

Potentiality (Or: How I Learned To Loathe The Quantum Bomb) by Jewels

Fandom: Torchwood

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Summary: Somewhere between "*Countrycide*" and "*Captain Jack Harkness*", Ianto Jones went from hardly knowing how to hold a gun to be willing and able to use it. How did he get there, and what did he have to sacrifice in the process?

Livejournal: <http://bjewelled.livejournal.com>

Part One

Jack Harkness first got the idea as he stood overlooking the Hub, Gwen Cooper by his side, the pair of them watching as Ianto Jones slowly and self-consciously picked his way around the Hub, cleaning, tidying, desperately pretending that there was something normal about the situation. At the time, Jack's anger was still sitting so close to the surface that the idea was swamped, consumed by the rage and dismissed as stupid and unworkable.

But the thought of it lingered somewhere in the back of his mind, beyond the immediate glare of consciousness, possibilities and potentialities swirling in the nether regions of his consciousness. Perhaps it was what had prompted him to include Ianto Jones in the expedition to the Beacons, some part of him determined to take stock of the young man, and work out whether he still had merit.

Regardless of his reasons behind taking Ianto out of the Hub and his comfort zone, the moment where the Idea blossomed into Jack's head, fully formed, was as the pair of them sat outside Ianto's tiny rented terrace house, the SUV engine off, and neither of them making any move to exit the car.

Jack had already dropped Owen and Gwen off at the hospital, so that she could get some formal medical treatment, and Tosh had been walked to her door by a solicitous Jack, who had noticed the way her eyes were unfocused with exhaustion, and the way she was pale with shock. Ianto had stayed in the car while he took her inside, made her a cup of tea, and then left her to recover in private.

Their relationship, if one could call the shallow flirtatious conversations and the meaningless time-passing sex a 'relationship', had all but died with the discovery of Ianto's betrayal and Lisa's existence. Jack had come to feel rather oddly like he was looking at a stranger every time he saw Ianto. Where there had once been a charming man who had responded to Jack's flirting in kind, there was now only someone whose pain was covered by a thin veneer that Jack only recognised because he'd worn the same himself for so many years.

They'd barely spoken since that day, which made it all the more surreal that Jack found himself turning towards Ianto after he stopped the car, and asked, "Will you be alright?" and Ianto responded,

"Sure." He sounded tired, and so very soul sick. "Not the first time someone's threatened to cut me

up after all. Admittedly, though, the fact that they were cannibals was a little bit different.”

Jack froze, hands clenched on the steering wheel. He made no move to touch Ianto, knowing it wouldn't be appreciated, and for a second, forgot to breathe. “Canary Wharf?”

He half expected Ianto to not answer, to get out of the car and go into his house without looking back, but after a moment, Ianto sighed, and leaned his head backwards on the headrest, looking towards the felted roof. “Yes,” he said, simply.

While Jack was trying to think of how to phrase his next question, Ianto surprised him by continuing to speak.

“They caught a group of us all at the same time. Five of us. Five of us and two guards. The guards were taken out quickly, I remember that. I can remember hearing them screaming. The lighting had failed, and all the light there was came from these emergency glow strips on the floor. The electricity, it lit up the corridor. We tried to run, but more of them came, and blocked off the corridor.

“They were desperate. It was towards the end of the battle, and they needed bodies to replace those the Daleks had been killing. So they didn't kill us, they just gave us all jolts hard enough to temporarily scramble our motor nerves, and dragged us to the conversion units.

“I remember the blood. It was everywhere. The units were just hacking off limbs and replacing them, rather than carefully extracting the brain. They incinerated all the waste flesh at the end of every cycle of the machines, I could smell the burning, but some of the blood came out from under the doors, made it slippery. One of them nearly lost its footing.”

Ianto laughed, but it was a hollow laugh, without mirth or humour in it. Jack tried to keep his breathing even, and stared at the side of Ianto's head.

"There were two or three units, the newly built ones out of scavenged Earth tech. I was last in, right after Lisa. I still couldn't move, but they still strapped me down anyway. I could hear Lisa screaming, but couldn't move, could only look upwards. I could see the unit descending, the knives still had blood from previous... upgrades... on it. One of them came close enough to start cutting," Jack realised with a jolt that what Ianto had claimed was a surgery scar really wasn't, "And then it stopped. I still couldn't move. I couldn't see the Cybermen and Daleks being torn away, but I could hear things. I could hear air rushing, and I could hear electronic screams mixed with Human ones, but I couldn't move. I stared up at those knives for what felt like forever, waiting for them to start up again."

Ianto straightened his head, breaking the spell of cold icy tension that had fallen over the SUV. He turned to look at Jack, and smiled thinly. "And then it wore off, and you can probably guess what I did next."

Got up, dragged Lisa out, and watched as Torchwood Three came and salvaged the best toys and never once moved to help. Jack had refused to feel guilty at the time, but he found that he had trouble meeting Ianto's eyes.

Ianto shifted in his seat, making a pained-sounding grunt as he reached for the car door. Jack reached over, and stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Do you need any help? I can get some painkillers or-”

“Jack,” Ianto interrupted him, frowning at the hand Jack had on his arm, and then looking up to frown at him directly, “What the fuck would make me think you actually cared about me like that?”

Jack found himself at a brief loss for words. Ianto took his silence for answer enough. Fabric slid away beneath Jack's fingers, and Ianto was out of the car, slamming the door behind him, and walking up to the path to the entrance. He didn't glance back at the SUV as he unlocked the door and let himself in, a light flickering on that just allowed Jack to see through the rippled glass and lace curtain that obscured any direct view. He could see Ianto's silhouette shrug off its coat, and then lean against the wall for a moment, tiredly, Jack imagined, before Ianto straightened, and disappeared from view.

Jack sighed, and reached for the keys still sitting in the ignition. Ianto wouldn't have wanted to hear it, would have taken it as an insult or, at the very least, an extremely backhanded compliment, that Jack thought that he had handled himself as well as could be expected. In many ways, Jack was more impressed with his reaction to the whole terrible situation than Gwen's or Owen's reaction. Gwen was desperate to understand why, Owen just thought they were all sick fucks, and Toshiko was so shaken she'd nearly spilt her tea all over the kitchen worktop when Jack had taken her inside her flat.

Some part of him had expected that Ianto would have fallen to pieces in the face of nearly been eaten, but after losing your whole world not once but twice, Jack ruefully supposed that it didn't really compare. It had been horrible and terrifying yes, life destroying, no. The engine of the SUV smoothly turned over, and Jack realised that the little sensation he could feel building in his chest was quite possibly pride. It had been unfair of Jack, perhaps, to just hand Ianto a gun and expect him to acquit himself well with no real training or experience. But he hadn't expected anything to happen, only anticipating an easy mission in the countryside that would allow Ianto to feel a little more confident and included.

Imagine what he could become with a little training.

Jack paused, the SUV partway out of the parking space in front of Ianto's house. The indicator lit up the darkened road in periodic flashes of amber, but there were fortunately no other drivers around at this hour to get annoyed at Jack blocking the street. The Idea, having percolated beneath his conscious mind for weeks now, slowly unfurled before him. Jack knew from distant recollections of having read Ianto's personnel file (surreptitiously swiped off the Torchwood London network, along with a complete copy of their database, when Tosh had been in a bad mood after spending an unproductive morning on the phone with someone at London's technical department) that Ianto had been a researcher, not a field agent (try as he might, Jack couldn't quite recall which department he'd been a researcher in) and Jack had initially hired him as something nice to look at around the office, never bothering to give him much in the way of arms training beyond how to put on and take off a safety, and how to load a clip. Ianto had been happy to slide into obscurity, until they all realised exactly what Ianto had been hiding.

Why shouldn't he provide more training, training that would prove useful to Torchwood? There

were secrets that Jack knew which he'd never felt able to share with anyone else, and they needed to be shared. Ever since the century had changed, he'd been waiting, knowing that the Doctor could arrive any day, and he would leave and take his secrets, important secrets, with him. Toshiko wasn't strong enough, still looking out of the corner of her eye for UNIT guards coming to take her away, and Owen was so very angry at the world. Gwen was too new, and he hadn't the heart to break her by showing her the metaphorical bloodied corpses shoved in the back of the cupboards. Ianto, though, Jack knew could keep a secret. And he found that he honestly believed that Ianto had no secrets left to hide of his own. He'd said as much to Jack, as the others had withdrawn to their own homes in the aftermath of Lisa's demise, as he knelt in a genuine display of penance on the Captain's office floor, fully expecting to die, and claiming that he had nothing left in his life.

"Nothing," he had said, unable to meet Jack's harsh and unrelenting gaze, "Except this place. Torchwood was all I had left, apart from her. So if you're going to kill me, now would be a very good time to do it."

Jack hadn't killed him, only told him to get up and go home, and to be on time tomorrow, since he had a lot of cleaning up to do. Ianto had looked like he didn't know whether to be thankful or dismayed, but he'd gotten up and walked out without another word.

No, Jack didn't think he was hiding more of his own secrets. And maybe, just maybe, it was time Jack shared one or two of his own.

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Jack hadn't expected Gwen to be in the next day, knowing that she was still recovering from her injuries, but had had been surprised when Owen called in sick. Owen usually took a perverse delight in putting two fingers up at all the Universe could throw at them and pretending it didn't affect him, but his reasons became more obvious when, during the phone conversation, Jack caught the sound of a soft female voice in the background, a voice Jack recognised. His own flash of anger at hearing a gentle Welsh accent lying to her boyfriend on the phone nearby was a bit of a shock, and he bit off some response to Owen that he didn't recall, and slammed the receiver down. He couldn't decide if he was angrier at Gwen for ignoring everything he'd told her about letting Torchwood change her, or Owen for taking advantage of someone new and still naïve. He got to his feet, pacing over to his office window, and looked through the lines of stellar diagrams out onto the Hub.

Tosh had come in, bruised and dressed in clothes to hide the extent of her injuries, but with a stubbornness in her expression that Jack was pleased to see. She had a resilient spirit, they all did. After over a century of experience on the matter, Jack had realised that if you managed to get through your first week at Torchwood Three without cracking up, you were liable to keep your sanity enough to function for a good few years (although hadn't Suzie just proved the exception to that rule?). She had called up one of her personal projects on the screen, analysing some linguistic samples, and although there was more pressing things that she needed to do, Jack couldn't begrudge her the opportunity to do something she would rather spend time on instead. He would have insisted she take time off, if he thought she'd take it.

It was the same with Ianto. He'd known the minute that Ianto had arrived, but it was the first time he'd ventured out of the tourist office and into the Hub proper all morning. He clearly knew that

neither Owen nor Gwen were in. As Jack watched, he saw Ianto descend from the gantry, carrying a tea tray with just three mugs on it. Jack realised with a start that Ianto had made himself a drink, and that he'd never used to do that. He'd simply made everyone their beverages of choice, and withdrawn to the above-ground office or the archives.

He watched as Ianto placed a mug on Tosh's desk, her favourite purple one with the silly rainbows and bunnies motif, which she swore up and down she was only fond of for the ironic value. He flashed her a brief smile and started to move away, but Tosh halted him with a gentle hand on his arm. Jack was too hard to hear what was being said, but from their expressions, he was willing to bet that she was asking how he was doing, and he was responding that he was fine. Then Tosh said something else, and Ianto chuckled and shook his head. Jack vaguely wished his hearing were good enough to hear through solid walls.

He realised that Ianto was heading to his office with the remaining mugs, and stepped away from the window.

"Coffee, sir?" Ianto asked, as he stepped through the open door.

"Ah!" Jack said, affecting the manner of a man who'd just spotted an oasis after a long trek across the desert, "You're a godsend, Ianto."

Ianto smiled a small polite smile. Lines in his forehead and around his eyes eased though, as he realised that Jack clearly wasn't going to hold the previous night's statement against him. "I try my best, sir," he said, picking up one of the mugs and holding it out. Though he did his best to mask it, he winced with the motion. Jack had watched how stiffly he'd been moving, but knew that if he were to suggest a hot bath would help, it wouldn't be appreciated.

Jack sniffed appreciatively at the coffee as he took it, savouring the first sip that spread that chocolate-rich bitterness across his tongue. He closed his eyes and may have made a small 'mm' of pleasure, before saying, "Thank you, Ianto."

Ianto inclined his head in acknowledgement, and made to leave.

"Oh, Ianto?" Jack called him back just as he reached the doorway. "One quick question."

Ianto turned back, moving his whole body to do so, clearly not having the flexibility right now to move just his neck. "And what might that be, sir?" he said, in his most patient tone.

Jack sipped the coffee again, relishing the taste, as he looked at Ianto speculatively. Just when Ianto was starting to shift uncomfortably, he asked the question that he knew could change a lot of things, not the least of which were Ianto's whole position at Torchwood, and what would happen to the fragments of their relationship, what might have once been called something approximating a friendship. "Tell me, Ianto, because I'm curious. What do you want?"

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When Jack posed the question, Ianto Jones could do little more than stare at his boss in a dumbfounded fashion. For a moment, he was intensely aware of the screaming sensation in his

muscles every time he moved, of the fact that his back was killing him with the effort of standing upright, and that while he'd taken the prescription painkillers pushed on him by Owen the night before, they hadn't made much of a dent in the actual pain he was experiencing, although they were certainly making his brain processes fuzzy (he'd spent twenty minutes that morning staring at his email without making any effort towards actually reading it). All he could think was: *what a stupid question.*

Instead of voicing that opinion, though, he affected an expression of polite confusion. "I don't quite understand, sir," he said.

"I would have thought it was a pretty simple question," Jack said, holding his mug near his face, breathing in the scent of the coffee. Ianto would die before admitting it, but he found it rather delightful that he could make simple coffee that could cause an expression of bliss on Jack's face that Ianto had only ever witnessed at one other time (and those times didn't involve coffee, since neither of them got off on second degree burns). "What do you want?"

Ianto felt, disconcertingly, like he'd just turned over two pages in a book at once, and he'd missed some vital point of information. "I..." He shook his head, "Nothing. I'm fine, sir."

Jack gave him a thoughtful look, and then shook his head. He didn't look angry, or disappointed, but it didn't look like the answer he was hoping for. Jack set his mug down and picked up a piece of paper with Jack's distinctly scrawling handwriting littering its surface. He held it out to Ianto. "In the interests of keeping UNIT sweet, I've decided to accede to an information request from them. I want you to collate some info into a report, and have it on my desk by the end of tomorrow."

Ianto took the sheet of paper, looking down at it. There was a summary of the request printed at the top, and Jack had written the file IDs of the information he was willing to release underneath it. Several of them had the same string of suspiciously familiar numbers on the end. Ianto glanced at Jack cautiously, "Are these in...?"

Jack nodded. "The secure archives, yes." He paused, picked up his mug again, turning away slightly as he did so. "The codes are still the same."

Ianto was grateful that Jack was turned away, and couldn't see that Ianto's hand briefly shook in a way that had nothing to do with muscle fatigue. The day after Lisa, a day which had a line drawn over it in Ianto's mind, Jack had unceremoniously informed him that his access to the secure archives and datastores was revoked. Knowing that he'd deserved far worse, Ianto hadn't said a word in objection, though he'd been surprised at how much it had hurt to have the trust which Ianto had earned over a year of quietly and efficiently doing his job suddenly taken away. At that point, he had thought that nothing could add to his pain. The fact that Jack hadn't changed the codes, merely trusting in Ianto's adherence to Jack's instructions, spoke volumes.

A flickering ember of hope caught somewhere in his stomach. Ianto ruthlessly squashed it, and folded the piece of paper one handed, and tucked it in his pocket. "I'll get right on it," he said, and was thankful his voice didn't tremble and reveal his weakness.

Jack nodded and sat down behind his desk. "You *do* want something, Ianto," he said, surprising him by changing the topic again. "And when you've figured out how to say it, I'll be waiting."

Disconcerted, but with a funny feeling in his stomach that he couldn't account for, Ianto nodded. "Sir," he said, and headed back upstairs.

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And that rather set the tone for their encounters for the rest of the day. Every time Ianto emerged from the archives or his office behind reception to make some fresh coffee or tea, Jack would be there, watching him with that thoughtful expression he'd decided to make his own for the day. If Ianto had reason to engage him in conversation then it would conclude with the same question: what do you want?

All Ianto wanted was for Jack to stop asking him the same bloody question over and over. It was a daft question anyway. As the day wore on, Ianto found all that he wanted was to go home to a hot bath, a lot of painkillers, and possibly a Monty Python marathon. It became a physically exhausting effort to make his way back and forth between the archives in the sub-levels below and around the Hub and the tourist office, so he eventually decided to give up on the writing of the report for UNIT and bow to the weaknesses of flesh, and asked to skip out a few hours early. It was well past the rush hour, but by Torchwood standards, the day was nowhere near finishing.

"I'm surprised it took you so long to ask," Jack said, when Ianto made one last trip into the Hub to ask to leave early. "You've been moving around like you're a six hundred and four all day."

"Know a lot of six hundred year old archivists do you?" Ianto asked, tired, but managing a faint smile anyway. It was a tentative bit of banter. It had been their habit since Ianto had joined Torchwood, but it had fallen by the wayside. Jack had been angry, and Ianto ashamed and both of them had realised that it was too much like lying. Jack had feigned interest, and Ianto had feigned honesty.

But now when Ianto looked at Jack, he didn't see the anger that had been there in the days after Lisa. Instead he saw watchfulness. He didn't know which was worse.

"Oddly enough," Jack said, leaning back and absently tapping his fingers on the desk, "That's one section of society I'm not well acquainted with. If you're six hundred years old, you've probably got something better to do with your time than play librarian."

"Come now," Ianto said, chidingly, "Some of us enjoy it."

Jack's looked at him piercingly. "Do you though?" he said, "Enjoy it?"

Ianto hesitated, then sat down in the chair opposite Jack's desk. Outside, Toshiko sat working, earphones firmly tucked into her ears and listening to MP3s. She was completely unaware that an innocent intent to request the evening off had turned into the first conversation that Ianto and Jack had started in... a very long time.

"I'm good at it," Ianto said, slowly, "I worked very hard to be good at it. I had to. So that..." He hesitated, but Jack nodded encouragingly, "So that you'd need me." He resisted the urge to rub his fingertips together in a nervous gesture.

“It’s not what you trained for,” Jack said.

Ianto shrugged lightly. “I wasn’t trained to modify conversion units either.” He stopped speaking, abruptly, the topic and words slightly too raw to let pass so easily.

Ianto fully expected to be dismissed, and the conversation over, but Jack looked him in the eye and said, “I think you’re a clever enough man, Ianto Jones, to know when you need training and when you don’t.”

“Now you’re just trying to flatter me,” he said, but the joke fell a little flat.

“I hardly need to,” Jack said, “Like you said, you’re good at your job. Receptionist, guard dog, butler, building maintenance, archivist, server administrator, you’re good at all of it. But,” Jack leaned forward. They were still separated by a desk, but Ianto suddenly felt as if there were hardly any space at all between them. “Do you enjoy it?”

Ianto shifted uncomfortably, uneasy with the serious tone things were taking. Flirting, he could handle. He'd been dealing with that ever since he'd joined, it was how which he'd managed to secure the Captain's interest after all, and gotten this job. Anger, he was prepared for. He'd seen the utter fury on Jack's face, and known he'd caused it, even if a spiteful part of him wondered if Jack had any right to be angry after the dismissive way they'd all acted, after they'd never *asked*. He'd wondered, sitting at home on a bed that felt too large and too empty, staring at the blood on his hands that he hadn't been given a chance to wash off, what the point of any of it was if Lisa was gone, Jack hated him, and the others had gone from not noticing him to actively resenting his presence. He wondered if he had ever even had that much, if Lisa hadn't been lying to him for a long time.

(Owen had left a copy of the autopsy results on Ianto's desk two days later. At first he thought it simple cruelty, until he saw that Owen had highlighted the section which indicated that parts of the brain had been excised and others modified with cyber-tech, until it was quite clear that whatever passed for Lisa had been dead and the remainder controlled since Canary Wharf. Ianto had spent an hour in the tourist office, trying not to break down into fresh tears, and when he went back down into the Hub, he brought Owen a coffee, unasked. Neither of them ever acknowledged the unspoken gratitude.)

He'd toyed with the idea of suicide, or the equivalent thereof. He'd a bottle of Retcon in the kitchen that he'd palmed one day while Owen was distracted, chatting up Suzie, not knowing why he'd grabbed it at the time. But at the end of the day, he realised he had no desire to die, and to deliberately forget Lisa and everyone else who died at Torchwood One seemed unjust. So he'd closed his eyes in the shower as he rinsed the blood off, and turned up to work the next morning desperately trying to forget the fact that he felt like he was being physically torn apart, cold looks from everyone and nothing being left for him but low level filing that he was barely trusted to do.

Ianto suddenly felt very tired, and a slow burning sort of resentment started in his chest. He reached up, and rubbed his face with his hand. “You asked me what I wanted,” he said, and Jack straightened, looking at him expectantly. “How am I supposed to answer that? I want a lot of things. I want the Battle of Canary Wharf to have never happened. I want Lisa to still be alive and healthy

and Human. I want a new pair of socks because I always seem to lose one of a set in the wash. I want Gwen to stop looking at me with that weird combination of pity and guilt that she does so well. I want things to be the way they were before Lisa, because, as fucked up as it is, with all the lying and sneaking around I got to do, it was like I actually had something to live for again.

“But really, I want more. Because, you know something? I did enjoy it. I enjoyed being the *butler*. I enjoyed the fact that you seemed to trust me, and occasionally, when I wasn’t clearing up shit or praying that Lisa would somehow make it, it all felt worthwhile. So, what do I want, sir? I want more than what I’ve got now, because I really don’t have that much left.”

At some point during his recitation, he’d clenched his hands into fists, nails biting into his palms, and he focussed on that, the pinpricks of pain that it caused, because he realised with a very frightening clarity, exactly what he’d just said to the man who’d threatened to kill him. He stared at his whitening knuckles, and held his breath.

The explosion he was waiting for never materialised, nor did the alternative, Jack’s cold voice telling him to pack up and get out. After a long few seconds, the silence became unbearable, and Ianto looked up.

Jack was grinning.

Ianto still couldn’t breathe, waiting for the other shoe to drop, when Jack held up a post-it note. It was lurid pink, and had an address written on it. “Bring down the UNIT research you’ve gotten done so far before you leave,” he said, “I’ll finish it up. You have a lunch appointment tomorrow.” He indicated Ianto should take the note. “Take the train, charge it to Torchwood. You’re still in no condition to drive. Oh, and don’t forget to check out a weapon and a clip of ammunition from the armoury before you go.”

Ianto had been frowning at the address. It was quite far away, and would take an hour or two on the train to reach. At Jack’s instructions, he glanced up, surprised. “Weapon?” he echoed. “To a lunch meeting? Am I expecting there to be an issue with splitting the bill?”

“I’d hope not,” Jack said, with a distinct smirk, “Especially since I’m letting you take the expense account credit card.”

Ianto wasn’t quite sure what was going on, but he was certainly willing to play along. “Ah, so you trust me enough not to charge a new TV to it?”

“I don’t know,” Jack said, that smirk still fixed in place, but his eyes so very serious, “Can I trust you?”

Ianto tried not to appear uncomfortable in the face of Jack’s scrutiny. He elected for deliberate misunderstanding. It seemed safer. “With the expense account?” He tucked the post-it into his pocket. “Considering I’ve been managing it since I got here, I think you can trust me more than you can Owen.” He hesitated. “What’s this meeting about?”

“Torchwood business,” Jack said, “You said you wanted more, now don’t disappoint me.”

“I think I already did that.” The words slipped out before Ianto could stop them, and he found it abruptly hard to look at Jack. When Jack said nothing further, Ianto forced his hands to unclench, stood, and left the office.

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Part Two

One thing about being dispatched on a mysterious errand, Ianto mused, as he sat on an uncomfortable railway seat, head resting against the glass, watching the countryside speed past, was that for once he'd gotten a rather nice lie in, not having to get the train until mid-morning. The only problem was that he'd awoken even stiffer than he'd felt the day before, and it had taken half an hour in a hot shower before he'd been able to move without wincing.

He'd received a single text message from Tosh that morning, asking where he kept the instant coffee, but apart from that there had been no communication with anyone else from Torchwood. Ianto guessed that either Gwen and Owen were still off work, or they just had no interest in knowing why he wasn't around. He wondered if Jack would have enlightened them, or just wound them up by not saying anything. Considering that even Ianto didn't know what he was heading into, it was probably the latter.

He tried running through all the current Torchwood business that he was aware of, which was a fair amount. Jack no longer kept him in the loop as he used to, but he still had a reasonable grasp of what was going on. He switched tacks, and tried thinking about what was at his destination. There had been no reports of alien activity, and if there had been, Jack would have dispatched one of the others.

Ianto didn't understand, and was resigned to being hopelessly confused, right up to the point where he stepped off the train, glanced down the platform towards the exit, and caught sight of a woman wearing a distinctive and familiar uniform: a UNIT uniform. She was holding a printed sign with his name on it, eyes searching the crowd.

Ianto briefly wondered if Jack had decided to hand him over to UNIT and let them deal with him, but then realised he probably wouldn't have told Ianto to come armed, and the woman wouldn't have been waiting with a *sign* if they were going to throw him in one of their quietly unmentioned prisons. Taking a deep breath to fortify himself, he approached.

She was a rather plain looking woman, mousy brown hair tucked up neatly underneath her cap, but when Ianto stepped up to her and cautiously said, "I'm Ianto Jones," she beamed in an apparently genuine fashion, which made her a lot prettier, and softened her features.

"Mister Jones, pleased to meet you. I'm Captain Louise Monroe." She held out her hand. She spoke with an Australian accent that sounded like it had been modified from years of living in the UK, flattened with an English inflection. That was unsurprising, considered that Ianto had crossed the Welsh border three quarters of an hour earlier. He suddenly remembered what this town was notable for. It was the closest civilian town to one of the main UNIT bases in Britain. "Did you have a good trip?"

"As well as can be expected," Ianto said, attempting to look less confused than he felt.

"No baggage?" She asked, looking at his empty hands.

Ianto blinked slowly. “No,” he answered.

“Oh. Ok, then.” Louise Monroe scrunched up the cheap paper sign into a ball and threw it into a nearby bin, gesturing for Ianto to follow her. “I must say,” she said, conversationally, as she started to lead Ianto out of the station, “We were rather surprised by Torchwood’s request.”

Ianto stuck his hands in his pockets as they wove their way through the crowd towards the car park. “Well, we do endeavour not to be predictable.” He had the uncomfortable feeling that Jack was testing him, throwing him into whatever situation this was without briefing him. He also had the distinct feeling that Jack was laughing at him somewhere back in Cardiff.

She laughed, politely. “Of course, we’re always happy to advance the cause of inter-agency cooperation. I dare say this whole endeavour will placate some at UNIT who think Torchwood is too much of a lone wolf.”

“Indeed,” Ianto agreed. *Jack, what the fuck have you gotten me into?*

Louise Monroe’s car was a nondescript blue Ford, clean, tidy and apparently official, if the authorisation stickers and security passes stuck to the inside of the windscreen were any indication. The radio was tuned to something inoffensive, and the UNIT Captain made small talk about the weather, Cardiff, and if Ianto had ever visited the area before (damp, dull and no, respectively) as she drove, and it was a fortunately short drive up to the UNIT bases, twenty minutes outside of town, where Monroe asked, as she pulled into a car parking space,

“Have you had anything to eat? Oh, of course not, if you’ve been travelling all morning. Here.” She handed Ianto a small clip-on visitor’s badge with a security tag. “Tell you what, I’ll drop you off in the mess. Grab anything you like while I go get my files from my office, and we’ll chat over lunch.”

Lunch meeting, Ianto thought. Very bloody funny, Jack.

The food was palatable, if not particularly flavourful, and Ianto spent his time waiting for Captain Louise Monroe to return by watching the UNIT officers and soldiers coming in and out, hearing snatches of their conversations. Some of them fell silent as they saw a civilian sitting in their mess hall, and he occasionally heard the word ‘Torchwood’ drift over to him, although those speaking were usually discrete enough to keep their voices below his threshold of hearing.

He took to turning his mashed potato into abstract sculptures while he waited.

Eventually Captain Monroe returned, a slim file folder tucked under her arm. She was carrying a two cups of coffee, one of which she placed in front of him while she sat down. “Now,” she said, without preamble, “It’s a bit short notice to put together a proper program, so what we’ve arranged to do is to do your assessment tomorrow, and we’ll use that to refine the provisional schedule we’ve put together.”

Ianto was tired of not knowing what was going on, so he finally succumbed to the urge to ask and said, “I’m sorry, assessment?”

“Yes,” Monroe blinked owlishly at him. “Obviously we can’t organise the proper training without first assessing your current level of ability.”

Ianto set his fork down carefully and precisely aligned with his plate. “Got a copy of the provisional schedule with you?” he asked, “Mind if I take a look?”

Monroe smiled, and handed over the folder in her hands, opening it to the relevant page for him. Ianto stared at the lines of neat print, all laid out in a tidy tabulated format. There it was in black and white: weapons qualification assessment. And underneath that, there was a further list of specified training including basic survival, tactics and demolitions, all marked as ‘possible future training – pending approval’.

‘Demolitions?!’ Ianto stared at the page, and then flipped back to the front of the folder, and stared at the page he knew would be there, having read so many similar reports and schedules in his time. Training requested for Ianto Jones, by Torchwood, Cardiff Division. Contact name: ‘Jack Harkness, Captain’.

Ianto abruptly realised that the information Jack had set him to gathering the day before hadn’t been just to keep UNIT ‘sweet’, it had been payment. Jack had obviously agreed to trade information for training that Jack usually provided his staff personally. But... why?

He folded the file and handed it back to a still pleasantly smiling Louise Monroe. “Is there a toilet around here?”

“Oh yes. Just outside, turn left, and around the corner.”

He thanked her and headed that way, his fingers wrapping around the mobile inside his pocket before he’d even pushed the door to the toilets open. Thankfully, they were empty, and Ianto punched in Jack’s number without thinking. It was only a couple of rings before the phone was answered.

“Ianto!” Jack said, cheerfully, *“I didn’t think I’d be expecting to hear from you so soon.”*

Ianto briefly wondered how he was supposed to phrase his questions. “Sir, what’s going on here?”

“I can hear your voice echoing off tiles. You calling me from a bathroom, Ianto Jones?”

“Yeah,” Ianto said, hoping his scowl carried across in his voice. “A UNIT bathroom.”

“Oh, you arrived alright then. I love UNIT bases, all full of very fit young men and women in uniform. Don’t suppose you took a camera with you?”

“Captain,” Ianto grit his teeth together. “What. Is. Going. On. Here.”

There was a brief pause and then Jack spoke again, sounding markedly less flippant. *“You said you wanted more,”* he said, *“I’m giving you more.”*

“Weapons training? I don’t understand. You’ve never exactly been shy about dispensing your...

particular brand of instruction to staff.” Distance, and the inability to see Jack’s face, lent Ianto the strength to say things he might not have been able to say to the Captain’s face.

“And that would be the point,” Jack said. *“You called me on it, after I gave Tosh that refresher course. You know exactly why I give people training.”*

Ianto remembered coming into the shooting range as Jack was giving Tosh a quick refresher in certain types of weapons handling. He remembered the touches designed to distract, and to push and pull the woman into certain stances or movements, seen the way that Tosh flushed and did exactly as ordered and he’d blurted out, the moment Tosh had left the room, “You do it to control them, don’t you?”

It had been a poorly thought out statement, and Jack had given him a sharp, too-searching look. Ianto had briefly realised that he’d drawn too much attention to himself by asking, by seeing, and quickly covered for himself by asking if Jack wanted a coffee, and fleeing. Jack had never mentioned it since.

“And you and I both know you’d never accept it from me.”

Ianto would have been suspicious that Jack was trying to exert the same subtle control he did over the others. He kept them ever so slightly off-balance with too-familiar touches, close brushes with those non-contemporary pheromones that they had no defence against, quietly reinforcing his position as leader, as one to be followed. No, Ianto wouldn’t have been able to trust him to teach, and would never have agreed.

Ianto sighed, and pinched the bridge on his nose, willing back the incipient headache. He tried to blame it on the strong scent of bleach in the toilets. “You’re right,” he said, “I wouldn’t. Doesn’t change the fact you sent me here for two weeks of training without telling me to pack a bag.”

Ianto could almost hear Jack rolling his eyes. *“Yes, and that would be why I said to take the expense card.”*

Ianto leant against the cold tiled wall, feeling it leech the warmth from his back even though his suit jacket. “Why am I here, Jack?”

Maybe it was the effect of using his name, but Jack didn’t make the obvious response that he was there to learn how to handle his weapon. *“This is just the first step. When you come back to Cardiff, we’re going to have a lot to talk about.”*

Ianto realised from the dull ache of *want* in his stomach that he needed that so much, that the promise of such was something he hadn’t even realised he’d been missing. Jack had things to share with him, to trust him with.

At least he hoped so.

“Alright,” he said, softly, “But if you’re expecting me to salute you when I come back, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“I live in hope,” Jack said, and hung up.

**

Ianto returned to Captain Monroe and her schedule with a smile on his face and no indication that he found anything amiss. It was a technique he'd perfected over the months of tending for Lisa, and he wasn't surprised when she gave no sign of noticing his confusion. He made agreeable noises as she ran through the basic plan for his assessment and subsequent training, and took her up on her offer of a quick tour of the base, since he was going to be spending the better part of the next two weeks there.

From the outside, it seemed a fairly typical military facility, with nondescript hangers and buildings that wouldn't look out of place on a university campus. The major difference between most Universities and a UNIT base, however, was that most educational facilities didn't have armed red-beret wearing guards striding casually around. Captain Monroe lingered at the administration buildings, before giving only a cursory pass over some of the hangars and buildings set further away from the main base area. It didn't matter what she tried to disguise, Ianto already had an idea of what was where from Torchwood's intelligence gathering (which, admittedly, was old, having come from the time before the fall of Canary Wharf), and even if he hadn't had this illicit knowledge, the fact that there were generators and obvious containment procedures around certain buildings easily gave it away that they were research labs.

Out of respect for his hosts, and the fact that Jack had no doubt had to compromise a great deal to arrange this training, he didn't point out the abysmal secrecy and instead nodded politely when Monroe told him they wouldn't “have time for a full tour”. He rather supposed working for a subversive and literally underground organisation gave you a skewed perception on what exactly constituted ‘secret’.

Their tour ended at an indoor range, where there were several UNIT soldiers either practising or, he assumed, getting assessed for various marksmanship certificates. Monroe took him past the range, not giving him more than a cursory peek through the doorway, and to an office tucked away at the back of the building.

“This is Sergeant Jaq Tumenggung, one of our senior instructors,” she said, introducing Ianto to a man with a dark tilt to his skin, who had been sitting behind the desk scowling at paperwork when they had come in. “This is Ianto Jones, from Torchwood.”

“Mister Jones,” Tumenggung extended his hand, and his accent was thickly Indonesian. Ianto had to strain to understand it, though he gave no sign as he shook the Sergeant's hand firmly. “I must say that we were surprised to get a request from Torchwood for training. Last time we had a run in with you lot, I believe your Commander gave General Carver something of an earful, if the way he was stomping around the base with a face like thunder was any indication.”

Ianto tried not to smile. “Actually, he's a Captain.”

“A Captain, ah. So that gives him permission to subvert UNIT operations.”

Ianto shrugged slightly, as if to say *'We're Torchwood. What do you think?'*

“Well,” Tumenggung grinned, his teeth shiny and white and contrasting sharply against his skin. Ianto felt like he was being smiled at by a shark. “Far be it from us to turn down a request from such illustrious organisations as yourselves.” He stood. “I tell you what, shall we have a quick trial in the range right now?”

Monroe shifted. “Uh, I should probably...”

Ianto smiled pleasantly at her. “Not at all. The Sergeant is in charge of training, after all, and I’m here to be trained. If he’d like to do an early assessment of my abilities, I’m quite happy to let him do so.”

Captain Monroe frowned, but nodded, and trailed after Ianto and Tumenggung as the latter led the way down the corridor to a small three-person range. Ianto realised that this had all been planned when he saw the array of handguns and larger rifles already laid out.

“So,” Sergeant Tumenggung said, as they entered, and he gestured to the weapons. “Tell me what you know about these.”

Monroe settled against the doorway, arms folded, watching silently.

Ianto glanced at Tumenggung and at his nod, stepped closer. He looked the table over and saw, to his relief, that there was nothing he didn’t recognise. Quickly, he named each type of weaponry and the ammunition used, and looked up at the end of his recitation to see Tumenggung looking at him thoughtfully.

“And what do you know about using them?” he asked.

Ianto shrugged, sticking his hands into his pockets. “How to load and unload ammunition. How to store, how to make safe, how to clean.”

Tumenggung frowned slightly. “But not how to fire them.”

Ianto shook his head. “I’m Torchwood’s archivist and chief recorder.” It was the least offensive of his jobs, and more impressive than Owen’s moniker of ‘teaboy’. “It’s my job to maintain the armoury.”

“A librarian, god help us all.” Tumenggung looked faintly disgusted, like he was being asked to deal with an idiot. Ianto wondered if he should be offended, given that the man had only just met him. “You were asked to bring a Torchwood standard issue weapon. Did you?”

Ianto suddenly understood Jack’s instructions, and once again cursed the man for lacking the ability to simply be up-front and explanatory. He reached beneath his coat, pulling the standard Torchwood handgun out of a holster and setting it on the table, then pulled the clip of ammunition out of his pocket and set it down alongside.

“May I?”

Ianto nodded, and watched while Tumenggung picked up the weapon and looked it over. The man seemed intrigued, and puzzled. “Who makes these?” he asked after a moment.

“Torchwood does,” Ianto informed him, and pretended not to notice Tumenggung’s surprised glance. “It’s reverse engineered from something that landed in Snowdon around the 70’s.” He pointed to the clip. “The bullets are microflechette rounds, two hundred per clip. We make those as well.”

Tumenggung nodded slowly as he set the gun back down. “Load it for me.” Gone was the slightly suspicious look of a UNIT officer being forced to deal with a mistrusted ally, instead he was focussed, thoughtful, watching with sharp eyes as Ianto loaded the clip in quick, practised motions before setting it back on the table and stepping back.

The Sergeant nodded to himself, picked up the weapon and examined the safety.

“It’s designed to be as similar to most Earth weaponry as possible,” Ianto supplied, helpfully.

That was all Tumenggung needed to know, it seemed. He released the safety easily, and before Ianto could say anything, he fired three rounds quickly into a target already set up at the end. The noise of the shots resounded in the space of the range and made Ianto’s ears ring. He thought about making a comment about ear defenders, but decided it wasn’t the right time. Monroe had nearly leapt out of her skin, and had banged her elbow into the door. She stood at the back, swearing in an undertone and rubbing her elbow.

“Interesting,” Tumenggung said, resetting the safety. “Hardly any recoil, fires rapidly. A great improvement, I’d say, over most ‘Earth weaponry’. And absolutely useless for learning on.”

At Tumenggung’s gesture, Ianto took the weapon back and ejected the clip.

“You need to swim before you can drive a speedboat,” he said, and while Ianto was trying to puzzle that out, he spun on his heel and started to walk out of the range. “I’ll see you in the morning, Mister Jones.”

And then, before Ianto could say anything, he was gone. Captain Monroe approached, and nodded at the weapon still in Ianto’s hands.

“You can stow that in one of the lockers at the range,” she said, “It makes the MPs nervous if non-UNIT personnel walk around armed, Torchwood or not.”

Ianto saw the logic of not arguing and handed it over. As she took it, she frowned and said, “Look, I’m sorry, but I have to ask. You look like you’ve gone twelve rounds with a mad bear. Are you alright? I can take you to the base medic if you like.”

Ianto was aware he still looked a mess of bruises, but had rather hoped she wouldn’t call attention to it. “Cannibals,” he said, shortly.

Monroe’s eyebrows leapt upwards. “Seriously?”

Ianto nodded.

“Is that...” She frowned. “Is that normal?”

“It’s not *abnormal*.”

“Oh.” Monroe blinked rapidly, then shook her head. “I see why your Captain wants you checked out then. Come on. Let’s get this stowed, then I’ll show you your quarters.”

**

The phone was ringing. Ianto would have liked to pretend that it had woken him from his sleep in the dead of night, but considering that he’d been staring at the blank grey ceiling for the last two hours, he could really claim no such thing. He fumbled for his mobile, dropped next to the bed, in the dark, and cast an eye at the screen. He wasn’t surprised at the name it displayed.

“Hello?” He kept his voice low in deference to the hour.

“*How’re the digs?*” Jack sounded as awake as Ianto was, but then Ianto had known for a long time exactly how much the Captain slept.

Ianto raised his head off the lumpy pillow to glance around, although he’d already thoroughly explored the place earlier that day when Monroe had brought him there. “Prefab chic,” he answered, dryly. “And I thought *my* place was under-furnished.”

The prefab hut was one of a cluster given over to visiting staff or personnel that needed to be temporarily housed on site. Louise Monroe had apologetically explained that they weren’t set up for VIP guests, there having been a massive incident with a broken sewage line a fortnight before, and the nearest hotels were overbooked for a local science fiction convention. It had a bed, a desk and chair, and a TV shoved in the corner. There was also a small rail behind a curtain that supposedly acted as a wardrobe, upon which Ianto had hung the clothes he’d managed to buy when Monroe had taken him to the shops to find some outfits, but that was all there was in the way of furniture.

“*I didn’t realise you were an advocate of Spartan living.*”

Ianto felt himself smile slightly. “More ‘unpacked boxes’ living. I never really... got around to it.”

They both knew why he’d been too busy to unpack, but Ianto was grateful when Jack chose to brush the issue aside. “*If you’d like,*” Jack offered, studiously calm, almost disinterested sounding, “*I could help you unpack one of these days.*”

Ianto felt something catch in his chest. The stuff in his house, hurriedly packed away into boxes without checking as he ran away from London, hadn’t been unsealed since he arrived in Cardiff. It was everything he had, everything he used to be. Could he handle the thought of Jack rifling through the remnants of his old life, touching it, questioning it?

“Sure,” he said, forcing his voice to lightness, “If you want to, I mean.”

“Only if you’re happy,” Jack added, hurriedly, “I don’t want to intrude.”

Ianto wondered if he had forfeited that right the day he brought a Cyberman into the Hub. “I’m sure,” he repeated.

“Good,” Jack said, “Although at this rate, I might tell you to come back earlier. I’m not sure how Owen manages it, but he’s managed to mess up instant coffee. It’s revolting.”

Ianto chuckled. “I’m surprised you got him to make any. Usually you can’t force him to go near a kettle.”

“Oh, he’s trying to impress Gwen by making her drinks before she asks,” Jack said, and although to an outsider, it might have sounded like he was joking, Ianto could hear the edge of jagged glass just underneath the surface of the words. “Did you know they’re having sex?” He said it conversationally, as if asking if Ianto knew how the weather had been lately, but Ianto winced, hearing that undertone.

“No,” he admitted, “Though I’m not surprised. I think it’s jealousy.”

Jack snorted, an unpleasant sound. “I’m not jealous of Owen.”

Ianto was genuinely glad that Jack couldn’t see his face. “I didn’t say you were,” he said, calmly, “Though if it would make you feel better, I could make a comment about the lady protesting too much.”

“Ianto...” Jack growled, warningly.

“I think Owen’s jealous of Gwen,” Ianto interrupted.

There was silence for such a long time on the phone that Ianto wondered if Jack had put the phone down on him, but then he heard the pterodactyl creeling in the background, and he knew the line was still open.

“You’d be amazed what you see when no one realises that you’re always standing there, watching,” Ianto said, “And for someone who claims to be such an expert on Human behaviour, you can be rather blind closer to home, Jack.”

Another long moment of silence. “Enjoy your training, Ianto,” Jack finally said, sounding, for the first time in a very long time since Ianto had met him, confused and a little bit defeated.

“Good night, sir.” This time it was Ianto who disconnected the call. He realised he should have maybe just kept his mouth shut, and not said anything, but the night wrapped around him, cushioning him from reality, and the distance from Jack and only being able to hear his voice did the rest. At least if Jack was still mad at him when he got back to Cardiff, he’d be able to shoot back correctly.

Laughing a little at his own idiot thoughts, Ianto turned his head into the pillow, and kept on trying to sleep.

**

Part Three

Captain Monroe came to collect him in the morning, confirming his suspicions that she had been assigned to mind him. When he asked her what she was usually doing, she simply said “Admin” and refused to be drawn further. Rather than alienate her so early into his stay at the UNIT base, Ianto let the matter drop. She gave him enough time to grab a coffee and a pastry for breakfast, before whisking him off to the medical building for his first examination of the day since, apparently, part of UNIT regulations specified that individuals be certified fit before any training proceeded.

Ianto was subjected to the horror of the medical staff upon their witnessing the extent of the bruising over most of his body, but after they carefully prodded and poked for a while, the Doctors reluctantly were forced to agree with Owen’s assessment of Ianto’s health; he may not be pretty to look at, but there was nothing in the way of internal or head injuries to concern them.

One of the Doctors made a crack about the sheep fighting back, and Ianto tried to memorise his name from his security badge, contemplating abusing the power of the Torchwood mainframe to plant goat porn on his computer. It wouldn’t be that hard to do, and it would be awfully satisfying.

Externally, though, he made no sign of being bothered by the predictable joke, only smiling and buttoning up his shirt as Monroe entered the examination room brandishing a pen and a stack of forms and paperwork hefty enough to be used as a doorstop.

It was the usual brand of confidentiality agreements, health and safety forms, and medical information which managed to comprise most bureaucracies. Ianto hadn’t even realised how much he hadn’t missed the vast tonnage of paperwork that Torchwood London had produced. Cardiff, given that it had five of the six remaining Torchwood personnel within its walls, felt no similar need for paper trails and forms filed in triplicate. Signing and dating and signing some more took them right up until midday, leaving the pair of them to go to grab a light lunch before Ianto’s assessment began in earnest that afternoon.

And it was as they walked towards the mess, along a path that ran under the shade of trees that were starting to turn bare and thin as autumn drew on, their leaves yellowing and falling to the ground to moulder and decay, that Ianto had his first encounter with General Horatio Carver. Even if he hadn't been able to identify the rank on the General's uniform, the way Monroe halted and snapped to attention gave an indication as to his position.

“Sir,” she said, crisply, as Carver came to a halt in front of her, nodding and returning the salute.

“Captain,” he said, his eyes resting on Ianto, “I take it this is our Torchwood guest.”

Ianto smiled politely as Monroe assumed a perfect at-ease stance and nodded sharply. “Yes, sir,” she said, “Ianto Jones, Torchwood Cardiff.”

“One of Harkness's lot, eh?” Carver said, raising an eyebrow.

“That's the one, sir,” Ianto said, holding out his hand. Carver paused just long enough to reveal exactly how much esteem he held Torchwood in, before taking Ianto's hand and nearly attempting to crush it. It clearly wasn't a difficult task for him. He was a solidly built man who clearly kept himself in shape, and had the no nonsense look of one who expected to always be dealing with fools.

Ianto let his eyes narrow, as if in pain, and his mouth thin, and saw Carver's lips twitch faintly in satisfaction. He released Ianto's hand and Ianto quickly put his hand behind his back, flexing it silently. The pained expression hadn't been entirely an act, but it made Carver feel like he'd won something so Ianto was willing to allow one slightly crushed limb.

“Rumours of Torchwood's demise must not have been exaggerated if you're sending your personnel off for outside training,” Carver said, eyes narrowed as he looked at Ianto.

“Oh, I wouldn't be scanning the papers for our obituaries just yet,” Ianto replied, quickly. “I think you'll find that Captain Harkness simple sees the wisdom in diversifying our training sources.”

Carver snorted disapprovingly. “Hardly any way to run a unit,” he said.

Ianto smiled thinly. “Just as well we're not answerable to the military then, isn't it?” It was a subtle dig, but from Carver's tight expression, he picked up on it well enough.

“Don't let me keep you,” Carver said, nodding his head sharply, “Mister Jones, Captain.”

“Sir.” Monroe threw a quick salute as Carver walked away with barely any further acknowledgement. She let out a quick breath once he'd passed out of earshot.

“I'm guessing,” Ianto said, as he watched the general go, “That General Carver and Captain Harkness have some sort of prior history.”

Monroe glanced at him with surprise. “You don't know?” she asked, curious.

Ianto shook his head. “Before my time in Cardiff, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Monroe repeated dryly. “I don't know much myself really, just rumours that tend to do the rounds whenever the name 'Torchwood' comes up. I think it has something to do with technology that Harkness managed to take out of the General's hands.”

Ianto nodded. “Sounds like him.”

“And something to do with the General's daughter.”

“*Definitely* sounds like him.”

**

A UNIT base, it seemed, never truly slept. Guards still moved around the base, and trucks came and went at odd hours, but with most personnel off duty and the administrative and research staff gone

for the day, the base fell into a lull in early evening, which was fine by Ianto. After his initial testing in the morning, the afternoon had been taken up under the merciless oversight of Sergeant Tumenggung. For hours, with only brief breaks for something to drink and to give his arms a rest, Ianto had been forced to heft weapons of various calibres and demonstrate his weapons handling, showing that he knew how to unload, load and correctly maintain all sorts of guns. He hadn't even been allowed to fire a single shot until the very end of the day, but the effort had left the muscles in his arms, already sore, shaking and weak. Still, Tumenggung hadn't appeared too disgusted by his basic knowledge, though his expression had been stern as he'd dismissed Ianto for the day.

“Not too bad, not too shabby, but you don't seem to have any respect for these weapons. You just see them as tools, or toys other people use. Listen carefully,” he said, leaning close and glowering at Ianto, “Because I'm going to keep saying this until you have these words burned into your brain. Never, ever draw your weapon, unless you're damned sure you're going to use it.”

Monroe had magically appeared right as he headed out of the doors to the training centre, and Ianto tried not to feel too irritated by the fact that he was clearly being escorted everywhere. He had begged off doing more than grabbing a sandwich from the mess, and returned to his little home away from home, happy to collapse, fully clothed, onto the thin mattress of the bed, and the world grew dark around him as time passed, losing himself in his own thoughts. He didn't even realise how dark it had become until his phone rang, the screen casting the room into eerie blue as it lit up.

The screen read: HARKNESS, JACK

Ianto pressed the answer button, and pressed it to his ear. He didn't get a chance to draw breath to speak before Jack spoke, clear irritation audible all the way through a phone line.

“What the hell did you mean Owen's jealous of Gwen?” he demanded.

“Good evening, sir,” Ianto said, struggling not to make his grin heard, “Had a good day, have we?”

“I've had a rotten day. If it's not bad enough that I'm having to start the day with the cheap brand of instant that Gwen brought from home, we wound up with a Tir'Vor infestation setting up shop under the town hall. I got liquefied remains all over my clothes.”

“Oh dear.” Tir'Vors were a pest, rather than a menace, but they left behind a caustic liquid after dying that smelt like a combination of raw sewage and old fish. No wonder Jack's temper sounded fragile. “You're not going to ask me to hurry back to clean things up are you?”

“Oh, you're missed, but not for your janitorial abilities,” Jack said.

Ianto felt his fingers twitch, and something felt deeply unsettled somewhere inside him at Jack's words. *No*, he told himself, *Don't read too much into it.* “Ah, the coffee then. I knew it.”

There was a pause, and Jack changed the subject. *“So it's been driving me mad all day. What did you mean when you said Owen's jealous of Gwen?”*

Ianto sat up gingerly, mindful of his still sore muscles, fumbling for the bluetooth earpiece for his phone, switching it over as he said, “Do you want the flattering answer or the full and honest one?”

Hands free, he pulled off his shoes, throwing them somewhere in the dark. He'd worry about where they landed in the morning.

"I'd say flattering, but I think I want to know exactly what that cunning little brain of yours has worked out."

"I'm not sure whether I've just been insulted, sir." Ianto sat back with a sigh. "Owen respects you, or at least values your opinion very highly."

Jack snorted. *"He has a great way of showing it."*

"He argues, but he still does what you ask of him, doesn't he? He looks at you and see a man he'd like to be, someone who takes all the alien crap in his stride and still manages to be a hit with men, women, and aliens of no particular gender. I think he wants you."

A small pause, and when Jack spoke again, he sounded surprised. *"Owen? But he's never given any sign that-"*

Ianto waved a hand dismissively. "I don't mean he wants to have sex with you. Although I suppose he might not say no if you asked. He wants your attention. He had it, before Gwen. Suzie was too distant, Tosh too caught up with her machines, and me... well... So Owen had more or less your undivided attention. Then Gwen comes along. Not only does she have your undivided attention, but she has something else that Owen wants: someone who loves her and might some day marry her."

"You've read Owen's file," Jack said, and it wasn't a question.

"I read all of the files." Ianto bit his lip and wondered if he should admit to it. "Including," he said, after a long moment, "Yours. Although it was much harder to find."

"It should be," Jack said, sharply, *"Considering I thought I'd destroyed all copies."*

"Torchwood was always afraid you might just do that. They were rather thorough in keeping hidden copies. You should be aware, sir, that I do know everything."

"Oh really? How do you travel faster than the speed of light?"

Ianto smiled. "Everything about Torchwood," he amended. "And from the files, it looks like you *are* Torchwood. How old are you, Jack?"

"Don't believe everything you read," Jack said, and, remarkably, he didn't sound angry or cross. But then Jack had, once upon a time, told Ianto so much more than the others. Although it had quite possibly been because he'd intended to retcon Ianto, which was a cheery thought.

"And here was me thinking the late night chats were supposed to be all about deeply personal questions," Ianto said, surprising himself by the upsurge of bitterness he suddenly felt.

So many times *during* (during Lisa, during the lying, during the guilt...), Ianto had found himself wandering the Hub too late at night, unwilling to leave the Hub and abandon her, and more than a

few times, running into Jack. Late night meetings had led to conversations, where they both asked deep questions and both pretended to answer, and then built on that falsehood with sex that Ianto justified to himself as being to protect Lisa and nothing else, and Jack, perhaps, thought he was sleeping with someone else entirely, the person that Jack wanted to see, the person that Ianto created, all sharp suits and flirtation. One night, as Ianto sat on the opposite side of Jack's desk, jacket off and tie loosened, a glass of whiskey in his hand while Jack nursed his usual tumbler of water, Jack had abruptly looked up from the contemplation of the liquid he had been indulging in, and straight at Ianto. His eyes had glinted, oddly bright in a night-time illumination of the Hub, reflecting the dotted lighting of the data conduits. It made it seem like there was something alive, alien, blue and twisting, inside Jack, a though which Ianto had thought would explain so much.

"I've always loved the night," Jack had said, "The darkness, the intimacy. Nothing but you, your lover, and what eyes can't show you. Touches and scents and hushed voices."

Ianto had been grateful for the dim light that the bright shade of red he was surely turning, and had taken a convulsive swallow of the drink Jack had given him. He'd nearly choked on it, and had stifled the coughs lest it completely ruin the mood. "The night isn't for sleeping?" he'd managed to ask, when his throat was clear.

"Sleep when you're dead," Jack had answered, "There's some much more fun things you can do in bed."

Ianto had downed the last mouthful of whiskey left in his glass. "I've always thought darkness was great for secrets, for hiding in the corners and whispering things. You can hide a lot of things down there, in the dark." Later, he would wonder if he'd been trying to tell Jack, to warn him, but Jack had simply grinned at what he thought was a rather lascivious contemplation on his subordinate's behalf. Ianto had always privately thought Jack had a bit of a one track mind, but the simple fact of the matter was that Ianto hadn't wanted him to look, and Jack hadn't wanted to see. Ianto found he couldn't hate Jack for it, though, even if it would make life so much easier. At the time, though, he'd set his glass down on the edge of Jack's desk and firmly put all thoughts of Lisa as far away from his brain as possible. "So do you want this blow job, or are we going to sit here talking all night?"

Jack had grinned, and there had been very little conversation after that.

"Jack," Ianto asked, staring blindly into the dark, "Why do you keep calling? You already sent me here for me to get weapons training for a reason that's apparent only to you, why keep calling me? I'm not going to run off."

When Jack finally answered, he sounded pensive. "*You mean you really haven't worked it out?*"

"I..."

"*I don't worry that you're going to run off. For one, I'd really hope you don't hate me so much that you'd leave me to explain to UNIT why you'd suddenly disappeared.*" There was a splashing sound in the background, and Ianto hoped that Jack was managing to stick to water. At least he only tended to drink when he was desperately unhappy, and it never seemed to do anything but make Jack seem more depressed. When Jack spoke, it didn't sound like he was choking words past the sting of alcohol, and Ianto felt his shoulders relax.

“I don't hate you,” he answered, without thinking.

“That's not what you were saying a few weeks ago.”

“Are you honestly telling me that if you had been in my position, if you were at the lowest point you'd been in your life, if you'd just had the last shreds of what you thought was your life ripped from you, that you wouldn't have said the same things?”

A low, and not entirely kind chuckle drifted through the handset. *“I think I would have hated me too. In fact, I would still hate me now. What's changed?”*

Ianto thought about it seriously for a moment. “Were you angry at me?” he asked, after a moment.

“Yes.”

“Are you still angry at me?”

“Ah. No, I don't think I am. I was, certainly, but...”

“Then I think you have your answer,” Ianto said, “In some ways, it would be nice if I still hated you, because that would mean that the world is black and white, the good guys always managing to save the day in the end while the bad guys get their comeuppance. I could be angry, but console myself with the thought that you'd get your own just reward some day. And then one morning, I woke up and realised that maybe, just maybe, you'd made the right decision. Maybe I'd needed someone to save me, and to put her out of her misery, and I felt sick, because I really wanted to hate you at that moment, but couldn't.”

“You could have come to me earlier, you know. You could have said something.”

“No,” Ianto said, shaking his head, even if the motion went unseen. “I really couldn't have.” He'd gone through that course of action in his head so many times, toying with the probable results of each action. He could have let Lisa die in the conversion unit, in pain. He could have told Jack about the Cyberman he was hiding away. He could have tried to get medical help from UNIT themselves, perhaps. But, at the end of the day, each of those courses of action would have resulted in Lisa's death, and Ianto's too, if he'd been unlucky. He would never have been able to make that decision, and Jack would never have allowed himself to help her. Maybe that made Jack a monster, but did it make Ianto a monster for well for understanding him?

“Alright, no.” Jack seemed to have reached the same conclusion that Ianto had a long time ago.

“And I'm not going to apologise for that.”

“I didn't think you would,” Ianto said, softly. “I wouldn't accept it even if you offered. You were all that was left of Torchwood. You should have helped us. But you didn't, and neither did anyone else. The government was too happy to see Torchwood fall, a victim of its own hubris. You could almost hear the champagne corks popping in Whitehall. Geneva was worse. There were twenty seven survivors of the fall of Canary Wharf, and I don't even know if they're all still alive. I'm not even sure who they are. I saw the obituaries for six, all suicides. I stopped looking for any more months

ago.”

“For that,” Jack said, after Ianto had fallen silent, anger bubbling somewhere in the pit of his stomach, “I am sorry.”

Ianto put a hand over his eyes and focussed very hard on not having any sort of breakdown over the phone. He refused to humiliate himself that way.

“I haven't...” Uncharacteristically, Jack's words stumbled to a halt, and after drawing a deep breath, he started again. “For the longest time, I haven't needed to worry about anyone else. Just me. Torchwood London deserved what it got for nearly destroying the world. For...” Jack's voice faltered, then came back stronger. “For getting someone killed I truly cared about, that I loved. I was angry at them, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you.”

“Who did you lose, Jack?” Ianto asked.

“The girl who helped show me that there was more to life than the next quick pay-check,” Jack said, sounding like he was indulging in the breakdown that Ianto refused himself. “Someone who was too young to die.”

“We were all too young,” Ianto fought hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice, and sighed. “If you can honestly say that you never followed orders even though you had a suspicion they were a bad idea, Jack, then I'll accept you were right and we all deserved what we got.”

Jack said nothing.

“So where does this leave us?” Ianto said, after the quiet had stretched on long enough.

“At the start of a new chapter,” Jack said, “A new page of the storybook. I've found there's so much to do, so much work, and I can do it alone, but I won't be around forever. You're a clever, sneaky man, Ianto Jones, and your heart's in the right place. You can keep a secret, and I'd wager you keep your light rather carefully hidden under a bushel even now. You're going to help me, help Torchwood, because that's how you're going to forgive yourself for nearly killing us all.”

“I think there were at least three different metaphors in that,” Ianto said, the dry comeback all he could think of to say for a moment. “And I don't need forgiveness. I did the only thing I could.”

“I didn't say you needed it from me.”

Ianto bit back the words *Fuck You* and tried not to contemplate the idea that Jack might have been correct.

“Good night, sir.”

“Night, Ianto,” Jack echoed.

“By the way, sir,” Ianto said, speaking quickly to catch Jack before he cut the line, “If you're wanting to travel faster than light, you're going to need a power source capable of generating four

point seven cochra per second per kilo that you're accelerating. So you're going to want a massive matter/anti-matter reactor, or a point singularity source engine. Got one of those lying around?"

Jack's laughter warmed him, and long after he'd hung up he went to sleep with a smile on his face.

**

Jack called again the following evening, a little later than previously, leaving Ianto to conclude that it had been a long day for everyone back in Cardiff. He himself was starting to get lulled into a false sense of what a day should consist of. He had the evenings free, instead of spending hours after everyone else had gone home tidying and cleaning, and doing basic maintenance on the systems. So after spending an impatient hour or two wandering around, he'd been shown the way to the base's recreation facilities, and spent an enjoyable few hours with some of the soldiers, playing a game of pool that had gotten progressively raucous as time wore on. It was nice, being around people who had no idea what he'd done in the past, and who seemed willing to overlook his current allegiances after a pint or two. He would have been lying, though, if thoughts of Jack's words the previous night hadn't been weighing on his mind.

Their conversation that evening was far more mundane, less emotionally charged, Jack relating to Ianto some anecdote about Owen not realising that the blood of his necropsy *du jour* tended to eat through latex and stain Human skin (hence the reason Owen was now walking around with fingers that were a delightful shade of cyan blue) and Ianto returned the favour by explaining what he'd learn about Captain Monroe and her reasons for being stationed behind a desk in the wilds of England.

"Apparently she was stationed out of New Zealand for a while," Ianto said, while he sat in the uncomfortable chair provided, feet on the desk, slowly eating a sandwich in between speaking. "They had an unexpected Kraglik infestation. You know Kragliks, the little..."

"Yeah," Jack interrupted. "*The parasitic little buggers.*" Kragliks were little six-inch long grey slugs that didn't appear to be sentient by any known measure, and would generally have been classified as a nuisance, except for their rather irksome habit of trying to take over Earth lifeforms as hosts if they had the chance. They tended not to pick Humans though, something about the biochemistry just didn't suit them. They'd been named by some wag at Torchwood London's Xeno-Zoology department, who claimed that the creatures look like someone had licked a piece of craggy rock.

"Turns out they were getting into several flocks of sheep..."

"Oh no..." Jack was already starting to laugh.

"Oh yes. Given that the Kragliks aren't designed for Terran hosts, they pushed the blood pressure of the sheep right up and *pop!*" Ianto mimed an explosion, accidentally flinging a slice of tomato across the room. "Exploding sheep."

Jack's laughter was boisterous, and very loud.

"Apparently it was some fly-by-night alien mercenary outfit trying to do a first assault at Earth's

defences without realising that sheep weren't the dominant lifeform.” Ianto couldn't help but chuckling at the story Monroe had related to him, vaguely embarrassed, over lunch. “After that, she applied for a transfer. I think she wanted to end up in a desert somewhere, but now she has to worry about training exercises that take place near farmland.”

“Getting awfully fond of this Captain, aren't we, Ianto?”

“Must be something about the title,” Ianto said, dryly, “Besides, she's assigned to stick near me every hour of the day when I'm not shut up in my little hut. I think UNIT are worried I'm going to start spying on them.”

“Damn, I should have thought of that one. Think it's too late to engage in some daring espionage? I'd hate to disappoint UNIT Command.” Jack “hmm”ed thoughtfully. “We've probably got some suitably James Bond-esque gadgets lying around the Hub you could put to good use.”

“I bet you've watched all the films, haven't you, sir?”

“You've got me. I was always a fan of Sean Connery – that accent does it for me every time. But then they have the gall to go and cast someone who looks as good coming out of the ocean as Daniel Craig, and my loyalties are torn.”

Ianto snorted, and took a bite of his sandwich, chewed and swallowed carefully before he answered. There was nothing more disgusting, he knew, than hearing someone speak over a microphone with a mouthful of food. Although he'd learnt the hard way that someone eating a Mars Bar near a microphone sounded utterly and completely filthy and sent his brain all sorts of terrible places (this knowledge was, of course, Jack's fault). “I'm surprised you haven't claimed to have met and slept with one or more of the Bond actors.”

“Who says I haven't?”

“Incorrigible, sir, totally incorrigible.”

“Thank you,” Jack sounded all too cheerful at the idea.

**

After several days of training, Ianto's arms were finally beginning to stop shaking so much in the evening. He would have liked to think that it was because he was becoming more used to holding heavy weapons that suffered from all the recoil Torchwood guns *didn't*, but it was probably more because his arms were completing their transition into strings of wet noodles, and they didn't have the capacity to shake any more. He was even becoming used to the surreal experience of Jack calling him, every night, for nothing more than simple conversation and some light flirtation. Jack always rang Ianto – while Ianto's hours were regular, Jack frequently had his first free moment late into the night and then he called Ianto to check in on him, to see how he was doing. Ianto was starting to feel as if slowly, carefully, they were rebuilding - or more accurately, he supposed, *building* - a friendship. He didn't even glance at the screen of his phone now as he answered it.

“So,” Jack said, as soon as the phone had beeped to indicate a connection, “What are you

wearing?”

Ianto actually found himself laughing a little before he caught himself. “We are not doing the phone sex thing, sir.”

“Who said it was about phone sex? Maybe I'm just interested in your wardrobe. It's been so long, I'm starting to forget what those suits look like.”

“It's been two weeks,” Ianto corrected with a smile, “And with you, sir, it's always about sex, phone or otherwise.”

“Not always,” Jack said.

“Yes,” Ianto murmured, “I think you lasted at least a week before propositioning me.”

There was a moment of silence and Ianto realised he may have spoken too freely, lulled into security through a week of easy back and forth between them. He wished briefly, intensely, that he could be standing face to face with Jack, and have some idea what he was thinking.

“Please,” Jack said, finally, *“Week and a half. I'm not that desperate.”*

Ianto tried not to heave a sigh of relief, or at least not make it heard over the phone line. “So what, did you walk in on Gwen and Owen and wind up with sex on the brain tonight?”

Jack laughed shortly. *“Got it in one.”*

Ianto blinked. He would have thought they'd have been more discreet. “Really? I... Ok, that's a surprise. I would have thought Gwen would be too ashamed to try anything.”

“They were in the vaults. Two cells down from Janet.”

“You... are joking.”

“Oh I wish.” Jack's rolling of the eyes was nearly audible. *“They thought they'd redirected the internal CCTV footage. I don't think they realised that Tosh made some alterations to the feed since...”*

“Since I got into the habit of judicious editing?” Ianto forced his voice to sound light, even if it made his chest reflexively tighten.

“You didn't exactly do a brilliant job, you know,” Jack pointed out, *“There were massive gaps in the records where you'd deleted footage. It wouldn't exactly have been hard to copy some other recordings to cover the gaps, but you never bothered. It's almost like you wanted to get caught.”*

Ianto sighed, “I can't speak to any subconscious desires I might have had. But it wasn't purposeful at the time. Maybe I knew she couldn't be saved. I remember once wondering what would happen if she really was a Cyberman, properly, I mean. I remember wondering what would happen to you and the others if she killed me.” Ianto rubbed his fingertips together. “Maybe I wanted a trail you could

all follow to work out what had happened. I don't know. I keep trying to put it out of my mind. I'd rather forget, I think.”

Jack hmphed softly. *“You shouldn't forget her.”*

“I don't want to forget her,” Ianto said, sharply, “I never will. It still hurts and I think it's going to hurt for a long time. But... I wish I could forget the...”

“The what?” Jack prompted, when Ianto spent a fair few moments lost for words. *“What would you rather forget?”*

“The shame,” Ianto answered, “And the look on your face when you realised I'd betrayed you. I don't think there's enough Retcon in the world for that.”

“Would it make you feel better if I forgave you? If I told you that even though we both know you should never have done it, I understand why you did it?” Jack's voice was suddenly rough, with a dark undercurrent of emotion that Ianto was sure he wouldn't hear if he wasn't so used to hearing Jack's voice, and his voice alone, after over a week's worth of separation. *“Would you like it if I said that I want you to come back to Torchwood and for us to get to know each other better, because I need the support you quietly, so subtly offered? The support I didn't even realise I'd come to rely on until it was gone?”*

Ianto's eyes stung slightly, but no tears fell. “I don't know,” he said, “What would you say if I said I forgave you?”

Jack sounded sad. *“The sins I've committed you cannot entirely forgive.”*

“No,” Ianto said, “But I can forgive you, and the others, for killing her, and for not being there when we both needed you.”

Jack's breathing was ragged. *“Ianto-”*

“Jack,” Ianto interrupted, “There's something I need to tell-”

Ianto abruptly pulled the phone away from his ear as an alarm sounded in the Hub, transmitting at an ear-splitting volume through the handset. “Jack?”

“Ianto,” Jack sounded all business now, professionalism firmly in place. *“Got to go.”* The phone went dead.

He knew it was helpless, but Ianto stilled yelled, “Jack? Jack!” into the phone. No use. The screen only displayed the total call time, and then it flicked off, going into standby. He briefly toyed with the idea of calling back, but realised that it would be a bad idea. If there was an emergency, it would only interrupt Jack, and Ianto was too far away to be any use. Unhappy, but resigned, he put his phone down on the beside table, and tried not to worry too much. Probably just a minor Rift alert, or a Weevil sighting. That was the most probable, certainly.

It didn't change the fact that Ianto was reasonably certain he'd never had cause to hear that particular

alarm before.

**

When the familiar knocking came on his door in the morning, Ianto opened the door and was thrown for a minute when instead of the familiar sight of Louise Monroe, he was confronted by a young officer in Lieutenant stripes. “Leftenant,” he said, a little confused, “Captain Monroe not around?”

“She's busy,” the man said, “I'm to escort you to the training today.”

“I see,” Ianto shrugged into his jacket as he left the hut. “Nothing world-ending I hope.”

“Who can tell, so early?” the Lieutenant said, earning a smile from Ianto.

“Lead on,” he said, even though he knew the way to the training centre perfectly well by now.

He was quickly distracted on arriving by yet another day of intense training, which not only taxed his body, but occasionally made his brain start to hurt as Sergeant Tumenggung poured one concept after another into his skull regarding weapons, tactics, and bits of useful information gathered over a lifetime's worth of professional soldiering.

As Ianto was gearing up with several other UNIT soldiers to do a simulated run of a building under the control of a hostile force, he caught a glimpse of his new shadow. He had already performed this run more than once, and he was gradually improving. The last time, he hadn't been “killed” by the hostiles until the very end, as opposed to the five minutes he'd lasted on his first attempt. His hands were getting familiar enough with the motions of donning protective gear and checking and rechecking his rifle that he could spare enough brainpower to notice the oddity. On the way out of the changing rooms, he paused by Tumenggung.

“Is there something wrong with Captain Monroe?”

Tumenggung looked at him with faint annoyance. “How the hell should I know? Get your arse in gear before I have one of the NCO's use it for target practice.”

Ianto got the point, hustling after the other soldiers. He managed to survive the simulated run, losing himself a bet with a private in the same training group, and abused his use of the Torchwood expense account to buy twenty hardened soldiers rounds for the night. He wondered how he was going to explain it to Jack, and briefly surprised himself by contemplating softening the blow with a serious offer of sexual favours in return for overlooking a couple of hundred pounds spent at the “Mouse and Bull”. The thought didn't fill him with the vague disgust it had only a few weeks ago, and he found himself smiling as he handed over the credit card to the barmaid, ignoring her faintly quizzical look at his mysterious grin.

That night, Jack didn't call.

Ianto stayed awake as long as alcohol and exhaustion would allow, staring at the darkened phone for what felt like hours. Once or twice, he reached out to make the call himself, but hesitated,

worried, pathetically, about seeming needy. There wasn't any sort of relationship between them. He had no right to expect Jack's attention whenever he demanded. Then why did it go the other way? Ianto asked himself.

Well... he was the Captain, obviously.

**

He didn't even realise that he'd fallen asleep, until the beeping of an incoming text message awoke him. He felt muggy, the beginnings of a decent hangover starting to kick in, and swiped clumsily at his face before reaching out for the phone.

It was a text from HARKNESS, JACK and read:

Something's going down. Stay sharp.

Ianto stared at it for a very long moment, rubbing his thumb across the screen to wipe away the oily residue of his own fingerprints. After a moment, he got up, and went to find the analgesics he'd swiped from the base infirmary a few days earlier. All of this meant when when Louise Monroe hammered on Ianto's door at three in the morning, looking stressed and exhausted, she was rather surprised to find that the man she'd been sent to fetch was fully dressed in a smart business suit, and had apparently been expecting her for some time.

**

Part Four

Monroe didn't say anything other than a brusque “follow me” when she came to fetch Ianto from his little prefab home away from home, and a warning glance was sufficient to keep his questions to himself. He, of all people, knew the wisdom in not blurting out questions somewhere out in the open, where anyone might be listening. Instead he followed silently, following Captain Monroe to a building set a fair way apart from the cluster of administrative buildings that Ianto had already pegged as important by the sheer overt innocuousness of it. It looked little more than a squat storage bunker with a chipped wooden door as the only entrance. But there were CCTV cameras all around high up on the exterior walls, three of them pointed straight at the entrance. If that hadn't been enough to convince him of the buildings importance, all doubt vanished as he stepped in through the doors after Monroe, to be confronted by three armed guards, one sitting by a computer attached to a scanner arch and two more guarding the room watchfully.

He was scanned quietly and efficiently, and they removed his security badge and replaced it with one almost identical except for the fact that it had a different barcode along the bottom edge. No words were exchanged, apart from the guard saying, after he had completed all his security checks and scans, “You're cleared, sir,” to which Monroe responded to with a terse nod and gestured for Ianto to follow her through the double doors at the other end of the room.

She lead him down nondescript white-walled corridors that flowed with UNIT staff rushing around, all clutching files or official looking bits of paper. They didn't so much as glance at Ianto and his escort as they walked at a brisk, urgent pace down the corridor. They moved through two more security checkpoints, before arriving at a final set of doors that were guarded by UNIT soldiers that scanned their badges before opening the doors to let them through.

“So,” Ianto said, as he got a good look at what he'd already guessed was the base's command centre, “This is where you've been hiding. And here was me starting to think you didn't love me any more.”

It was a large room, one wall completely dominated by an expensive looking panel screen that was currently showing a map of the British Isles and a dizzying array of readouts and graphs besides it. There were video windows of UNIT personnel at other stations, clearly on a constantly monitored feed that allowed the base to keep up with the status of other sites. There were banks of monitoring equipment and computers, all facing the large screen, and a glass panelled conference room at the back of the room, by the door where Ianto and Monroe entered. The noise was almost deafening. Between equipment chittering and beeping, and staff talking to each other and over comms in low tones, it wasn't helped by an air conditioning system that was blowing noisily, trying and failing to keep the temperature of the room down to bearable levels. Ianto could feel the prickle of sweat between his shoulder blades. General Carver was standing by large monitoring screen, on the phone to someone who was apparently infuriating enough to make the General occasionally raise his voice and acquire a particularly impressive shade of red skin.

He started to understand why Monroe was looking so tired.

Monroe shot him a wan smile at the joke. “It's gone crazy over the last twenty four hours,” she said,

“We weren't certain of the level of threat, but since I got ordered to bring you in, I'm guessing it's very serious indeed.”

“About that,” Ianto leaned down towards her, dropping his voice, “What is going on anyway?”

“Jones!”

Ianto raised his head at the yell, looking towards the source. General Carver was glaring at him, holding out the phone in his hands. “For you.”

Ianto exchanged a glance with Monroe, but didn't argue, approaching and taking the phone. “Ianto Jones,” he said, trying to ignore the way Carver watched him carefully.

“*Ianto.*” It was Jack's voice, and Ianto found himself unconsciously straightening at Jack's all-business tone. “*Good to hear your voice again.*”

“Likewise, sir,” Ianto said.

“*Long story short,*” Jack said, “*There's something strange going on, and frankly we don't know what the hell's causing it. UNIT'll fill you in, but for now consider yourself to be Torchwood's official liaison to UNIT.*”

Ianto managed to hide his surprise, both on his face and his voice. “Liaison.”

“*Right, keep an eye on them. And don't let them forget who's boss.*”

“Yes, sir.”

“*Good. Now pass me back to Carver. I'm not done with the old goat yet.*”

Ianto managed not to grin, and held the phone out to the General. “Captain Harkness for you, sir,” he said, politely, and pretended not to notice the visible irritation on the man's features. For a moment, he contemplated making the situation worse by offering some words of condolence regarding unreasonable American Captains, but decided that goading a UNIT General into having him shot would be one of the poorer decisions of his life (although far from the worst, really) and instead smiled politely, turning away.

Monroe had hurried away when he'd been called over by Carver, and was now approaching with a small earpiece in her hands. “Here,” she said, as she handed it to Ianto. “Comms unit. One channel's tuned to general chatter. The other's a personal one. Don't lose it. You're logged into the system now if you need to use a computer. Your name and 'Torchwood' as the password.”

“Original,” Ianto said dryly, fitting the comms unit into place over his ear. He tabbed through the channels. The general channel seemed to be a running feed on all non-classified communications. He could hear various sectors reporting in, voices running into each other. The other channel was silent, empty. He dialled down the volume on the general channel and left it to burble quietly in the background.

Monroe shrugged. “We were in a hurry.”

“So,” he shoved his hands in his pockets. He'd donned the suit he'd arrived on the first day in, warned by Jack's text message and determined that if something bad was going to happen then he would be at least well dressed for the occasion. “What's all the fuss about?”

Monroe opened her mouth to answer but General Carver interrupted her, having apparently finished his phone call. “The fuss,” he said, “Is that.” He pointed to the giant screen or, more accurately, at one particular set of graphs that danced in the bottom corner of the monitor. “Yesterday, Torchwood Cardiff started picking up unusual readings they couldn't identify. It seemed to be coming from our vicinity, so, naturally, I got woken up in the wee hours of Thursday morning by an American demanding to know what we were up to. By lunchtime, the readings were strong enough for us to pick them up as well. The only problem is that we don't know what the readings are, and neither do Torchwood Cardiff. All either of us can agree on is that they aren't Earthly in origin.”

Carver nodded to a nearby technician. “Put up the area of effect grid, would you?”

The technician nodded, fingers dancing across the keyboard, and the map of the British Isles changed, pulling out so that it showed most of Europe. Another keystroke, and a roughly circular shape was overlaid on the image. Its centre point was somewhere in Britain, not too far away from the UNIT base, if Ianto wasn't very much mistaken, and it spread out from there. The circle managed to cover the whole of Britain, and a good deal of France, reaching out to the point where it wasn't far off the coast of Denmark. “We're getting gradually escalating readings within this area,” Carver said, “Centring on this area of Britain where the readings are strongest.”

Ianto nodded slowly. “So I assume the working theory at the moment is that it's some sort of alien incursion?”

“Good a theory as any at this point.” Carver said, “Now why don't you pick a nice spot and stay out of the way while the proper soldiers do their job. Monroe, with me.”

Carver strode off towards the conference room without looking back, and Monroe shot Ianto an apologetic look before following.

Ianto had no doubt that the clearance assigned to him gave him a much more restricted access than UNIT's own login, but short of forcibly evicting someone from their own workstation it was doubtful that he would manage to see any data at all. A quiet query to one of the staff, however, earned him a laptop and a space of clear desk that he could sit down at. It gave him an excellent view both of the room and of the conference room, in which he could see Carver pacing while speaking in short terse sentences to his staff. Ianto briefly wished he'd learnt how to lip-read at some point and instead turned his attention to the laptop.

By Torchwood standards, it was sluggish. Earth technology couldn't yet hope to match the smooth slickness of the alien-enhanced one that Tosh nurtured at the Hub. He drummed his fingers impatiently while he waited for the operating system to finish loading (Windows – rarely a good sign, he sincerely hoped it was only on laptops and that the main systems had something more robust), and watched the room while he waited. He was unused to spending a crisis, any crisis, surrounded by people. He was used to the small team at Cardiff, presided over by Jack who barked

orders and ran roughshod over everyone with a clever word and an insouciant grin. But here, the UNIT staff functioned like a well oiled machine. He could hear the reports easily dovetailing into one another as stations reported in sequentially, and he watched as personnel moved around the room, dancing around each other where there wasn't enough space, and the hum of voices littered the air. He hadn't been around this many people since... since London... and that felt like a lifetime ago these days.

The computer beeped at him. It had finished loading, and was waiting for his access code. He ignored the prompt that asked for the information that Monroe had given him, instead typing in an apparently random string of numbers and letters and tried not to smile as the network chewed it over, before the screen cleared and box popped up, informing him that administrative-level access had been accepted. He wondered what Carver would say if he learnt that Tosh had long ago hacked UNIT's systems, and took it as a challenge whenever they tried to upgrade their security. Their back-door clearance to UNIT files had come in useful on more than one occasion, and Ianto knew he'd have to be careful to wipe the laptop's memory after he was done with it. It wasn't that he had no trust in UNIT or the login that Monroe had so helpfully provided him, it was just that he was reasonably sure that whatever information he might have been able to access would have been more than useless.

With high level access granted, he could see all the computers on the network, and the linkages to other UNIT sites as well. He ignored them for the moment, instead digging into the logs of sensor readings and pulling up information for the last twenty four hours. He didn't go further beyond that. From what Carver had said, it was doubtful that UNIT scanners were sensitive enough to detect changes in ambient energy levels at the point where it would trip the Hub's sensor arrays. The information appeared as pages and pages of data, accompanied by images that showed the same information in graph form. He lined them up carefully on the screen, and flicked through them, watching the progression of energy spikes and dips over time. Back and forth he clicked, forward through time and then back.

There was something odd about these readings, something familiar.

The problem was that he was certain he'd never seen anything like it working at Torchwood Cardiff. He'd stayed away from the Rift monitors mostly, not wanting to draw attention to himself. It was Tosh's dominion, and he had no desire to attract her attention, or Jack's, by appearing more knowledgeable than he perhaps should. But he was certain he recalled seeing... something... like this before. It was maddening, like a word caught on the tip of the tongue. He turned to the Lieutenant sitting next to him, working at his own laptop. He seemed to be coordinating communications and looked up impatiently when Ianto attracted his attention.

“Have you got a pen and paper?” he asked, and had the back of an old phone list and a biro shoved towards him.

“Thanks,” he said, politely, even though the man had already gone back to ignoring him.

Shrugging to himself, he set to draw a set of axis on the paper, and began plotting a new graph, using the data on the screen as a reference. Slowly, though clumsily, given that he was plotting the waveform with a rather loose definition of accuracy, a new shape began to form on the paper. And this one he definitely recalled. His breath caught in his throat as he remembered exactly where and

when he'd seen this pattern before. The familiarity was painful, and instant.

No. He could be wrong. He had to be wrong. He must be wrong. There was no other explanation.

Ianto rolled the biro between thumb and index finger before decisively dropping it on the table next to him, nodding to himself. He opened a new window on his screen and started typing slowly. Character by character, stopping frequently and frowning, he entered into the system an equation, a piece of script, that would chew through the sensor logs for the last several hours and produce a new data set. He had to go back and erase odd lines, here and there, amending or replacing them. He was working entirely from memory, and he was no longer sure he remembered the details clearly. When he'd finally finished, and there was nothing glaring that jumped out to his eye, he set the computer to running the script, and sat back to wait while the computer laboriously processed the directive.

Carver was saying something that he punctuated by pointing at Ianto. Ianto smiled at the faces that reflexively turned towards him, and laughed quietly to himself as they all quickly looked away again. They were probably discussing what they were supposed to be doing about their new "liaison". UNIT and Torchwood had never particularly gotten along. The attitude in the halls of Torchwood London had been that UNIT was an up-itself johnny-come-lately organisation that would break apart as soon as the disparate nations contributing to the force realised that they had about as much in common as a collection of furniture in a student bedsit. So high and mighty, the staff had giggled. They'd get their comeuppance, for sure. Torchwood survived in the shadows, and would be around long after UNIT had bitten the dust.

It was a rather pointed example of hubris proving to be one's downfall.

The remnants of Torchwood, namely Cardiff, had a somewhat more relaxed attitude towards UNIT. Ianto had occasionally wondered if the fact that Jack had clearly once been a military man himself tended to bias him in favour of sympathising with UNIT. Certainly, he didn't seem to mind giving them the run around when it suited him, but Jack never seemed to indicate that he held UNIT in less esteem than any other organisation. Maybe that was why they'd agreed to take Ianto on for the duration. Probably, Ianto mused, he would never know.

The laptop played a musical tune to indicate it had completed its analysis, tearing Ianto's attention away and redirecting it back to the screen in front of him. He pressed the key to call up the new result graph. What he saw made his stomach do backflips, and his breathing hitched.

"No," he whispered, aghast, "It can't be. It's impossible."

He scabbled in his pocket for his phone, dialling the Hub and getting the number wrong twice through sheer nerves. "Come on, come on," he hissed, as the phone rang.

"*Ianto?*" It was Tosh's voice.

"Tosh!" Ianto gripped the edge of the desk he was sitting at, pushing himself away from the monitors, over to a quieter corner, where hopefully no one would hear him. "Where's Jack?"

"*Jack?*" Tosh sounded briefly confused. "*He's just in-*"

Ianto didn't have time to wait for her to finish. He glanced up at the transparent-walled conference room. Carver was talking to an assemblage of UNIT officers, and hadn't noticed Ianto's movements. "Tell him. There's been a breach of the secure archives. There must have been. It's the only explanation."

"The secure archives?" Tosh's voice rose in alarm. "What are you talking about, Ianto?"

Ianto took a deep breath. "The readings that you and UNIT have been picking up. I've seen them before, but only in simulation data. It's fallout from a pre-shock wave. It's-" The phone beeped, and died. Ianto pulled the handset away from his ear and looked at it in dread.

NO SIGNAL, it said.

On screens all around the room, line graphs jumped around into a frenzy of motion and light, and Ianto realised that, as much as he would have liked to have been, he wasn't mistaken.

And then the world turned inside out.

**

By anyone's definition, Ianto Jones had been through an awful lot in just a few short years. Between the Battle of Canary Wharf, cannibals, aliens and nearly getting himself and everything he cared for killed after hiding Lisa away and telling himself that it would be alright in the end, it was a miracle he'd managed to come out unscathed (as long as one took unscathed to mean still breathing and possessing of a pulse). What happened next, though, was something so utterly beyond his experience that he had no way of describing it properly.

It felt like he'd hit a wall at speed while standing completely still, like he had been turned inside out from the navel, before being hung up by his ankles and shaken. And, through it all, he was vaguely aware that he was still standing upright, in the corner of a UNIT command centre.

Hmm, he mused to himself, I wonder if I'm dead.

He thought about that for a long moment.

I don't think I'm dead, he finally decided, Though I do feel decidedly odd.

Then he remembered why he could be confused about such a thing, and why it was very very important that he decide to be alive. *I'm alive!* He mentally screamed, as loud as he could bring himself to do. He might have even been screaming out loud, but he had no way of knowing. *I'm alivealivealive!*

The Universe shifted into a blurred sort of focus, like a photo taken while the photographer was moving.

He was staring at unbroken grey, and it wasn't until Ianto blinked that he realised he was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. Most of the lights were flickering on and off, and the monitors were

dark. He turned his head slowly to look around. There didn't appear to be any damage to the room, and he didn't feel injured, but whatever had happened had clearly affected everyone else. Around the room, people were groaning and awkwardly picking themselves up off the floor. General Carver stumbled out of the conference room, followed by his staff, and looked as if someone had struck him in the forehead.

“What the hell was that?” He sounded more confused than anything.

Ianto heard a choking sound, and turned his head in time to see a woman in a green UNIT officer's uniform being copiously sick on the floor next to him. The acidic stench wafted over to him, and turned his stomach. He looked down at the phone he'd somehow managed to keep a hold of through everything. Its screen was still dead. No chance of contacting the Hub just yet then. He shoved it into his jacket pocket and pushed himself into a sitting position. A hand landed on his shoulder, and he looked up to see Louise Monroe staring down at him, blinking rapidly as if to try and focus.

“You okay?” she asked.

He nodded, and accepted the hand she offered to help him to his feet. She was surprisingly strong for a woman her size. He smiled at her, and let go, and immediately had to grab a hold of the edge of the nearest table. Apparently his balance hadn't been as stable as he'd thought. He swallowed against an upsurge of nausea, and tried not to think about the woman still crouched on the floor, retching.

“Systems!” Carver was snapping at the technicians. “I want external monitors up, asap. What's going on, people?”

Ianto awkwardly reached for the desk phone a few feet away. For all that the staff had wound up on the floor, shaken up, all the equipment was still in place, and apparently undisturbed. He lifted the receiver, but didn't hear a dial tone. It was as dead as his mobile. That was bad. If UNIT dedicated landlines weren't functional, that meant that there was probably no way to communicate with the outside world, and certainly no way to get word to Torchwood. Ianto was very much on his own, and, he realised, there was every chance that the situation was going to get far worse.

There was the buzzing sound of power starting to surge through wires again. It was intermittent, though. Like the lights, monitors flickered on and off, as if they couldn't decide whether to be fully functional or shut down. After a second, there was a triumphant cry from a technician, and the main monitoring wall lit up.

Carver stared at it. “What the hell?” he said, in a low voiced growl.

The monitor was, at least for the moment, staying on, but the image on it kept flickering and shifting. One moment, it showed an 'all status nominal' message across the British Isles and Europe, and the next it painted a picture of utter devastation, with a scrolling list of damage and casualty reports, and an illustrative area of effect overlay, which kindly informed anyone looking that most of northern Europe had been destroyed by unknown means. Then it flickered back to normal.

Monroe bent down next to the technician, grabbing the diagnostic screen off him and scowling at it. “What did you do?” she demanded. “We're not dead. This thing's wrong.”

“No,” Ianto said, his voice feeling somehow disassociated from his body. “No, it isn’t.” He didn’t even realise he’d spoken aloud until Carver, his expression not angry but deadly serious, turned to look at him.

“What precisely are you talking about, Mr. Jones?”

Ianto passed a hand over his mouth, and tried to force his thoughts into some sort of order. “Those energy readings that you’ve been picking up. They’re a pre-shock event. A trans-temporal signifier of-” Ianto stopped himself, and took a deep breath. “It’s a Quantum Bomb. Someone set off a Quantum Bomb. The destruction resonates out through twenty-odd dimensions, including time. The bomb hasn’t exploded yet, which is why we don’t have a reading on the damage caused by the explosion. It’s not happened yet. We’re in a suspended quantum state.”

“How exactly do you know so much about this thing?” Monroe’s voice was soft, but in the sudden quiet that had overtaken the room as Ianto spoke, she was clearly audible.

Ianto laughed, though humour was the furthest thought from his mind. He rather thought that if he didn’t laugh he might do something unseemly, like sob. “Because, Captain,” he said, looking General Carver straight in the eye, “Torchwood designed it.”

**

It had hardly been what Carver wanted to hear. The General had ordered Ianto escorted into the conference room under guard, unwilling to let Ianto out of his sight by locking him up in a brig somewhere else on the base, and so Ianto got a very good view on how General Carver handled a crisis. He watched silently, hands folded neatly on the table top, as Carver spoke to technicians and soldiers, and some white coated people who were clearly scientists. He looked confused though, and the scientists pale, so Ianto guessed that whatever was being said was not what the General wanted to hear. He watched Carver pace, becoming increasingly more agitated, until the man finally caved and entered the conference room with a couple of scientists and senior officers.

“Start talking,” he said, brusquely. “And give me one good reason why I shouldn’t have you dragged off to interrogation being thrown in the deepest darkest little hole I can find.”

Ianto spread his hands, palms upwards, unimpressed by Carver’s bluster. He’d faced Jack Harkness in a murderous rage, and, after that, a General held little threat for him. “Where would you like me to start?” he asked, trying for ‘cool and collected’ in his response.

“What the hell is a Quantum Bomb?” Carver snapped, “And why can’t we get a fixed reading on it?”

One of the scientists had pulled out a notepad and pen and was listening intently.

Ianto thought for a moment about how to phrase it. Finally, he said, “You know Schroedinger’s Cat, right? The classic thought experiment? Simplified, you put a cat in a box with a vial of poison and close the box. You have no way of knowing until you open the box whether the cat is alive or dead. Once you open the box, and observe the result, you know whether the cat is dead, or just very

pissed off.”

“We're a cat in a box?” Monroe was standing at the back of the assembled UNIT officers, and there was a faint smile on her face at the notion.

Well, at least he had at least one ally, or something approaching that, in the room. “More or less. At the heart of a Quantum Bomb is a point singularity source. When it's detonated, it tears through reality in all directions, space, time, and a lot of dimensions in between. But, as far as we're concerned, it's not detonated yet. It's a possible future. Until we pass the point in time where the bomb has either been detonated or defused, we're stuck in an indecisive quantum state. We're both alive and well, and we're also dead and blown to pieces.”

One of the scientists snorted. “Ridiculous,” he said.

Ianto smiled placidly. “I've not eaten in fifteen hours, and I've only had about an hour's sleep. Right before the shockwave hit, I was working up a killer hangover. Now I'm not hungry, thirsty, or tired. How about you?”

The scientist didn't have a response for that.

General Carver was frowning. “Why precisely would Torchwood build a weapon capable of destroying most of Europe? Or should I be unsurprised at the continuing evidence of Torchwood's late Empire-building ambitions?”

Ianto frowned. “I didn't say Torchwood built it. Torchwood *designed* it.”

“The difference being?”

“It was a last line of defence, in theory.” Ianto folded his hands together and examined his fingers thoughtfully, lost in recollection. “Though I always thought that it represented a rather childish attitude of 'well, if we can't have Britain, no one else will'. It was to be used if Britain ever fell to the slaving alien hordes. Turns out, however, that the upper echelons actually had half a brain cell working the day they reviewed that project. They decided that it smacked of cowardice, and that if Britain ever did fall, then Torchwood would still be waiting in the shadows to retake our 'blessed land' through guerilla tactics and obscenely powerful weaponry.” Ianto rolled his eyes expressively. “There was also the rather minor question of whether or not the act of using a controlled point singularity in a destructive fashion wouldn't in fact destroy the Universe altogether. It was shelved before it reached the prototype stage. Though, I must say, score one for Torchwood R&D, since it apparently worked exactly as it was designed to do.”

Carver's lip curled slightly. “Forgive me if I hold off on the celebrations.”

Ianto smiled.

Carver sat down opposite Ianto and leaned forward, mimicking his hands-together position. “So you're telling me that this bomb hasn't gone off yet.”

“Yes,” Ianto said.

“So we've still got a chance to stop it.”

Ianto shrugged. “Theoretically,” he said, “If you can find it.”

“We.” Carver stabbed a finger in Ianto's direction. “Since you know so much about the device in question, and since Captain Harkness's last act before we lost communications was to insist that you function as a liaison officer, then you're going to be helping us, because, frankly, you're only other option is to spend the rest of your life in a very small and dark cell.”

“Well, when you put it like that, General, how can I refuse?” He remembered reading Toshiko's file before insinuating himself into Torchwood Three, and the stark descriptions of her accommodations in a high security UNIT prison. Jack had left a lot out of those scanty reports, not intending anyone other than himself to read them, but Ianto came to learn how to read between the lines of what Jack didn't say.

General Carver shook his head. “You Torchwood lot are unbelievable,” he said, “Designing bombs like that. What were you thinking?”

Ianto raised his eyebrows. “Are you telling me you would never even consider doing exactly the same thing?”

The corner of Monroe's eye might have twitched, but it could have been Ianto's imagination.

“Let's hope you never find out,” Carver said, quite seriously, and Ianto was taken aback for a moment. “One more thing. We've lost several of our staff. What's happened to them?”

Ianto looked at Carver, who returned his glance with a steely look. Ianto found that he couldn't bring himself to lie, even though Carver clearly desperately wanted him to. “I don't know,” he admitted, “My best guess is that they're caught on the wrong side of the decision to be alive or dead. All of us here are more alive than dead, and they might be more dead than alive. We might have made the conscious decision that we could be alive, the observer effect and all that. There's some stuff about decoherence that might help to explain it, but that's really not... ah... relevant.”

Carver nodded. “So, if we stop the bomb from going off...?”

“Then everyone's alive,” Ianto said, “Because it never went off.”

“Good enough for me,” Carver said, slapping his palms on the tabletop and standing. Ianto reflexively followed suit. “Get to work. All of you. We're going to find out what the hell is going on and stop it from happening, because there is no other option.”

**

Ianto stared at his mobile, which still displayed the maddening ‘no service’ message, and cracked its casing, hard, on the edge of the conference room table. It did nothing except to scratch the edge of the phone, and perhaps assuage some of his frustration.

“Still nothing?”

He looked up. Monroe had looked up from her laptop, peering across the table at him. The conference room had been turned into a working area, with what pieces of equipment they could get to work set up, and several white-coated scientists were standing by the white board and squabbling. Ianto had been attempting to call the Hub for nearly an hour now, and there had been no look. Every so often, it seemed that the problems with the equipment would resolve, and he could dial out, but it died again before anyone at the Hub picked up.

Presuming, of course, that there was anyone at the Hub to answer. Ianto couldn't help but wonder if the realisation that something was going on was what had prompted most of the people in the Command Centre to still be alive. They were observing what was going on. Would that have affected it?

It made his brain hurt to think about it.

He would feel much better if someone at the Hub, anyone, even Owen, would just answer the phone.

“No,” he said, and slipped the phone back into his pocket. He returned his attention to the file folders in front of him. UNIT had pulled all their paper records (given that the electronic ones were hard to access) on current threats, plus speculative ones, or anyone related to Torchwood who might bear enough of a grudge to wipe out a good part of Western Europe. The number of files was frighteningly large.

He fingered the edge of the file he had open in front of him. It detailed the activities of a subversive quasi-terrorist organisation which had made several attempts, usually through blackmail or other forms of extortion, at getting their hands on alien technology. There was a notation at the bottom of the file that the group had been “deactivated” several years earlier, and Ianto tossed the file aside without further thought, picking up the next.

“How do you know about it?”

Monroe's question caused him only to glance up briefly before returning his attention to the files. She was staring at him in a decidedly odd fashion, biting her lip.

“Know about what?” he asked, in return.

Morecome, Alec. Card carrying anarchist who sold dangerous alien components on eBay. Killed when he mistook a Venzeni subductor for a sandwich toaster. Ianto tossed the file into what he'd started to call the ‘waste of my bloody time’ pile. Who the hell had organised these files, anyway?

“The Quantum Bomb.”

Ianto glanced up. Monroe's mouth was set into a thin line. After a moment, she got to her feet, picking up the laptop in front of her, and moved her chair around to the other side of the table so that she was sitting next to Ianto and could lower her voice to speak.

“You know an awful lot for just a 'librarian',” she said, softly, leaning in towards him. He could detect the faintly floral scent of her perfume. “How do you know about a weapon like this?”

Ianto picked up another file and gave her a pleasant smile. “Like you said, I'm a librarian. Maybe I read the files while I was archiving them. Maybe I hacked into the old Torchwood systems out of curiosity and read up on the subject. Or maybe,” he leaned in towards her, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial murmur, “Maybe I helped design it.”

Monroe straightened sharply.

“Wouldn't that be a bit of a mind screw?” He asked, and grinned. Apparently the expression worked as well as it did for Jack to throw people off. Monroe's expression moved from shock to uncertainty, not knowing whether or not he was playing with her. He restrained the urge to laugh, glanced at the file in his hands and discarded it.

“You're a strange man, Ianto,” Monroe said, leaning back in her chair and folding her arms. “Are all you Torchwood people like that? I... I hear things. People talk about what Torchwood's like.”

“And what do they say?”

Monroe shrugged, a tiny minuscule motion that belied the tension in her shoulders. “Arrogant jerks who like to hide behind the veil of monarchy and Rule Britannia while plotting to take over the world.”

“You forgot to say how unfairly attractive we all are,” Ianto teased.

“That too.” Monroe smiled slightly. “I don't believe it, though. At least not about everyone at Torchwood being bastards who deserved what they got. I was on a salvage team that went into what was left at Canary Wharf-”

It was only through long practice that Ianto managed to conceal any sort of reaction to a mention of the battle.

“- and I saw the bodies, Ianto. There were a lot. I don't know if you guys at Cardiff ever turned up there, but it was pretty devastating. I refuse to believe that anyone is bad enough to deserve that.”

Ianto stared blindly at the file in his hands, unable to read a single word on the page.

“What's it like?” she asked.

“What's what like?”

“Torchwood.” He looked up at Monroe. Her eyes were wide, and staring at him. “What's it like to work there?”

Ianto opened his mouth to give a glib answer, but found that the words stuck in his throat. He thought about it a long moment, and tried again. “It's the best and worst thing that ever happened to me. It's horrible, and it's probably going to kill me before my thirtieth birthday, but it's the only

thing that gives me life meaning. *The only thing*. And the promise of something beautiful coming from Torchwood is one of the few things that stops me from killing myself some days.”

Monroe's expression softened, and she reached out to rest a hand on his arm. “Ianto...”

“Louise,” he interrupted, “You can't understand, you really can't.”

She shook her head. “I don't pretend to. But you're in pain. Is it worth it?”

“Oh yes,” he said, quickly, before he could even think about it. “It really is.”

She smiled. “Then that's alright, isn't it?”

He looked at the hand she had resting on his arm, and the way her thumb gently stroked over the sleeve of his jacket. “I suppose so,” he said, and then the photograph in the file he was holding finally caught his eye.

He raised the file, staring at the picture, trying to imagine what the flat and unflattering image would look like on a person.

“What is it?” Louise asked, realising his sudden interest. Her hand dropped away.

“I know this man,” he said, hurriedly shuffling through the pages looking for a name. “Shit, I know this man.” He stood. “Where's General Carver?”

**

Part Five

“His name, according to his file, is William Balder. That, however, is an alias. In actuality, he's a former Torchwood London officer by the name of Sean Bartram, late of the Research and Development department.”

There was only one file, and the photocopier wasn't working. The folder had been passed around the assembled UNIT staff while Ianto spoke, and it had reached General Carver. He looked up at Ianto and frowned.

“That information's not in here,” he said.

Ianto shrugged lightly. “The London office didn't exactly make its personnel database public knowledge. I remember working with him and, more to the point, I remember that his name was on the list of deceased staff members.”

General Carver read down the file. “Malcontent, on UNIT's radar due to a number of websites that were uncomfortably close to the truth about alien life, and some rumours about smuggling alien technology, but nothing was ever proven. Low priority threat.” He looked up, eyes narrowed. He was scrutinising Ianto.

Ianto straightened. He realised that Carver seemed to have forgone his previous antipathy towards him as a Torchwood representative who was causing him nothing but trouble, and was inspecting him carefully to see exactly how seriously he should take this information.

“And you're sure,” Carver said, setting the file down, “That this is the man responsible.”

“No,” Ianto said, shaking his head, “But frankly, he's the best candidate I can think of without any deep investigation.”

Carver nodded slowly. “Right. That's all well and good, but it's not much help if we don't know where to look for the guy. There's nothing in here about his current whereabouts.”

Louise Monroe straightened. “Actually, sir, that might not be as hard as we think.” She gestured to the old fashioned paper ordinance survey map that was spread out on the conference room table. The scientists and technicians had spent a great deal of time fussing over it with protractors, rulers and marker pens, and it was a mess of lines and arcs that all converged on a single area, just to the north of where the UNIT base was marked on the map. “We assumed that the high point of readings that Torchwood Cardiff detected before they went silent,” she glanced at Ianto, but didn't pause in speaking, “Would represent the centre of the blasts. In other words, the point where the bomb went off.”

“And that's where he'll be?” Carver looked between Ianto and Monroe expectantly.

“If he's not there now,” Ianto said, “He will be by the time he plants the bomb.”

Carver nodded slowly. “Then I think you know what to do, Captain.”

Monroe straightened, and snapped off a salute. “Yes, sir,” she said crisply. “I’ll assemble a team immediately.”

Carver stabbed a finger in Ianto’s direction. “You’re going too.”

“Yes, sir,” Ianto said. If Carver hadn’t told him to go, he would have volunteered anyway. If the Quantum Bomb was, or was going to be, there, then Ianto was quite possibly the only one who knew enough about it to, if not diffuse it, at least handle it safely.

It didn’t help that there was some nagging guilt deep down that if Torchwood really did have a hand in the possible destruction of half a continent, then he had a responsibility to do everything he could to help, because he almost hadn’t once before.

“Get geared up,” Monroe told him, as she left the Command Centre, “We’ll leave in an hour.”

**

Getting to the armoury was a difficulty that Ianto hadn’t foreseen. He hadn’t stepped foot outside the windowless Command Centre since the explosion-that-wasn’t had occurred, and so he was unprepared for a world that didn’t seem quite *right*. Part of his brain was telling him that he was looking around a devastated landscape, strewn with debris and small smoky fires, but his eyes were also telling him that the world was just as he’d last seen it, and it was a peaceful and rather sunny morning. The conflict made him dizzy, and a headache sprung into existence behind his eyes.

He closed his eyes, and breathed slowly, trying to combat the rising nausea. He tried to rationalise it. The Command Centre was heavily fortified, so there was a higher probability of it surviving any sort of explosion, which must be why it was easier to see in its undamaged state. Maybe the way the world was wavering indecisively was because of shifting probabilities. The chance of them stopping the bomb changed with each moment.

For a moment, he had a burning desire to sit down with Toshiko and watch her puzzle over the maths of it all, but that was quickly overruled by the immediate need not to vomit. He took another deep breath, and struck out across the base, keeping his eyes fixed on the building he knew was the armoury, refusing to let his brain even for a moment contemplate the possibility that it didn’t exist.

At one point he could have sworn he tripped over a half-melted tyre, but a quick glance revealed nothing, and he forced himself to ignore it, and carry on.

He arrived at the armoury sweating and pale, and stumbled through the doors rather than step through them in a dignified manner as befit the representative of a secret and subversive alien hunting organisation.

Jaq Tumenggung looked over at him, turning his attention away from one of the soldiers who was sagging on the floor, head clutched in his hands. “What the hell took you so long?” he demanded.

**

Indoors it was easier to deal with the confusion, and after a while Ianto found that he was starting to even get used to the unnatural overlaying of one reality on top of (underneath, around) the other. It was a bit like standing in a crowded room, and picking out one particular voice.

As he donned the black garb and body armour of a UNIT soldier, Monroe stood giving her briefing, having already changed. Like the others, she wore no rank on her clothing, the rationale being that it would be harder to target a leader if you couldn't identify them on sight. She seemed smaller, somehow, out of her green officer's uniform, and the red beret she toyed with in her hands was a splash of unnatural colour that made Ianto, disturbingly, think of blood.

No one had given him a beret, and he was fine with that. It wasn't what he exactly thought of as flattering, or conducive to hiding.

"The target is at these coordinates," she said, rapping the map pinned on the wall behind her with a knuckle, "We don't know how much resistance we may encounter, or what resources they may have at their disposal."

"So we're going in blind?" One of the soldiers looked sceptical, and not entirely pleased. "Oh, this'll end well."

"We're going in carefully," Monroe said, firmly, leaving no room for argument. "Any large numbers of weapons or personnel moving around would have attracted the attention of the security services long before now, but we're not going to assume this'll be easy."

There was a murmur of acknowledgement.

"I know the world is all shades of fucked up right now," Monroe continued, "But this is why the world needs UNIT. It's why our organisation was created, it's why we're the best, and it's why we're the ones who are going to deal with this."

There was a much louder chorus of agreement. Ianto's mouth twitched, but he managed to restrain his smile at the over-earnest nature of Monroe's words. It seemed to appeal to the soldiers, though, and he couldn't help but think that Jack would probably be saying the exact same words in her place.

"Finish getting your gear together," she said, "We hit the road in twenty."

"Yes, sir!" The voice echoed around the room, and Ianto almost echoed it before he caught himself.

Monroe nodded sharply, and left the room, and the assembled soldiers started to talk amongst themselves as they finished lacing boots and zipping up jackets. As Ianto followed them out of the room, he was stopped by Sergeant Tumenggung putting a hand on his arm.

"Here," he said. He brought his other hand from out behind his back. In it he held Ianto's Torchwood issue sidearm and the spare clips he'd left locked up in storage. "Can't hurt to have an advantage, and you're not entirely incompetent with it."

It was as close to a compliment, Ianto know, as he was likely to receive. He took the gun and accoutrements from the Sergeant's grasp. Where once it had felt like an alien thing in his hand, something he only touched when its purpose was done, and it simply needed cleaning and storing, now it felt comfortable and familiar. In fact, after having spent an intense week with firearms of varying sorts, it even felt lightweight, almost flimsy. He slotted the clip into place, and put the gun into the holster at his side.

"Thanks," he said.

Tumenggung snorted. "Just sort this shit out, would you?" he said, "My wife'll kill me if I miss dinner two nights in a row."

**

It was amazing the sort of dramatic entrance that could be achieved with a full assault team and several packets of C-4 explosive. Unfortunately, Ianto was rather disappointed to learn, there was no one beyond the now thoroughly demolished doorway to appreciate the spectacle.

The team had driven to the approximate location of what they had determined to be the epicentre, expecting it to require many hours of searching and a good deal of technical wizardry before they found anything close to what they were looking for. It turned out that the region of elevated energy readings was abandoned industrial estate. One large warehouse, surrounded by what might have, at one time, been parking space and porta-cabins that had long since started to moulder and rot away. There was nothing else save electricity pylons and a few roads, for miles, and after much discussions, Monroe had agreed that such a location made sense, if one wanted to be able to construct such an elaborate item as a Quantum Bomb without attracting attention.

They had carefully scoped out the warehouse from a distance, but were unable to find any trace of external cameras, or any security devices that might trip upon their approach and either alert someone or set off a trap. They had approached, carefully, electing to make a surprise entrance, and, if there was heavy resistance, hopefully put them off-guard.

The team moved in, and it wasn't long until loud yells of "Clear!" resounded through the air.

Monroe entered after them, and Ianto followed her. She frowned.

"Is it just me?" she asked, hand resting on her gun holster in an apparently habitual gesture. "Or is this entirely too easy?"

"I generally find that when faced with one's doom, I'd rather have it easy than hard," Ianto commented, earning a twitch of a smile from Monroe.

"So you're easy, I'll bear that in mind," Monroe murmured, flashing a brief grin at him, though it faded quickly as a sharp gesture from one of the rifle-bearing soldiers indicating she should come over to a door that seemed to lead deeper into the warehouse.

Ianto followed, drawing his weapon as he did so.

They went through the doors, down a short corridor which abruptly opened up into wide empty space, the warehouse proper. There were discarded bits of plastic wrapping and straps littering the floor, and some wooden pallets stacked to the side, obviously unmoved since the place had been abandoned.

And right in the centre of the room, on an upside down wooden crate, a small metal cylinder, so innocent and apparently innocuous in its size, sat flashing small coloured LEDs along its sides. There was a high pitched whine, almost too high to be audible, that grew louder as the assault team cautiously approached it. As soon as Ianto was close enough to get a good look at it, he shoved his gun back in its holster, and swore. He strode forward, past the UNIT troops and a rather startled Louise Monroe, heading straight for the device.

“Ianto! Don't!”

Ianto ignored Monroe's shout as he reached centre of the warehouse and snatched the device off the empty crate it was standing on. He turned it upside down to look at the base, and flicked a switch. The lights on the side immediately died, and the high pitched whining sound went away. He swore colourfully, using one or two of Owen's favourite phrases.

“Ianto.” Monroe's teeth were set, and she looked set to throttle an explanation out of him.

He strode back towards her and pushed the device into her hands. “It's not the god damn bomb,” he said, and stormed back to the vans, trying to ignore the thick churning sensation in his stomach which was one part nausea and three parts utter terror.

**

“If it's not the bomb,” General Carver demanded, upon their return to the UNIT base, “Then what the hell is it?”

Neither Ianto nor Monroe had taken the time to change out of their black assault gear, and so they both stood in the command centre like tiny black beetles amongst a sea of olive green. Ianto fought the urge to unconscious mimic Monroe's parade-rest stance as she stood, jaw clenched, in the aftermath of giving her report on the failed assault.

“It's a repeater,” Ianto said, and at Carver's look, waved a hand apologetically, “Sorry, a bit of Torchwood slang, in a way. It's an autonomous wide-band dispersal auto-repeating beacon. It puts out false energy trails, which is handy if you're trying to throw someone off the scent of something you'd rather they didn't know about.”

“Someone was putting out false energy readings to mask the true origin point of the detonation,” Carver said, his face moving from tight to indescribably weary as he realised exactly what this discovery implied. “So, we've no idea where to look for the actual bomb.”

“No, sir,” Monroe said.

“We have no way of knowing if the bomb even puts out energy of the sort the beacon was giving

off,” Ianto said, carefully, “It's possible the device was put there just to keep us occupied while Bartram sets up the bomb in privacy.”

“Assuming it really is Bartram and that's just not another colossal fuck-up,” Carver said.

Ianto shifted uncomfortably. Carver didn't sound angry. He sounded defeated. From Carver's next words, it wasn't hard to understand why.

“The scientists have been crunching numbers,” he said, “Based on the quantum wave readings they've been picking up here and there, when the systems deign to work. They say things are approaching 'coherence' whatever that means.”

“The decision point,” Ianto murmured, “The moment where the bomb goes off, or doesn't, as the case may be.”

Carver shook his head. “Things have been getting worse. I don't know about you guys, but folks here have been claiming to see the world as it's destroyed more and more. Twelve more people have vanished without a trace.”

Monroe was pale. “Then right now, it's more probable it will go off than not?”

Carver spread his hands helplessly. It was an elegant gesture, if not a particularly reassuring one.

Ianto felt the weight of his mobile in his pocket, pulled it out and held it up. “General, I'd like to try to get in contact with Cardiff again.”

Carver waved a hand. “Go,” he ordered, brusquely. *For all the good it'll do us*, went unspoken, but heard by all.

Ianto inclined his head and, clutching the phone tightly in his hand, he left the room, nodding tightly to the UNIT guards who opened the door as he passed through before going back to ignoring him. Evidently they had bigger things to worry about than if he had an escort with him any more. That, or, given the outfit, they'd mistaken Ianto for one of them.

He went searching down the corridor for somewhere with a bit of privacy, and eventually found it in a room labelled 'First Aid' which actually turned out to be the stationary cupboard. There was a first aid kit secured to the wall inside the door, so maybe it was technically accurate. There was only one bare tungsten bulb to light the room, and it threw stark shadows across the room as Ianto leaned against a shelf full of printer paper, and dialled the Hub's number from memory.

After a tense moment, where Ianto was convinced he would chew through his lip before anything happened, and then he heard the line ringing, which was a vast improvement on anything before. He refused to allow himself to hope, and was waiting for the line to go dead when the ringing stopped. He almost hung up, but then he heard one of the most beautiful sounds he could have wished for.

“Ianto?”

“Gwen?!” Ianto knew at that moment that he would never say a single thing bad about Gwen,

dubious taste in sexual partners notwithstanding. Her voice was like the clarion call of angels, and sweeter than a bell.

"Ianto, th.....od!"

Ianto winced. There was no crackle of static, but Gwen's words were distorting, like a signal dropping out. There were brief pops of silence in her sentences, and he felt like nothing more than a delicately fine thread connected them.

"Gwen, what's going on there?"

"W.....ing o... Something's wrong.....ack."

Ianto clutched the phone tighter in his hand, and thought he heard the casing creak. "What was that? Jack?"

"Infirm...Jack.....fi.....Owe....at's causing it."

"Gwen?" The dropped out was becoming more frequent. "Gwen, what's wrong with Jack?"

There was no answer. The line had died completely, and the phone had decided to shut down for good measure as well. Frustration bubbled over and he found himself pitching the phone across the room. It clattered against the wall and the casing finally conceded defeat. It broke apart, sending the battery in one direction, and the phone in another.

It hadn't helped, and he'd probably just destroyed his phone.

There was a clicking sound, and he turned to see that Louise Monroe had entered the stationary cupboard and shut the door behind her. She was leaning back against the door and staring at him, wide-eyed. He abruptly realised that her witnessing his aggressive solution to a bad connection may not have impressed her.

"Sorry," he said, forcing himself to breathe out against the tension in his shoulders. "I... I just can't get through to the Hub. I'm just frustrated is all. And no, it didn't help. I know it's a terrible thing to say, given all UNIT's trying to do, but I can't help but really want to be back in the Hub with the others."

He sighed, and passed a hand over his face. "Stupid I know. Especially when you think that their opinion of me is generally lower than the opinion most of you guys have. The Sergeant calls me a librarian, but I barely rate 'pond scum' there some days. Well, occasionally I rate 'threat to the security of the world', but I promise, that was a one time thing." He halted himself, realising that it was probably a bad idea to continue down that route. "Forget I said that. It's probably a bad idea for me to say such things in front of a UNIT officer. You might just throw me in prison or something. If there's still a prison left after the really big and nasty bomb that we can't find goes off, which, incidentally, I can't help but feel completely responsible for through association even though that's an unreasonable thing to think and totally illogical."

Monroe was still staring at him. He realised he hadn't babbled this much since his first blind date

with Lisa, when she had smiled and laughed as he found himself absolutely tongue tied by her charm and beauty. He'd always been relieved that she was willing to ever speak to him again, having apparently not immediately written him off as a bumbling idiot from the Valleys.

“Sorry,” he said, rubbing his hand over his eyes. He wasn't tired. He hadn't been for days in this strange half-existence they were all living in, but his thoughts were sluggish, like he needed to sleep. “Sorry, were you after something?”

Monroe blinked at him, and pushed away from the door. She covered the ground between them in three quick strides, grabbed the front of his jacket and, dragging him down to her level, pressed her lips against his in a bruising kiss that left him stunned and unable to move for half a second, before his arms came up around her, a hand at her back pulling her closer, the fingers of the other tangling in her hair. It was intense, and dizzying, and they had to break apart after a moment to breathe.

“Captain, I-”

Ianto licked his lips, still feeling the phantom sensation of her mouth against his. This was all shades of wrong, wrong, *wrong*. He was a visitor, a guest, and he had no idea what Jack would say if he managed to get himself in trouble by having sex with a member of UNIT in a stationary cupboard. Actually that was a lie; he knew exactly what Jack would say. Jack would congratulate him, and then make a comment about being so proud, and Ianto fiercely put any thought of Jack Harkness out of his brain.

Because, really, it had been a very long time since he'd had any sort of companionship that wasn't Jack, and those incidents hadn't exactly been among the prouder moments of Ianto's life. It had been a means to an end, and what had made it worse was that there was a little part of Ianto that wanted to believe the lie, that it was something other than meaningless physical contact. But if he'd ever wanted a confirmation of exactly where Ianto stood, it had been demonstrated in Jack's open affection towards Gwen, and his utter willingness to shoot Ianto not long after Ianto revealed the depth of his betrayal.

Monroe was leaning back, staring at him, her eyes wide and shining. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were darkened and wet, she licked her lips as if reading his mind, drawing his eye. She was warm, soft, pressed against him and without a trace of metal or scars that had haunted his dreams whenever he had tried to think of Lisa, whenever he'd tried to fantasise on his own. A trace of floral perfume still lingered about her, but after so many hours, it was undercut by a more earthy feminine scent, and Ianto found some critical part of his reasoning centres short-circuiting.

She was here, she was willing, she was *Human* and genuinely seemed to want him, his attentions, and Ianto, for the first time in a long while, had no ulterior motive with someone other than ‘this would be quite nice’.

“What?” she prompted.

“Nothing,” he said, “Absolutely nothing, ignore me.” He wrapped his arm around her back tighter and pulled her towards him.

She made a pleased sound, muffled by an abrupt kiss, and pressed them both backwards until they

came up against the heavily laden metal shelves that dug into his back and rocked with their combined weight but, fortunately, didn't collapse. That would have been embarrassing and hard to explain. The world narrowed down to touch, to taste, fingers fumbling aside clothing and Ianto could feel the blood pounding in his ears.

That didn't, however, prevent him from hearing the very startled sounding yelp as the door opened and someone walked in.

Monroe stiffened, her back to the door. They had been rather intent on kissing when the door had opened, and she had pulled away barely a centimetre. Ianto looked up. A UNIT Private that he'd seen in the Command Centre was standing there, frames by the doorway, unmoving in shock.

Ianto briefly considered the situation. He was in a badly lit stationary cupboard with a UNIT Captain, not so much as a hair's breadth between their bodies. They'd been engaged in a rather messy kiss when they'd frozen, and while she had pulled up his t-shirt with one hand, and was fondling his groin with the other, he'd managed to get the top button of her trousers undone, and his hand disappeared inside the waistband.

In short, there was very little chance of explaining it to be anything other than it looked like.

The Private, whose surname was 'BROOKS' according to her uniform, abruptly went three shades pale and lost the power of speech. "I... I..." She desperately tore her eyes away from the tableau before her. "*Paperclips!*" she said, too loudly, to explain her presence. She grabbed the first box that came to hand, and Ianto decided it would be a bad idea to mention that it was a box of thumb tacks.

"I'll just..." Brooks waved vaguely to the corridor behind her and started to back out. She half turned away, then winced and said, very quickly, "Er. Captain? The... er... General's looking for you. I can tell him you'll be fifteen minutes."

She glanced at Ianto. "Maybe twenty?"

Unseen by Brooks, Monroe closed her eyes, looking like she was praying for deliverance, and licked her lips. She eased her hands out of Ianto's clothing and turned her head, offering a vague smile. "I'll be right there," she said.

Brooks nodded hurriedly and made a rapid retreat, thumb tacks still in hand.

The door thudded closed, and Monroe looked a little guilty at Ianto and tilted her head towards the door. "I should just-"

"Yeah," Ianto said, quickly, then realised where his hands still were. He awkwardly managed to extricate himself, and they quickly tried to restore some sense of order to their appearances.

Monroe had turned an interesting shade of red. She ran a hand through her hair, getting it into some sort of state of general presentability and cleared her throat, eyes downcast and unable to meet his.

"I'll just-" He gestured vaguely to the room.

“Yeah,” Monroe said, and spun on her heel and walked out, hurriedly zipping up her jacket and tucking in her t-shirt as she went.

Left on his own in the suddenly entirely too warm cupboard, Ianto was still breathing hard, and let his head fall back to thud against the shelf behind him. The impact finally unbalanced the whole stack of shelves, rocking them and knocking over a packet of biros somewhere above him, which cascaded down onto his face in a shower of blue plastic.

No way he was going back into the Command Centre just yet. Private Brooks had no doubt spread the news over half the base. Ianto wasn't above admitting the necessity for a tactical withdrawal. And if anyone called it fleeing, he wouldn't have denied it.

**

Jaq Tumengung was sitting in his office in the training facilities, feet up on his desk when Ianto arrived. He took one look at Ianto and fished a cheap plastic cup, with what looked to be a child's cartoon character decorating the side, out of his drawer and set it next to the one already in front on him. It lined up neatly with the bottle of something that looked to be brown and seriously alcoholic.

“You look like you could use this as much as me, for all the good it'll do,” he said, taking in Ianto's ruffled state with a quick glance and gesturing that he should take the seat on the other side of the desk.

“Bit early isn't it?” Ianto said as he dropped heavily into the other chair, but he didn't complain as Tumengung poured a healthy measure out and handed it over.

“Put it this way,” the Sergeant said dryly, refilling his own cup, adorned with a representation of what looked to be a Disney character. “That bottle was full this morning and I feel pretty bloody clear-headed.”

“You won't feel like that if we survive,” Ianto said. He toyed with his cup, rolling it between his hands.

“So it's true?” Tumengung narrowed his eyes at Ianto. “The rumours about probability and being half dead-half alive all that crap?”

Ianto frowned, realising that, as far as UNIT was concerned, the Sergeant probably didn't have enough rank to be told such things. Then he realised that he wasn't a member of UNIT and he had no reason to keep to such silly regulations. “Yep,” he said, “All true. Big bomb. Might explode, might not. Given our current state of not having a clue what's going on, I'm leaning towards the idea that it probably *will* explode and kill us all in a quite horrible fashion.”

“Well, in that case, I'll definitely not have to worry about a hangover,” Tumengung said. “I never needed to think about bombs that needed a degree in mathematics to turn them on in the regular army.”

“What, you don't think you'd be bored in the regular army?” Ianto asked, a small smile flitting

across his lips.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never thought about quitting and becoming a dog groomer, or something,” Tumenggung said, with a grin.

Ianto shrugged, “Hardly. Torchwood’s my life. Has been for years and probably will be till I die. Fortunately, that day may only be... well... hours away.” He felt the sting of something in his eyes, and took a sip of his drink to cover it. He felt his eyebrows involuntarily twitch in surprise. It was good quality whiskey, not cheap dreck that could be found on the shelves of your average value supermarket.

Like so much else in life, he had Jack to blame for this knowledge, though it was mostly earned from knowing that Jack kept strong alcohol around without caring whether it was any good. Ianto, when he figured out why Jack kept alcohol around when he didn’t drink it, was vaguely surprised that Jack didn’t just keep rubbing alcohol in his desk and have done with it.

“From that expression,” Tumenggung said, “You look to be a man who knows his drinks. You surprise me, my librarian friend.”

“Full of surprises, that’s me,” Ianto said, and surprised himself with how bitter he sounded. He took a larger swallow of the whiskey, felt it burn its way down his throat and warn his stomach, but he didn’t feel any other sign that he’d just taken a hefty drink that, by rights, should have gone straight to his head. He didn’t feel any warmer, or looser, though, or even a little light-headed.

Now, he mused, where was the fun in that? His muscles remained stubbornly knotted, as they had been since their disastrous raid on the warehouse, and he rubbed his neck, hoping that would help.

“And where might you have learnt such an appreciation for my fine hair of the dog, hmm?” Tumenggung asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“My boss,” Ianto said, after a moment.

“He’s a connoisseur?”

Ianto snorted. “Only in the loosest terms. He’s an alcoholic.”

That seemed to take Sergeant Tumenggung aback. Ianto dimly realised that it probably wasn’t the best idea to go telling UNIT officers gossip, not if Torchwood ever wanted to be respected. Maybe the drink was having a more subtle effect on him than he realised.

“I suppose the more accurate statement would be that he used to be,” Ianto elaborated, and held out his cup for a top up. Tumenggung obliged silently. “Or that’s the impression I get. He stopped drinking a long time before I met him. When he does drink, he never tastes it, just drinks to forget. And then remembers why he stopped drinking in the first place.”

Tumenggung looked at him thoughtfully. “You sound like you’ve had to scrape him up.”

“Once or twice,” Ianto allowed, sipping the drink contemplatively. “Oddly enough, it was one of

the things that convinced him to trust me when I first started working with him. I came from a different branch. We had a different way of doing things, a different outlook on the world. So, I think he was... grateful... that I helped and said nothing.”

The best phrase to describe that encounter, so early on in Ianto’s tenure at Cardiff, where he found Jack slumped on the Hub’s sofa late at night, glass in hand and an empty bottle on the table, mere moments before he’d staggered to his feet and stumbled down into Owen’s autopsy bay, voiding his stomach into a convenient metal pan, would be “slippery slope”.

Ianto had simply retrieved a glass of water and soaked some paper towels, by the time he’d retrieved the items Jack was back sitting on the sofa, looking miserable, head in his hands. Ianto had had no idea, at the time, what had caused his bout of drinking (although he’d later found out that Jack had been forced into making a decision that had resulted in the loss of three innocent lives, lives that, as it turned out, hadn’t need to be sacrificed – Tosh, Owen and Suzie had blamed Jack, and it was clear that Jack blamed himself too), but he only asked, as he gently tugged Jack’s hands away from his face and pushed the glass into them,

“Did that help?”

Jack had made a harsh sound, almost laughter, if laughter was spurred on only by self-loathing, and abruptly sat back, staring at the ceiling. “God, no. I keep hoping it does, but it never helps. It causes nothing but trouble. One of these days, that knowledge is going to stick.”

Ianto had folded the wet paper towels into a long rectangle, and draped on Jack’s forehead, holding it there gently, a hand laid over the top. He knew he should have been taking advantage of Jack’s incapacity to go check on Lisa, should encourage it, perhaps, if it meant that it was easier to sneak around behind his back, but something in his chest gave a funny little twist at the sight of Jack so despondent.

“Do me a favour,” he’d told him then, “If you’re going to try to kill yourself with alcohol poisoning, don’t do it on your own so I can’t call an ambulance. I’d rather not be dealing with Suzie in charge just yet. She doesn’t even like coffee.”

Jack had started laughing like it was the best joke he’d ever heard, and Ianto had the feeling he wasn’t laughing at the weak joke about Suzie’s beverage preferences. He had his suspicions but they were far from explaining anything.

He’d not mentioned it to any of the others, nor brought it up to Jack. He’d noticed a tension in Jack’s attitude for the next few days, as if he was wondering what Ianto was saying about him, perhaps still expecting that Ianto would suddenly develop what he called the ‘typical London attitude’, but when it became clear that he had kept his silence, his attitude towards Ianto had started to change...

Ianto shook his head, dispelling the memories. Tumenggung was looking thoughtful and hadn’t remarked on his silence.

“My brother,” he said, then hesitated, drew a deep breath and took a drink of whiskey and then continued, “My brother has something of an addictive personality. When he was younger it was

drugs – so called ‘soft drugs’, mind, as if that’s supposed to make it better – and when he was done with that, he moved to alcohol. Now he has diabetes. Broke our sister’s heart, but we eventually had to just wash our hands of him. He didn’t want to give it up, didn’t want to listen to us, and eventually we decided that he was a grown man, and it wasn’t our responsibility to live his life for him.”

Ianto sighed, and shook his head. “I don’t think Jack’s addicted. But I think it’s far too easy for him to slip into the habit of drinking to try and forget. But it never works. He gets drunk, but the alcohol doesn’t... affect him.” He thoughtfully tapped the side of the cut, looking at the wall over Tumenggung’s shoulder with a frown. “Never does. Things like that don’t.”

Sergeant Tumenggung frowned and made a show of thoughtfully stroking his chin. “Jack, eh? Quite fond of him, are you, to be making excuses for him and such?”

Ianto straightened in his chair, and scowled over the table. “Less of that, please, I’ll have you know he once tried to shoot me.” Apart from the personal reasons, Ianto mused, Jack probably would have had a certain amount of legal backing. Betrayal of Torchwood was still counted as High Treason against the Crown, and though the offence was no longer officially subject to the death penalty, Torchwood always seemed to manage to be an exception to the rules.

“Must be love,” Tumenggung said, sounding amused.

Ianto’s mouth went dry, but before he could open his mouth and issue a croaky denial, he realised that Tumenggung hadn’t meant anything by the off-hand remark, and was more concerned with draining and refilling his cup. He forced himself to relax, and inject a sarcastic quality into his own voice. “Right,” he said, trying to ignore the sudden palpitations of anxiety he could feel, “That must be it.”

Jaq Tumenggung knew nothing, he told himself. He had no reason to be worried.

“It wouldn’t be great if UNIT Command found out about the Captain’s fondness...” Ianto raised the cup pointedly.

Tumenggung snorted. “I’m very probably going to be dead shortly. Who’s going to know anything?” But the serious, quick glance he shot Ianto told him everything. UNIT wouldn’t hear anything from him. Ianto felt a knot of tension leave his stomach.

“Just one more of Torchwood’s dirty little secrets,” Ianto mused, leaning back in his chair and staring at the ceiling. “Staff on the verge of cracking up completely, bombs capable of destroying reality, Cybermen in the stationary cupboard...” Something started to niggle at the back of his brain, and he frowned at a small crack in the ceiling tiles.

“Sounds like fun, my friend,” Tumenggung said, “Sure you won’t reconsider that dog grooming position?”

Ianto smiled faintly. “Something to think about. Some days I think the world would be better off if Torchwood didn’t-”

He brought his head up, realisation striking him suddenly, abruptly, and he realised exactly what that niggling thought had been. Distracted, he dropped the plastic cup, still half-full, on Tumenggung's desk.

"Thanks for the drink, Sergeant," he said, getting to his feet and hurrying out the door.

"Sure, no problem," Jaq Tumenggung said, bemused, and finished Ianto's drink off as well as his own.

**

"Canary Wharf," General Carver repeated, turning in his desk chair to look at Ianto. He had gained a look of irritation when Ianto had burst in unannounced, had been deep in conversation with Monroe, who suddenly had trouble looking in Ianto's direction. "How can you be sure he'll be there?"

Ianto ignored her discomfort. Saving the world was a little more important at that moment. "It makes sense."

"Care to share your reasoning?" Monroe asked, glancing vaguely in his direction.

"It's Torchwood," Ianto said. "Bartram isn't just perpetrating a random act of violence for the sake of doing so. This is very personal. He's gone to the effort of building, and *probably* activating, a bomb which Torchwood designed, knowing exactly what it would do. It's an expensive, and dangerous job, some of the materials would have to be alien, and some of them are almost certainly lethally radioactive in their raw form. He doesn't expect to just set it off and run. He's going to blow himself up in the process. He doesn't think anything to do with Torchwood deserves to survive."

"You're a telepath now?" Monroe's expression was professional, sharp, and scrutinised him with an unnerving level of regard.

Ianto stuck his hands in his pockets. "I know it, because it's exactly what I'd do."

Carver and Monroe exchanged glances. "Mind if you elaborate?" Carver said, turning narrowed eyes on Ianto.

"There were less than thirty survivors of the Battle of Canary Wharf," Ianto said, brushing aside the memories that phrase brought up with the ease of long practice, "And after we'd fought and watched our friends die for our country, we were abandoned. There was no help, no kind words, not even a paramedic unit to help tend to our injuries. We were left to die. We weren't responsible for the decisions of our superiors, but in the eyes of the government, the military, UNIT and the other Torchwood branches, it was like we'd brought it on ourselves."

"But..." Monroe seemed confused, "You work at Torchwood Cardiff..."

Ianto smiled thinly. "Cardiff isn't London, and I have my reasons why I moved to Wales-ward," he said, and took a deep breath. "Frankly, General, we don't exactly have any other leads. I'm pretty

certain we'll find him there, and if we don't, it really won't matter in a few hours.”

Carver didn't look happy, but gave them the go-ahead anyway.

**

Part Six

Military troop transports had virtually no concession towards comfort, or working suspension, apparently. Ianto was packed into the back of a UNIT transport with nine soldiers, who were all grim-faced and silent. Ianto was starting to get to recognise the look of people fiercely fighting back nausea and the weird double-vision of reality. There were three other vehicles in their little convoy, but Ianto couldn't hear their engines over the rush of air from the open rear of the truck.

It was, he dimly thought, not how he'd expected to return to London. In fact he would have been quite happy if he'd never had to go to the city again. He remembered going there for the first time, and then the satisfaction of getting a job in Torchwood and not only being at what felt like the centre of the Universe, but being able to see all the things and people that worked behind the scenes. It was like being privy to all the greatest and naughtiest secrets. It had been a world away from home, and that was exactly what he'd wanted, at the time.

And then *that day* happened, and Ianto had never planned to return. Torchwood should have taught him, by now, that it was unwise to assume anything about the future.

The truck suddenly slammed its brakes on, throwing everyone inside forwards, and Ianto had the unpleasant experience of being nearly crushed between two very heavy-set soldiers. There was more than a few highly creative curses being flung around as everyone righted themselves, and Ianto awkwardly pulled himself free, moving past the soldiers to get off the back of the truck and come around to the driver's side doorway.

"What's going on?" he asked.

The driver was gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were turning white. There was the squeal of brakes as the other vehicles came to a more sedate halt.

"Don't you see it?" he asked, sounding panicked. "The road's gone..."

Ianto turned to look down the motorway ahead of them. There was no other cars on the road. A few looked to have been abandoned, and the convoy had been weaving their way in and out of the empty cars for several miles now. No one, it seemed, was willing to brave the nightmare of the outdoors. Ahead of them was a bridge, that spanned over a river, a wide six-lane affair.

Ianto looked hard and could see a bridge, perfectly intact, lit by the dim sodium lighting of the lamps that rendered the scene visible in the dark of the night, or, rather, the extremely early morning. But, if he let his mind drift, he could see a bridge with its supports destroyed, which dropped away into nothing after a few meters, with crumbling masonry and broken tarmac littering the road. He shuddered, and tried to focus his brain on the 'safe' version of reality.

"Why don't you let me drive?" he suggested, opening the door.

The driver looked grateful, prising his hands off the steering wheel, and making his way down.

Ianto moved out of his way, taking his eyes off the man for just a second, and when he turned around to suggest that the man go take his seat in the back of the vehicle, the road was empty. He looked up and down the road, seeing no one, and unable to hear any footsteps that might have indicated he had moved out of sight.

He swore, and climbed up into the driver's seat.

Louise Monroe was sitting in the passenger seat, a PDA clutched in her hands. "What happened to the driver?" she asked, as he settled himself and put the truck into gear.

"Gone," he said, brusquely, moving off and watching the other vehicles doing the same in his mirrors.

"Fuck," Monroe swore, looking out of the passenger window. "That's the third one."

"I know," he said, tightly, and focused on the bridge.

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the rumbling of the engine, and the sounds of wind rushing past the windows. Finally, Louise spoke up, and even though he didn't take his eyes off the road to look at her, he could feel the weight of her regard. He was glad he had an excuse not to look.

"About... what happened..." Monroe started, awkwardly.

He took a deep breath. "Captain Monroe..."

"Oh god," she said, "You had your hand down my knickers. You can call me Louise."

He broke off his intense study of the road to look at her, startled, and seeing that she was probably as surprised as him at having said it, started laughing. After a moment, she joined in.

After a moment, though, her laughter faded. "I'm sorry for jumping you like that," she said, and gave an embarrassed cough. "You must think I'm a complete slut."

"I don't know," Ianto commented, "You work with Jack Harkness for long enough and your idea of what constitutes 'inappropriate behaviour' shifts dramatically."

"I just mean," she pressed, "It was an adrenaline thing. A 'shit, we're all going to die and I haven't been laid in the better part of a year."

"A year?" Ianto exclaimed in surprise.

Monroe didn't seem to have heard him. "I don't even know if you've got a girlfriend or anything."

"No," Ianto said. "She died."

Monroe swore, and put her head in her hands. "Now I just feel like an insensitive bitch. I'm sorry."

Ianto shrugged slightly. "Not your fault," he said.

Monroe was silent for a while. "How did she...?"

Ianto shifted uncomfortably in the driver's seat. "Murdered," he said, shortly, "She lingered, kind of painfully, for a while."

He felt the warm weight of Monroe's hand on his arm. He flashed her a strained smile.

"It was Canary Wharf, wasn't it?" she asked.

Ianto tensed, and Monroe withdrew her hand.

"I ask," she said, "because you clearly counted yourself amongst the survivors of the battle, even though you were quite happy to let me think otherwise."

"It's not exactly a happy recollection."

"You said you were all abandoned by Torchwood. How'd you wind up at Cardiff?"

He shot her a look out of the corner of his eyes. She had her arms forded and was watching him with an unnerving regard.

"You're not Admin," he told her.

She frowned, then slowly shook her head. "No."

"If I were to hazard a guess: you're Intelligence?"

"Have you been reading my file?" she asked, with forced joculariry.

In point of fact, he had, but he'd already worked out her role without needing to resort to abusing his back-door access to the network. Admin staff didn't have closed-door meetings with Generals or lead assault teams.

"My point," he said, "Was that you represented yourself one way to me because it suited your purpose. I did the same to Captain Harkness, because I needed Torchwood's resources. I didn't care if I destroyed it, because I honestly thought everything to do with Torchwood deserved to die." He stared contemplatively in to the black, unreal night, lit either by fires or street lamps. "It's why I can see where Bertram's coming from."

"But you don't still think that."

"No."

"So what changed your mind?"

"I..." His thoughts seized up, unwilling to admit to anything, even to a stranger when they might

both die soon. "It's complicated."

"Something?" Monroe tilted her head. "Ah. Someone?"

Ianto wasn't entirely sure how to answer. "Not quite," he said, in a very small voice, "But for some reason, and I don't quite know how it happened, but Torchwood's more important to me than it ever was."

"Sure, sure," Monroe said, wriggling deeper into the uncomfortable military transport seat. "I'm just saying: office romances always end in tears. Try not to get your heart broken, sweetheart. I'm actually starting to like you."

Ianto tried to ignore the ominous ring of her words and focused on the road.

**

It was harder to navigate around cars abandoned in the narrow London streets, but Ianto managed to impress himself by remembering a few alternate routes to the Docklands. They were well within sight of what had formerly been known as Torchwood Tower, looking for somewhere convenient and out of sight to park and unload the trucks when they hit the barrier.

It felt like struggling to move through clingfilm stretched taut. It left Ianto feeling breathless, but when he looked around, the world seemed blessedly normal, with none of the underlay of devastation he'd grown accustomed to.

Beside him, Monroe was clenching her fists and her eyes were wide. "I'm hungry," she said, "Why am I hungry?"

Ianto turned the truck's engine off and put on the handbrake. "The bomb generates a pocket of normal space in its immediate vicinity. Protects it from being damaged by its own explosion." He squinted through the windscreen at the dark outline of the Tower. "I'm surprised it's got such a wide radius, though."

"You know a lot," Monroe said, breathlessly, pulling a handheld scanner out of her pocket and turning it on. It had no difficulty staying on, unlike the way it had been flickering the whole way to London.

"Not everything," Ianto returned, "Do we have anything to eat?"

They did: tasteless but nutritious ration bars that were stowed under the benches in the trucks. Everyone grabbed one, and they tucked in as Monroe went over the plan of attack.

"According to our liaison," she said, talking around a mouthful of food and glancing at Ianto, "The building won't have any CCTV or internal tracking and intrusion detection systems, though door locks will still be active."

"Security was an independent system," Ianto supplied, "Anything controlled by the computer died when the Daleks and Cybermen shot up the nodes, but the guard-systems were earth-built and

electronic.”

“Like last time,” Monroe said, “We've no idea of force capabilities or numbers, so we'll play this safe. Clear it – quietly – one floor at a time.”

“If we find the bomb and those responsible?” a soldier asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Give them a chance to surrender,” Monroe said, “But don't give them a chance to set off the bomb. You're authorised to use lethal force if necessary.”

“So how do we get inside?” one of the other soldiers asked.

Monroe held out her datapad. It displayed a schematic of the Tower. “The least visible entrance is through an underground accessway.” She tapped a portion of the screen and it highlighted in blue.

Ianto folded his arms. “The only problem is that the doors have a Deadlock Seal fixed on them.”

Monroe frowned. “There was no Deadlock Seal in place when UNIT cleared this place.”

“No,” Ianto agreed, “Torchwood 3 put it in place after they'd finished clearing out the secure archives.”

The frown deepened into a scowl. “What secure archives? We found no such thing.”

“Which is why they're called 'secure'. What you need to get through the door is a ranked Torchwood access key.” Ianto held up his hand, displaying the black swipe card held in his fingers. There was the Torchwood logo printed on it in red, but it was otherwise unadorned. “Now, aren't you glad you brought me along?”

**

Ianto's memories of Torchwood Tower, apart, obviously, from its last day, were that it had always been busy. Even on the sub levels, there was the constant moving of researchers and staff as they moved around, discussing latest finds or theories. There was always a low level hum of conversation and the sound of footsteps. That was what stood out the most to Ianto as he unsealed the underground access doors and followed behind Monroe and the UNIT soldiers: the silence.

That, and the bloodied bootprints that had dried to brown smudges on the floor.

He didn't even realise he was staring at them until Monroe none-too-subtly elbowed him and held up her datapad-cum-scanner. “No jamming,” she said, “But I'm not picking up any heat signatures on this level. We'll sweep on the off-chance though.”

Grateful for the distraction, he drew his own sidearm and followed along behind the team as they moved with a slick efficiency and stealth that Ianto could only ever dream of mimicking. The sub-ground levels were clear, mostly empty security offices. As they progressed upwards they passed the hangar levels, then the standard offices that were the ground-level corporate front, then started to progress upwards, reaching the laboratory levels, the bright clinical white that the walls had been

dulled from time and a lack of upkeep, and periodically decorated with scorch marks.

When they reached level nine, Ianto hesitated at the threshold of the door off the emergency stairway. The team had been using the wide evacuation stairs to ascend, knowing that the lifts didn't work and even if they did, they left the team too vulnerable.

Monroe was already through the door when she realised he wasn't following, and she hung back, frowning. "Ianto?"

Ianto didn't gesture towards the door with his drawn weapon, Tumenggung had trained him too well for that, so he just jerked his head in the direction of the door. "I... ah... don't think I can... um..."

Monroe's face cleared with understanding. "Wait here," she said, and stabbed a finger in the direction of one of the soldiers. "You, wait with him." And then she disappeared out of sight.

Ianto was grateful that she hadn't said anything, and grateful that she'd been here before and knew exactly what this level was. Intellectually he knew that there was nothing left of the conversion machines that had filled this level from wall to wall, not even a stray scrap of wire left behind, but he didn't think his ability to shove memories to the back of his mind would hold out if he was forced to go inside. He found himself praying to a God that he didn't believe in that Bartram hadn't chosen this level to hide in.

After several minutes, Monroe emerged with the team, and shook her head. Ianto made his sigh of relief as unobtrusive as possible.

They continued upwards, past several more levels of labs ("How many labs does a place need?" he heard one disgruntled soldier mutter), until finally they reached one level where they discovered on trying to open the emergency door that it was locked. None of the other doors had been locked.

Monroe made a silencing gesture at the team. "There's a heat signature on this floor," she said, looking at her scanner.

Ianto looked at the label next to the door. "I was afraid of that." He pointed to the number '14' depicted in hexagons. "He picked the best place in the building to hide."

At her questioning look, he elaborated. "Space doesn't seem to work... quite right in there. You can get turned around really easily. Even if you've got the place memorised, walls seem to be where you don't expect them. It was weird, because if you compared the layout at any time to the building plans they'd always match up..."

Monroe stared at him. "I'm starting to think you Torchwood people are just goddamn insane," she said.

He smiled brightly at her. "Now you're getting it." He looked at the door. "There were rumours about an experiment going wrong, or the building's designers having gone temporarily insane and deciding to construct a whole floor around non-Euclidean geometry. I think the Accounting Department was based on this floor for a while."

“Maybe I was being generous with insane,” Monroe muttered, and gestured to the panel next to the door. “Can you open it?”

“One way to find out.”

It was a nondescript panel at shoulder height, and when Ianto pressed a hand to it, it lit up a sickly green and hummed. When he took his hand away, there was an after-image of his palm print on the panel, and, after a second, the words ‘authorisation granted’ flashed up, and the lock clicked open.

Monroe peered through the door, down the hallway that was as unlit as all the others they’d passed through, and as normal looking. “Doesn’t look like it’s breaking the laws of physics,” she said.

“Looks are deceiving,” Ianto said.

Monroe frowned, and with several short words and gestures, the assault team silently crept through the doorway, and started to move through the hallways.

There was as much damage to the walls here as anywhere in the building, with chunks taken out of the plastering, and insulation hanging down from holes in the ceiling. But it only extended to the first few hallways they passed through. After that, the damage stopped, as if the invading aliens had only gone so far into the rooms before they’d turned around and gone back. Apparently the weird geometry had been too much for them. Offices and labs were overturned from the scramble to try to escape the building, but they weren’t shot up.

Apparently the geometry was getting to be a bit much for more Human invaders too. Monroe abruptly stopped and looked around her, then back at her datapad.

“We’ve been walking in a straight line,” she said, her voice a hissed whisper, “How the hell did we manage to walk in a circle?”

Her face was illuminated blue by the datapad, and she turned ghostly pale in the torchlight that Ianto shone on her as he turned to look at her. “Try not to think about it,” he said, turning back around and walking a little way down the corridor, shining his torch into offices. The scanner readings said they weren’t yet on top of the heat signature, but they needed to be cautious.

Monroe turned to the rest of the team. “Everyone stick together, we can’t afford anyone to get lost.” She turned, “That means you too, Ianto.”

There was no response. She shone her torch into the dark, but it didn’t show any sign of her wayward liaison. She didn’t shout, or raise her voice, wary of being overheard. She started to reach up and tap her earpiece, but stopped, partway there, recalling her own instructions with regards to radio silence before they’d entered the building. She dropped her hand and grimaced.

“Shit,” she said.

“Do we go look for him, sir?” she was asked.

She thought about it a moment. “No. Our priority is to stop the bomb. That’s what we have to do. Let’s go.”

**

Ianto Jones was quite certain there hadn’t been a wall behind him a moment earlier, nevertheless, however much he ran his hands over the surface, searching for some hidden mechanism or catch, it was clearly just a wall.

He sighed, and turned his torch into the corridor that stretched away from him.

“Right,” he said, “Dark mysterious hallway of doom it is then.”

**

Part Seven

In Torchwood London's heyday, the fourteenth floor was something of a rite of passage. It was the done thing for new members of a department to get sent up there on some meaningless errand, while their much more knowledgeable colleagues took bets on how long it would take them to get back. When they inevitably returned (except for that one girl from Ianto's department who had gotten so dreadfully lost they'd had to track her subcutaneous implant to find her), cross and thoroughly confused, the department would generally take the incensed newbie out for drinks to mollify them.

The lesson was well-learnt, however. Never assume anything is what it seems, even if it just looks like a corridor.

Ever since the place had been built, different methods of marking the halls had been attempted, none of which managed to make navigating any easier. Eventually, you started to get a 'feel' for where things were. You had to trust your instincts, and so, given that was all Ianto had to rely upon, he fixed his goal in his mind, looked into the dark black depths of the hallway, and set out, striking out in what seemed to be as good a direction as any.

In the end, it was the noises that gave it away. The humming was audible first, a low frequency vibration that made his joints ache and set his teeth on edge. As he followed that humming sound, he could hear the clattering of metal, like someone picking up something and putting it down again, the sounds of wires being cut, and then, just underneath that, a soft and irregular beeping.

He turned a corner and could see where it was coming from. Light was spilling into the hallway around the next corner, standing out sharply in the complete dark. Ianto clicked off his torch and stuck it into a convenient pocket and slowly, silently, removed his weapon from its holster and eased off the safety.

He turned the corner, and saw the doorway from which the light spilled, and heard the low muttering. One voice, male, talking to himself, but too softly to be clearly audible. Ianto crept forward, slowly, praying for nothing to creak or catch and make his presence known, and ever so carefully peeked around the door frame.

There was definitely only one man inside. He was kneeling in the middle of what had been a large open-plan office, with the tables and chairs shoved to the sides to clear a rough space in the middle. It was a mess, with papers and folders and bits of equipment lying around, and there was even a potted plant in the corner that had long since died through neglect. It was an exterior room, windows decorating one side of the room, unusual in a building this size, through which could be seen the hazy dual-reality of the outside world.

Fluorescent lights on stands had been set up in the roughly circular clearing in the centre of the room, throwing harsh white light around in an indiscriminate fashion. It cast long eerie shadows, but was more than enough for Ianto to see what was going on.

The man, his clothes worn and shabby, was kneeling with his back to the door, working on something that came up to about waist height. Ianto wasn't in the right position to see what it was, but the man was picking up and putting down screwdrivers, pliers and wire clippers, and was surrounded by bits of metal detritus. He was definitely working on something electronic, and Ianto was staking his life on the fact that it was almost certainly the Quantum Bomb that hadn't yet destroyed everything.

He didn't need the best guess he had made from the files, though he'd later wonder if some lingering trace of psychic training from Torchwood had made him pick the correct file out of the dozens provided by UNIT; he knew exactly who it was. He recognised the voice, the accent, and the permanently mussed blond hair, and the glint of a face he could see in the reflection. It was definitely Sean Bartram.

He couldn't see anything nearby that resembled a weapon. Ianto took a slow, deep breath and eased himself fully into view, stepping into the room.

Sean Bartram didn't notice him.

Ianto, briefly and ridiculously, found himself at a loss for words. Part of him cringed away from aping such silly Hollywood behaviour as running into a room and yelling, but he was at a loss for a suitable phrase to announce his presence. A slightly baffled 'er, hello?' seemed to lack appropriate gravitas.

What would Jack say, he wondered?

"As much as I appreciate the rear view, you should put the pliers down and step away from the big old bomb. I'm too pretty to be blow to smithereens just yet."

Ianto fought the urge to roll his eyes at the mental recreation of Jack that his brain had decided to produce. Definitely *not* the approach Ianto wanted to take.

Finally, he decided to opt for the simple approach, kept his weapon down and pointed at the floor, not wanting to startle the object of his attention.

"Hello, Sean," he said.

**

They'd met at the office Christmas party, the name of which was slightly inaccurate, since it wasn't actually held in the offices of Torchwood London. It had been wisely decided, at some point, that putting dozens of extremely drunk employees within reach of potentially lethal alien technology and labs full of experimental pharmaceuticals was generally a bad idea, and so Torchwood London hired out a different hotel every year for its staff to get trashed in.

Ianto hadn't really wanted to go this year. At the last minute, Lisa had apologetically produced a copy of the roster which showed that she had been assigned to keep an eye on an all-night experiment, and there was no way she'd be able to make the party. Ianto had been fully intending to skip out on the event, until the memo from Director Hartman came around the building, politely

reminding everyone that seasonal office get-togethers were vital for 'team cohesiveness' and 'communications facilitation'.

You didn't get anywhere in Torchwood without learning to read between the lines, and in this case the message was quite clear: attendance is mandatory.

So Ianto had grimaced, gone, and consoled himself that it was, at least, a free bar.

He'd spent the meal portion of the evening sitting at a table with about half a dozen other people from his division, and had the experience of being the only unaccompanied person at the table, which just made him feel depressed, and the moment the bar opened, he made a beeline for it and managed to stay there for two pints and a rum and coke. He was just starting to wonder whether or not that had been enough to qualify as having 'attended' the party, the speeches started up, which lasted through another two drinks.

He had a vague recollection of rolling his eyes at Director Hartman's usual pro-Imperialism speech, the likes of which virtually everyone in the room could recite by heart, followed up by a "you're all special, you make the company great, I love you guys" speech from the head of R&D, which never failed to get cheers, but which were always slightly sarcastic ones.

Ianto was grateful when the music started up, nearly deafening in its intensity.

"And the funny part is, we had to pay for tickets to hear these people go on and on."

The sentence was shouted to make itself heard over the music, and, at first, Ianto thought that he was just accidentally eavesdropping on someone else at the bar. It was only when he felt an elbow nudge into his side that he noticed that there was a man standing next to him, smiling in amusement, and he realised that the man had been talking to him.

It was hard to see anything in the room, given that it had been plunged into darkness and illuminated only from the fast moving coloured lights that highlighted the dance floor, but the bar had several strips of light, presumably for the staff, and so Ianto could make out a tall, lanky man, his hair a light colour, blond, Ianto thought, as he squinted slightly. He was dimly aware that it was possibly the alcohol that was making such judgements difficult to render.

"Pay for two tickets," Ianto corrected, raising his voice and leaning forward to make himself more audible. "My girlfriend stood me up."

"Ouch," the man said, "Work stuff?"

"Of course," Ianto rolled his eyes. The Torchwood Christmas party, for security reasons, was employees only. "She got stuck covering an experiment. I'm a Torchwood widower." He affected dramatic woe, which prompted sniggering from his companion.

"I'm-" he seemed about to introduce himself, but someone else that Ianto didn't recognise approached, and the man broke off with a "Hey, how are you, mate?" and threw an apologetic look at Ianto. "Hey, sorry. 'Scuse me, would you?"

Ianto shrugged, picking up his latest drink (another rum and coke, possibly a double) and nodding easily. He moved away, planting himself at an empty table where someone had abandoned a bowl of what seemed to be olives, left over from the starters of the meal. He nibbled on them, and drank his drink (which was refreshed once or twice by one of the hotel staff), slouching back in his chair and watching the dance floor without really paying attention to any of the bodies that flailed about in what only the British would call 'dancing'.

'Fear us, alien hordes,' Ianto thought to himself, and laughed around the rim of his glass. 'For we could get our groove on at any moment.'

"Nice to see you're having a good time," a female voice came from above him.

Ianto tilted his head back to see who it was, and nearly fell off his chair as Director Hartman's visage loomed, upside down, above him. He attempted to scramble into some sort of sensible sitting position, but it wasn't until he attempted to move that he found that his coordination had, without his consent, become completely shot to hell.

"Director, ma'am..." he said, hurriedly, as she sat down in the chair next to him, smiling broadly.

"Oh, call me Yvonne," she said, breezily, waving one hand dismissively. In her other hand was clutched a rather hefty glass of something that looked, in the dim light, like orange juice. "I'm sure that I sent a memo around regarding informality in the workplace."

"Ah, ok... Yvonne," Ianto would have normally demurred, but, along with his coordination, his inhibitions had apparently similarly gone to hell. "Nice party," he said, for lack of anything better to say.

Yvonne looked pleased. "Well, we do try." She tilted her head significantly towards the dance floor. "You're not tempted to get up and dance?"

"Bit strange to do it on your own," Ianto said.

Yvonne's eyes gleamed in the dim lighting. "Oh yes, some things are definitely best done in pairs."

"Or, you know, as a group." Ianto could have slapped himself on the forehead, as his brain helpfully supplied images of groups of people doing things that weren't called dancing except in euphemism.

Yvonne was looking at him speculatively. "You're... Ianto, yes? Researcher?"

"Junior," Ianto corrected.

"Aha," Yvonne nodded, leaning forward conspiratorially. "I find it so important to be on a first name basis with all of my employees," she said. "I feel that it makes for a much more intimate working environment."

Yvonne's hand landed on his thigh, and edged upwards, and Ianto realised from that, and the slightly unfocused look in her eyes, that it probably wasn't just orange juice in her glass.

He was trying to think of the best way to get out of the situation with his dignity, and job, intact, when a pair of hands landed on his shoulders, sliding down over his chest. He had a brief, terrifying vision of being accosted by all the senior execs at the party, and of screaming that he wasn't that kind of girl and running for his life, but mostly he found himself frozen still as the owner of the hands leaned down and said, into his ear, warm breath brushing his neck,

"Ah, here you are."

Ianto blinked. His brain wasn't entirely functioning properly, but he thought he recognised the voice.

Yvonne's face had acquired a brief look of 'well, shit', that passed quickly, before she donned her usual bright and broad smile that, nevertheless, seemed a little strained. "Oh, I see. I didn't mean to... intrude."

"Not at all," Ianto said, quickly, unsure of how his escape had been achieved, but not willing to shun it.

"You know, I think I see Mark Hodgson over there. Excuse me, we really must discuss the plans for retrofitting the Jvari pods. Oh, Mark!" Yvonne got up so quickly that her drink sloshed over her fingers, which she ignored, before hurrying away on high heeled boots.

The body pressed against Ianto's shoulders started to shake with laughter, and released him to come around and sit in the chair that Yvonne had just vacated. It was the man from the bar.

"Sorry," he said, not looking very apologetic. "I thought you needed rescuing. You had this look of a rabbit caught in the oncoming headlights of a steamroller."

Ianto laughed. The adrenaline still buzzing through his system combining with the alcohol made him feel more than a little light-headed. "You, sir, have my eternal gratitude."

The man stuck out his hand. "Sean Bartram," he said.

Ianto shook it, though his grab was a little clumsy. "Ianto Jones," he returned.

And that made them, in the traditional manner of the truly drunk, best friends.

Sean froze, and his head jerked up. Ianto could see his eyes going wide in his reflected image in the glass. Sean turned, still crouching, and blinked owlishly at Ianto. In his hands he held a pair of pliers and a transparent cylinder with some sort of cloudy white substance inside. He was messing with a cap that was sealed at one end with rather clumsy looking electronics.

"I... Ianto?" Sean looked astonished, though not at getting caught, it seemed. "I thought you were dead."

“Likewise,” Ianto said, with forced lightness. “Mind stepping away from that?”

“You mean this thing?” Sean turned sideways and laid his hand on the device he had clearly been working on.

It was, as Ianto had initially thought, about waist-high, roughly egg-shaped and standing on a tripod base. Rough was the key word in any description he could have applied to it. Torchwood’s original designs would have no doubt called for the bomb to be housed in a sleek casing, disguising its lethal capacity behind a veneer of modern aesthetics. Sean Bartram had obviously had no such capabilities.

Some of the materials were mundane, bits of wire and plating that could be found from any industrial supplier, but some of them were clearly alien. Ianto recognised a hodgepodge of different species’ technology, and doubtless there was more in the core of the device that he couldn’t see. Things didn’t quite meet where they were soldered or welded together, and edges were rough, jagged and uneven. There was a keypad on the top which looked like it had been glued on.

“You’ve been busy, I see. UNIT has you on file as a smuggler of alien technology,” Ianto said, “I’m guessing you weren’t smuggling it. You were keeping it. To build this?”

“Among other things,” Sean agreed, fiddling with some of the wires sticking out of the cylinder in his hands. He nodded towards the table next to Ianto. “Want a coffee? I vaguely remember a good portion of your time being spent feeding your addiction. If you’ve been caught up in the indeterminate waveform you probably need it.”

Ianto flicked his eyes in the direction that Sean indicated, for just a second, but Sean made no move to lunge for a weapon or otherwise attempt to jump him, so he took a second, longer, look. There was indeed a Thermos sitting on the table, a tartan-covered affair that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a photograph of a 70’s picnic. There were also a couple of half-eaten banana sandwiches wrapped in clingfilm next to it. But it was the small brown glass bottle that caught Ianto’s attention.

Keeping his eyes on Sean, he edged that way, picking up the bottle with his free hand and glancing at the label. His eyes widened. “Amphetamines? Sean, are you building a bomb while you’re *high*?”

Sean twisted two tiny pieces of wire together with his gloved hands. “Well yes,” he said, looking at Ianto like he was a particularly moronic species of dormouse. “The moment I made the decision to build the bomb, and had sufficient materials to construct a working bomb, the possibility existed of detonation. So.” He gestured vaguely with his hands, his gaze darted around the room, no doubt nervous about someone appearing from behind Ianto to shoot him.

Ianto suddenly realised he was in the room with a probably very crazy individual who was hopped up on speed.

“I had to work fast,” Sean continued, still twitchily fiddling with the cylinder. “I knew someone would come for me. There wasn’t any time for sleep. I didn’t think it’d be you that came. Thought if anyone did, they’d just find the repeater. Working for UNIT now, are you?”

It was a reasonable assumption, given Ianto’s state of dress. “Not quite,” he said, slowly, “But I’m

working with UNIT.”

“So what? Government? MI5?”

Ianto shook his head slowly. “I’m still Torchwood, Sean.”

Sean stiffened, becoming almost preternaturally still. But his breathing was short, rapid, and if Ianto squinted across the intervening space, he could see that Sean’s pupils were wide open. “Torchwood was destroyed,” Sean started, but then stopped himself, “Cardiff, right? That’s the only other place you could have gone. Scotland’s not even big enough to be called a branch. One bloke who minds the library at the House part time, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Ianto said, carefully.

Sean drew a shaky breath. “Right,” he said, forcing a bright smile onto his face, “Well, hey, nice to know you survived, anyway. Pity you didn’t move to Australia or something. Really sorry about that.”

Ianto stared at him. Sean smiled and stared back. But the expression was a dull one, mere hints of desperation showing around the eyes, although that might have just been the drugs. “You’re not a murderer, Sean,” he said, calmly, “You were a scientist. So what changed? Why are you so keen on killing most of western Europe?”

“It’s the most efficient way to deal with the situation,” Sean said, seriously, eyes restlessly flicking towards Ianto before his gaze would roam around the room.

“Situation?”

“Torchwood,” Sean said, in surprise, as if expecting Ianto to know that.

Unfortunately, Ianto had the feeling that he was floundering, with no actual idea what Sean meant. “Sean-”

Sean, at least, seemed to find it important to explain things to Ianto. “Torchwood isn’t just confined to this place, this tower. It’s in Wales, and Scotland, and its ideas have permeated our society. It’s been here for a hundred years, quietly whispering in the ears of the population that we’re strong, powerful, better than everyone else. It’s led to the decay of society, it’s put us on the path to our own downfall.

“The technology, the experiments, it was all just one facet,” Sean said, earnestly. “Forgetting about the aliens - the Cybermen might have come over eventually, and the sphere with the Daleks would have come anyway. We might have had the same problem, but Torchwood’s faults extend beyond that one single incident.”

Ianto thought that might have been a good enough reason on its own, but he said nothing.

“No,” Sean continued, “Torchwood has been a part of Britain for a century, a festering, unseen canker that has gnawed away at society. Its ideology has permeated throughout its people, and the

only way to save Humanity is to eradicate it. When it's gone, Earth will be able to look at the aliens with open eyes, and save themselves. Torchwood would only destroy them."

'Jesus Christ,' Ianto thought, 'This guy is insane.'

He didn't say that, of course. He had no intention of annoying a man on the verge of mass destruction.

"You don't mean that, Sean," he said.

"Yes I do," Sean said, and smiled twitchily at him. "You want an example? Ever heard of Project K?"

Ianto frowned. "No."

"Oh well. I would have thought you had, working at Cardiff. It doesn't matter, or it won't. Torchwood's arrogance beggars belief. We were always so proud of ourselves. We thought we were the best, the greatest, of anyone, anywhere on the planet. Look what it got us. Journalists who investigated us were suddenly and mysteriously sectioned. Our own staff disappeared off to the sixth floor if they showed too much unusual psychic ability. And now we start to see similar things happening throughout the country, the world."

'Insane, and a conspiracy nut to boot,' Ianto amended his original assessment of Sean's mental health.

"This is the world that Torchwood made!" Sean threw his hands outwards, gesturing wildly. "A world that doesn't care about the people in it, or what they go through."

He stared, wide-eyed, at Ianto. "Do you want to know? Do you want to see?"

Before Ianto could say anything, Sean reached up, tearing at the collar of the jumpsuit he was wearing – bulky and ill-fitting, Ianto had thought when he'd seen it – and unzipped it, pulling it down, exposing...

Ianto stifled a gasp, and felt nauseous as his stomach did a nervous flip. His right shoulder, and a good part of his torso, glinted dully in the light, thin plates of burnished metal sheeting covering them. Wires were exposed, awkwardly poking into flesh that was dull, pallid and bloodless. Ianto knew the technology so well that he didn't even have to think about it.

Sean Bartram, it seemed, had not escaped the Battle of Canary Wharf unscathed.

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The last time they'd seen each other, they'd been creeping through the hallways of Torchwood Tower, five of them, and two guards. The emergency exits had been sealed, their only hope, the guards had said, was to try and make it to the ground floor doors, which appeared to be more or less unguarded. Two of the staff, twin girls who had worked in the Psych department together, were clinging to each other, crying in near unison, though they tried to keep quiet for fear of attracting

unwanted attention. Ianto could sympathise.

He was gripping Lisa's hand so tightly he was sure he was hurting her, but she didn't complain. She wasn't crying, but she was shaking, her tremors becoming apparent the moment they stopped for more than a second or two. Sean was pressed against his side, and Ianto could feel his rapid, frightened breathing. The five of them were pressed into a recess in the corridor wall while the guards scouted ahead a short way, making sure the way was clear.

"We're all going to die, aren't we?" Sean said, frantically glancing back and forth down the corridor, clearly terrified of anything emerging to attack them.

"We are not going to die," Lisa said, sounding angry, though Ianto was fairly certain it was an attempt to hide her fear. "Ianto, tell him."

Ianto couldn't speak, couldn't bring himself to lie to himself and the others like that. He kept his lips pressed together, and tightened his grip on Lisa's hand. She winced, and glanced away.

"I heard that the weapons systems have been destroyed," one of the twins, Miriam or Heidi, he wasn't sure which, "Internal security's down. What sort of thing could cause this? What were those things? Robots?"

"I heard one of them say they were 'Cybermen'," Sean said, "I... I don't remember them from the files though."

"I do," Ianto said, "I think they were in connection with UNIT or the Doctor or something. I think... I... I don't know. I saw them grab some people, before I got out..."

"Cybernetics," the other twin moaned, clutching her sister closer, "Oh god. I heard screaming. God."

Ianto fumbled by his side, after a moment finding Sean's hand with his and gripping just as tightly as he was holding onto Lisa. Sean's hand was clammy with fear, and he shot Ianto a look that meant Ianto knew the physical touch was as comforting for him as it was for Ianto.

*They hadn't even known what was going on, at first. The whole tower had been abuzz with the news that the TARDIS - **the TARDIS** for Heaven's sake - had arrived in one of the hangars, and gossip, rumours and speculation had been flying around faster than the speed of light. Chat about what it could mean, what Director Hartman would do (would she hold to the letter of the charter and see him destroyed, would he be contained, would he be questioned, imagine what he could teach). And then the ghosts had become real, and they'd started killing.*

Then the other things appeared, which one researcher identified as Daleks, right before they killed him, and half of Ianto's division. The rest of them barely made it out of the room fast enough. He'd run into Lisa and the others creeping through the hallways, trying desperately to get out, not knowing what was happening other than the fact that people were dying, and there was a lot of screaming coming from behind closed doors.

There were footsteps, and Ianto leaned forward slightly to spy their two guards, black clad and

carrying rifles, coming back towards them, looking around anxiously.

“Come on,” one said, gesturing. “It seems to be clear.”

It might have been when they had checked, but as they turned the corner, the lift doors slid open, disarmingly naturally, revealing only an empty lift shaft, and two of the creatures that had been named as Daleks were hovering inside. They glided out, settling on the floor, and turning towards their small group, bringing their weapons to bear.

The guards, to their credit, didn't hesitate. They immediately opened fire. The bullets, though, never reached the Daleks, and, after a moment, having quickly expended their ammunition, they stopped firing. They knew enough about alien technology to recognise a kinetic field when they saw one.

The Daleks seemed unimpressed. “EXTERMINATE,” they said.

In bright flashes of light that left lines seared into Ianto's retinas, the two men screamed, and died. They stood there, shocked, staring, and it was Lisa's, “Run!” that spurred them all into moving, fleeing as a group backwards the way they came, terrified, not caring where they were going, as long as it was away from the Daleks.

“EXTERMINATE. EXTERMINATE.” The Daleks said it over and over, scraping over every last nerve Ianto possessed, and he reflexively ducked at the sounds of the Daleks firing after them, pursuing them down the corridors.

One of the shots hit the wall, gouging a hole in the plaster and striking the cables and tubes running behind the walls. It might not have been so bad, only knocking out some lights, if half the main trunking leading to the hangar levels didn't run through this section of the building. The shot ruptured a fluid line, which started venting pressurised coolant into the corridor, flash freezing anything in its path. One of the Daleks was caught side-on, electronic shrieks filling the air as unevenly cooled metal suddenly ruptured under the strain.

“Run!” Lisa yelled again, “The plasma lines-!”

She didn't need to finish the sentence, nor did she have time to. They were already running. Deprived of coolant convecting the heat away, the superheated plasma that ran through the building as part of its power supply, feeding fusion generators in the sub-levels, caused the surrounding electrics to overheat and spark, and then one of the lines broke free, its housing melted, and the plasma was released into the air.

It caught the walls, and they immediately burst into flames from the exposure to the plasma's high temperature.

The twins crashed through the doors to the emergency stairway, and the five of them ran through, coughing from the choking fumes released by the walls catching fire, and started to run, staggering, down the stairs. They were on the fifth floor, and need to get to the ground. In the end, they only made it down two flights before one of the doors crashed open. Two Cybermen came through the doorway from the third floor and stared up at them.

“Soldiers are required,” one said. “You will be given the Emergency Upgrade.”

The five of them didn't waste time arguing, just turned and ran back upwards again, with no plan in mind other than to get away. To get anywhere that wasn't confronted by cybernetic robots that spoke in ominous terms about Upgrades. On the fourth floor, the door opened, banging aside, and Ianto had a brief glimpse of silver-coloured metal before he felt something immovable thudding into his chest.

Then he felt pain. He'd once stuck his fingers in a light socket by accident, felt his muscles contract and yank his way before the pain hit him, and he realised how much electric currents actually hurt. But this was longer, more sustained, and Ianto was sure that he was dead-

He crashed to the ground, struggling to breath, his chest feebly inflating enough to keep him alive, but he couldn't move. He heard Lisa screaming, and one of the twins, and felt a body land painfully across his legs. He had no idea who it was; he couldn't move his head to look downwards.

The thud of heavy, artificial footsteps caused the stairway to shake, and he stared at the dented and scuffed feet of one of the Cybermen.

“Take them to level nine,” one said, and Ianto was brusquely rolled over, and surprisingly warm metal fingers closed around the clothes at the back of his neck. He was dragged up the stairs, the edges of the steps themselves banging into his legs. If he could have thought through the sheer blinding terror, he would have thought that if he was going to survive, he'd have dreadful bruises.

But he couldn't think. He just wanted to scream, but was unable to give voice to the desire. As they dragged them through the doors, he could see three, maybe four, free standing nearly cylindrical partitions, but it was the overwhelming stench that would have made him throw up if he hadn't been almost completely paralysed. There was the heavy metal tang of blood, the smell of piss undercutting it, but, most overwhelmingly, he could smell what he first thought was burning meat and then, as he felt the heat from one of the partitions they passed, accompanied by screams, he realised it was burning flesh.

He couldn't raise his head, but he wanted to, he desperately wanted to, when he heard Lisa moaning, and then her voice, rising in terror.

“Oh God, no! Let me go! LET ME GO! OH GOD! IANTO!!” Her voice became muffled; she must have been dragged behind one of the partitions, and her words became nothing but incoherent screams, and Ianto desperately wanted to weep, realising that those had probably been her last words.

Then he heard Sean as well. The two of them had either been given a lesser jolt, or Ianto was taking longer to come around properly, because he was still completely immobile. All he could hear Sean say was the same phrase, over and over, “My fault. God, my fault. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

Ianto couldn't look up. He was still being held at the back of the neck by one of the cybernetic monsters, could only look straight down, where his head was tilted. Blood was pooled in the doorway that seemed to protect the access to whatever was behind the partition. He didn't have to wait long. It slid aside, and he was pulled inside. The Cyberman slipped slightly on the pool of

blood, and let out a short artificial bleat of what might have been surprised, before it yanked Ianto up, one handed, and lay him flat on a metal table.

There was a pressure on his hands as the restraints locked into place. The inside of the partitions were caked with dried and baked blood splatters, and Ianto could smell blood so close to him he knew he must have been lying in some left over from the previous occupant of the slab.

He wished he could scream like Lisa was, like Sean was starting to, but instead he could only stare upwards dully as a piece of machinery he'd never seen before irised open, and the stuff of nightmares emerged.

Later, when Ianto was picking through the remnants of the once-proud Torchwood Institute, London Office, he found a thick document detailing a potential usefulness for the Tower's pet rift, in so much as it could provide virtually limitless energy, removing the British dependence on foreign oil and gas, whilst being environmentally friendly. There was a note scrawled in red from Director Hartman on the front, simply saying "Brilliant!". It was the document that had led directly to the instigation of the ghost shifts, and everything that had come afterwards.

On the last page, it was signed by the man who had made the recommendations: Torchwood Officer No. 872, Doctor Sean Bartram.

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Sean shrugged back into the jumpsuit, sealing it carelessly with one hand. Ianto must have had a stricken expression on his face, because he shrugged. "It doesn't hurt."

"God," Ianto breathed. He had thought he had become rather used to the sensation of his heart breaking, but, apparently it was just as bad as the last time. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

He need not have asked. Sean hadn't been able to find anyone for the same reason that Ianto hadn't been able to tell anyone about Lisa.

"Don't be thick," Sean said, "You think they'd accept me? Aliens are the enemy, remember? Torchwood's mandate is to destroy aliens."

"I'm so sorry, Sean," Ianto said, gently, "They should have helped us. They shouldn't have abandoned us like that."

"It's not about that!" Sean screamed the sentence, and then visibly reined himself in. "It's not about that," he repeated, in a calmer tone, though Ianto could tell he'd been shaken. "Humanity deserves to be free of Torchwood. I'm going to do that."

Ianto shook his head, urgently, "No. Torchwood is needed. Maybe they don't need Torchwood Tower, and they didn't need Yvonne Hartman trying to bring glory to the Empire, but someone's got to protect people from the things that would harm us. The unfriendly aliens, the things on Earth that no one understands but could still hurt us."

And who protects us? He heard his own voice, addressing Tosh, not so long ago.

He took a deep breath, closing his eyes briefly. *We protect each other.* He answered his own question and knew, deep down, that it was the right answer. That was how it should be and Torchwood had failed Ianto, Sean, Lisa and the other twenty five survivors of the massacre.

“This isn’t the way,” Ianto said, talking a small, slow step forward. “Come with me back to Cardiff. We’ve a good doctor, he can help.” Although Ianto would die before admitting any grudging respect for Owen’s abilities to the man himself. “And the Captain...” Ianto hesitated. “He’ll help.” At least, Ianto thought that Jack wouldn’t turn someone away if the alternative was major global catastrophe.

“So naïve,” Sean said, sadly. “I’m surprised you still have any faith in Torchwood left.”

“So am I,” Ianto admitted, “But I do. Come on, Sean. This isn’t you.” It was so unlike the man, that Ianto knew that he’d almost certainly gone mad in the aftermath of Canary Wharf. He didn’t seem to have any implants near his brain, he seemed to be still Human-

Unlike Lisa, a treacherous little voice whispered.

All that had happened was that he’d had a limb replaced (and, of course, was burdened not only with the loss of everyone he cared about but the inescapable knowledge that he was mostly responsible). They could remove the machinery, wipe his memory with Jack Harkness’s oh-so-handy and yet somewhat reprehensible chemical formula, euphemistically named Retcon, and they could make up some story about a car accident and memory loss, and Sean would be fine.

“Please,” he knew he was begging. “Please come with me.”

“I’m really very sorry, Ianto.” Sean said, and shook his head. “But this is for the best.”

Sean abruptly, with so little foreshadowing of the motion that Ianto didn’t even realise he was going to move until he’d finished, Sean took the cylinder he’d been fiddling with, and in one smooth motion, slammed it into a matching housing in the top of the bomb, and twisted it into place. The sounds from the Quantum Bomb changed. An up-scaling hum issued from somewhere inside it, and more status lights lit up, the keypad mounted on it changed to a simple activation key. It would only take a single touch.

He’d finished the bomb, and Ianto cursed himself for letting Sean distract him with meaningless chatter, with words that did nothing except stop Ianto from being aware what he was doing.

Ianto realised he was still holding his gun. He brought it to bear quickly. “Sean, step away,” he ordered, trying to sound as firm and fearsome as he could.

Sean didn’t seem impressed, just looked at him sceptically. “Oh, Ianto,” he said, and smiled, “Both of us know you’re not that sort of person.”

The sort of person to shoot him, he meant. He reached for the bomb.

Ianto shot him three times. Bang, bang, bang. There was hardly any effort involved. A slight

tightening of his finger on the trigger, and it was no more difficult than landing hits inside the paper targets on UNIT's range. He wasn't even aware he'd done it, truly, until a look of surprise crossed Sean's face, and he staggered forwards, tripping over his own feet and landing on his knees.

The shots had landed in his chest, missing the artificial implants and hitting only flesh, ugly blooms of dark red instantly appearing on the front of his shirt. But it hadn't killed him instantly. He reached out blindly with one hand, reaching for the bomb's activation switch.

Ianto shot him one last time, and this time the shot caught him in the face. Sean Bartram tumbled backwards, unmoving, clearly dead.

Ianto's ears were ringing, the loud sound of his fired shots still reverberating in his skull, and it took him a moment to realise that the only sounds in the room were the beeps of the bomb's systems, and his own harsh breathing. Slowly, cautiously, he approached Sean, still not lowering his weapon even though he knew that he had shot the man, knew that he had to have killed him.

Telling himself that, and seeing the result up close were two entirely different things.

He stood over Sean's body and looked down at him. The damage caused by Ianto's shots to his chest was the least of the damage. Torchwood's rounds weren't exactly explosive, but they were extremely damaging if you hit in just the right place. The final shot to his face had entered, by the looks of it, just below his eye, taking away his cheekbone, destroying the eye sockets, and taking a significant portion of the skull with it. His brain was exposed, bits of ripped up grey matter swimming in blood that had continued to be pumped around the body for a second before the heart stopped completely, and the dark fluid was leaking out onto the floor forming a slowly expanding pool.

Ianto stared down at Sean Bartram and realised that he was dead. It should have been obvious, really, the state of his body and the way he was so very unnaturally still, but that thought was only just starting to penetrate his brain. He'd dealt with dead bodies for months now, at Jack's behest, a duty given to him in an unkind attempt to scare him off. He'd rationalised it to himself that the bodies weren't really people any more, that they were just bits of flesh, and the thing that made them Human was gone somewhere... else.

He'd even, indirectly, been the cause of deaths. He'd had to handle the corpses of Doctor Tanizaki and their pizza delivery girl while they were still warm, known that they had died because of him, that he was responsible.

But still, he'd never actually killed someone himself.

It was something he'd never thought of. In Torchwood people died, and often Torchwood was the cause, and Ianto had thought himself able to deal with that, thought that he'd come to terms with it a long time ago (though it had caused him no small amount of disgust when he'd seen how callously the people in Cardiff seemed to act towards those unfortunate enough to be caught up in their oh-so-damaging wake). But he'd never actually killed someone.

Sean sightlessly stared back up at him, and Ianto realised he'd taken a life. He had made the decision to end someone's life, to take away their remaining days and leave nothing but a cooling

shell. He was someone's son, a scientist, a friend, a lover, and Ianto had, in a tiny flexing of the muscles that had barely required any conscious thought, ended all that.

He had always treated the cavalier attitude the others had towards guns and fighting and weapons with nonchalance. It was just something they talked about in missing briefings, or he read about in reports. He didn't...

He didn't *kill* people.

Except he did, and the proof was sticking to his boots.

His stomach tightened, and he felt a rush of sweetness on his tongue. He dropped the gun, uncaring (thankfully, it didn't go off), and stumbled away from the body, crashing through some of the furniture that had been pushed aside, and landed heavily against the wall. No, the window. He could feel the cool glass against his palms as he slumped to his knees. He vomited, feeling miserable and guilty, throwing up the half-digested remnants of a UNIT field ration, and Sergeant Tumenggung's whiskey.

He could hear footsteps approaching, but spared them no more thought than a brief feeling of bitterness for being too late, too busy completely voiding his stomach completely, spitting out bile onto the floor. The acidic stench mixed with the smell of blood, and he would have thrown up again if he had anything left in his stomach. Instead he just retched.

"Jesus," he dimly heard, "is that-?"

"We're clear, sir."

"Fan out. Check the surrounding rooms. Make sure there's nothing and no one else. Corporal?"

The voices were a white noise that Ianto screened out without thinking, closing his eyes. He vaguely wished he could pray, wished that he'd ever found religion something to believe in. Instead of a comforting prayer or thoughts of divine will, all he could think was what Tumenggung had said to him.

"I'm going to keep saying this until you have these words burned into your brain: never, ever draw your weapon, unless you're damned sure you're going to use it."

A shadow fell across him, and he looked up to see Monroe standing over him, her expression sympathetic but firm. She held out his weapon, handle first, and waited patiently for him to wipe his mouth with his sleeve and stagger into some semblance of standing.

"We need you to disarm the bomb," she said, her eyes flickering towards the device, which still whirred menacingly. "You're the only one who knows how."

He looked over at the Quantum Bomb, and the body that still lay there. No one had made any attempt to move it or cover it up, but then that was hardly the priority at that moment. Steeling himself (and his stomach) Ianto picked his way through furniture he had overturned, and stood over the bomb, looking at the keypad. It was pretty standard, one that had been a generic one made by

the Torchwood engineers for interfacing with alien technology. He keyed for general access and started looking around the systems.

Sean's head was right next to his foot. Ianto had felt a bit of bone crunch underfoot as he had stopped, and blood was still seeping through the carpet, clinging to his shoes. The metallic stench wafted up every time Ianto made the slightest movement.

“In a way,” he said, conversationally, his voice a little hoarse from the acid that had washed through his throat, “He was right.”

Monroe was standing a few feet away, watching him carefully as he worked. She stiffened when he spoke, but her voice was light as she answered. “Oh? How so?”

“The world doesn’t care. If it did, then there wouldn’t be any need for sneaky underhand organisations and their abhorrent tactics.” Ianto’s fingers danced across the menu. It wasn’t that hard to figure out. The bomb prompted him for a fifteen digit code.

He entered the date of the Battle of Canary Wharf, and, with a sad recollection of a conversation between the two of them, the word ‘swordfish’.

The bomb chirped and gave him deeper access. He started to work on breaking the deeper encryption layers.

“No need,” he said, “For Torchwood, in other words. Would that be a paradox? Torchwood was created to protect a world that wouldn’t need it if it hadn’t been created?”

Monroe folded her arms lightly, watching him closely. “There’ll always be a need for people like Torchwood, and UNIT,” she added. “Because that’s the way the world is. Thinking that things might have been different could drive you mad.”

“Sean wanted to change the world,” Ianto said, glancing down at the slack face below his eyeline. “He always did. That’s why he joined Torchwood. That’s why he proposed the things he did. He wanted to make a difference.”

Monroe shrugged. “Doesn’t everyone?”

Ianto shook his head sadly. “I didn’t. I just wanting meaning, looked for it here. But I was probably looking in the wrong place. Torchwood Tower is a monument to pride, a modern day Tower of Babel struck down by God, or, in our case, aliens.” The keypad chirruped, and a new directory unfolded in response to his careful hacking, this one more protected, and more easily affecting the detonation systems. He frowned as he concentrated.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot. “Did that make him right?”

“I think if you start trying to pick out what’s right and what’s wrong, we’re all going to come out as monsters.” Ianto glanced up from the keypad for a moment to look at her. “I know I don’t come out well. How about you?”

“I don't know. I try not to think about such things.”

Ianto shook his head. “Forgive me for being blunt, Louise, but that would be why you're a soldier. You take orders. Torchwood liked its outcasts, its rebels, the people who were nominally marginalised by society. It's how the Institute managed to hold separate from the government and the world at large, because it was full of people that didn't think the way everyone else did. And, eventually, you start to justify it as being better than everyone else.”

“Then,” Monroe spoke hesitantly, uncomfortably, “What would you say the solution is?”

“To end it all,” Ianto said, and smiled tiredly, “And to try to forget it ever existed.”

He tapped a final key and stepped back. Monroe's head whipped around as, outside the windows, the doubling up of reality vanished. It was the decision gate, the moment of the point of no return, the instant where the waveform collapsed and the future was set in stone.

And in the centre of the room, between them, the bomb exploded.

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Part Eight: Epilogue

The perpetual cool and damp air of the Hub which, as always, smelt faintly of mildew, wafted over Ianto's face as the main security door rolled aside, alarms blaring in the manner he'd become so used to ignoring. It was late at night, and the Hub was in low power mode, the majority of the illumination coming from monitors and scattered optical cables and bits of equipment. There was none of the restless chatter and hum of activity that had pervaded the UNIT base, and Ianto found he was quite glad of it.

The phone system had come back up the moment that Ianto had disabled the bomb, but it had been a few hours until Ianto had heard from Torchwood. By then, he'd been back at the UNIT base, steadfastly refusing to listen to Louise's entreaties for discussion, simply re-donning his suit and thanking her for the opportunity to help out.

Gwen had been the one to call. Jack, she had said, with an uneasy note in her voice, was unavailable. Yes, he was fine, but he was knocked out with enough sedative in his bloodstream to take out an elephant. She wouldn't elaborate, saying only that she would explain when he got back.

In the meantime, knowing that it was better in the long run to cooperate with UNIT, he agreed to take part in their extensive, and exhaustive, 'debriefing' process, which wound up lasting for three days. Several officers from outside UNIT bases came via helicopter, and while Ianto was able to skirt a lot of details by pleading the security of Crown protection, he was still forced to relive events over and over again, until his thoughts became numb and the effort of speaking was automatic, mindless.

No, he said, again and again, of course he had no intention of destroying the world. He'd simply had no plans to let UNIT, or Torchwood for that matter, get their hands on a weapon of such devastating potential. That meant it had to be destroyed.

By blowing it up? He was asked. Wasn't that a bit risky?

He had shrugged. Probably. But he'd been very careful to set the blast radius at no more than a foot away from the central core, which was more than enough to protect everyone. Sean Bartram may have been a madman, but he built very good bombs.

UNIT would have dearly liked to hold him, that much was clear, but Ianto got the impression that Torchwood was putting pressure on them to release him, and so, finally, grumbling, they let him go.

Louise put him in a taxi back to Cardiff, the charges going to UNIT.

"See you around, yeah?" she'd said.

"Yeah," he'd echoed, refusing to look at her. He had the impression that he'd hurt her feelings, but couldn't bring himself to care. He'd just wanted to go home.

Strange, how when he thought of home, he thought of the Hub. And so, he directed the driver to drop him off on the Plass, rather than at his house. It had been dark, and he'd expected the place to be abandoned, half anticipating that even Jack would take the opportunity for a breath of fresh air and would go scale a building or something.

He heard a call from the ceiling, the half-screech that the pterodactyl liked to occasionally utter whenever she saw someone new, and watched for a moment as she dipped in and out of the shadows, gliding on the odd air currents that swirled around the highest part of the Hub due to an oddity of the ventilation systems.

"Hello, sweetheart," he said, softly, "Miss me?"

"She was inconsolable. Wouldn't let anyone feed her, and damned near bit Owen's hand off when he tried."

Ianto turned to see Jack leaning on the doorframe that led to his office. He had his arms folded and a lopsided smile on his face, but he looked, to Ianto's eyes, utterly exhausted. He didn't have the brightness about him that Ianto was used to. Ianto climbed the stairs and headed towards him, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets as he walked.

"I didn't think you'd be here," he admitted.

Jack tilted his head slightly. "I could say the same to you. I'm pretty sure even I'm not a heartless enough boss to make you come in at one in the morning."

Ianto stopped in front of him, out of arms reach, and frowned slightly. "You look terrible."

Jack made a show of looking insulted. "Gee, thanks."

"I mean it. You look tired."

Jack straightened, though the effort seemed a lot for him. "I spent the better part of the last few days heavily sedated on Owen's table. Drugs still haven't quite cleared out of the system yet."

Ianto's frown deepened and he rocked back on his heels. "Sedated? What happened?"

"It was the strangest thing," Jack said, staring into the middle distance somewhere over Ianto's shoulder. "It was like the whole world was changing, like it was more than one thing at the same time. I could look at someone, and I was seeing them staring back at me, but I was also seeing a corpse. It was like space was tearing itself apart over and over again."

He shrugged, slightly embarrassed. "Apparently I went a little crazy, but, I'll be honest, it really *hurt*. Like I was standing still, but the world kept moving. They wound up sedating me and restraining me in the autopsy bay. Not as fun or kinky as it might sound." He shook his head sharply and refocused his eyes on Ianto. "And what have you been up to?"

Ianto started to shrug, to give some flippant answer about keeping busy, or seducing UNIT captains, but when he opened his mouth, he found himself saying, "I shot a man four times. Three times in

the chest, once in the face. He used to be my friend, and I killed him, because he was a danger. I didn't even hesitate. I just shot him, and then got his blood on my shoes."

He realised that he was shaking, and that he was feeling light-headed, as if the world was just one step removed. Jack was looking concerned.

"And you know something?" He continued, hysteria bubbling up from somewhere in his chest, "I'd do it again, because I had to do it, and there wasn't a choice. I never thought... I mean, I just... I deal with bodies, all the times, those bodies... Lisa, the others... those were my fault, but I looked at him and... I... I did that and I..."

Jack stepped forward, reaching out, as if to pull Ianto into an embrace, but Ianto stepped back sharply. He wasn't sure it was because he didn't think that Jack had the right to offer comfort like that, or whether he felt he didn't deserve it. All the others seemed perfectly able to cope with the idea of shooting people in cold blood like the monstrous little psychopaths they all were, so why was he finding it so hard?

Jack dropped his arms, and after a moment's thoughtful stare, walked around Ianto, and away from him.

Ianto heaved a shaky breath and stumbled slightly as he made his way to the sofa, collapsing down on it and resting his head in his hands, covering his face, his elbows resting on his knees. He thought it was rather rich of Jack to be disgusted at Ianto's actions, given all that Jack himself had perpetrated over the years. Ianto wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at the thought that he'd managed to alienate even Jack Harkness.

He felt the sofa dip beside him, and then nearly leapt out of his skin as something cold landed on the back of his neck. He took his hands down from his face, and lifted his head slightly, and realised that Jack had retrieved some paper towels from the kitchen area and soaked them in cold water, before putting them on the back of his neck, resting a heavy hand to keep them there.

After a moment, Ianto decided not to be incensed, and gave himself over to the cool and soothing sensation.

"You must think I'm weak," he mumbled, staring at the floor.

Jack was silent for a long moment. Unusually for him, he seemed to be weighing his words. "Humans," he finally said, "Are a social species. It's wired into our brains that we don't go around killing each other. When something goes wrong and Humans kill other Humans, we call people criminals, murderers. But when we train that instinct out of someone, and put them in a situation where they'll have to kill people, we call them soldiers. It's not fair to call you weak for being willing to do something so dreadful, and so horribly necessary."

Ianto shifted uncomfortably, a trickle of cold water making its way down the back of his neck, between his shoulder blades. "So I'm a murderer."

"So am I. So's Gwen, and Tosh and Owen. We've all had to kill someone Human. It deadens some part of you." Jack took a deep breath, and took the paper towels off Ianto's neck, folding them up

and setting them aside. Ianto straightened, wanting to look Jack in the eye.

“You’re Torchwood,” Jack said, slightly harshly, “And us? We’re all that’s left of Torchwood. Half a dozen screwed up people who have enough personality problems for a good sized psych text. In London you could be the researcher who worked on artefacts and weapons and never have to come anywhere near the brutal reality that sometimes, to protect Humanity, you have to be willing to destroy. When I sent you to get some training from UNIT, I was hoping to give you the tools that you might need in the future. I never thought you would have to use them so quickly. I was hoping to give you time to adjust.”

Jack reached out and gripped Ianto’s hand. He gripped slightly too hard, and it hurt, but Ianto said nothing in protest.

“Because I’m sorry, but you *will* have to kill someone again. It might not be someone you know, it’ll be a stranger, it’ll be an innocent, and then you’ll do it again, because you have to. And you’ll feel a little bit less for it. But, if it’s any tiny consolation, if it didn’t hurt, if it didn’t make you feel sick, and if it didn’t make you feel like you wanted to scream, then you wouldn’t be... Human.”

They were words that Ianto didn’t want to hear, didn’t want to sit there and endure, but he knew, painfully, that they were truth. He looked down at Jack’s hand, and saw the way his fingers were turning white. Jack seemed to realise the strength of his grip too, and relaxed, though he didn’t let Ianto go completely.

“If you want,” he said slowly, “I have Retcon. Two white pills and a good night’s sleep and you forget it all. We put memory loss down to reality getting twisted six ways from Tuesday, and I’ll fry UNIT’s records, so they don’t have any debriefing notes. I’ll never ask you to go out in the field. You can stay in the Hub, you can feed the pterodactyl and make us all coffee. And you’ll never have to kill anyone.” He reached out with his free hand, and put his fingers under Ianto’s chin, forcing him to look at Jack.

“What do you want?” he asked, simply.

Ianto sighed, and closed his eyes. “I wasn’t lying when I said that Torchwood means everything to me,” he said. “I want *this*.”

Jack’s hand dropped away, and though Ianto couldn’t see his expression, he knew that Jack was pleased.

“I’m the only one who knows all of Torchwood’s secrets these days,” Jack said, and Ianto opened his eyes to watch Jack shift so that he was leaning back on the sofa. He tugged Ianto’s hand until he followed suit. “Although I’m pretty sure you know a thing or two about London I don’t. By the time I’m finished, you’ll know everything. All the lies, all the treasures, all the dirty little laundry that’s spent the best part of a hundred years shoved in the back of the closet. *Everything*.”

Ianto was staring. His father had always taught him it was rude, and it was probably especially so when you were less than a foot away from the object of your scrutiny. “But... why?”

“Because you can keep a secret,” Jack said, turning his head towards Ianto. There was still a fair

gap between them, but somehow it felt like there was less distance between them than there had been between he and Louise in that stationary cupboard. “And you’re strong. Strong enough to survive Canary Wharf and cannibals and still do what needs to be done. Torchwood needs you more than you realise. *I need you.*”

Ianto didn’t know quite what to say. “Why me?” he asked, “Why not one of the others?”

Jack gave him an ‘are you kidding?’ look. “Which one should I tell? The angry doctor, the social conscience, or the technician who can’t bring herself to ask someone out on a date?”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

Jack’s mouth thinned as he sighed. “And because, Ianto, I’m not going to be here forever. I’m going to be gone one day. You know that.”

Ianto blinked slowly, nodding his understanding. “You’re waiting. You’ve been searching for the Doctor for a long time.”

Jack looked fondly exasperated. “You’re really going to have to tell me where you found copies of my file.”

“Torchwood is supposed to stop him,” Ianto said. “He’s dangerous.”

Jack looked at him, a slight twinkle of amusement in his eye. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous.”

“Yes,” Ianto responded, and his heart leapt into his throat as he realised that he really *wasn’t* joking.

Jack, thankfully, didn’t seem to pick up on that, only laughing as he heard it as the joke that Ianto had originally intended it to be when he’d said it. “I’m sure Owen would flirt with you in my stead if you asked nicely.”

“But you want me to know everything,” Ianto said, trying to return their conversation to the original topic as quickly as possible, “So that when you leave...?”

“Things will change,” Jack said, “I don’t know how, or when, but they will. If I’m gone, someone else needs to know how things work around here, to carry on getting ready.” Abruptly, Jack stood, dragging Ianto with him. “Are you tired?” he abruptly asked.

Sleep was the last thing on Ianto’s mind. He was fairly certain he’d be seeing Sean Bartram’s face in his dreams for a while. “No,” he said.

“Good, come with me.” Jack started to lead him out of the main Hub area, towards the corridor leading towards the Vaults.

“I don’t want to do any filing at one in the morning,” Ianto complained, though he couldn’t deny the little frisson of anticipation. Once upon a time, Jack had hauled him down to the Vaults for entirely nefarious but quite enjoyable purposes.

“This isn’t filing,” Jack said, rolling his eyes. “I’m going to share one of my secrets with you, but one of the good ones. You look like you could use it.”

Ianto resisted the urge to make some smart mouthed response about Jack, dark rooms, and ‘secrets’, but wasn’t willing to chance a poor reception of his wit, so he just kept silent, and let Jack lead him down towards the Vaults. They seemed to be heading in the direction of the cells, but a few corridors away, Jack stopped by a door labelled simply ‘*Restricted Access*’ and tapped in a eight digit code into a keypad next to it.

Jack looked at him. “Omoikane,” he said, and when Ianto frowned, gestured to the keypad. “The code.”

The word scabbled at Ianto’s thoughts, a niggling memory that he couldn’t quite pin down. He nodded, though, in response to Jack, filing away the code, repeating it to himself to make sure he had it. The door was heavy, and Jack clearly had to strain to move it once the lock had released, holding it open for Ianto to step through and then releasing it, leaving it to swing shut with a clang.

Inside was dark, so utterly pervasive was the black that Ianto at first thought there was no illumination whatsoever. For a brief terrifying moment, he wondered if Jack was going to leave him locked up in the bowels of the Hub forever (because, surely, that was a possibility if one wanted to get rid of troublesome employees – Ianto was reasonably sure there were parts of the Hub that made Floor Fourteen of Torchwood Tower look like a cheap carnival trick). Then he felt Jack’s fingers touch his wrist, and realised that he could hear the other man breathing next to him.

“Just wait for your eyes to adapt,” Jack said, softly, and Ianto willed himself to calm, blinking rapidly in an attempt to get his eyes to function properly.

It took a while, but ever so slowly, Ianto became aware of shapes in the darkness. He briefly entertained the notion that he was hallucinating, before he realised that the soft purple light was threaded through the walls, leaving Jack visible in silhouette, and rendering the tunnels into an ethereal, alien version of themselves.

Jack tugged his wrist. “Come on,” he said, and started leading Ianto deeper.

As they moved through dimly lit corridors, the glow from the walls started to slowly increasing, and with it came an increase in temperature. The air was slowly becoming warmer, thicker and more humid, and, bizarrely, left the scent and taste of nutmeg lingering when he breathed in. There was definitely some sort of ventilation, he could feel the air currents shifting against his skin, but he couldn’t hear the fans, but he could hear...

What was that he could hear?

He slowed, straining to hear, and it brought Jack to a near halt as well. Jack turned, and now the light was strong enough that he could make out the smile that graced Jack’s lips.

“You can hear it better this way,” he said, and Ianto needed no encouragement to follow him now.

He realised, as they passed through corridors that were no doubt originally designed in exactly the

same manner as the featureless concrete tunnels throughout the underground complex that was simply called the ‘Hub’, that the threading of purple light wasn’t through the walls, it was on top of them, tenaciously gripping the concrete like creeping ivy. He reached out and ran his fingers across one of the lines of light as they walked, and was startled to find it wasn’t a line, but a tendril of some kind. It had a rubbery texture, and was faintly moist. He sniffed the thin residue on his fingers, and smelt nutmeg. The presence of the tendrils grew denser as they moved, and the light grew ever brighter.

Eventually, they stopped, Jack pulling them down a side corridor. They didn’t seem to be heading for where the light was brightest, Jack stopping some way clear of that. He was briefly tempted to ask why they weren’t continuing, but then he saw the rapt look on Jack’s face as the other man whispered, “Listen” and he understood.

At first Ianto thought he was listening to some piece of metal creaking in fatigue, but then he realised that the sound was too clean for that. But he really had no other basis for comparison. It sounded like nothing Ianto had ever heard.

Ianto, while he had still lived and worked in London, had once been travelling via the Tube, and one of the buskers that day had been an opera singer. Usually you heard the music of the buskers on the main thoroughfare, but her voice had resonated down through the tunnels in a way he had never heard before and he had, somewhat embarrassedly, found himself entranced by the ethereal sound that had echoed, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. It was the closest comparison he could think of for the notes that slowly rang through the dimly lit tunnels.

And then, after a moment, other notes, harmonies and discordances, introduced themselves slowly into the mix, combining and clashing and somehow, even though the cadence was utterly alien, and some of the notes didn’t sound right, and some of them sounded like words, Ianto realised it for what it was: music.

“You can hear it best from here,” Jack said.

“What is it?” Ianto asked.

Jack smiled, and his expression was one of quiet awe. “Omoikane,” he said, simply.

Ianto frowned, opening his mouth to ask, when he remembered where he had seen that word before. It had been in an encyclopaedia, and he had been looking for another entry when it had caught his eye. Omoikane, the Shinto god of knowledge.

His breath caught. “The computer,” he said, “This is the computer? I thought...”

Jack nodded slowly. “Installed by Torchwood Cardiff’s Miss Lovelace at the turn of the 20th century, from a cutting from the London nodes,” he said. “It’s infiltrated several sublevels, but never extended beyond that. No one’s ever needed to come down here before. I stumbled down here and realised...” He laughed, and there was a carefree note to the laughter that Ianto wasn’t used to hearing, “I don’t think it’s intelligent, the way we think of intelligence. But it’s more than a dumb calculator. It’s sentient, but in a way our brains don’t understand. But it sings to itself. I don’t think London ever realised. They kept their computer under much tighter reign, while this one has had a

hundred years to grow as it liked. No one knows that it lives here, this alien lifeform under the Hub. It's happy, I think, it likes being used. But I don't think anyone except me ever knew it sang."

He glanced at Ianto. "And, of course, now you know as well."

Ianto, the alien song ringing in his ears, stared at Jack, as the Captain reached out and ran his fingers across a bundle of tendrils that draped down from the ceiling and spread across the wall. They seemed to tremble slightly with the touch, and Jack laughed, delighted. In an instant, Ianto realised that Jack loved this alien thing, loved the strangeness of the Universe beyond this small world, and knew, in his heart of hearts, that Jack would never see the beauty that surrounded him here, on this planet.

For a moment, Ianto honestly, truly, *hated* Jack Harkness.

He wanted to grab Jack, and shake him, and point out all the things that made life on this planet worth living. Perhaps he wasn't best qualified to make such observations, or perhaps he was the only one who could make them. He'd lived his life, and died twice over, his whole world come crashing down on him, and he'd made his decision, his conscious choice, to come back to the world, to come back to Torchwood, because there was a part of him that knew there was something worthwhile in it all. Because if he hadn't thought that there was some little part of the world that was good, he would have let the Quantum Bomb explode, and had done with it.

Jack looked up at him, a curiously unguarded expression on his face. The moment passed, and Ianto smiled.

"You wanted to share your secrets," he said, and leaned forward. "So share. I want to know *everything*."

- Fin -