your dog also has fangs, so it’s a Weevil.”

“Okay…”

Still Ianto chuckled. “Anyway, rugby’s not in my genes, Owen. And no, you won’t get to test it.”

“I’ve got enough work as it is,” Owen snorted. “So… do you support a team?”

“Well, actually, no. I rarely get to go to the games,” Ianto shrugged. “I watch the Celtic League on TV when I can.”

“Ah, so you are Welsh after all,” Owen teased. Yawning widely, he got up and walked around the couch to where Ianto sat, lightly patting his upper arm.

“C’mon. The day was long enough.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Because you’re high on adrenalin,” Owen snorted. “That’ll change when you’re in bed. C’mon.”

Reluctantly, Ianto let himself be prodded over to the bathroom and prepared for the night. Owen still insisted on Ianto taking the bed and prepared the sofa, that turned out to be a studio couch, for himself.

Once Ianto stretched out and Owen pulled up the covers, the young Welshman had to admit that the medic was right. He was dead tired. Still being somewhat wound up, he settled on his side. When Owen switched off the lights, his gaze drifted out of the panorama windows. The view across the bay was spectacular. Lights were dancing on the water and a freighter cut through the waves in the moonlight.

*Looks peaceful,* Ianto thought. *As if nothing has happened at all. Somewhat weird.*

A signal horn blew.

In a day or two, he would find himself a place to stay. He was not ready to worry about that just now, but he could not impose upon Owen indefinitely. Then he would look in on Mam and Rhi. He wondered if maybe Captain Harkness would give him a week before he started integrating the Torchwood One objects into Three’s archives. He had not been home in quite a while, and now that he was here, he was suddenly homesick for some of his old haunts. It would be nice to have some time to visit.

But all of that could sort itself out tomorrow. Right now, he was finally safe, and he needed to sleep.

“Owen?” he murmured.

“What?” the doctor grunted.

“Thank you.”
Another grunt and the rustling of bedclothes were the only answer Ianto got. Smirking at Owen’s attitude, Ianto enjoyed the view until his eyes fell shut and he drifted off to sleep.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Well… this is it. I’m both excited and sad about seeing Doomsday end. I want to thank everyone, especially EllianaDunla, who commented or added the story to favourites. I’m looking forward to seeing you in the sequel.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!