

GUILT

A man in a red shirt is shown from the chest up, leaning over and placing his hands on the shoulders of another man. The man in the red shirt has a calm, supportive expression. The man in the blue shirt is looking down with a distressed or guilty expression, his hand near his mouth. The background is a dark, textured wall. The overall mood is somber and emotional.

etmuse

Chapter One

“Like the suit by the way.”

Ianto halted momentarily, a tiny frisson of pleasure snaking through his mind as he felt Jack’s appreciative stare burn into him. A second later, the pleasure dissipated, replaced by self-directed anger; guilt for allowing himself to respond to the charismatic Captain when that had definitely not been part of the plan. Just for a fraction of a moment, he had forgotten the reason he was doing this, forgotten quite *why* it was so important that he land a job at Torchwood 3.

Lisa.

His beautiful Lisa, so full of life, trapped inside a metal shell, clinging onto life by her fingertips. He had to save her, and getting into Torchwood Cardiff was their best hope. He had told Jack that morning that she was deceased, and he was desperately afraid that his lie might become truth.

He hadn’t been able to save her when the Cybermen attacked. The mysterious ‘ghosts’ that had troubled him for weeks, finally materialising into something truly horrific. He had dodged Cybermen and Daleks alike as the battle intensified, his only aim to find Lisa and get them out of there. He’d been too late. He’d failed her.

Dragging her from the conversion unit, they had stumbled through the darkened hallways of the ruined building, the pain from his own injuries forgotten in his desperate need to help Lisa. The authorities couldn’t, or wouldn’t, help. He’d heard the soldiers being given their orders as he and Lisa struggled down empty corridors. *If there are any Cybermen left, destroy them.* He couldn’t let that happen to Lisa, and from that moment on, he knew he was on his own.

At first, Lisa had been pulling through remarkably well, her body holding up despite the metallic components of her incomplete ‘upgrade’. All too soon, however, things began to deteriorate. Systems slowly failing as the full effects of the mutilation set in.

Ianto had drawn upon long-forgotten skills gained during his misspent youth, sneaking into the heavily guarded tower to retrieve various components from the conversion units. Rebuilding them, with Lisa’s guidance, as a life-support system. He had been forced to resort to even more trickery when it became clear that over-the-counter painkillers would not be strong enough, and his own prescription for stronger analgesics had been exhausted. He had employed all manner of deception to acquire the medication Lisa needed, but even those supplies were beginning to dry up.

Lisa’s condition had worsened each day. Ianto had cried the day he’d been forced to intubate her, her broken body no longer able to breathe independently. Without access to significantly more advanced technology, Ianto knew he would soon lose her.

And thus, barely a month after the fall of Torchwood One, he had relocated them to Cardiff, hiring a van and driving through the dead of night to minimise exposure.

He remembered the rumours about Captain Jack Harkness that had filtered through to his department at Torchwood One. A little covert research around Cardiff quickly verified them, and his strategy to persuade the older man to hire him was quickly formed. Finding the pterodactyl had really been a stroke of luck, although Ianto had his suspicions that his dinosaur hunting technique may not have been the only factor contributing to Jack's offer.

Still, no matter the motives, he was in. One step closer to saving Lisa.

As he walked away from Jack, a tear escaped and slid silently down Ianto's cheek.

Everything was going to plan, and he would finally have the resources to help Lisa. So why wasn't he more pleased?

Chapter Two

Quietly closing the door behind him, Ianto quickly checked the readings from the various pieces of equipment keeping his girlfriend alive, replacing the bags on the drips that provided her with nutrients and medication.

Lisa was rarely awake these days, the combination of painkillers and mild sedatives keeping her comfortable but perpetually drowsy. He hated keeping her this way, but the painkillers alone would not be enough. He'd seen the constant pain in Lisa's eyes before he had hit on the right combination of drugs.

"I got it, the job," he started quietly, unsure if Lisa was awake enough to hear him, but needing to say it out loud. He'd grown used to the one-sided conversations in the last weeks, the machinery helping her breathe preventing her from speaking even when she was alert.

"I'm not sure if it was my coffee making or my dinosaur wrangling that impressed Captain Harkness, but I got it."

He'd deliberately skipped the 'flirt with Jack' part of his plan when he'd outlined it to Lisa, finding himself unable to even suggest the subject. Given his own unexpected response to the man's chiselled good looks and charm, he was even more reluctant to broach the topic.

"I start tomorrow," he continued, shaking off the memory of laughing on top of Jack earlier that evening, the sexual tension between them thick in the air. "It might take a few days, but I'll find somewhere, then we can get you out of here."

He looked around at the dank storage unit. It was the best he could afford on what savings he had, but all in all pretty miserable. Getting Lisa into Torchwood had to be an improvement on this.

Mind skipping forward, he considered all he had to do in the next days. Everything he had been able to discover about the Cardiff base suggested that, despite the vast network of tunnels, vaults and archives, only a small area was actually in regular use.

Being newly employed would give him plenty of excuse to explore, and he was sure he could find some out of the way room for Lisa.

Actually getting her there was a plan for another day, once he had a chance to scope out the inner workings of the base.

A small pang of dismay ran through him as he thought of the deception he was proposing. He didn't enjoy practising dishonesty. His late teens had been a mess of lies, cons and petty theft, as he rebelled in the wake of the devastating loss of his father.

After he had been convicted, he had put that period of his life behind him, determined never again to descend into that murky world. Yet here he was, planning a mass of deception again. Although this time, he rationalised, it was all for a good cause.

It still niggled at him though, that kernel of guilt. He was rapidly becoming aware that he had more or less flirted his way into a job, and keeping a secret like Lisa could easily be perceived as a betrayal of what he hoped was a tentative friendship. It was the only way though.

This was Torchwood. An organisation that, for all its lofty mission statements, generally wasn't all that accepting of anything different. Alien threats were there to be eliminated and their technology scavenged; whether they had ever really been a threat to start with was never a matter open for debate.

UNIT would have executed Lisa on the spot, and his experience with Torchwood suggested that they would do the same.

Although...

Every story he had ever heard about Jack Harkness that *didn't* involve outrageous sexual exploits – however few and far between they may be - had told of his apparently legendary fights with those in command of Torchwood. It was generally accepted that he and Yvonne had never been on the best of terms.

Having met the man, Ianto didn't think he seemed the type to indiscriminately execute anything vaguely resembling a threat, and his help would no doubt be invaluable. But...

Lisa shifted slightly beside him, a slight moan escaping her unconscious lips. Increasing the rate on her medication drip slightly, he gazed down at her wistfully.

Should he really risk Lisa's life on a hunch? Could he live with himself if he failed?

Chapter Three

Ianto looked at his watch again.

8.06am.

Jack hadn't exactly given him a time, *or a place*, the previous night, so he had relied upon his intuition and turned up at 8 outside the tourist office. He knew there were other entrances, but having met Jack here before, this seemed like the logical choice.

8.07am.

However, as the minutes slowly ticked past, he was beginning to have his doubts. Was he too early? Too late? He was almost certain they would have CCTV coverage of this path, so if anyone was inside they should know he was here.

8.08am.

Taking a deep breath, he shoved his hands deep into the pockets of the dark suit he wore. Despite telling himself that he wasn't affected by Jack's opinion of his clothing, he had unconsciously reached for the suit this morning when dressing, Jack's voice from the previous night echoing quietly in a corner of his mind.

Like the suit by the way.

He looked out over the bay as yet another minute ticked by.

8.09am.

Enjoying the view, he nearly didn't notice when the door beside him finally creaked open, revealing a smirking Jack. Masking his nerves, he smiled back as he allowed himself to be ushered into what was supposed to pass as a tourist office.

A quick glance around told Ianto that the current team weren't too particular about the authenticity of their cover office. What few leaflets there were looked out of date and a thin layer of dust was testament to the rarity of anyone actually sitting up here.

Ignoring the state of the office, Jack swept directly through an opening in the wall, obviously expecting Ianto to follow.

After a slightly uncomfortably silent trip down in an elevator, Ianto stepped through the opening left by a large cog door and took in his surroundings. Whilst intellectually he knew that the Cardiff base was significantly different to Torchwood Tower, he wasn't quite prepared for quite *how* different. He could see Jack looking at him expectantly, waiting on some reaction. Taking a more thorough look around, Ianto inadvertently let his thoughts slip.

"It's... a bit of a mess."

Jack grinned ruefully. "You did offer your services as a butler."

Ianto shot him a look. "And you said you didn't need one." Jack cocked his head, conceding the point.

Waving an arm expansively, Jack gestured towards a Japanese woman who spun around from her computer screen as he spoke.

“Ianto Jones, Toshiko Sato. Toshiko is our resident computer genius.” Tosh smiled, nodding warmly at Ianto, who couldn’t help but smile back.

“And this,” Jack continued, spinning around to point out another dark haired woman, “is my second in command, Suzie Costello.” Suzie lifted an arm in greeting before turning back to the project in front of her. Thinking for a second, Ianto realised that he recognised the pair. They were the agents he had spotted scavenging tech from the ruins of Torchwood Tower while he had been doing the same.

“It’s barely eight o’clock, so Owen isn’t here yet. You’ll meet him later.”

When Jack offered no further introductions, Ianto inferred that he had already informed the team of his impending arrival. Jack had already taken several steps into the Hub when he turned back to offer Ianto a grin. “In the meantime, how about a little tour?”

Ianto’s mind presented him with a myriad of considerations as Jack showed him around the Hub. Keen eyes noted passageways that were ignored as they passed, shrouded in darkness and ideal for hiding a secret.

The neat freak in him despaired over the empty pizza boxes and disposable coffee cups scattered everywhere. Jack really *had* underestimated the state of the place. The abundance of coffee cups astounded him; especially considering the coffee machine he had spotted lurking under the dust in the small kitchen area. Jack had sighed when he pointed it out.

“None of us ever really figured out how to use it. I’m convinced there’s alien tech in there somewhere because it doesn’t work like any other coffee machine on the planet.”

Ianto had simply smiled, and put ‘*Figure out coffee machine*’ on his mental to-do list, right under, ‘*Tidy this damn place up*’.

The mood had been light-hearted and flirtatious throughout the tour, but Ianto sensed a distinct sobering in Jack’s countenance as they headed down to the vaults. They passed several Perspex-walled cells, Ianto noticing that several contained subdued Weevils.

Jack stopped outside one, gazing sadly at its occupant. “I hate keeping them like this,” Jack started suddenly after several minutes of silence. Ianto said nothing, content to listen. “I wish we could really do something for them, but we don’t even know where they came from.”

Jack sighed, “But we can’t just let them roam free around Cardiff, attacking indiscriminately. And I refuse to murder them if we don’t absolutely have to, so I guess we don’t really have another choice.” Shooting Ianto a sideways glance, Jack must have noticed something in the younger man’s face, as his expression grew concerned. “What is it?”

Ianto shook his head, his emotions conflicted.

“I can’t do this.”

Chapter Four

“I can’t do this.”

If Ianto thought he had been conflicted the night before, it was nothing compared to his current state of mind. The temptation to just confess all and see where the chips fell was nearly overwhelming, but only *nearly*. Almost as strong was the urge to run.

The only thing he *was* certain of was that he couldn’t continue with his original plan. He would find another way to get Lisa the help she needed, he just couldn’t do it like *this*.

“Can’t do what?” Jack looked perplexed.

“This. This job. I just... I can’t. Not like this.” Ianto knew he wasn’t explaining himself well, but his normally collected thoughts were scattered. He was having trouble formulating a response that didn’t involve spilling all his secrets. It didn’t help that part of his brain *wanted* to spill them.

Ignoring the confusion evident on Jack’s face, Ianto turned to walk away, choking down a sob that threatened to erupt. He had only taken a few steps when he felt Jack’s hand gently grasp his shoulder, spinning him back to face him.

“I don’t understand.” Jack shook his head. “Yesterday you were desperate to work here, and now you’re, what, quitting before you even start? What’s the problem? What do you mean, *not like this*?”

Ianto took several steps back, trying to escape the feel of Jack’s warm hand on his shoulder. “Yesterday was... I was... I just...” Closing his eyes, Ianto attempted to summon some inner calm before he spoke again. “I was lying to you - deceiving you - and that’s not me. Or at least, that’s not who I *want* to be, not anymore. So, I can’t do this. I just... can’t.”

“Ianto...” Jack’s brow furrowed; Ianto’s speech had done nothing to really clarify the point. “You’re still not making sense to me here. Just tell me what the problem is and I’m sure we can figure it out.”

The urge to do just that, to unload his problems and let Jack help him ‘figure it out’, was growing stronger, but fear kept Ianto resisting. “I wish I could. You have no idea how much I wish I could.” Despair started to well up inside him, and his voice broke, “But I really can’t. I... I can’t... Can’t risk it.”

Overwhelmed by his emotions, Ianto didn’t notice Jack moving towards him, until he was right in front of Ianto, gripping his biceps and trying to catch his gaze.

“Ok. Breathe for me, Ianto. You need to calm down.” Jack’s voice was low and soothing as his hands smoothed down Ianto’s arms. “You can’t hyperventilate on me now; Owen’s not here to save you yet.”

As Jack had no doubt intended, Ianto felt a snort of laughter bubble up at that, and his breathing slowly began to even out. “That’s better,” Jack grinned, and stood back, giving Ianto more room to breathe.

“Now, how about you tell me what’s going on?” He held a hand up, stopping Ianto before he could interrupt, “And before you say you *can’t*, I think the way you just reacted says that you *need* to tell *someone*.”

Ianto blinked, knowing he was right but still unsure of Jack’s reaction to the truth. He was relieved when Jack turned away, indicating for him to follow. Mutely he did as requested, following Jack through the Hub to his office. The short walk gave him a few minutes to think, and he used them to consider his options.

1. Say nothing and run.

While part of his consciousness was screaming at him to do just that, Ianto knew that it wasn’t really an option. It would leave him searching for another new way to help Lisa, and that was only if he could get away quickly enough.

He wasn’t stupid enough to think that he could just walk away with his memories entirely intact now that he’d been inside the Hub. Especially considering how suspicious running away would make Jack and his team. No, that option was out.

2. Lie. Cover up the lie with another one and stick to the original plan.

And he’d be back where he was half an hour ago: dreading the thought of routinely practicing the art of deceit and indirectly betraying his new colleagues. Combining the slightly sick feeling the thought brought to his stomach, with the cynical surety that Jack’s now heightened curiosity would be able to see through any new lie, led Ianto to only one conclusion. That wasn’t really an option either.

That left him with only one viable solution to his problem.

3. Tell Jack everything and hope my hunch is right.

Chapter Five

3. Tell Jack everything and hope my hunch is right.

Jack led the way into his office, closing the glass door behind them as he urged Ianto to sit. Ianto was relieved that Tosh and Suzie had apparently found something to keep them busy in another part of the Hub. He wasn’t sure he could get through his confession with an audience.

Sitting awkwardly across the desk from Jack, he stared at his hands in his lap as he pondered the best way to start.

Jack's voice interrupted his contemplation, "If it helps, I promise to do my very best to just listen, and not judge."

Ianto took a deep breath, mustering the courage to meet Jack's blue gaze.

"You were right. About yesterday. I *was* desperate to get this job." Finding Jack's stare a little too intense, Ianto lifted his head, focusing on a patch of bare wall near the ceiling. "Have been for weeks. I still am."

Swallowing past the lump in his throat, he looked straight at Jack. "But not for me." Despite the unshed tears beginning to cloud his vision, he could see the gears working in Jack's brain. "I have to help her. I have to find a cure."

Jack's mouth fell slack, his eyes searching Ianto's face as he attempted to make sense of his statement.

The gritty determination behind his gaze was tempered by the gentleness in his voice. "Help who? Find a cure for what?"

Ianto's throat burned tightly as he focused on Jack and uttered the single word that would make going back impossible, "Lisa."

The exact moment the significance of the name registered in Jack's consciousness was clearly visible on his face. "Lisa? As in your *girlfriend*, Lisa?"

Ianto nodded sadly, his eyes now glassy as he fought to retain his composure.

"But..."

"I know, I said she was dead," Ianto interrupted, his voice small and quiet, "but she's not. But she's so sick and in so much pain. Torchwood *has* to have something that can help. So, I thought... I was going to..." he trailed off, a tinge of shame joining the mix of fear and sorrow etched on his face, as he let Jack intuit what he had planned.

"And then you decided not to?" Jack prompted softly, apparently holding to his promise to listen to the whole story before making judgements.

"I never really *wanted* to." Ianto's voice was tight as he forced the words out. "Then... then I met you, and I came down here, and... I just couldn't go through with it."

Passion emanated from his very soul as he lifted his gaze from where it had dropped to the desk. "But I still have to help her. *We* have to help her," he implored. His eyes were shining earnestly as he pled his case to the Captain.

"Lisa worked for Torchwood. She... she practically got me the job. She'd been there over a year before I started; was higher up than me, even had her own research team." His tone was wistful as he allowed the memories to flow over him.

“She had *nothing* to do with the ghost shifts though,” he rushed to clarify, seeing the suspicion brewing in Jack’s eyes. “Neither did I. That was Yvonne’s baby. Only the chosen few worked on that. The rest of us... Well, the rest of us were given the same story they fed the public and told to stay at our posts during the shifts.”

He shook his head, “I didn’t like them and I didn’t believe the ‘ghost’ story. But I never even suspected...” He had to stop and take a breath, steeling himself to continue. “When the Cybermen came, then the Daleks... I just wanted to find Lisa, make sure she was ok so we could get out of there.”

His composure was beginning to slip. Talking about the battle, taking his mind back into the thick of it felt like he was digging up old ghosts who should stay buried. “It was chaos. People were running everywhere. Screaming. Crashing. I... I just couldn’t find her. I had to hide, because there were Daleks and... and Cybermen everywhere. But then they just... weren’t, they vanished somehow.”

“That’s when I found her. She was... She’d been ...”

Ianto felt a warm hand cover his own, Jack’s gaze boring into him. “What did you find, Ianto?” he questioned quietly.

“Lisa... She was in a conversion unit. Half converted.”

“What?!”

Chapter Six

“*What?!*”

Jack couldn’t restrain the exclamation at Ianto’s revelation that his girlfriend, the girlfriend he wanted Torchwood to *save*, had been converted.

“Your girlfriend is a *Cyberman* and you were going to bring her into the *Hub*?” he cried incredulously, jumping to his feet. “Are you insane? Or are you just trying to get us all killed?”

A vague glimmer in the back of his mind suggested that he may be overreacting a little, but he didn’t care. He knew exactly how much of a threat the Cybermen posed and he couldn’t let that happen.

He opened his mouth to continue his tirade, but Ianto cut him off before he could utter a single word. “She’s *not* a *Cyberman*,” he stated forcefully, getting to his own feet, mirroring Jack’s stance perfectly. “She’s still Lisa. I *know* she is.”

“Ianto, if she’s been converted...”

“But she hasn’t, not properly,” Ianto insisted. “The process was never completed.”

Jack was confused. What he remembered about the ‘upgrade’ process wouldn’t allow for survival at an incomplete stage.

His confusion must have shown in his expression, as Ianto's next words offered an explanation. "It happened near the end of the Canary Wharf battle. The Cybermen needed more soldiers, and fast. They started upgrading whole bodies, instead of just transplanting brains."

"The machines must have switched off when the Cybermen and Daleks disappeared. Lisa was only part way through the process. I dragged her out." Ianto's expression was beseeching as he stared at Jack. "I've done what I can, but please, *please*, you have to help me help her."

Jack sank back into his seat, exhaling slowly as he considered how to continue. "And if I don't - if I can't - what then?"

Ianto's face crumpled slightly as he too sat back down. "I don't know."

Jack leant back in his chair, observing the young man staring at his hands opposite him. Inside, Jack was conflicted. Ianto had clearly experienced more than any normal person his age should have to, and he hated the thought of adding to that. But, on the other hand, could he really risk the possibility of restarting the Cyber-invasion from right there in the Hub?

He could see that Ianto truly believed that Lisa's conversion had been stopped early enough that she would not pose a risk. But it was also painfully clear that Ianto loved Lisa very much, and Jack knew from experience that love that strong could be blinding.

It was a very real possibility that Ianto, after all the hardships he had endured to keep Lisa alive, was seeing what he wanted to see.

Jack was also aware that even if he agreed to try, there were no guarantees that anything could really be done. They had a lot of advanced technology in the archives, and the combined skills of his team were remarkable. But reversing Cyber-technology was a world away from anything they had done before.

If he agreed to help, he might have to face the task of telling Ianto that - even with Torchwood's resources - nothing could be done.

He knew that facing up to that would break Ianto's heart just as surely as an outright refusal.

Closing his eyes, he made a decision. "Ianto..."

Chapter Seven

"Ianto..." The younger man, who had been sitting quietly as Jack pondered the options, lifted his head at Jack's voice. "I... Look, I'm not promising anything, but... I want to help... But there has to be one condition."

"What? Anything." Hope blossomed in Ianto's eyes.

“I can only try to help - only have her come to the Hub - if she isn’t a threat.” He held up a hand, staunching Ianto’s torrent of words before they could leave his mouth. “I know you said she isn’t, but I’m sorry, I need more than just your belief.”

He could see the conflict raging behind Ianto’s brilliant blue eyes. Despite his confession, it was clear the younger man hadn’t quite decided if he could fully trust Jack or not. The moment he made the decision was obvious, as his chin lifted and he set his shoulders.

“I’ll take you to see her. You can see for yourself that she’s not a threat; that she needs help.”

Jack nodded. He knew that allowing someone else into Lisa’s world couldn’t have been an easy choice for Ianto and he suspected that his next words wouldn’t be exactly what Ianto wanted to hear.

“I might have to take Toshiko with me.”

“What? Why?” A slightly scared look had come over Ianto’s face and Jack blew out a breath.

“I told you, I can’t rely on your belief alone. In this situation, I don’t feel I can rely on my own intuition either. Tosh is much better with tech than I am. She might have something that can actually provide proof - one way or the other.”

“But why does that mean she has to come with us?”

Given Ianto’s general unease, Jack doubted that the realisation that the rest of the team would find out about Lisa if she was brought to the Hub had hit him yet. And even if it had, he clearly was not keen on the idea of any of them finding out before the final decision had been made.

“Because Tosh is probably the only one who would actually understand the stream of data that would come out of whatever piece of equipment was involved. Unfortunately she hasn’t come up with anything yet that just spits out ‘Dangerous’ or ‘Not a threat’.”

“I’m sure she could explain it, but whether either of us would actually understand is doubtful.”

Ianto worried his bottom lip between his teeth, looking thoughtful.

Despite the topic of conversation, Jack couldn’t help but allow his gaze to be drawn to Ianto’s lips. The memory of Ianto on top of him the night before was still fresh in his mind, and the temptation to kiss the younger man was strong.

He pushed the thought away; regardless of his attraction to Ianto, he knew that nothing could happen. Ianto clearly loved Lisa and Jack wasn’t going to do anything to get in the way of that.

“Do you trust her?” Ianto’s question snapped Jack out of his contemplation. It took him a moment to bring his mind back into their previous conversation and realise he was referring to Toshiko.

“With my life.” Jack knew instinctively that Tosh would understand Ianto’s predicament. She too had gone to extremes - resorting to deception and subterfuge - to protect a loved one. “She’ll understand.”

Ianto sighed softly, slowly nodding his head.

“Okay.”

* * * *

They had given Toshiko an abbreviated version of Ianto’s story, skipping some of the more horrific details. Jack had done most of the talking, realising that Ianto would probably struggle to go through the explanation a second time within an hour.

Tosh had been, in turn, curious, shocked and sympathetic. When they reached the point in the story where the necessity for her involvement became apparent, her face took on an intensely thoughtful look for a brief moment before she assured them she had just the thing.

Less than half an hour later, the three were on the road, heading for Lisa’s temporary home.

A slightly awkward silence had fallen over the SUV, none of them able to quiet the turbulent thoughts in their minds enough to make small talk. None of them were really willing to discuss what – who - they were on their way to see.

The stillness of the car was broken only by Ianto’s brief directions whenever they reached a junction.

They pulled up outside the block of storage units and Jack found that he had a lump in his throat. No one should have to live somewhere like this. Ianto stopped them outside Lisa’s unit.

“I need to go in first. Even if she isn’t awake, I want to explain to her before she sees you. I don’t want to upset her with you two just barging in there.”

Understanding and agreeing, Jack and Tosh held back, allowing Ianto to go on ahead. He reappeared almost ten minutes later, ushering them into the dank, dimly lit room.

“She’s resting now, but I told her what’s going on, anyway.” His breath hitched, “I don’t know if she can hear me when she’s out cold, but...”

Jack and Tosh smiled warmly at him as the nervous young man led them across the room to the conversion unit that housed Lisa.

They both noted the numerous leads monitoring her vitals and the nearly as numerous tubes that snaked in and out of her body.

“You did all this?” Tosh asked quietly, awe evident in her voice.

Ianto nodded. “I had to. Anything to help her.”

Jack and Tosh were struck anew by the sheer determination that drove the young man. “Lisa helped me figure it out at first, before she needed the help breathing. She was always better at biology than me.” A faint smile graced Ianto’s lips as a memory from a happier time surfaced.

Pulling a chunky device from her bag, Tosh stepped closer to Lisa. “Ok, so we all know that the basis real danger the Cybermen posed comes from the lack of emotion in their thought processes. This device will let me scan Lisa’s brain activity. It’ll let us know for sure if the Cyberman thought processes have taken over or not.”

Ianto moved to Lisa’s side, taking her hand in his as he nodded at Tosh to proceed.

The scan took several minutes and neither man could make any sense of the streams of diagrams and numbers popping up on the device’s screen. Tosh was studying the data carefully as she moved the scanner across Lisa’s head.

The machine beeped and Tosh looked up seriously to meet Jack and Ianto’s expectant expressions.

Chapter Eight

Tosh took a deep breath before grinning at the worried men staring at her. “Well, according to these readings - despite appearances, Lisa is still very much human.”

The smile this announcement produced on Ianto’s face practically lit up the whole room. Despite his conviction of Lisa’s continuing humanity, there had been a hidden kernel of doubt deep in his subconscious and Tosh’s words had just quashed it.

Jack was still torn.

He was relieved that Tosh’s scan hadn’t shown Lisa to be a cybernetic monster. He really hadn’t looked forward to the possibility that he would be forced to ‘deal with’ her. It was never an option he liked to carry out, and in this case he had feared that Lisa wouldn’t have been the only one lost.

The implications of Tosh’s statement had also rekindled a few of his fears from earlier that morning. Lisa’s condition was even worse than he had imagined and he didn’t want to get Ianto’s hopes up too much.

Yet, he couldn’t crush what little hope the young man did have. Ianto’s fighting spirit was what had kept Lisa alive this long, and if she was to have any chance of recovery, he would need to draw on it again.

He moved closer to Ianto, dropping a hand onto his shoulder. Ianto twisted to look at him, keeping Lisa's hand in his. "We'll do everything we can," Jack promised softly. "But please stay realistic." He let his eyes drift back to Lisa's supine form. "There might not be much we can do that will really help."

Ianto's expression remained resolutely positive. "I know that. I do. But it's got to be better than what I can do alone. I don't think I could save her on my own."

Jack fixed Ianto with an intense look. "Don't you *dare* underestimate yourself Ianto Jones. You got yourself and Lisa out of Canary Wharf and kept her going all this time. That's no small achievement."

Ianto scoffed self-deprecatingly. "Really, I just got lucky. Without Lisa's help, without..."

Jack held up a finger, silencing Ianto's rambling. "You witnessed a horrific massacre and you haven't had a complete mental collapse, that's more than luck, Ianto, that's *you*."

The two men shared a fervent look. Jack silently - desperately - urging Ianto to hold onto that inner strength that had served him so well.

For a long moment, the room was still, silent but for the soft whooshes and clicks of Lisa's life support system.

Tosh's voice broke the hush, momentarily surprising the two men who had almost forgotten she was there.

"Is she awake often?"

Ianto turned to face her, shaking his head sadly. "No. Not anymore." He reached over to caress Lisa's cheek, his fingertips soft against her dark skin. "At first, yes. But then the pain got too much, and her breathing gave out."

He exhaled roughly. "I can't keep her awake without putting her through agony, and I hate to see her like that. I've been giving her the strongest painkillers I could get my hands on. Not always strictly legally." He paused, his cheeks pinkening slightly. "But they're just not enough."

Tosh leant over Lisa's body to grip his arm. "We're going to help her, Ianto. Owen has a whole cupboard full of painkillers; he'll find something to stop her agony."

Tosh's mention of Owen reminded Jack of what was ahead of them. "Speaking of Owen, he should be at the Hub by now." He cocked his head at Ianto. "And we should probably be getting back there."

Tosh nodded her agreement. "Heaven knows what Suzie thinks, the two of us running out of there with the new guy barely an hour after he's in the door." Jack smirked. He knew what *he* would be thinking.

“Right then.” He squared his shoulders beneath his greatcoat, a plan beginning to form. “We go back, we talk to Owen and Suzie.” He took a moment to check for Ianto’s reaction to the implication in those words, relieved to see his minute nod. “And we go from there.”

Chapter Nine

Owen and Suzie reacted to the tale much as Jack had expected. Both had initially been shocked and dismayed and slightly worried at the revelation, their gazes flying to Ianto, who was once again allowing Jack to do the bulk of the storytelling.

Once the shock had worn off, Jack could see that Suzie was just itching to have the chance to examine the technology of the Cyber conversion unit more closely. She had been curious about the machines ever since the fall of Canary Wharf. But Jack had forbidden any research to be done, insisting instead that any intact units they came across when scavenging the tower should be destroyed. It struck him as slightly ironic that the one unit they missed – due to Ianto having taken it already – would now be brought to the Hub anyway.

Outwardly, Owen had very little reaction. To anyone who didn’t know him well, or who wasn’t familiar with his history, his cynical mask would appear to be uncracked. Jack knew him better than that, though, and could see that behind the sardonic façade, Owen sympathised with Ianto’s plight to save his girlfriend.

Whether Owen was looking forward to the medical challenges inherent in the pursuit would remain to be seen, but it was definitely something different, making a change from Owen’s usual tasks of autopsying the aliens too dangerous to save, researching a more effective weevil spray and patching up his fellow team members on a regular basis.

With the background explained and the results of that morning’s visit shared, a momentary silence fell over the group as each considered the magnitude of the task they had ahead.

“We can’t leave her in that miserable storage unit, for a start,” Tosh began.

“I agree,” Jack nodded. “It’s no place for anyone to live if they don’t have to.”

Ianto sighed guiltily. “I…”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Jack interrupted. “You did what you could with what you had.”

“So we’re bringing her here?” Suzie asked, making eye contact with each of the team in turn.

“It makes the most sense,” Jack answered. “All of our equipment is here, and we can keep an eye on how she’s doing without major disruption.”

“But where? And how?” Owen questioned pointedly. “I doubt she’d want to be out there in the main floor, and the vaults wouldn’t be much better than a cheap storage unit.”

“We could clear out one of those rooms just into the corridor down to the archives,” Tosh suggested. “I don’t actually know what’s in them, but we’ve never needed anything from them, so anything worth keeping could be stored somewhere further into the archives.”

“It’s definitely a possibility.” Jack looked thoughtful. “There are a few other corners around this place that might be suitable too. We’ll need to investigate the various options.”

He steepled his fingers under his chin, elbows leaning on the boardroom table. “As for how, I’m thinking we’re gonna need a van. The SUV just isn’t going to be big enough.”

He caught Ianto’s eyes, noticing how brightly uneasiness was shining in their depths. “What is it, Ianto?”

“It’s just.” Ianto shook his head slightly. “It’s not that it’s a bad plan. I just... I just don’t feel right that we’re making all these decisions about Lisa’s future without even talking to her.” His voice cracked a little as he continued. “I know she won’t be able to reply, but I have to at least wake her up and talk to her about this.”

Despite the threat of tears in his choked voice, his gaze was steely as he looked around the team, almost daring them to disagree.

Although none of them could truly see any reason why Lisa should not be included in the decision process, the determination on Ianto’s face would have been enough to quell any argument any of them could come up with. It was clear that their newest colleague was a force to be reckoned with when it came to things he cared about.

Jack nodded once, his eyes flickering meaningfully at the medic. “Owen?”

“Sure,” Owen sighed, standing up from the table and heading to the medical bay.

* * * *

Jack and Owen leant against the wall of the storage unit, watching as Ianto perched on the stool next to Lisa’s head. Owen had switched her drip from Ianto’s concoction of painkillers and sedatives to a single dose of high strength painkillers about forty minutes ago, and it was just a waiting game for her to rouse.

A few minutes later, Ianto’s head lifted as Lisa stirred.

“Lisa?”

Her eyes fluttered open, finding his. Her expression betrayed her surprise and relief that she was awake and yet in minimal pain.

“Lisa, I have two people from Torchwood Cardiff here with me. We’re going to get you better.”

Chapter Ten

Ianto’s words brought a wave of panic over Lisa; Torchwood knew about her. It took Ianto a while, but eventually he managed to calm her down enough so he could explain. After his soothing words, Lisa slowly accepted their fledgling plan, feeling thankful that someone was going to help her – help Ianto.

An old storage room, just off the main Hub floor, had been cleared out. Its disorganised contents had been added to the growing ‘to be archived... eventually’ pile that had been accumulating since long before Jack took control of Torchwood Three.

The empty room had been scrubbed and sterilised. Ianto had taken pains to try to disguise the fact that it was still an old storage room in an underground base.

Just under a fortnight after Ianto had begun his new job, he and the rest of the team had assembled in the dead of night to perform the tricky task of moving Lisa to her new home.

Lisa had, with her permission, been sedated again for the trip. The move itself was fraught with problems – if it hadn’t been for the careful planning-for-all-eventualities approach Ianto had forced the team to take things could have gone downhill very quickly.

Nevertheless, by morning Lisa had been comfortably settled into her new room and was back on the painkiller-only drip.

A week later and things were beginning to settle into a pattern - of sorts. Even without the sedative mixture, Lisa slept a lot. Ianto filled most of his days with his mission to clean and organise the Hub.

Soon the multitude of empty takeaway containers and coffee cups had been disposed of, the coffee machine had been dragged out of forced retirement and he was determined that the Tourist Office would actually resemble one by the end of the week.

The pterodactyl - which Jack had taken to calling ‘Myfanwy’ - was also set with a clean nest at the top of the Hub. Jack treated her like a puppy, leaving her to fly freely around the large expanse of space whenever she wanted.

Ianto wasn’t sure if he was anticipating or dreading a request to sort out the archives. They clearly needed it - and he knew he could do a good job there - but he couldn’t be entirely sure that if he were to take on the task and descend into the murky depths of their disorganisation, he would ever find his way back to the surface.

Torchwood One had employed an entire team of archivists, hawkishly controlling Torchwood's vast amount of information; if Torchwood Three had ever employed even one he would be astounded.

For the most part, even when they were in the Hub and not out investigating some sighting or another, the rest of the team left him to it, not wishing to get in the way of his Hub cleanup.

He did draw the odd guilty look when he sighed over the incredible – and previously assumed impossible – places he found empty coffee cups jammed. Even Owen had apologised once for the state they had allowed the Hub to fall into.

On his third day, after the rescue of the coffee machine, he had made a round of drinks for everyone – saving *them* a trip to the coffee shop and *himself* a set of empty cups to discover and dispose of. If the reactions from the team were any indication, then this part of the 'food and drink' he had offered Jack was going to be taken up with gusto; especially on Jack's part.

When he occasionally found himself frustrated by the lack of movement in the undertaking to help Lisa, he would stop to consider what *had* been done. Lisa was conscious again and the little room at the Hub was undoubtedly more comfortable than her previous situation.

Ianto had found a kindred spirit in Toshiko and she had devoted an evening or two to helping him scour the massive anthology of contacts available to Torchwood in the hope of finding someone with a little more expertise in the subject that they could ask for assistance.

They hadn't found anyone yet, but they were only a tiny way into the list, so Ianto wasn't giving up hope that someone would be found.

Owen had done a short examination upon her arrival, but was giving her a chance to settle into her new home before he started any more invasive investigations.

Just a few days more and the work would truly begin. They would help Lisa, she would be cured and everything would be right again.

Surely?

Chapter Eleven

Ianto hovered protectively, gripping Lisa's hand as Owen located an accessible vein to draw a blood sample.

"You know tea-boy, I *have* actually done this before," Owen commented teasingly. "There's no need to look so worried."

Ianto glared mildly at the medic, responding to both the teasing and the nickname. Owen had been using the moniker for nearly three weeks, starting shortly after the team had discovered Ianto's talents with the coffee machine. Ianto had refrained from

pointing out that he didn't, in fact, deliver tea, knowing the nickname wasn't being used disparagingly - at least, not consciously it wasn't.

Lisa's hand tightened almost imperceptibly around his as Owen slid a needle into her leg and clicked a tube to collect the blood in place. He dropped his head to meet her sleepy gaze, rubbing a thumb comfortingly over the bare skin on the back of her hand.

"Just a couple more and we're done," Owen smiled, drawing on every ounce of bedside manner he could.

He watched as the final tube filled, catching Ianto's best effort at a reassuring face from the corner of his eye. "Here," he wrapped a hand around Ianto's free wrist, tugging his hand across to where he was withdrawing the needle from Lisa's flesh.

"Hold this." Gathering up the blood draw equipment, he pressed Ianto's fingers to the dressing over the puncture.

Ianto was startled momentarily, before flattening his fingers confidently over the square of padded gauze. He studied Lisa's face for a few seconds, relieved to find no unusual distress or pain marring her features. He felt her fingers squeezing his hand again, the message in the gesture unmistakable - 'I'm okay.'

Owen turned back to them, his vials all labelled, and, quickly checking the wound from the blood draw, covered it with a colourful children's plaster.

"Barbie?" Ianto asked, raising an eyebrow at Owen's choice of plasters.

The doctor looked up, meeting Ianto's eyes challengingly. "They're not 'Barbie'," he scowled. "They're 'Action Man'."

Ianto rolled his eyes, "It's still an anatomically incorrect *doll*."

Owen glared at him for a long moment, before his professional mask slipped back into place. "You ready for this next part?" he asked both Ianto and Lisa.

Lisa nodded minutely, utilising the full range of head movement allowed by the life-support unit - Ianto refused to continue using the name 'conversion unit'. Owen directed his glance at him, and he echoed Lisa's consent.

Owen and Ianto crossed the room to a large machine they had, with the rest of the team's help, constructed over the past few days. It somewhat resembled a contemporary MRI or CAT scanner, but was equipped with slightly more advanced technology and had been constructed such that it could be used on Lisa without attempting to remove her from the unit.

Just like an MRI scan, the full body scan Owen wanted to perform on Lisa would be a lengthy process. Staying still throughout the procedure wouldn't be a problem, but both Owen and Ianto had concerns about making Lisa feel further trapped in the slightly claustrophobic interior of the scanner for an extended period of time. They

had offered her the option of a mild sedative, but Lisa had silently, yet resolutely, refused; she'd had enough of sedation.

Dragging the large machine over, they connected up the data recorder. Once the scan was complete, the results would be sent to the Hub's network to be loaded into a program Tosh was working on that would – hopefully – allow them to visualise the data in a manner more familiar to Owen than the streams of numbers the scanner exported natively.

If the Rift stayed reasonably quiet, as it had thankfully been doing since Ianto joined, the program would be complete and ready for Owen's examination by the end of the following day – or sooner, if Tosh's sheer determination counted for anything.

Locking gazes with Lisa once more, Ianto projected all the calm he could muster before the scanning machine came between them as it surrounded Lisa's head.

As expected, the scan took nearly an hour, during which Ianto resumed his hovering. He stood close to Lisa's head, ready to rush into action (although he would admit that he hadn't quite decided *what* action) should she show any sign of distress.

They had just disconnected the machine and shifted it away from Lisa when there was a loud noise from the main Hub.

The Rift alarm had gone off.

Chapter Twelve

Owen ran out into the main Hub, leaving Ianto to calm Lisa, who had become slightly agitated as the alarm continued to blare.

"It's okay, Lisa," he said firmly and calmly, recognising the source of her upset. "It's not the intrusion alarm, it's the Rift. We're safe here, I promise."

Lisa calmed, her gaze flying to his, the entreating message in her eyes clear – *'Are you sure?'*

"I promise," he told her, answering the unasked question as he stroked a knuckle gently down her cheek. "I'm just going to see what's going on, if there's anything I can do to help, okay?"

Lisa's eyes fluttered shut for a moment as her head twitched slightly in a clear gesture of acceptance. She would never protest against Ianto's offering his aid in any circumstance where it might be needed. Ianto helped when he could – it was part of who he was.

Ianto entered the main Hub area to find it in what appeared to be the early stages of chaos. Owen and Suzie were running to and fro, collecting items from scattered locations around the Hub. Jack was calling out orders and suggestions, while Tosh fed them information from her computer screen.

“What is it? How can I help?” he asked as he made his way across to Jack.

Jack was a little startled at Ianto’s question, or rather at Ianto speaking at all; in the heat of the crisis he had almost forgotten Ianto was even there.

“Rift activity out near Leckwith Woods. Tosh says there are huge energy spikes – something big came through and we need to find out what.”

“And how can I help?” Ianto repeated.

Jack looked at Ianto, noting the vehemence in the younger man’s eyes and coming to a realisation. Ianto’s offer of assistance wasn’t the dutiful offer of an employee; it was a defining characteristic of Ianto’s personality. Helping others gave Ianto strength.

Making a swift decision, he pointed towards Tosh’s workstation. “Tosh, you showed Ianto how to work with the mainframe, didn’t you?”

“Yes...” Tosh replied, uncertain where Jack was going. “He picked it up really quickly, actually.” She directed a friendly smile at Ianto.

“Great,” Jack grinned. “Tosh, get your stuff. We could really use you out there. Ianto, monitor that energy signal. If it goes anywhere or changes in any way, we need to know about it.”

“Got it,” Ianto nodded, reflexively catching the earpiece Jack tossed in his direction.

The rest of the team spent several more minutes gathering various pieces of equipment from around the Hub. Ianto spent that time familiarising himself with the Rift energy signal blinking on Tosh’s screen, one eye half watching the movements of his team-mates and pondering if a little reorganisation would be helpful.

Suzie, Owen and Tosh disappeared down to the garage a few long minutes later, Jack turning around to face Ianto again just before he too disappeared.

“Are you...?”

Ianto interrupted him. “I’m fine. I’ve got it. Go.” Jack nodded in acknowledgement before turning to follow the others.

* * * *

“Tosh, get Ianto on comms. See if he can tell us if we’re going in the right direction or not here,” Jack called as they tramped through the grass. They’d pulled the SUV to the side of the road slightly south of the woodland, but were now faced with a large expanse of farmland to search.

“Ianto, can you hear me?” Tosh said quietly, tapping her earpiece.

“*Loud and clear, Toshiko, what is it?*” Ianto replied, a faint vein of worry underlying his tone.

“We’re a few hundred feet west of the B4267, but we can’t see anything yet. Jack just wanted to check we were definitely in the right place.”

“The signal hasn’t moved since you left, although it’s a little weaker. Another few hundred feet and you’ll be on top of it. If...”

Ianto’s response was cut-off as Owen shouted something a few feet away.

“Across there, what’s that? Doesn’t look like it belongs in a field, whatever it is,” he called as he started to jog over to the unidentified object, Jack, Suzie and Tosh following.

The object, when they reached it, very definitely did not belong in a sheep field on the outskirts of Cardiff. The metallic shell glistened preternaturally in the afternoon sunlight, and the technology involved in the craft was clearly beyond current Earth innovation. It was also obvious that the ship had crashed.

It sat at an odd angle that, despite its unearthly origins, the team doubted was the intended position, and one corner looked distinctly crumpled.

Walking round the complete perimeter of the craft they came across an open door and discovered something else about the crash-landed spaceship.

It was empty.

Chapter Thirteen

Repeated examinations yielded the same results as the first: whatever creature had been flying the craft - assuming there *had* been a pilot - was no longer inside.

The life form could be anywhere in Cardiff. Doing anything. To anyone.

“You still there, Ianto?” Jack asked, tapping his earpiece.

“Of course, sir,” Ianto replied, picking up on the apprehension in Jack’s voice. *“What’s wrong?”*

“Tosh hacked into the police database months ago, I need you to check if there have been any... unusual reports. Our alien visitor is AWOL.”

“Doing it now, sir.”

Leaving the channel open while Ianto searched, Jack wandered over to the rest of the team, who had moved a few feet away while Tosh attempted to pick up any sort of reading at all on her handheld scanner.

“Getting anything?” he asked hopefully.

“Nothing.” Tosh sighed in frustration. “The energy coming off the ship is drowning out any other readings I might be able to get. I could try to filter it out, but by the time I’d done that it would probably be pointless.”

“Seems we’re back to plain old searching then, at least for now.” Jack blew out a breath, wishing not for the first time that their incredibly advanced alien-modified technology was just a *little* more advanced.

“*Jack? Sir?*” Ianto’s voice came over the communication system again.

“Yes, Ianto?”

“If anyone has seen or had any contact with the missing alien, they haven’t reported it. There are no reports consistent with any alien activity I can think of.”

“Thanks, Ianto. Keep an eye on them, just in case.” Jack sighed again.

The lack of reports could be either a very good or a very bad thing. Either no one *had* actually come into contact with the being, or anyone that had had been influenced or injured seriously enough to prevent a report being made.

In over a hundred years of experience with Torchwood, Jack had only encountered the former a handful of times, so he wasn’t feeling particularly optimistic.

“Okay, guys, let’s hope it hasn’t gone far. Owen, Suzie, that way. Tosh, with me.”

Splitting up, the two pairs headed briskly off in their assigned directions, eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary.

Ten minutes later and the only things they had found were more fields, a thankfully calm bull, and Owen was grumbling over the comms. after ‘finding’ a particularly slippery patch of soggy mud.

“Still nothing, Ianto?” Jack asked worriedly, following Tosh over a stile.

“No new police reports, sorry sir,” Ianto replied, *“but I’ll…”* His voice trailed off and the sound of typing drifted very faintly into their earpieces.

“Ianto? Jack cried sharply. “What is it?”

“The monitoring program has picked something up just south of your current position.” Ianto’s voice sounded frustrated. *“But I don’t know what. I don’t recognise the readings at all.”*

“We’re checking it out,” Jack told him, breaking into a run before he’d finished speaking. “Tell us immediately if there’s any change.”

Jack pulled out his Webley and sprinted across the field, Tosh hard on his heels. Barely minutes later, he ran right into a field full of sheep.

While there was absolutely nothing unusual about coming across sheep in Wales, this particular flock had an alien sitting calmly in their midst.

Chapter Fourteen

If it wasn't for the brightly coloured scales that covered the top of its head and disappeared down the back of its shirt, the being could have passed for human.

Intensely grateful that – for now, at least – it didn't appear to be hostile, Jack approached cautiously, gun in hand but at his side so as not to appear openly threatening.

As he neared, he noticed that the creature appeared to be fiddling with a small device resembling a PDA as it stared intensely at the bemused-looking ewe before it.

Getting closer still, he realised that he actually recognised the device the being was gripping and poking at. It was a Universal Translator – very popular and in widespread use throughout much of the universe from about the 32nd Century onwards.

It would translate instantaneously both to and from thousands of languages from hundreds of planets around the universe, but not, evidently, the language of sheep.

Hoping that it was an advanced enough model to automatically switch to a recognised language, and that English was still included in the default language pack, he spoke up tentatively.

“Hello?”

The alien looked up, startled. Scrambling to its feet, it took a few steps away from Jack and Tosh before looking down at the Translator. After studying the screen for a brief moment, it looked back at Jack and Tosh.

“Hello?” To Jack's experienced ear, the slight distortion caused by the Translator doing its job was clear. “Where am I?”

“Earth. Early 21st Century.” Jack told the clearly shaken and nervous alien.

“Earth? But, I was...” The being's shoulders slumped. “What happened?”

“You were sucked into a space-time rift that runs through this area. I'm sorry.” Jack answered.

“Can I get back?” the alien asked hopefully.

Jack shook his head sorrowfully. “I really am sorry, but probably not. We can't control the Rift.”

“Great,” the alien sighed. “I crash land on an alien planet thousands of light years from home, I’m not even in my own *century*, and I’m probably stuck here. This day just couldn’t get any better, could it?”

Despite the Translator distortion, the tone and content of the alien’s statement reminded Jack distinctly of Owen, and he fought down a smile at the reality that species, home planet and time period didn’t really matter – the same personality traits emerged everywhere and every time. Pushing the thought to the back of his mind, he pushed his professional persona to the forefront again.

“We’ll do everything we can to help you, I promise.” He tried his best to look reassuring.

“And who would ‘we’ be in that scenario?” questioned the alien, not looking particularly reassured.

Jack stuck a hand out to shake, taking a brief second – after he had done it – to hope that the being wasn’t from a culture where handshaking was considered rude or obscene.

“Captain Jack Harkness.” The alien took a hesitant step forward and shook Jack’s outstretched hand, a wary glint in its eyes. Dropping the contact, Jack gestured to Tosh, and then to Owen and Suzie who were approaching at a brisk walk. “And this is my team, Toshiko, Owen and Suzie. We’re Torchwood.”

If the name sparked any hint of recognition in the alien’s memory it didn’t show on its face. “Oelmue,” it – he – volunteered. He looked thoughtful for a long moment before speaking up again. “So... if you can’t send me home, what exactly do you mean when you say you’ll help me?”

“We can’t send you home, but we can help you deal with being stuck here.” Jack explained.

“And maybe one day in the future we’ll know enough that we *can* send you home,” Tosh added optimistically.

Jack opened his mouth to explain further, but changed his mind before he started speaking. “Let’s get you back to our Hub. We can explain more there.”

Jack turned to head back across the fields, but hadn’t taken more than three steps before he realised that Oelmue had made no move to follow. When he spun back to face him he noted the uncertainty in the alien’s face. He raised his eyebrows in query.

“What about my craft? It’s crashed, and I don’t want to just abandon it.”

“We found it,” Jack assured him, “and we’ll get it somewhere safe before anyone else spots it.” Oelmue gave him an oddly confused look. “The majority of this planet’s population don’t know for sure yet that there is life elsewhere.” *Despite the regular near-invasions* he added silently.

Oelmue nodded slightly and allowed himself to be led back to the SUV.

Chapter Fifteen

Although he couldn't be sure if the alien liked it, or could even digest it, Ianto had coffee ready for everyone by the time the team returned to the Hub with their 'guest'.

With the possible alien threat appearing, at least for now, not to be such a big threat after all, Ianto had been able to take the opportunity to get Lisa properly settled again. After making sure she was as comfortable and pain free as possible, he'd left her with a mix of her favourite CDs playing while he did his best to anticipate and prepare for the team's arrival.

As it turned out, despite never having tried it before (due, naturally, to the non-existence of the substance on his native planet), Oelmue *loved* coffee, and spent quite some time after his first sip lamenting the fact that the human race hadn't, apparently, seen fit to introduce it when they had first visited his home galaxy. Ianto too thought this was something of a travesty.

As the friendly exchange continued in the boardroom, Ianto began to wonder just what it was that Jack planned to *do* with the poor being. Torchwood One hadn't really given him any experience with aliens found on Earth beyond eliminating them and cannibalising any technology they brought with them. Dealing with one amicably was, well, rather an alien concept.

Watching the team interact with Oelmue, he couldn't believe that he would be kept in the vaults like the weevils, but neither could he quite see Jack just blithely releasing him into the 'wild' of Cardiff.

He was so engrossed in his own musings that he completely tuned out the conversation around him, and it took him nearly thirty seconds to realise that Jack was trying to get his attention.

"Ianto!"

"Sorry. Yes, sir?"

"How are you at forgery?"

* * *

After Ianto had calmed his startled splutters at the question, Jack had outlined the plan for Oelmue's continuing existence in Cardiff. Tosh had, he explained, long since hacked into all of the relevant government databases, but she wasn't fond of producing the actual documents, and it was one of the few areas in which she doubted her own proficiency.

Everyone on the team had given it a shot at least once, but frankly, Jack confessed, none of them really had the necessary patience for such a painstaking job. And Ianto clearly did.

As a side effect of this lengthy (and frequently wandering) explanation was Ianto's discovery of just how mixed Cardiff's population was. While they didn't appear frequently, there were actually a surprising number of peaceable, humanoid aliens who had been stranded here and were now living out their lives in Cardiff, albeit still under Torchwood's watchful eye.

And once they'd checked him over and helped him acclimatise, Oelmue would join them.

The process of settling Oelmue in Cardiff swallowed the next few days. Although part of him was frustrated with the delay this put on helping Lisa, Ianto understood that it was necessary. Dealing with things – people – that had been dragged through the Rift like Oelmue was, after all, a large part of the reason why Torchwood Cardiff even existed.

Witnessing the respect with which the team treated Oelmue was a constant reminder of the stark differences between Torchwood Three and Torchwood One – the very same differences that had convinced him to come clean about Lisa – and it served to reinforce in his own mind that it had been the right thing to do; despite the last few weeks and all that had already been done, he had still occasionally harboured doubts.

After Jack had secured his agreement to his proposal, Tosh had shown Ianto how to make the necessary additions and changes to confidential databases. Thanks to Tosh's custom user interface, it was a simple enough process, and he picked it up easily.

What he did find utterly astounding – and, if he was honest, slightly scary – was Tosh's easy ability and comfort in navigating between supposedly secure government networks. It was clear that she was someone you definitely wanted on *your* side.

With Oelmue safely registered everywhere he needed to be, Ianto settled down to produce the physical documents to prove it. Jack hadn't been exaggerating when he'd described it as agonising, painstaking work.

He had a suspicion that, in time, he would get more practice and be able to forge the documents to a better standard and in less time, but this first time he really would have to take his time and concentrate.

He worked on them fairly solidly for the next several days, splitting his time between the desk in the Tourist Office (which still held rather outdated leaflets but significantly less dust) and a small table he'd set up in the corner of Lisa's room. While both left him close enough to be called to assist (or make coffee) when required, they were significantly quieter and less hectic than the main Hub.

The rest of the team were similarly devoting their time to Oelmue's involuntary relocation.

Owen was carrying out a battery of tests, the vast majority of which Ianto had never even heard of. Owen had started to explain the specifics, but the details were too

convoluted for Ianto's limited medical knowledge and he'd given up on trying to understand.

Apparently, though, they were Torchwood Cardiff's standard procedures. Owen wouldn't let Oelmue back out of the Hub until he had all of the results and could be sure that Oelmue wasn't going to inadvertently infect the general population of Cardiff with some alien disease.

When he'd finally been given a clean bill of health (at least as clean as Owen could test for), Owen subjected him to yet another series of needle pokes; this time a set of inoculations to help his system resist what were, to him, alien ailments. According to Owen, the jabs were based heavily on the immunisation series most British children were given growing up, but had been adapted for 'generic alien life forms'.

When he wasn't busy being poked and prodded by Owen, Oelmue could be found either discussing the storage and possible repair work of his ship with Suzie, or going through a 'Welcome to Life on Planet Earth' induction program with Tosh and Jack.

Given the general disorganisation of the Hub paperwork, and the stated rarity of new arrivals to take it, Ianto was astonished to discover that this induction program included sets of standardised leaflets and worksheets, covering everything from grocery shopping to interpersonal relationships and world history.

That Jack and Tosh had actually located said leaflets and worksheets when required was also something of a miracle.

While Oelmue would obviously need more support on integrating into Cardiff life than a few days of discussion and a pack of leaflets, it was a start.

Chapter Sixteen

Ianto shuffled the mugs around on the counter once more as he waited for the coffee machine to finish. He hadn't been able to sit or stand still all day – and he knew that more caffeine probably wasn't the answer, but preparing it gave his hands something to do. He wasn't generally given to fidgeting but, he rationalised, these were far from general circumstances.

They had sent Oelmue out to face the world a few days before, armed with his translator (which Tosh had thoroughly scanned to ensure it really *was* just a translator – it wasn't that they didn't *want* to trust Oelmue, but it never hurt to be sure), the pile of induction leaflets and the instruction to contact them immediately if he needed help.

Even barring any emergencies, he would have a regular check-in meeting with one of the team for the duration of his stay on Earth, which Ianto recognised sadly would almost certainly be the remainder of his life. It made him feel rather like a parole officer, but he knew it was the best of the possible alternatives – at least he had a chance at some sort of a life, even if he was out of his time and on an alien planet.

Oelmue's departure, and the Rift's return to relative quiet, meant that Owen, Tosh and Ianto could return to their previous activities, and it was this that had Ianto so worked up.

Tosh had completed her visualisation program early that morning and Owen had promised to have at least his initial analysis of the scan, along with the results of the blood tests, by late afternoon.

Ianto had been studiously avoiding both the autopsy bay and Owen all day, leaving him mugs of coffee on his desk before beating a hasty retreat. If asked, he couldn't have said definitively if he was dreading or anticipating the results of these tests.

Either they would give them something to work with, solid ways to help Lisa, or they would tell them there was nothing to be done. Ianto wasn't sure he was ready to find out which.

Jack had, thankfully, clearly noticed his nerves surfacing at Owen's announcement that morning and had found any number of small mindless jobs for Ianto to occupy himself with that day. On another day, he might have protested at the busy-work, but with his mind busy running in circles, he was grateful for the simple tasks.

The coffee machine clicked slightly, alerting Ianto to the fact that it was ready. With hands that remained steady only through sheer determination, he filled the waiting mugs, preparing each drink just the way the recipient liked it, and picked up the tray to deliver the team their ninth (or was that tenth) coffees of the day.

He approached Owen's desk, ready to set down the mug, call to Owen that it was there, and flee, as before. The plan was somewhat ruined by Owen's sudden appearance at his side just as he was placing the doctor's coffee on the desk.

He spun away from the desk, hot coffee sloshing slightly over the edges of the remaining mugs on his tray. A nervous shiver passed through his body, and he took an involuntarily step backwards in a physical manifest of his subconscious desire to hide from the truths he sensed would be imminently divulged.

A glance at Owen's face confirmed his suspicions; the doctor's expression was serious and Ianto thought he detected the faintest hint of sympathy lurking behind his eyes.

The tests were complete, the results were in, and it was time to face the future.

Chapter Seventeen

Owen glanced again at Ianto, who was slumped slightly in his seat, eyes staring at the opposite wall but not really seeing it. He was a little worried about the younger man. Owen had informed him that he had results to talk about in the boardroom and he had yet to speak a word since. He had simply allowed himself to be led upstairs and placed in a chair, his movements automatic and his unseeing gaze fixed.

Owen's attempts to draw him back out of himself had come to nothing. Ianto's mind had clearly decided he wasn't ready to deal with what was about to happen, and, unable to simply repress the emotions given the situation, had withdrawn from the world in self-preservation.

Owen recognised the defence mechanism, but felt ill-equipped to actually directly help Ianto cope any better. He could only hope that, once the difficult conversation was over and they had worked out a plan of action, the remarkable resilience Ianto had shown so far would reassert itself.

Ianto's blank look also drew the concerned attention of the rest of the team as they filtered into the boardroom. Owen just shook his head when they looked to him questioningly.

"Ianto?" Jack's voice was unusually hesitant. Ianto showed no signs of hearing him anyway.

After everyone was seated, Owen took one last look at Ianto before deciding that he may as well begin.

No sooner had he opened his folder and taken a breath to speak than he was interrupted by the unexpected sound of Ianto's voice.

"This doesn't feel right."

Everyone's eyes were drawn to Ianto, who had apparently snapped out of his daze while everyone had been distracted getting settled. While he still looked understandably worried and a little scared, the determination had reappeared in his eyes. His gaze flickered around the room, clearly noting the puzzled looks he was receiving in response to his sudden statement.

"We shouldn't be talking about this behind Lisa's back. She might not be able to talk, but she can listen and this concerns her more than anyone. She has a right to hear this."

Owen considered the younger man's impassioned words, aware that the rest of the team were doing the same. Part of him agreed – when he had been in Ianto's situation, he had wanted Katie 'in the loop' as much as possible.

The rest of him knew that there were some hard facts that had been revealed by the scan, and he wasn't even sure how much of it he could bring himself to tell *Ianto*, let alone Lisa. While he didn't want to get either of their hopes up too high, he also knew that keeping their spirits up, especially Lisa's, could bolster her chances.

"Ianto," he started softly, still not entirely sure how best to proceed. "Maybe... maybe it's best if we talk about this without her, just this once."

Ianto's stare instantly turned suspicious. "Why? Are you planning...?"

“No! Honest. I’m not saying that.” Owen interrupted quickly. “It’s just that there’s going to be a lot to take in, and I’m not sure she’s ready to handle all of it at once.”

*I’m not even sure **you’re** ready to handle all of it.*

While Ianto still looked a little suspicious, it was clear he was thinking about Owen’s words. The worry and fear were starting to take over his expression again. “It’s that bad?”

Oh yes...

“Not necessarily. Just a lot to take in,” Owen lied. Although he knew that Ianto would catch him in the lie when all the facts were laid bare, he couldn’t bring himself to push the severity of the situation in Ianto’s face.

He already *knew* it was bad. He *had* to know how slim the chances were of a complete restoration.

And although he knew it went against the sardonic uncaring persona he had carefully cultivated these last few years, Owen was still a doctor.

And he wanted to *give* Ianto hope, not take it away.

Chapter Eighteen

With Ianto, if not entirely convinced that it was best, at least resigned to having this discussion without Lisa, Owen prepared to start again.

“First things first, the blood tests all actually look pretty good. Her blood sugar is a little high, but we can adjust a few things to deal with that. More importantly, there was no sign of any infection. I was a little worried about sepsis considering she’s on continual dialysis, but we seem to have avoided that thus far.”

Owen was pleased to see that the scrap of good news appeared to help Ianto compose himself. Although he couldn’t fool himself into believing that Ianto’s apparent calm was anything more than another coping mechanism. However, the obvious suppression of emotion Ianto was doing now was healthier than the complete detachment that had manifested earlier, so Owen wasn’t going to interfere.

He took a deep breath. The scan had revealed a lot of things, some of them more worrying and difficult than others, and it wasn’t all going to be easy for Ianto to hear, or for Owen to tell.

“Hopefully that little bit of luck will hold, as even though her kidneys are mostly intact, they *have* been infringed by some of the metal, and their blood supply has been seriously disrupted.”

“Can you fix it?” Ianto’s voice was strong despite the almost imperceptible shake in his hand.

Owen tilted his head uncertainly. "I can't say for sure. Going on the information from the scan, I should be able to, yes. But I've never dealt with this sort of intrusion, so I don't want to make any promises."

"Not to be negative here, but isn't there a bit of a problem with fixing her kidneys when her... well... when she has all that... metal... there?" Jack waved a hand in indication of the problem area.

Owen blinked. He hadn't even thought that far, and from the slightly startled expressions around the table, he could tell he wasn't the only one. "Umm... yeah... I suppose there is. But... erm... how about we cross that bridge when we come to it?"

He was fairly sure that between them they could come up with a workaround to that particular issue, but there was a related one occurring to him now that wouldn't be quite so easily sidestepped.

"I guess that sort of brings me to the digestive system," he continued, cringing internally a little at his choice of segue. "I'm assuming that had the... *process*... been continued, it would have become redundant, with something else as an energy source. But there wasn't anything actually removed. It's all still there, and mostly undamaged, just not exactly... connected up, anymore."

"So where does that leave us?" Tosh asked, noting a few things down on her notepad.

"Basically, we're going to have to keep her on the TPN for a while longer. Eventually we can try to do something about that, but meanwhile we just have to..." Owen trailed off as he registered the puzzled looks on Jack, Ianto and Suzie's faces.

"TPN?"

"Sorry about that... it's just the fancy name for a drip feed." Owen explained, wondering a little at how quickly he'd slipped back into medical lingo.

"Anyway, as I was saying, we do have to keep an eye out for infection and liver problems from that, but we don't really have an option. She's not really in a position to be eating anything, even ignoring the intubation."

Here, Ianto spoke up again. "About the intubation... is there anything we can do about that? It's just..." He glanced down at the table while he gathered his thoughts. "It's not that I can't carry on a one-sided conversation with her, but I *know* she hates not being able to communicate. If there's anything we can do, anything at all..."

Owen sighed. "Her lungs were quite badly damaged during the con... process." He had come to an agreement with Jack to avoid the 'c' word wherever possible, but it was hard not to let it slip out. "She definitely needs help to breathe, and the intubation is the only way current medical science can do that."

"What about Torchwood science? Surely there's something?"

Owen thought for a moment and looked at Tosh and Suzie. “I dunno, it’s not something we’ve ever needed before. We can look into it though. Tosh and Suzie can do wonders with a bit of alien tech and some tinkering.” He grinned thinly at the two women, who both blushed faintly at the praise.

“Thank you.” Ianto blew out a breath. “I know, I know there are no guarantees, but it really will do wonders for her mental state if we can do something.” His eyes unfocused a little as a sad smile drifted across his mouth. “She’s always loved to talk.”

“It might actually be rather useful in monitoring her status too,” Owen mused, possibilities flashing through his mind. “She can tell us a lot more than we can get just from scans and tests, especially when it comes to the brain.” He could see Ianto deliberately prepare himself before he spoke.

“They put something in her brain, didn’t they?”

Owen took a calming breath of his own before he answered. “Yes, the scan showed several intrusions into her brain. Mostly affecting the somatosensory system and the cochlear nucleus. Touch and hearing,” he clarified, realising that he had inadvertently reverted to the technical medical terminology again.

“The parts I’m most worried about, though, are the intrusions into her limbic system. We know that the completed process would have rendered her emotionless, so that’s worrying, but...”

Owen saw Ianto’s face light up in protest and he held up a hand to stop him. “*But*, we also know from Tosh’s scan that that isn’t the case.”

Ianto settled back into his seat, apparently mollified for now, and Owen felt safe to continue. “The presence of intrusions into that area of her brain is still worrying, there could be something there that is just inactive, and we *really* don’t want to accidentally activate it if there is.”

“Well, how would whatever it is get activated?” Suzie asked. “So we can be careful not to do that.”

Owen shifted uncomfortably. “Well, that’s the problem really. We have no idea how it could be activated, how to tell if it *was* activated or if there would be any way of *deactivating* it if we did. We don’t even know for sure that there’s anything there *to* be activated.”

“So we have to avoid doing some unknown thing that will have an unknown result to something that might not even exist. Just great,” Jack sighed, the frustration evident in his voice.

“I’d give you more information if I had it, we just don’t know enough about the technology,” Owen told him, feeling a little useless that he didn’t have all the answers.

“Is that everything?” Ianto asked entreatingly. His shoulders were beginning to slump, and Owen worried that he was beginning to get overwhelmed with the details. “Please say that’s everything.”

“I’m sorry,” he shook his head. “Not quite. Good news is that there’s nothing in any of the tests or scans to suggest there’s anything wrong with her heart. It’s working pretty hard to try to cope with all of the other issues, but as far as I can tell it’s fine. And that brings us down to the final thing, and I promise you that this is the last of it, Ianto. And it’s mostly a cosmetic issue.”

“The metal.” Ianto said dully. Owen nodded in response.

“The metal. It’s been cybernetically bonded into and in place of her skin, so we’re not going to be able to just remove it. The result would be similar to giving her 3rd degree burns all over her body, and that’s no trivial amount of damage.”

“Can we treat it like they do burns then? With skin grafts and the like?” Tosh inquired thoughtfully.

“It’s definitely an option,” Owen concurred, “although I’m no expert at cosmetic surgery, so there would still be visible scarring.”

“But we could do it?” Ianto wanted to know.

“We’d have to source or build a few bits of kit to culture the skin growths from harvested cells, but yes, I think we could.”

Ianto was quiet and thoughtful for several long minutes in which the rest of the team barely dared speak, let alone move.

Finally, he roused himself and looked up at Owen.

“We have to talk to Lisa.”

Chapter Nineteen

Jack found Ianto slumped on the Hub sofa a few hours later, the stress positively oozing from his stiffly set shoulders and downcast eyes.

He and Owen had spent the better part of the late afternoon and early evening with Lisa, and Jack assumed they had been giving her a version of the results the team had discussed in the conference room earlier. Even if it had gone well, it was never going to be an easy conversation to have, and Jack could see it had taken its toll on Ianto.

The rest of the team had gone home over an hour ago, while Jack had been busy with the always-dreaded and oft-procrastinated pile of paperwork that invariably covered his desk. He had, at the time, assumed that Ianto had departed with them.

He had clearly been mistaken.

He wondered briefly just how long Ianto had been sitting alone on the sofa like this. While he usually avoided the paperwork, when he actually got started on it he could become quite absorbed, so it was a real possibility that Ianto could have appeared at any time in the last hour.

He took a tentative step closer, but the action seemed to go unnoticed by Ianto. Another step, and another, until he was standing right next to the battered sofa.

“Ianto?” No response.

Jack wasn't entirely sure what the best course of action was. Ianto was obviously in distress and, knowing that he couldn't just remove the cause of his upset, he wasn't sure what he could do to help.

He could do the big dashing hero bit, the rushing in to save the day. If you had an alien invasion crisis, he was the man to call. But those were problems he could actually *fix*.

Comforting and helping someone when their problems weren't so easily solvable wasn't his speciality. Other people's emotional suffering always made him feel helpless, when he knew there was little he could practically do to make them feel better.

As he slowly lowered himself to sit next to Ianto, he recognised that neither one of his normal methods of helping a distressed friend were going to work. He'd been doing the first, using work as a distraction, for days, and while it seemed to help during the day, Ianto didn't currently look like he was in any fit state to be trying to work.

And the second, well, the second method definitely had its appeal in his own mind, but despite his reputation, he knew that offering physical comfort was completely inappropriate in the situation.

“Ianto?” he tried again, reaching out a hand in the younger man's direction. “Are you okay?”

As soon as the words left his mouth he realised how idiotic they sounded. It was patently obvious that Ianto was far from okay; that the stresses of caring for Lisa had temporarily overwhelmed the younger man.

Ianto looked up, finally noticing Jack's presence, and Jack could see him trying to hide his emotions behind that calm façade again.

“Sorry, Sir. I'm fine. Just needed a moment.”

Jack shook his head softly. “Ianto, you are *not* fine, but...” He waved off Ianto before he could protest. “No one could expect you to be, going through what you're going through. It's OK if sometimes you're not 'fine'.” He paused as something else occurred to him. “And you're not working right now, Ianto, please call me Jack.”

“Sorry, Sir. I mean... Jack.” Ianto’s voice was still tight and restrained and none of the tension had left his shoulders.

“You know,” Jack began awkwardly, “if you need someone to, I don’t know, talk to, or ... scream at, or... or whatever, I’m here. Whatever you need. And I think Toshiko would be too. You don’t have to cope with this alone.”

Ianto nodded tensely and stood up. He looked back down at Jack, a tinge of gratitude appearing in his eyes. “Thank you. I mean it. I promise I’ll keep it in mind, but right now... right now I think I should just go home.”

Jack stood to join him, taking a small step back so as not to crowd him. “Okay,” he nodded, trying to smile comfortingly. “Good night, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He sighed sadly as he watched Ianto’s back disappear through the cog doorway.

He wasn’t sure what he was doing, but he wasn’t going to let Ianto suffer through this on his own.

Chapter Twenty

Ianto stood at the bottom of the lift, waiting impatiently for the cog door to roll back. He was running a little bit later than usual, and it made him anxious.

Despite this, the Hub was still empty when he stepped through the door. He knew Jack lived in the Hub, but he assumed that the older man was still sleeping at this hour, as he very rarely bumped into him on his way to Lisa’s room.

He absently cleared a few stray coffee mugs from various surfaces as he made his way through the Hub. In the back of his mind he noted that he would have to talk to Owen later about leaving empty mugs on top of the sub-etheric resonator.

When he pushed open the door to Lisa room, he found that, as was very often the case, she was also still asleep. Quietly, so as not to disturb her, he moved into the room and checked on the support system and medication lines.

Owen would check them again when he came in later, but it gave him some measure of comfort to make sure that everything they’d set up to help her was at least working as it should every morning.

Pulling over the small stool he’d appropriated for this very purpose, he perched near her head and thought about everything he wanted to talk to her about. Everything he wanted to tell her.

A flash of shame swept through him as he realised that he’d come to prefer talking to her when she was asleep or sedated to talking to her when she was awake and lucid. He’d spent so much time doing it before they’d come to Torchwood Three, and he’d found himself able to say things he might not have said had she been properly awake and listening.

He consoled himself that it was partially a reaction to her being intubated and unable to respond. If she was alert, he could tell that she wanted to participate fully in the conversation, and it pained her that she couldn't. It hurt him to see it too.

Whereas if she was asleep, it was nothing to do with her condition that stopped her responding. She could have been perfectly healthy and she would still be unable to respond if she was unconscious.

It was the main reason he was so determined that they do their very best to find some way - any way - to help her breathe without preventing her talking. He *knew* it wasn't a trivial task but, today, after the events of the day before, he was actually feeling fairly optimistic that they might have a chance to succeed...

The team had been on their way back from retrieving an as yet unidentified piece of stray tech that had turned up in Butetown. Ianto had been preparing the round of coffee he knew would inevitably be requested when his comm. unit had crackled to life, Tosh's voice sounding in his ear.

"Ianto, I think I just had a brain wave!"

Other than telling him that her recollection was something that could help Lisa, Tosh had remained frustratingly silent on the details until the four of them trooped back into the Hub, a large, dull box-shaped item in Suzie's arms.

While Suzie and Owen had taken the alien box to store it while it awaited further tests, Tosh had rushed over to Ianto, followed at a slightly more sedate pace by Jack.

"Ianto! I really think this could be a much needed break, and I'm so sorry I didn't remember it before." Tosh had been highly animated, and Ianto couldn't help but stare at her blankly. She was excited, that much was clear, but she was also making very little sense to him.

"Tosh, back up a few steps. *What* could be our break?"

"It's a bit of alien tech. I'd completely forgotten about it, but we picked it up a few years ago almost right where we found that thing today, and it all came back to me."

Ianto had nodded along, waiting for Tosh to explain the significance of the discovery.

"We did a whole lot of tests on it and decided, well, Owen decided, that it was a sort of medical support device. I don't remember all the details off the top of my head, but I think with a little modification it could help Lisa breathe."

Tosh's optimism and excitement had been infectious, and Ianto had found a smile starting to take over his face for the first time in days. "Where is it now, then? I can go get it, and..."

His words had drifted off as he noticed Tosh's expression falter, and her eyes swing over to the Captain, standing a little to their side.

Jack's entire stance had echoed frustration and regret.

"It's in the archives." His mouth had quirked in a joyless smirk. "Somewhere."

Chapter Twenty-One

"Jack swears there was an archivist on staff in the 1920s, but I spent a bit of time down there yesterday, and I can't see any evidence of them." Ianto murmured softly to Lisa's sleeping form. "Everything is just tossed in there all higgledy-piggledy, and if there was ever some method of sorting in there, it has completely disappeared."

He shook his head in mild disbelief. "They've managed to keep a record of everything they pick up, at least as far as a vague description and where and when they found it, but apparently extending that record system to where they put it in the archive is beyond them."

He could imagine the indulgent smile Lisa would have been giving him in the past if she'd heard him bitch like this; the same smile she had always given him when he complained about the utter stupidity sometimes displayed by his superiors in London.

If he closed his eyes, he could almost feel her arms slipping around his waist, her lips brushing his ear as she whispered into it. He could almost hear the words she'd have said, urging him to go easy on whoever it was had frustrated him.

Give them a break, they've been very busy...

"I know," he said quietly, answering his own imagined entreaty. "But still. They must at least know the alphabet. Even if they didn't sort out the old archives, they could have kept their own additions in *some* sort of system. Instead, it looks like files and artefacts were just stuffed wherever there happened to be a space, and now we can't find *anything*."

He'd spent a few hours the previous day looking in the archives for the item Tosh had remembered. Armed only with the knowledge that item 02-135 had been picked up just over three years ago in Butetown and that it was a dull silver cuboid with a collection of connectors, he'd known the chances of just finding it were slim.

After several hours of unsuccessful searching, he'd come to a depressing conclusion.

"I didn't really want to do it, but it could help really you, and for that, I'll do anything, my cariad," he whispered, drawing a knuckle very softly down Lisa's dark cheek.

"I volunteered to sort out the archives."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ianto threw his file to the floor, sinking down next to it, and wondered, not for the first time, what insanity had gripped him when he'd offered to organise the archives. It was a truly mammoth task, and it was difficult to even see where was best to start.

Several hours ago, he had taken the plunge, choosing arbitrarily to start at the opposite end to the one at which he had begun his search the previous day. It was going to be slow going no matter where he started, but he held out hope that he would find the all-important artefact Tosh was talking about faster starting from this end.

When he had taken him his coffee that morning, he had asked Jack if there was any particular sorting method he wanted Ianto to use in the archives. The blank, slightly hesitant look he had received in response went a long way to explaining why Jack had never tried to organise the archives before.

Eventually, in a tone that suggested he was trying to sound like he knew what he was talking about, Jack had simply told him that he trusted him to use whatever method he thought was best, which didn't help Ianto much at all.

He'd been working almost non-stop for hours, with regular breaks to make the rest of the team coffee and make a quick check on Lisa, and he'd barely made a dent in the shelves and cabinets of alien tech and archived information.

He'd been relieved to discover that the majority of items were at least labelled and numbered, although some of the information on the labels was seriously lacking.

He wasn't entirely sure what he was supposed to do with labels like the one he'd found on item 53-273, for example. '*Probably does something but the buttons seem to be stuck, if they're even buttons,*' wasn't exactly particularly informative, and he had a feeling it would have to be placed with the unlabelled items in an 'unknown' section.

Conversely, some items were labelled so thoroughly that he began to believe that the mythical archivist from the 1920's that Jack had mentioned may actually have existed. A few older artefacts even had cross-referencing tags written on the bottom of the labels.

As he cleared the shelf, he'd taken note of the label information and archive number of each item, logging them in a notebook.

Sitting wearily on the floor, notebook in front of him, he made a mental note to talk to Tosh later about implementing the information he was taking down into the artefact database. After all, there was no point in him even recording the data if it was inaccessible and now that he had started this job, he wanted it done properly.

Even if, as he was beginning to fear, that took years to accomplish.

Glancing down, he noticed that it was nearly lunchtime, and wondered briefly if the team would actually manage to feed themselves if he just stayed down here and worked.

Theoretically, he knew they must have managed to keep themselves fed during the day before he arrived. But in the past few weeks they had somehow come to rely upon him to appear at lunchtime, food in hand, and it seemed a very real possibility that they would miss lunch completely if he were to suddenly stop.

Picking up his notebook, he got to his feet and began to wend his way back out of the archives. After checking once more that Lisa was resting comfortably, he returned to the main body of the Hub.

He raised his voice just enough to be heard by everyone as he climbed the small steps to the 'office' area. "Unless anyone has any particular lunch preferences, I'll just..."

Jack's voice cut in, interrupting him. "Already sorted. Should be arriving in a few minutes." He smiled affably. "You're not the only one who can pick up a phone and a take-away menu, and we thought you deserved a day off from feeding us."

Ianto was silent for a long moment, stunned. It certainly made a difference to only be responsible for his own lunch, and no one else's. "Right. Okay then. Guess I only have to..."

He was interrupted by Jack again before he could finish his sentence. "You're part of 'us', Ianto. We got yours too."

Ianto hovered, momentarily at a loss as to what to do next. "If you're desperate for something to do," Jack continued, apparently noticing his indecision, "I wouldn't say no to another mug of your wonderful coffee."

Glad to have a task, Ianto dropped his folder on a desk and disappeared to the kitchenette, returning with a tray of coffee just as Tosh came through the cog door with her arms full of lunch.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They ate around the conference table, with Jack, as usual, attempting to keep the mood light by telling outrageous stories of his past exploits. Ianto was sure that at least half of them had to be made up, but they were at least amusing enough to distract him temporarily from the realities of life.

It wasn't until he and Tosh were clearing away the remains that he remembered his request. Tosh quickly grasped what he wanted, and promised she would get right on it.

"It should be a fairly simple job, actually," she told him. "Just a case of adding a few fields to the database. We might have to improve the search algorithms to make sure it catches all the right entries and doesn't grind to a halt, but..."

She stopped and shook her head, apparently realising that her musings were about to descend into techo-babble, and although Ianto would probably understand, it wasn't really necessary at this point. "I'll try to have something for you to work with in a couple of hours."

True to her word, Ianto was roused from his study of an unfortunately faded artefact label just over 90 minutes later by a call from Tosh.

“You know, you could have come find me in person instead of phoning,” he teased her gently as he approached her desk. Her mouth lifted in a half smile.

“I think I was afraid that you might rope me in to help. I’ve seen the mess down there,” she replied, beckoning him in to look over her shoulder as she briefly explained the changes she’d made to the system.

“There should actually be a workstation somewhere down there,” she told him as she finished, “so you can input the data from there if you want.”

Ianto nodded, thanking her and turning to return to the archives. He’d taken fewer than half a dozen steps when her voice called him back and he turned back to face her.

“It’s nice to see you looking, well, not happy, because you mostly seem frustrated, but, well, you know what I mean,” she babbled.

Ianto took a deep breath, realising that he did feel calmer and more in control than he had previously. “I feel like I’m actually doing something to help,” he explained quietly. “It helps.”

By early afternoon the following day, the controlled calm was beginning to slip a little. He’d developed a nice rhythm and method to his sorting, examining and logging small groups of items before returning to the small computer near the entrance of the archives and entering the data onto the newly improved database system.

He was making good progress, but he still hadn’t found that one all-important artefact he was looking for. Theoretically he knew that, given the size of the archives, it could take him quite some time to find it moving at his current pace.

Practically, he wanted to find it *now*, and he was beginning to grow disheartened as shelf after shelf was cleared without it turning up.

A small voice in his head began to taunt him that he might never find it. Even worse was the fear that it might have lost its label, and he could have passed right over it.

Resolutely telling the little voice in his head to kindly *shut up*, he picked up the next item from the shelf.

‘*Yet another silvery box,*’ he thought. At first, he had approached every item vaguely matching the description of his desired object excitedly, convinced that *this* would be the one. After a day and a half of disappointments, his enthusiasm was severely dampened.

Turning it over, he found the identifying label.

Item 02-135. Probable medical equipment. Unknown metallic elements present...

It took a few moments for the information to sink in, before he dropped his notebook and ran towards the main Hub, artefact held tight to his chest.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Tosh?” Ianto called as he skidded to a stop at the base of the water tower. “Tosh! I found it!” He couldn’t keep the excited anticipation out of his voice.

Tosh stood up and hurried towards him. “You’re sure?”

The look he shot her could have cut glass. “Of course I’m sure.” He turned the item over to show her the label as she approached. “See? Item 02-153, probable medical equipment.”

Tosh took the item carefully, tilting it this way and that as she looked it over. “Yep, this is definitely the one I was thinking about.”

She handed it to Owen as the rest of the team joined them. He examined it slowly, bemusedly, before a light bulb appeared to go off behind his eyes. “Oh! I remember this now. It’s a sort of gas dispersal and filter thing, right?”

Tosh nodded. “I think it was the regulated pulses that made us go with medical use, although we never really tested it in that capacity.”

Ianto’s eyes were wide as he flitted between the other members of the team. “But you *do* think it could help her, right?”

Owen and Tosh answered simultaneously. “Yes.”

Tosh continued alone. “We’d need to refine it a bit, and there are some things it probably won’t do, but with a bit of tinkering...” She paused and looked to Suzie who nodded in agreement. “With a bit of tinkering, I’m confident we can get it to do what we need.”

“There should be a full set of reports on the tests we did on it in...” Suzie’s voice trailed off.

Ianto sighed and finished her sentence, his shoulders dropping a little in defeat. “In the archives. Great. I should have known. I guess I’ll just be...”

“Hey,” Jack said, interrupting as he stepped forward and rested an open palm on Ianto’s arm, preventing him from breaking away. “Before you go working yourself up about this, it isn’t as bad as you think.”

Ianto’s eyebrows lifted in disbelief. “You mean the reports are actually archived in some semblance or order?”

“Well, no,” Jack admitted. “But there are only a couple of filing cabinets we’ve used since I took over, so you don’t have to search the whole place.”

In the end, even with Jack's dubious assistance (and Ianto wasn't even sure Jack's help warranted the term *assistance*), it took Ianto the rest of the day to locate the relevant folders. He flicked through them, but they were written in a level of Tosh's techno-babble that, for the most part, rather went over his head.

Tosh, however, exclaimed happily upon their receipt and almost immediately had the mainframe crunching numbers. Ianto left her to it.

In an attempt to keep himself from hovering over the shoulders of his team mates as they worked, Ianto spent the majority of the next days back in the archives or sitting with Lisa, only reappearing in the main Hub at mealtimes or when he judged that another round of coffee might be appreciated.

Now that the urgency of finding a particular artefact had been removed, he found himself almost enjoying the quiet rhythm of examining and logging the archived items. With Tosh's updates to the system in place, he found himself beginning to add his own cross-referencing terms to items based on the descriptions, and an odd territorial feeling was starting to come over him.

These were *his* archives, and they were going to be great when he was done.

With the prospect of an actual action to be taken to help her, his time spent with Lisa also felt less fraught. He even caught himself smiling happily more than once as he talked to her.

The others had decided that Ianto was the best person to explain what was going on to Lisa, partly as they were all busy making sure it would actually work.

It wasn't until he was mid-way through his explanation that he realised quite how ridiculously miraculous it would be if it all came together and just worked.

"So the disperser-filter thing – and yes I know we need a better name for it – will boost regulated doses of highly oxygenated air directly to your lungs," he murmured, fingers gently stroking the back of her hand as he spoke. "Or at least that's the plan. Tosh and Suzie are still working on the filters."

His head tilted self-depreciatingly as he continued. "And I really don't understand the next bit at all, but they assure me it will work. Tosh and Suzie have built something to combine with the main unit that Owen says should stimulate your lungs into a breathing pattern to match the air boosts."

He could see the question shining in Lisa's eyes, and he was quick to assure her of the answer. "Yes, if this works, we can get rid of the tube and you can talk to us, talk to *me* again." He swiped a wayward tear from the corner of his own eye.

"I've missed your voice," he whispered hotly, "I've missed your laugh. I've missed... Hell, I've missed it all."

Lisa's fingers tightened on his minutely, and a few rebellious tears escaped as he lowered his head to kiss her cheek tenderly.

"This has to work. It *has* to. I love you too much for it not to."

Chapter Twenty-Five

"And you're sure?" Ianto perched nervously on the corner of Suzie's desk. The contraption sprawled across the majority of the surface beside him didn't look like much to him, but his colleagues were insistent that this was the device that could give Lisa back the power of speech.

"We're as sure as we can be, mate," Owen told him, awkwardly reaching out a hand as if to pat Ianto's arm, but drawing back before he made any contact.

"And how sure is that?" Ianto persisted, his fingers clutching tensely at the edge of the desk. "If you're not *really* sure, I can't, we can't..." His voice faded out, his eyes closing momentarily as he regained his composure.

"We've done every test we can think of," Suzie answered. "And it's passed every one."

"We couldn't test it any more thoroughly unless we had an actual human body to try it out on, and unless you're volunteering..."

Although Owen's suggestion was clearly in jest, Ianto knew that, if he truly thought it would help, he would be seriously considering it.

"Okay," he began shakily, "so what's next?"

"We put it into action," Owen replied simply. "And, all things going well, your girlfriend gets her voice back."

It was another day before Owen was satisfied that everything was adequately prepared for him to perform the surgery. Lisa's small room and all of the equipment had been thoroughly scrubbed again, and sterilised where possible.

Lisa herself had been monitored very closely. Owen was recording the readings from the machines almost every hour, and had taken multiple blood samples for simple tests. If there was even the slightest sign of infection, he'd told Ianto, the surgery wouldn't be going ahead. She was already at increased risk, and he wasn't going to exacerbate that by cutting into her chest.

Owen's thoroughness in preparing for the operation did little to calm Ianto's nerves, although he was grateful to the doctor for taking so many precautions to reduce the chance of failure or complications.

When the hour arrived for the surgery, the whole team assembled in a corner of Lisa's room, kitted out in sterile scrubs as per Owen's orders.

The scrubs were actually a compromise. Owen had, initially, tried to ban them completely from the room, citing the infection risks introduced by their presence, but Ianto had refused outright to stay away. Anesthetised or not, Lisa needed someone there, and he needed to be there for her.

Owen wasn't entirely sure how he'd gone from reluctantly agreeing to one person in the room to allowing all four of them to watch. The other three had insisted on being there to support Ianto.

"He's going to need someone there for him if it doesn't go as planned," Jack had murmured quietly. "We just want to help."

Owen had agreed, and somehow that had morphed into the current situation.

He glanced over self-consciously at his audience as he located his incision point. In an ideal world, he would have much preferred to make the incision lower in the chest, but the breastplate encasing much of Lisa's upper torso prevented it.

Taking a deep breath, and muttering a few indecipherable words under his breath, he got to work.

It wasn't an easy task; nor was it a fast one. It was well over half an hour before Owen found a point on the lungs he was happy to attach the stimulus cables to, and almost another hour and a half before he was ready to insert the oxygen boosting tubes. The insertion itself took a good hour, as Owen was carefully taking every precaution to avoid collapsing a lung.

He was painfully aware of the team watching his every move, especially Ianto. If he hadn't already been convinced, this one act would shown him exactly why it was that hospitals kept the relatives of surgery patients safely several corridors away in a waiting room.

Ianto almost cringed at his every movement; Owen had never been more nervous performing surgery in his life.

He could feel the sweat trickling down the back of his neck as he eventually pulled back, drawing the incision closed and sealing it shut with a total of 63 stitches.

Leaning over, he looked back at Ianto as he flicked the switch to activate the lung-support device. His pale expression was a cross between fear and anticipation, and he was only remaining upright with the help of Jack and Tosh.

Moving swiftly, he removed the tape holding it in place and pulled out the intubation tube.

Setting it down behind him, he waited with the rest of the room for Lisa to take her first breath.

Nothing.

Chapter Twenty-Six

29, 30, 31, 32...

Owen watched the seconds tick past worriedly. Forty-two seconds now and Lisa had yet to take a breath. Forty-five.

Ianto, on the other hand, was close to hyperventilating. He had rushed to Lisa's side as soon as the incision was closed and the intubation removed.

Right now he was gripping Lisa's hand tightly, begging her, *pleading* her, to just *breathe*.

59, 60, 61...

gasp

There was a collective sigh of relief when Lisa drew in a deep breath. Thankful tears were pouring from Ianto's eyes as he watched her draw another breath, and another.

"She's actually breathing," he choked out several minutes later, tearing his gaze from Lisa's face to look up gratefully at Owen, who was still hovering close by. "You did it!" His head swung around to encompass the rest of the team in his watery gaze. "You actually did it!" His eyes were burning with a gratitude he had no words to express.

By this point, Tosh was looking a little emotional herself, and she crossed the few feet separating them to place a hand on Ianto's shoulder, drawing his gaze back to her.

"*We* did it, Ianto. You included. We couldn't have done it without you doing all that hard work in the archives."

Ianto nodded, but from his vantage point on the other side of Lisa, it was clear to Owen that Tosh's words hadn't truly penetrated Ianto's mind.

Noting down a few readings, he dropped his clipboard and pen to the instrument table behind him and joined Jack and Suzie in the corner of the room, beckoning Tosh back over to join them.

Ianto didn't appear to register the movement, as his eyes were fixed firmly back on Lisa. The team watched quietly as he reached a hand up and brushed his thumb across her lower lip. The loving gesture looked tenderly familiar, yet, due to the accoutrements of the intubation, this was the first time in months that Ianto had been able to perform it.

"Maybe we should give him a bit of privacy with her," Jack murmured, taking pains to speak quietly even though Ianto was clearly paying them no attention.

The others started to shuffle towards the door, but Owen hesitated. Jack stopped right at his side, shooting him a questioning look.

“She’s not out of the woods until she wakes up,” he explained softly. “Actually, she won’t be out of the woods even then, but I’m just not comfortable abandoning her this soon after serious surgery.”

Jack gripped his arm firmly and tugged him just through the doorway so they could speak a little more clearly.

“Look, you know as well as I do that, when he gets back to himself, Ianto is probably going to be mortified at breaking down in front of everyone.”

Owen nodded tentatively, waiting to see where the Captain was going with this.

“And her vital signs were strong, yes?”

He nodded again.

“So what’s the harm in giving them a little time while Ianto gets himself together?”

Owen opened his mouth to reiterate his need to watch over her until she awoke, but Jack interrupted before he could utter a syllable.

“It’s not like we’re going to the other side of Cardiff, we’re only going out into the rest of the Hub. You can be back here in less than thirty seconds if you run.”

Owen frowned, but reluctantly agreed. “I’m still checking on them every fifteen minutes.”

* * *

Ianto barely noted the disappearance of the rest of the team, so focused was he on Lisa. In the back of his mind, he registered that the tears were still leaking from his eyes, but he was beyond the point of caring.

Lisa was still alive, she didn’t have a horrible tube stuck down her throat, and she was breathing. He knew there was still a very long way to go, but he felt they were finally beginning to move somewhere, even if it was just the first baby step.

On what he thought was Owen’s first return visit, the doctor had pulled over the small stool Ianto kept in the corner of Lisa’s room and persuaded him to sit. Ianto had perched on the seat absently, his mind not on the task as he gripped Lisa’s hand and watched her face for any change.

Owen came and went several more times over the next few hours, although Ianto couldn’t have said how often he visited, or how long he had been sitting there.

He was bent almost double, pressing a pleading kiss to her hand, when he heard a slight snuffle.

Lifting his head, he opened his eyes to a sight that couldn't help but bring a smile to his face.

Lisa's eyes were open.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Hey," Ianto murmured, his voice low and intimate. "Welcome back."

Lisa looked back at him, blinking blearily.

He could see the moment, about twenty seconds later, when she suddenly realised what was different. Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth to try to speak.

The only sound that escaped her mouth was a harsh croak.

Ianto reached over and pressed a finger softly against her lips, a small part of his mind thrilling that he could do that at all. "Shhh... your throat is still dry and irritated from having that tube down it for the last two and a half months. Don't try to speak yet."

He smiled at her, trying to project comfort and reassurance. "I'll go and get Owen. See if he can do anything to help."

He waited for her to nod her acceptance before jumping to his feet and hurrying out of the room.

He almost physically collided with the object of his mission just outside the door. Owen had been on his way back for another check, and was somewhat surprised to encounter Ianto in such a state of animation.

"She's awake!" Ianto cried.

Owen's relief was palpable. Yes, this was nowhere even approaching the end, but a patient waking up after major surgery was never a certainty, even in the best circumstances (which these certainly were not), so he could at least feel that they'd taken a baby step in the right direction.

"And she's lucid?" he asked, turning Ianto around to head back into Lisa's room.

Ianto nodded. "She's still a little woozy, but she's definitely there. She tried to speak, but her throat is too dry from the intubation."

Owen bobbed his head a little in thoughtful agreement. "Yeah, I expected that."

They were across the threshold and back into Lisa's room before Ianto continued. "Can we do something to help that?" he asked. "I mean, with her internal organs being the way they are." The last part was murmured softly, so as not to reach Lisa's ears and upset her.

Owen turned and addressed his answer to Lisa. “I can get you some ice chips to suck on; they should sooth your throat and moisten your mouth so it isn’t so hard to talk.”

Taking up his place at her side again, Owen took down the readings from several monitors and pulled out a small flashlight, which he shone into her eyes to check the response.

“OK, looking pretty good there, actually,” he told Ianto, who had watched the proceedings anxiously. He nodded at Lisa, attempting a faint smile. “I’ll just get those ice chips for you.”

He put his notes back down and disappeared through the doorway. Ianto had barely resumed his seat at Lisa’s side when he reappeared, holding a plastic cup of ice.

“Suck on a chip slowly. It might still hurt to swallow for a little while, but that should ease off soon.” He handed Ianto the cup of ice chips, watching as he carefully extracted one and held it to Lisa’s lips for her to take. Witnessing the obvious deep affection inherent in every touch, Owen began to feel as if he was intruding, and inconspicuously left them alone.

Ianto’s eyes were fixed once again on Lisa, so he didn’t notice Owen’s stealthy exit.

He didn’t realise *quite* how much he’d missed hearing her voice over the last ten weeks until he heard it again; a little raspy and rough from disuse, but still distinctly *his Lisa*.

“Ianto?”

* * * *

As eager as he was to hear more of her voice, to keep her talking, Ianto could tell that Lisa was tiring just a little over half an hour later. The conversation had been slightly stilted, and the topics a little inane, Ianto studiously avoiding any mention of her condition or the operation she had just been through.

He avoided them because he knew if they started talking about how *she* was, she’d want to know how *he* was – that was just the kind of girl she’d always been – and he just didn’t think he could tell her.

Didn’t think he could talk to her about how worried he’d been, how scared, when she hadn’t been breathing. Couldn’t tell her how close he had come to being physically supported by the rest of the team while Owen cut into her chest. Couldn’t discuss how he *felt*, when almost all of his problems were associated with *her*.

It had all been so much easier when she was unconscious.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

That evening, Jack found Ianto in much the same position he’d been on that night three weeks ago – although it felt like a lot longer ago than that.

On anyone else, Jack would have called the pose – slumped shoulders, tense neck and unseeing stare – utterly defeated, but, as he'd seen in the weeks since he'd first met the young Welshman, Ianto was made of tougher stuff than that.

That didn't mean, however, that he mightn't need help. Remembering his previous offer to talk – hoping Ianto did too, if he needed it – he sat down on the other end of the sofa. For a long moment, it didn't seem like Ianto had even registered his presence, but then his head turned, his gaze falling momentarily on Jack before dropping to fix on the grating beneath their feet again.

There was another long silence before Jack spoke.

“How are you, Ianto?”

At first Jack wasn't sure he'd even been heard, as no answer seemed to be forthcoming. Several minutes later, however, Ianto spoke, answering the question as if no time had passed at all since its asking.

“I'm ok, sir.”

Jack raised a sceptical eyebrow, but chose not to argue, simply stating. “Jack.”

“I'm ok, Jack,” Ianto dutifully repeated, his voice tired and emotionless.

Jack sighed almost imperceptibly and tried a slightly different tack. “And Lisa?”

Ianto took a steadying breath, and paused before answering, as if considering how much to give away. “Sleeping, for now.”

Jack waited, sensing that Ianto was teetering on the edge of saying something more.

When the words finally reached his ears, Ianto was still locked in a staring competition with the floor, and his voice was quiet and faraway.

“I couldn't talk to her about it, I can't.”

Jack shifted fractionally closer, his head tilting to look at Ianto. “About what, Ianto?” His voice was soft, but Ianto still startled a little as he realised he'd spoken aloud. He lifted his head and met Jack's concerned gaze. Jack could see the indecision in his eyes as he considered whether to answer.

“About how worried I was during the operation. How scared I was when she wasn't breathing. How scared I am *all the time* that she's not going to make it.” Ianto's words came out in a torrent as he finally released some of the tension that had been building inside him for days, weeks, even months.

Jack edged a little closer again. Not so close as to crowd him, but close enough to just be *there*.

Ianto's eyes, which had dropped to the sofa between them as his rushed words came to an end, met his again. "I just couldn't, Jack, couldn't do that to her."

"Couldn't do what?" Jack prompted gently, hoping it would help Ianto to get it all off his chest.

Ianto's eyes were blazing as they remained fixed on him. "I couldn't burden her with that. Not when she has so much more to worry about. She doesn't need to add worrying about upsetting me."

He scoffed at himself a little. "I mean, look at me. Compared to Lisa, what problems do I have, really? Everything I'm worried about involves *her* problems, and she doesn't need me bloody whining about that to *her*."

Jack, for once, sat silently, just letting Ianto rant. Letting him vent. He knew now that he'd been right all those weeks ago. Ianto needed someone to talk to, and he didn't know how he'd survived this long without someone.

As if he had read his mind, Ianto's next words answered his question. "Before, I'd been talking to her when she was asleep, or unconscious. When she couldn't really hear what I was telling her. I got so used to it, and I even managed to rationalise it to myself when I realised I liked it. But I can't do that now, not anymore."

He sighed and looked away, staring across the Hub. When he spoke again, it was if the words were forcing their way out against his will. "I think I might have come to rely on those talks though, one-sided as they were. I just don't know..."

Jack placed a hand on his shoulder and waited for Ianto to turn back to him.

"You can talk to me." He meant the words with every fibre of his being. "Anytime you need to, whatever it is, wherever I am, you can talk to me."

* * *

Ianto sighed as they moved onto the next person on the list. Lisa was sleeping, the Rift was quiet, and he and Tosh were continuing their search for someone who might be able to give them a little more expert guidance on Lisa's treatment.

He was trying not to, but Ianto was beginning to lose hope.

They'd already worked through a significant portion of the list during the two weeks between the scan and Tosh remembering the artefact, and so far, nothing had come of it.

Tosh tapped the next name into a few different searches and, as they'd done with every previous name, they perused the results together.

It only took about ten minutes to realise that, although the woman in question had looked hopeful at first, she wasn't going to be any more help than the growing list they had already discarded.

“This is hopeless,” he mumbled, dropping the list onto Tosh’s desk. “We’re never going to find someone.”

Tosh spun in her chair to face him. “Don’t say that, Ianto. Keep the faith.”

Her expression was earnest as she patted him a little awkwardly on the arm and picked up the discarded list. “The next name could be the one we’re looking for, you never know. You can’t give up.”

Bowing to the pressure, Ianto accepted the list back and scored out the name of the last person they’d checked.

“So, who’s next?” Tosh asked, her fingers poised again on the keyboard.

“A Dr. Tanizaki, from Japan.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ianto and Tosh’s heads were bent close together as they bickered gently over the precise wording of the email they were composing. Jack had attempted to help earlier, but been shooed away, after being told that his ‘helping’ was entirely unhelpful.

Dr. Tanizaki, as it turned out, was almost exactly what they’d been looking for. His research and experience could provide them with invaluable assistance.

Thus why, after several hours examining every shred of information on the man, and a long discussion with Jack, Ianto and Tosh were attempting to send out their first contact.

Despite their current dispute, they had actually agreed on the outline for the content of the email. They knew they couldn’t give too much away, especially before they knew him or even if he would be willing to help. They definitely couldn’t mention Lisa’s name, and if possible, they even wanted to avoid using the word ‘Cyberman’.

No, this first email had to be phrased very much as an astonishingly vague hypothetical situation. Only if and when he offered help would they consider letting him in on the reality.

“Don’t you think that sounds a little too desperate?” Tosh’s voice conveyed subdued exasperation.

“But if we make it sound any *less* urgent, he won’t be bothered to respond quickly,” Ianto argued. “We don’t have forever to wait on a reply.”

Tosh sighed, leaning over to delete Ianto’s sentence and replace it with one of her own. “How about that, then? A compromise.”

Ianto read what she had written and nodded half-heartedly. It wasn’t exactly what he wanted, but he sensed that he wasn’t going to be able to push Tosh any further on this

one. They'd already been forced to reach a compromise on several other points through the email and a growing part of him just wanted to get it finished and *sent*.

Pulling the keyboard over, Tosh typed in a few more lines, looking at Ianto with pleading eyes that clearly said 'please just say these are fine'.

Ianto shrugged, assenting silently. "Okay, are we done then?"

Tosh quickly read through the complete text and nodded. "I think so. All that's left is to send it."

Reaching over, Ianto grabbed hold of the mouse and with a hint of a ceremonial flourish, clicked the 'send' button at the top of the screen.

An alert flashed up on the screen just as the send confirmation did the same.

Tosh and Ianto turned from the computer to Jack's office simultaneously.

"Jack!"

Their Captain's head poked around the glass door he had retreated behind after being unceremoniously told to shove off earlier.

"Problem?"

"Picking up an alert from Cardiff PD," Tosh told him. "Suspicious reports out near Llanrumney."

"Casualties? Witnesses?" Jack asked, stepping out of his office. "Anything instantly identifiable?"

"As far as I can tell, no casualties as yet," Tosh said, quickly reading over again the report her scanning program had picked out of the local police chatter. "Couple of witnesses, and it doesn't sound like a Weevil attack, but..."

"So we check it out, interview the witnesses ourselves and see if we can't figure it out." Jack nodded decisively.

Running across the raised area, he called Owen and Suzie over, letting them know they should get themselves ready to head out.

Turning back, he noticed that Tosh was already doing the same, but Ianto was just standing there, looking a little unsure as to what he should be doing.

Making a snap decision, Jack decided to test out Ianto's people skills. They had witnesses to be questioned, and he had a feeling Ianto might be good at it.

"Ianto!" He waited until he had the younger man's attention once more. "Get your coat, you're coming too."

He had turned away when a thought struck him and he swung back around. “Oh, and if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, a thermos of your lovely coffee would be great. It mixes wonderfully with Retcon.”

Attempting, and failing, to mask his surprise, Ianto froze for a few seconds before moving swiftly past Jack and heading for the coffee machine.

Just over ten minutes later, the team piled into the SUV, and headed for the trouble.

Chapter Thirty

Jack pulled the SUV up behind a police car and they all clambered out. The Cardiff police hadn’t classified this as a crime scene, so there was no tape up and they walked straight for the large warehouse.

Two young policemen exited the building as they approached.

“Oi! Where do you think you lot are going?”

Jack stopped, the rest of them behind him, and simply directed a look at the two men, a look that clearly said ‘I have the power here, stay out of my way.’

Aloud, he spoke only one word. “Torchwood.”

The pair of coppers looked at each other, mystified. “And what’s Torchwood when it’s at home, then?”

“It means we go where we like, we do what we like, and you have no power to stop us,” smirked Jack, taking the first step to stride straight past them.

“But...” The uniformed men were left spluttering as the rest of Torchwood followed him.

“Sorry, but that’s just the way it is,” Tosh murmured to them as she passed.

When they swept through the main door, the two men inside were still sitting in what looked like it was supposed to be some sort of office or reception area, looking somewhat shaken.

They couldn’t have looked more different if they’d tried. The younger of the two, who judging by his fluorescent safety jacket worked in the warehouse, was wiry, with a shock of blond hair. The other was a dark stocky man, wearing a jacket bearing a logo that wasn’t quite recognisable at this distance.

Neither was paying much attention to their surroundings, so the Torchwood team went unnoticed until they were standing right next to them. This close, the logo on the older man’s jacket was easy to identify as that of a local haulage firm, Kyffin Transport.

Which explained the large van that had been parked outside.

Finally, the men looked up, looking confusedly at the five people assembled in front of them.

“Um...” The younger man appeared to be searching his mind for anything sensible to say.

Jack spoke before he could find anything. “We’re here to talk to you about your odd sighting.”

“We’ve already spoken to the police,” the stocky man told them.

Jack gave them a grin that could be interpreted as either charming or dangerous, depending on your mindset. “We’re not the police.”

“Who the bloody hell *are* you then?”

“Torchwood.”

Once again, the word drew blank looks. Ianto was quietly amazed that they’d somehow found four people who hadn’t even heard the name; Torchwood Cardiff wasn’t exactly the most subtle of covert operations (not that London had truly been much better).

“We investigate the things the police just wouldn’t know how to handle. Specifically aliens.”

Despite the shocks they had experienced that day – or perhaps because of them – both men burst out laughing at this.

“Aliens?” the older one scoffed. “In Cardiff? You’re mad, you are, the lot of you.”

“I assure you it’s the truth, and considering what you’ve seen today, are you really so sure about the non-existence of aliens?”

“Aliens existing isn’t a problem,” the man replied. “But in Cardiff? Really?”

Jack sighed, he was going to have to give him the usual spiel. He was going to have to find another way of explaining this soon, as he was beginning to get bored with this speech. “There’s a rift in time and space that runs right through the middle of Cardiff. Aliens come through it. We catch them.”

“Okay,” said the young warehouse employee, shaking his head, “supposing all of this is true, which I have my doubts about, what do you want from us?”

“We’ll need to have a look around, and to talk to each of you. If this really is something that came through the rift, we want as much information on it as possible before we go after it.” Jack’s tone brooked no disagreements, and both men nodded obediently.

Jack turned back to the team, and started giving out instructions. “Right, Suzie, take the scanner and have a look around. Tosh, Owen, talk to blondie here...”

“Evan,” the man in question piped up. “Evan Griffyths.”

“Right, you two talk to Evan, and Ianto and I will talk to...” He looked expectantly at the remaining man.

“Rhys Williams,” he supplied.

Jack nodded once, and everyone went to start their task, leaving Ianto with Jack and their witness, Rhys.

Chapter Thirty-One

“So,” Jack started, taking a seat next to Rhys. Ianto followed suit, a little unsure as to his role here, since he doubted Jack really needed help to do a simple interview. “Why don’t you tell me what happened earlier this morning?”

“Well, Evan was helping me load up the van, as he always does, like, and we were just going back in to get another load.”

“And that’s when you saw it?”

“Yeah. I think it was trying to eat something off a shelf, but it ran off when me and Evan came round so I dunno.”

“What did you actually see? What did it look like?” Jack pressed.

Rhys fumbled for words to describe it. “It was, well, sort of black. And maybe it had horns.” He thought for a few more moments. “Oh, and four legs. It definitely had four legs.”

Pulling a small notepad (usually used for shopping lists and the like) from the inside pocket of his jacket, Ianto started to jot down a few notes, as he noticed that Jack wasn’t.

“How about a tail? Any other limbs?”

“It might have had a short tail, but I’m sorry, I really can’t remember.” A look of consternation passed over Rhys’s face. “Other limbs?”

“Tentacles, arms growing from odd places, anything like that,” Ianto clarified for him.

Rhys looked a little taken aback. “There really are aliens that have those? They’re not just from movies?”

“Yes,” Jack answered shortly, his expression clearly conveying his expectation of a proper answer.

Catching the look, Rhys hastily shook his head. “No, no, no, nothing like that. Just the four legs. And the body, like. Of course.” He laughed nervously.

Jack nodded as Ianto scribbled down a few more notes. “And what about size – big? Small?”

Rhys seemed to struggle with this, obviously unsure as to what exactly classed as ‘big’ when it came to aliens.

“Bigger or smaller than, say, a sheep?” Ianto offered helpfully, trying to put the question into much clearer and more definable terms.

“Bigger,” Rhys answered immediately. “More like the size of, I don’t know, a biggish cow, maybe.”

Ianto took note of this as Jack returned to the earlier line of questioning.

“And you say it ran off when you approached?”

“Yeah, it just ran. And I reckon it must have gotten out somehow, ‘cause me and Evan had a look around afterwards, see, and we couldn’t spot it anywhere.”

Jack nodded and smiled, indicating to Ianto that he could close his notepad when he finished writing.

“Thanks, Rhys. This should really help.”

Rhys visibly relaxed at the news that the questions were over. “No problem. The police didn’t really seem to even believe us, so I hope you lot can deal with this thing.”

A few moments later Owen and Tosh reappeared, young Evan in tow.

It only took a few short minutes of quiet conference between the four members of Torchwood to verify that both stories matched, the only additional information being that Evan had been absolutely certain about the existence of a tail.

“Right, Ianto, I think these guys could probably do with a nice hot mug of your wonderful coffee, don’t you think?” Though neither his expression nor his tone changed, the underlying meaning behind Jack’s words was clear.

Retcon time.

Ianto was in the warehouse’s makeshift kitchenette pouring Rhys and Evan mugs of hot drugged coffee when Suzie came running around the corner, waving the scanner in the air.

“I got a specific energy signal down where these guys saw the creature, and I just did a city-wide scan and it picked up exactly the same pattern a couple of miles away in Newton.”

Snapping straight into action mode, Jack, Owen and Tosh joined her as she ran for the SUV.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“I think I might recognise the description,” Jack told them as he directed the SUV towards the location of the energy readings.

“Oh yes?” Owen’s voice came from the back.

“If I’m right, it’s called a Bleqaxi and it’s somewhat similar to a Hoix. Can and will eat anything and everything. They’re hunted by several other creatures on their home planet though, which tends to make them quite skittish.”

“So, assuming it’s still where we’re getting the energy reading, what’s the plan?” Tosh asked from behind her computer, where she was monitoring the energy readings from across the area Suzie had identified.

“I’m going to guess it doesn’t involve running at it, all guns blazing,” Suzie postulated from the front passenger seat.

Jack grinned, although as he didn’t take his eyes off the road none of the team could tell. “No, we’re going to have to do this one stealthily. Stay quiet, surround it, then move in for the capture.”

“And how are we going to do that, given that it’s apparently the size of a cow? We can’t exactly just grab it,” came Owen’s cynical tones again.

There was silence in the vehicle for a long moment while they all considered the problem.

“Do we still have that tranq gun in the boot from the Lopenken last month?” Suzie eventually tossed out.

“Yeah, I think so,” Jack said, looking over momentarily to grin at her. “That would be ideal. Good thinking, Suzie.”

“Uh, guys?” Tosh cried suddenly just as Jack was bringing the SUV to a stop. “The energy trace is gone. It just vanished.”

“What do you mean ‘it just vanished’?” Jack asked, twisting in his seat to look at her. “It can’t have.”

“Yeah, are you sure it didn’t just move and you’ve lost it?” Owen sniped beside her.

“I meant exactly what I said - it just vanished. And *no* Owen, I didn’t just *lose* it. Take a look yourself if you think you can do better.”

Owen put his hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay, I was just *saying*.”

“Right well if we could *all* stop just *saying*,” Jack interrupted, shooting the pair of them an admonishing look, “we need to get out there and investigate. The energy reading may be gone, but that doesn’t necessarily mean the Bleqaxi is.”

Suitably chastened, they all clambered quietly out of the SUV, Jack discovering that yes, they *did* still have the tranquiliser gun, and taking it, just in case.

Nearly forty minutes later, they had to admit defeat. They had searched every nook and cranny, but to no avail. The overturned bins and general disarray of the place did suggest that the Bleqaxi *had* been here however – they’d just been too late.

“Getting anything on that scanner, Tosh?” Jack murmured through his earpiece as he peered around one final corner.

“Still nothing,” she replied softly. “I might be able to pick something up with the big locator back at the Hub, but unless the signal reappears strongly I’m not going to get anything with this.”

Jack sighed. “Right then, I guess it’s back to the Hub. Let’s hope this doesn’t turn into a late one.”

* * *

Several hours later, it didn’t look much like Jack was going to get his wish.

They’d hit the first of the evening rush hour traffic on the way back into the centre of Cardiff, extending the journey time to over three quarters of an hour.

They eventually straggled into the Hub, Jack grumbling not quite under his breath about aliens that wouldn’t just stay put and stupid traffic.

“Iant- oh shit.” His call to beg for another coffee died in his throat. “We left him at the warehouse. I didn’t even think.”

Horrified looks passed between the rest of the team as they realised the truth of his words.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Jack had just turned on his heel, ready to head back out to the garage and the SUV, when a voice from behind him stopped him in his tracks.

“Yes, sir?”

The team turned as one to see Ianto entering the main Hub floor from the corridor that lead to Lisa’s room. On the surface, his manner appeared just as mild and polite as it usually was, but if you looked a little closer the slightly harder set of his eyes and jaw became obvious.

Ianto was *not* pleased with them.

Picking up on Ianto's displeasure, Jack wrought his brain for the best way to apologise.

"Look, Ianto, I'm sorry, *we're* sorry, but we're just not used to having you out in the field, and..."

Ianto cut him off. "Nothing to apologise for, sir." His tone was a little clipped, in comparison to his usual voice. "Although it's a good thing I learned the Cardiff bus routes off by heart when I was younger – and that they haven't changed much since."

Jack wanted to say something, try to apologise again, but he sensed that Ianto wasn't exactly in the most receptive mood and stayed silent.

"Anyway, was there something you called me for or can I go?"

"You couldn't do us a cup of coffee, could you?" Owen chanced his luck, receiving a hard glance from Tosh behind Jack's back.

"I'm terribly sorry," Ianto replied, his voice now the epitome of 'mild mannered butler', "but I appear to have left my coffee-making skills at the bus stop. I'll be sure to let you know when they arrive." With a slight tilt of his head, completing the image, he spun around and disappeared the way he had come.

Owen sighed. "Thought as much."

By 8pm, they were beginning to feel the caffeine withdrawal. Jack, Tosh and even Owen had all gone to take a closer look at the coffee machine, just in case Ianto had done something that made operation simple. None of them had dared actually touch it, though, just in case.

Tosh had searched Cardiff and the entire surrounding area for the energy pattern, but it wasn't showing up anywhere. The possibility that it had been snatched back by the Rift had been posited, but was quickly dismissed as highly unlikely – as far as they knew, the Rift just didn't *work* like that.

By 9.30, they had been reduced to shooting apologetic begging looks at Ianto every time he passed through the Hub to collect or deposit something. Unfortunately for them, Ianto remained immune.

However, no matter how annoyed at the team he was, or how willing he was to deprive them of good coffee (if they really just needed the caffeine he knew there was a jar of instant kicking around), he wasn't going to stop helping them on the case if he could.

Hence why a folder found its way onto Tosh's desk just before 11pm, when even a scan of as much of Wales as the equipment could reach was showing nothing.

"What's this?" Tosh asked, picking it up and spinning on her chair to face Ianto.

“Lisa’s asleep for the night, so I’ve been sorting out a couple of those filing cabinets in the archives. The cover sheet for this one mentioned sporadically disappearing energy patterns, so I thought it might be relevant.”

Tosh flicked through a few pages, looking thoughtful. “It just might be, thanks Ianto.” A few more pages were skimmed. “It mentions an alien race, but although it’s not the same one, it might be related...” She caught Ianto’s arm, stopping him from slinking off back to the archives. “Jack!”

Jack stuck his head out of his office, looking, unusually, a little frazzled. “Yes?”

“Ianto found something in the archives that could be useful, but I don’t recognise the species mentioned. If it’s too different then the information might not really apply.”

Jack came over and took the file, reading a page or two. “No, I think we might actually be in luck. From what I remember, this species is actually from the same solar system as the Bleqaxi, so there’s a good chance this will be right on the money.” He gave Ianto a grin. “Great work there, Ianto, really.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ianto replied, “but I still can’t make you a cup of coffee.”

He backed away and headed towards the archives again, barely escaping Jack’s full-on pout.

Chapter Thirty-Four

By 1.30am, they were tired, caffeine-deprived and frustrated, but they had at least worked out why the energy pattern had disappeared. Well, they had a working theory anyway.

Assuming that the Bleqaxi was genetically fairly similar to the creature mentioned in the archives, which given Jack’s knowledge didn’t seem to be *too* insane, it only emitted the energy pattern under certain circumstances. Once emitted it would linger around the area for a while before dissipating.

Based on what they could gather from tests done by the Torchwood team in the 50’s, one of the situations which resulted in exudation of the energy was extreme fear (although they didn’t particularly want to know how Torchwood of the 50’s had come to this conclusion).

Toshiko didn’t think this sounded like a particularly wise choice, evolution-wise, but Jack assured her that the majority of the predators in that system didn’t have the capability to pick up on it, while other members of its own species did, and would therefore come to help.

Obviously, both times they’d picked it up so far, the Bleqaxi had been scrounging for food and had then become scared at the approach of what it would see as entirely unknown beings, and run.

As soon as it calmed down a little, the energy would no longer be emitted, and the trail would go cold.

As, for some reason, there was no Rift energy attached to the creature (perhaps it had been here longer than they thought), this energy signal was their only way of tracking it, so for now all they could do was wait.

By 3am they had exhausted a multitude of other ideas they had managed to think up on methods to track the Bleqaxi if the energy signal didn't reappear. Jack was about to send them all home to try again in the morning when Tosh's computer started to bleep.

The Bleqaxi's distress signal had appeared again, and this time it was only a few minutes from the Hub.

Hastily gathering up a few items, Jack, Suzie, Owen and Tosh ran for the SUV, hoping to catch it before the signal disappeared again.

It was nearly half an hour before Ianto heard anything over the comms.

"Ianto, we got it, and we're on our way back." Jack's voice sounded very strained, and Ianto couldn't help but worry.

Deciding they'd been through enough, and would probably need it to get through all the post-capture details when they returned, he started a pot of coffee. His own thermos of the stuff was empty by now anyway.

Leaving it brewing, he headed down to the garage to wait on their return, just in case they needed a hand with what he assumed would be an unconscious Bleqaxi.

When the SUV pulled in a minute later, it did indeed contain an unconscious Bleqaxi, but it also contained an injured Toshiko.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Tosh!" Ianto ran around the side of the SUV to help her out, being careful to avoid her heavily bandaged arm. Despite the thick layers of cloth, a little blood was starting to seep through to the surface. "What happened?"

"Scared Bleqaxi," she mumbled as the rest of the team climbed out.

"We'll fill you in later," Jack told him as he passed, heading for the back of the SUV where the tranquilised body of the Bleqaxi was held. "Owen, get Tosh to the med bay and get her patched up. Ianto, we're going to need your help to get this thing to the vaults."

Even with the help of a trolley, it took Jack, Suzie and Ianto quite some time to manoeuvre the large dead-weight of the Bleqaxi out of the SUV and along to the cell it would occupy for the foreseeable future.

By the time they made it back to the main Hub, Owen was just putting the finishing touches on the last of the 28 stitches Tosh's wound required. Worried about his friend, Ianto hurried down the steps into the bay, hovering at Tosh's other side. Jack and Suzie weren't far behind him.

"Are you ok, Tosh?"

She managed a weak smile. "Once the painkillers Owen's given me kick in I will be."

Ianto looked round at the rest of the team, a faintly accusing look in his eyes. "So, what happened?"

"We were following the signal and we found ourselves in the old industrial area at Roath Docks," Jack began. "There are quite a few old buildings very close together down there, so we split up to search."

His eyes stopped on Tosh's arm regretfully as Owen started to wrap it. "Tosh found the Bleqaxi, which was a little more panicked even than we expected." His tone was full of self-censure. "It tried to run through her to escape, and I was too slow with the tranq gun."

"Not your fault," Tosh mumbled, the high strength painkillers beginning to make her a little drowsy. "Just bad luck."

"Okay," Jack said, noticing Tosh's eyes drooping, "we need to get you home."

He glanced around the rest of the team, dividing up the tasks in his head. "Suzie, give Tosh a lift home, and once she's settled you might as well go home yourself. Owen..."

Owen sighed, nodding his head before Jack got as far as identifying his task. "Fill out an injury report, I know, I know."

"I know you hate them, but they need to be done." Jack turned pleading eyes on Ianto. "Ianto..."

"Oh!" Ianto interrupted, his head jerking up as he had a sudden recollection. "I left coffee brewing when I came down to the garage." He sighed. "It'll be cold by now. I'll have to make a new pot."

Owen's entire posture perked up at the sound of the magic 'C' word, and Jack's sudden smile nearly blinded Ianto. "You're an angel, Ianto Jones. Once you've worked your coffee magic, could you keep an eye on the Bleqaxi? Just until it wakes up."

He blew out a breath. "I have my own report to write."

At the looks on Jack and Owen's faces, Ianto resolved to make the coffee extra strong. Neither of them were lovers of paperwork, and they'd need it to get them through.

* * *

“Ianto...” The voice sounded far away.

“Come on Ianto, wake up.” A hand shook his shoulder softly, and Ianto blearily opened his eyes to find Jack’s face barely more than inches from his own. *God his eyes are blue...*

A little disoriented, he pushed himself up towards a sitting position. “Wha’s goin on?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Jack murmured. “You just fell asleep on the couch, and that can’t be comfortable.”

“Oh.”

Jack helped him to sit up fully and perched on the sofa beside him. “Why are you even still here? I sent you home at the same time as Owen.”

“No point,” Ianto mumbled, almost too quietly for Jack to catch.

“What do you mean ‘no point’? I said not to come back until noon unless there was an emergency, remember?”

“Lisa. She’ll be ‘specting me like normal.”

Jack nodded in understanding. He knew Ianto was usually in well before eight to check on his girlfriend, even if he rarely made himself noticed to the younger man.

Seeing how exhausted Ianto was, he made a quick decision. “Come on,” he said, getting to his feet and taking Ianto’s hand. “You can sleep in my bunk.”

Even as tired as he was, Ianto resisted, trying to pull his hand from Jack’s grip. “No, no. I can’t. ‘m fine here.”

“No you’re not. That couch will be hell on your back.” Jack persisted, tightening his hold on Ianto’s hand and pulling him onto his feet.

“But...”

“No buts. Look, you’re not putting me out. I don’t sleep much anyway.” He grinned, unconsciously adding a bit of a leer. “Takes more than a bit of a chase with a Bleqaxi to wear me out.”

“kay.” Ianto reluctantly capitulated, too tired to argue further, and let Jack lead him into his office.

“You know,” Jack said hesitantly as he lifted the hatch, “if you want, we could get you a camp bed or something. In case you need to stick close overnight for some reason.”

Ianto's gaze met his as he tiredly started his way down the ladder. Jack didn't need Ianto's whispered 'thanks' to know how grateful he was; he could see it in his eyes.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Ianto woke up, groggy, with a serious bout of disorientation. This wasn't his bed – his pillow didn't *smell* quite like that – wasn't his room, wasn't even his flat.

It was several moments before he was fully awake enough for it to start coming back to him. The conversation with Jack a scant three hours previously, the older man persuading him off the sofa and down into his bunk.

At the time, he'd been too sleepy to question Jack's explanation that he 'didn't sleep much', but with the benefit of a few good hours of rest, he couldn't see how it could possibly be true. They had all been on their feet for at least twenty hours, and everyone needed *some* sleep.

The only rational explanation he could think of was that Jack had lied to him to make him feel better, and had taken the uncomfortable sofa for himself. The thought made him feel slightly guilty, and he resolved to make a point of thanking Jack for his kindness.

He quenched the small part of his brain that wondered why Jack had deemed him worthy of such care. 'I'm part of his team, that's all,' he told the little voice firmly, pushing it resolutely to the back of his mind.

Pushing up and out of the small bed, he made his way to the tiny bathroom adjoining the sleeping quarters, splashing some cold water onto his face to clear his head and using a cloth to have a brief wash.

Returning to what he supposed Jack would call his 'bedroom', he picked up his suit from the day before, looking at it in dismay. It was a little rumpled from the long day, and from falling asleep on the Hub sofa. It would have to do, though.

Hopefully he'd have time to go home and grab a shower and a change of clothes after he'd been to see Lisa.

Once he was dressed, and as presentable as he could manage, he made his way back up through Jack's office. As he made his way through the Hub, he noted that there was no sign of Jack. The sofa didn't look like it had been slept on either.

Ianto was puzzled, but made a conscious decision not to think on it any further. What business of his was it where his boss slept anyway?

Unusually, Lisa was already stirring as he made his way into her room.

"Morning," he murmured softly, pressing a chaste kiss to her lips as her eyes fluttered open.

“Morning.” Her gaze turned sympathetic as she took in the bags under his eyes that he’d been unable to hide. “Late night, Ianto?” Drifting her eyes down his body she also noticed the crumpled suit, correctly guessing that he hadn’t had a chance to make it home yet.

He nodded, perching on the stool and dropping his hand to grip hers in his now familiar position. “Yeah, it was.”

“They catch that Belacki thing then?” she asked, hesitating over the name of the species. Ianto had related the tale of his little trip the previous day, and had, at her request, fed her further information on the case as it came in.

Seeing her eyes light up as he related stories of various theories the team had expounded upon, he realised just how much she missed this. She was an intelligent woman, and had done wonderful work for Torchwood in London, and most of the time now she was relegated to listening to music or audio books, while the people around her did the work she had so loved.

He resolved to keep her in the loop more about what was going on around the Hub. It wasn’t the same as doing the work herself, but it was something, and it would give her things to think about when he was busy and couldn’t be there to keep her company.

Who knew, maybe she’d even help them solve a problem.

“Bleqaxi, and yes, they caught it.” He sighed, thinking back to the night before. “Not until half past three though, and it got Tosh.”

Lisa’s grip tightened a little around his hand and her eyes went as wide as they could. “Got? Not got as in...?” She’d worked for Torchwood. She knew the life expectancy statistics for its employees.

“No, no,” he was quick to clarify. “Not like that. She’s got a pretty nasty gash on her arm though.”

Although her grip loosened, Lisa’s eyes remained wide and concerned. She liked Tosh, from the little contact she’d had with the Japanese woman, and she knew from Ianto’s stories that he considered her a good friend.

“She’ll be okay though?”

Ianto blew out a breath and nodded, his chin dropping to his chest. “Yeah. Probably in pain for a while but she’ll be fine. Anyway...” He lifted his head again, meeting Lisa’s gaze. “How are *you* feeling? Anything worse than last night? Anything better?”

“No, pretty much the same.” Even though he knew it was irrational, almost like wishing for the moon, every time he asked he hoped that she would say that something was better, that something had miraculously healed itself.

“And the doses are all still fine?”

“Yes, Ianto, they’re still fine,” she told him, her tone betraying the tiniest hint of good-natured frustration. “Stop fussing.”

“Okay, okay,” Ianto surrendered. “I will. I just worry is all. But I promise, no more fussing. At least not this morning.” The affectionate smile he got in return, with just a trace of an affected long-suffering air, couldn’t help but bring a soft smile to his own lips.

“So,” he started, picking up a battered paperback from the table, “where were we?”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

When Ianto emerged from Lisa’s room some time later, leaving her, as usual, listening to music, the proximity alarm was going off and the cog door rolled back just as he entered the main Hub.

Greatcoat sweeping behind him, Jack walked in, spotting Ianto a moment later. Ianto couldn’t tell if he’d been in and out and back again during the time he’d been down with Lisa, or if this was him just getting back from wherever it was he’d spent the night.

‘*You’re obsessing again, Ianto,*’ he told himself, wondering where this sudden pre-occupation with his boss’s sleeping habits had come from, and deliberately blocking the part of his mind that might have provided any truthful answers to that question.

“Morning, Ianto,” Jack called, ignoring the call of his office and crossing the Hub towards Ianto. “How is she this morning then?”

It took Ianto a fraction of a second longer than it perhaps should have to realise who Jack was referring to.

“Pretty much the same,” he told him. “Although she seems more concerned with the wellbeing of the *rest* of us this morning than with her *own*.”

He noticed Jack’s look of slight confusion. “I told her about the Bleqaxi yesterday, and she sort of figured out that it must have been a late one.” He indicated his own less than impeccable appearance. “She wanted to know how it went, so I had to tell her.”

He paused, considering his next words. “By the way... thank you for last night. You really didn’t have to put yourself out like that. And although I don’t understand why you did it, I *do* appreciate it.”

“I told you last night, Ianto,” Jack said firmly. “I really wasn’t putting myself out all that much.”

He raised an eyebrow, almost daring Ianto to contradict him. “And even if I had been, I would still have done the same thing.” His eyes softened. “You’re expending all of your energy looking after everyone else, looking after Lisa. Someone needs to look after *you*.”

“I can look after myself,” Ianto retorted stiffly, bothered by the implications of Jack’s words. “I don’t need...”

“I know you can,” Jack interrupted calmly. “It’s just that, from now on, I’m going to be making sure that you *do*. You’ve been putting yourself as low guy on the totem pole, and that needs to stop. You won’t be any use to anyone, least of all to Lisa, if you run yourself into the ground.”

Ianto deflated, unable to argue with Jack’s logic.

“And on that note,” Jack continued. “Go. Home. Take a shower, get changed. Even grab a couple more hours of sleep if you want to. Barring an emergency, the others won’t be in for another two or three hours at least. I’m sure Lisa and I will both cope without you for a short while if you want to do the same.”

“I’m fine,” Ianto insisted. “I will go home and get cleaned up and changed, though, thanks.” The vague recollection of a conversation about setting up somewhere for him to stay the night, if need be, popped into his mind, triggering another thought. “Maybe I should start keeping a spare set of clothes here at the Hub too... just in case.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Jack said, stopping closer and taking Ianto’s shoulders in his hands. “We’ll talk about it later, after you’ve *gone home* and *rested*.” His eyes bored into Ianto’s as he made his point.

Ianto nodded, but after he pulled away and collected his coat to leave, he turned back. “I’m just going to shower and change. I’ll be back within the hour.”

Without giving Jack another chance to argue, he turned again and left.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

In the end, despite Ianto’s determination, Jack was right.

He had intended to head straight for the shower, but as he passed through his bedroom, the temptation of a nap, just a short one, proved too hard to resist.

When he returned to the Hub just before noon, he found that he was still the first one ‘in’, and went to find Jack to apologise for being so long.

Jack, naturally, refused to accept any apology. “I knew you probably wouldn’t be back for a few hours,” he told the younger man, cutting off all his attempts at explanation.

“You were exhausted; you needed more than the couple of hours of sleep you grabbed down there.” He inclined his head, indicating the closed hatch in the floor. “And hey, you still managed to beat everyone else in. As usual.”

He tried to lighten the mood with a grin, and was relieved to see Ianto relax a little in response.

“I’ll just go make some coffee, then,” Ianto said. “I’m sure you’ll be needing some by now.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

The door klaxons sounded just as he started up the coffeemaker, heralding Tosh’s arrival.

Her heavily bandaged arm was held close to her chest, and beneath the determined set of her face was an undercurrent of pain.

Leaving the coffee to brew, he hopped down from the kitchenette and intercepted her on her way to her desk.

“Are you ok, Tosh? Should you even be here today?” He knew his worry for his friend was plain to see.

“I’m fine, Ianto, really,” she reassured him, but he could see the discomfort in her eyes.

“Less than twelve hours ago, you had your arm slashed open by a terrified alien, Tosh. You are *not* ‘fine’.”

“I’ve worked through worse.” It appeared that Tosh wasn’t to be swayed, and Ianto could only sigh.

“Have you at least taken the painkillers Owen gave you?” Tosh looked vaguely guilty. “Tosh?”

“They make me feel woozy,” Tosh defended. “I took a couple of ibuprofen and I’ll be okay.”

Ianto looked sceptical. “I don’t believe you.”

“But...”

“Tosh, I can see it on your face, in your eyes. You are a *long* way from fine. Either you go home and rest like you should, or I’ll take this to Jack and get him to tell Owen to place you on medical leave.”

“Okay, so maybe I’m not fine. But I’m better off here than sitting at home, bored out of my mind, wondering what’s going on without me.” Ianto raised an eyebrow. “Look, if it gets worse, I’ll tell Jack myself, I promise.”

Ianto still wasn’t convinced, but decided it was pointless trying to argue the point any further.

“If I see you really struggling, I’m still going to take it to Jack, ok?”

Tosh nodded.

“Anyway, I’m making a pot of coffee. Would you like a cup?”

Tosh looked at him gratefully; glad the matter appeared to have been dropped. “Thank you, Ianto. I’d love some.”

* * *

The exchange was to become a familiar one over the following weeks. Tosh refused adamantly to take a day off, and Ianto persisted in telling her that she should.

It didn’t take all that long for Tosh to start gently complaining that he was coddling her, as he wouldn’t let her lift anything heavier than a coffee mug, and could quite often be found hovering in the vicinity of her desk – ostensibly cleaning or organising – just in case she needed something.

Tosh wasn’t entirely sure how he was managing to find the time to watch over her, look after Lisa *and* do his various jobs around the Hub, but somehow he was, and Tosh almost wished that he wasn’t.

Despite their ever-closer friendship, escaping Ianto’s watchful eye was a large factor in Tosh’s happiness when Owen finally removed the stitches from her arm and declared her fit for fieldwork again.

She wouldn’t, perhaps, have been thrown right back into the field quite as quickly as she was had they not been in the middle of a Weevil epidemic.

Less than forty minutes after the removal of the stitches, they started receiving reports of three ‘weird looking creatures’ in a park on the other side of Cardiff.

Jack, Owen and Suzie were on their feet and gathering equipment in a flash. Jack turned to Tosh to find her eagerly doing the same.

“Tosh...”

“Don’t even suggest it, Jack,” she interrupted. “I’m coming with you. You *know* that Ianto is perfectly capable of manning the comms. And I really need to get out and *do* something.”

Jack sighed and nodded. Although he would have preferred her to stay out of the field for just one more day, she had a point. Ianto *could* do it, and they could almost certainly use the extra body in the field.

Since Ianto had joined, they’d grown used to working as a field team of four rather than of three, and Tosh’s injury-induced stint of ‘desk duty’ had been hard work.

“Ianto!”

Ianto appeared just moments later, an empty DVD case still in hand from where he'd been setting up a movie for Lisa on the small portable player Jack had produced just days ago.

"We need you on comms. Tosh is coming with."

Ianto nodded and quickly settled into his usual chair.

Things were finally starting to get back to normal.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Are you sure this will work?"

"Yes."

"More sure than the last time?"

"Yes. Now..."

"But what about...?"

"For Christ sakes let the woman speak, Ianto."

"Sorry, Tosh, go on."

"It's okay, Ianto. I know you're worried. But I promise you this will be completely fine. The experimental part isn't even the part actually involving Lisa."

The spate of Weevil attacks had finally slowed – although they had still been unable to determine its cause – and in the last few days, Owen and Suzie had been able to spend some time helping Tosh finish a project she had begun work on during her recovery from injury.

Ianto had offered his own assistance in the early stages, and had understood what she was trying to do, but now that it was finished and ready to try out, he was beginning to feel a little uneasy.

"I know that, it's just..."

Jack put a comforting hand on Ianto's forearm. "We know, but it can't hurt to try, can it?"

"But what if it doesn't work?"

"If it doesn't work, we just go back to the tried and tested method they use in hospitals today," Owen replied. "It will take longer, and we'll probably need a lot more samples to work from, but in the grand scheme of things we won't have lost anything."

“Except time.” Ianto had been growing increasingly worried about the passing of time as the months went by.

“Except time,” Owen had to concede. “But even that is minimal really. We’ll know within a day or two if this is going to work, and if it does, we’ll save a lot of the time we would have had to wait before we could use this to help her.”

“Okay.” Ianto closed his eyes briefly. “Okay. So what do we have to do, then?”

Owen shut his folder over. “The main thing is harvesting the samples, which we could probably even do this afternoon, if Lisa is okay with it. We have all the equipment ready for that.”

“Will it be painful for her?”

Owen didn’t sugar-coat the truth. “Yes, it will. And it will take some time to heal. But all of that is why we want to give Tosh’s idea a chance. We’d never be able to culture enough new cells the traditional way without taking quite a lot of samples from her, but if this works we’ll only need one or two.”

Ianto sighed and nodded. “Let’s go see if Lisa’s awake.”

The procedure took most of the afternoon, and as Owen had warned, even with the heavy-duty painkillers, it wasn’t a painless process.

Two small sections where Lisa’s bare skin could be seen instead of hard, cold metal were not carefully dressed and bandaged – Owen was crossing his fingers that the resilience she’d shown so far to infection would continue.

The harvest sites were very susceptible, and Owen knew that if even one infection took hold it would seriously damage any hopes they had for her recovery.

None of the rest of them had been allowed to be present during the procedure – they’d pushed their luck quite far enough after the last operation, Owen had told them when Ianto protested.

When he was done, Owen had given her a mild sedative to help her sleep off the worst of the pain.

That had been a couple of hours ago, so Ianto knew she’d probably be on the verge of wakening and didn’t want her to be alone.

He was just crossing the Hub towards her room when a dark shape swooped through the air behind him.

“Hey!” he called towards the others as he turned around. “Who let Myf...argh!”

Chapter Forty

Ianto stumbled backwards.

That *definitely* wasn't Myfanwy.

He didn't know how it had gotten in here, or what it wanted, but the rows of teeth and razor sharp claws told him he didn't want to be sticking around to ask.

His back hit something, it felt like part of the rift manipulator, and his eyes flickered to the left and to the right, pondering his escape routes.

His breath caught in his throat as he realised that the creature, whatever it was, was not alone.

He almost stopped breathing entirely when he remembered that Lisa's door had not been closed that day, just in case she needed them quickly after the procedure. He couldn't let these things get to her.

But on the other hand, the rest of the team were up there in what he liked to call the 'office' area, and they would probably welcome the help. Might *need* the help.

So, to go left, or right?

Protect Lisa, or assist the team?

He hesitated for just a minute too long.

* * *

Ianto's shout brought heads up from desks and away from screens, and it took the rest of the team scant moments to notice that something was very wrong.

Three large, winged creatures had appeared as if from nowhere, and were swooping across the Hub just meters from the ground.

Jack was relieved for a second that the pterodactyl nest was still locked before his mind focussed on the more important issue.

It became apparent within moments that, unfortunately, capture and containment just wasn't going to be an option. If any of the creatures had been alone then it might have been an outside possibility, but with three of them there was almost no chance of a capture being successful without getting most of his team killed.

"They're too dangerous, we don't have time on our side - shoot to kill," he called to his team, pulling out his Webely and hoping fervently that bullets could stop these things.

Shots rang out around the Hub, but the creatures didn't stop. They flew swiftly, and seemed to be able to change direction in a moment, making it very difficult to aim accurately.

The team spread out a little and continued to shoot. Jack knew they had weapons more suited to the task in the weapons vault, but there was simply no time to go and find them.

Finally, what felt like hours later but in reality couldn't have been any more than fifteen seconds, there was a loud screech and one of the creatures crashed to the ground, bright purple goo leaking from a wound on its head.

Jack couldn't be sure whose shot had hit it, but it was a tiny glimmer of hope that at least a shot to the head worked – the creature had stopped moving almost immediately on impact with the ground.

Moments later, a second creature joined it on the floor, a wing twitching slightly before it expired.

There was only one creature left, and the whole team had turned their attentions to it.

Suddenly, the creature swung out of its swooping and circling pattern, and appeared to be diving for a target.

Jack's head spun around to look at the spot it was aiming for, and his heart froze momentarily.

There, right within the reaches of the dangerous talons of the remaining creature, was Ianto – defenceless without a weapon and stuck with nowhere to run.

Blood rushing in his ears, Jack took aim, and fired.

He almost couldn't bear to look, but the Hub was immediately filled with the ear-splitting screech of the final creature as the bullet ripped through its head.

The threat neutralised, Jack finally allowed himself to breathe.

He re-holstered his gun and looked around, watching as his team did the same thing.

He didn't know how the creatures had gotten into the Hub, but they had time now to work it out. The danger was over, and his team was – no, wait, where was Ianto?

Striding quickly across the Hub, Jack made his way to the spot where he'd last seen Ianto, before the death of the final creature.

What he found had him dropping to his knees, his throat tightening in panic.

“Owen!”

Chapter Forty-One

Owen was beside them in seconds.

“Oh fuck.”

He ran off again in the direction of the medical bay, leaving Jack kneeling helplessly beside Ianto's unconscious form, unsure of where he could put his hands that might staunch the worst of the bleeding.

It seemed to be coming from everywhere, but Jack was too scared to touch him in case he actually made things worse. Tosh and Suzie stood motionless just a few feet away, and it was clear from their expressions that they were just as scared and clueless as he.

The distress on his face was plain to see by the time Owen returned, less than a minute later, with a medical kit.

Dropping down beside him, Owen pulled out several large gauze pads and pressed them to some of Ianto's wounds. He grabbed Jack's hands a moment later, holding them to the pads while he took a closer look.

"Shit."

"What is it?" Jack was growing ever more worried.

"Some of the slashes have nicked internal organs," Owen told him, his own voice tense. "I just don't have the facilities here to treat him. We need to get him to a hospital, and fast."

Hearing this, Tosh reached for her mobile, and then froze. "Where do I call an ambulance to? *Can* we even call an ambulance?"

Jack would have hit something if his hands had not been busy holding down Ianto's dressings. "Dammit, no. We can't risk letting the paramedics in here, even for Ianto."

"But we won't get him there safely in the SUV," Owen pointed out, pressing yet more clean dressings to Ianto's cuts. "There isn't the space."

Jack blew out a frustrated breath before an idea hit. "Tosh, call that ambulance. Tell them to go to the car park outside our garage. Owen, where did you leave that old stretcher? The one you sometimes use for shifting aliens for autopsy?"

Owen stared into the mid-distance for a second as he thought. "Cold storage, I think."

"Suzie?"

"On it." Tosh had just started giving the emergency operator directions to the location when Suzie ran off.

It took all four of them to manoeuvre Ianto onto the stretcher without causing him too much more damage. The stretcher itself wasn't exactly clean, and Owen worried a little about infection or contamination of Ianto's wounds, but they didn't really have a choice.

They made it out to the car park just a little under a minute before the ambulance drew up, lights and siren blaring.

As soon as it came to a halt, the paramedics jumped out and rushed to tend to Ianto's still form. Jack knew he was being short with them when they asked what had happened, but he just didn't have the composure at the moment to come up with a convincing cover story.

"Does it really *matter* what happened? Just *help him!*" he found himself crying at them in frustration.

There hadn't been room in the ambulance for him to go with them. Owen, in his capacity as medic, had climbed into the tiny space with the female paramedic as her partner leapt behind the wheel. The doors had slammed shut behind them, leaving Jack just standing there, feeling a little lost, Ianto's blood all over his hands and clothes.

It was several long moments after the ambulance pulled away, siren once more ringing out, before Jack shook himself, and started thinking about what needed to be done.

"Cleanup of the creatures can wait," he said, turning to his two female team-mates. "Right now we need to get to the SUV and get to the hospital. Ianto needs us."

It wasn't until they were at the doors of the SUV that Jack looked at his hands and realised the state they were in. Not wanting to waste precious minutes going back into the Hub to clean up, he simply wiped them on his already stained shirt, reflecting that even Ianto probably couldn't have saved it anyway.

He was about to open the driver's door and climb in when a hand on his arm stopped him.

"What?" he muttered harshly as he turned around to find Suzie right behind him.

"Give me the keys." She held out a hand. "I'm driving."

"What? No."

She held firm. "I'm driving. It may sound terrible to say it, but I'm not as close to Ianto as you and Tosh are. You'll be distracted and dangerous on the roads, I won't. And you're wasting time here arguing this. Just give me the keys."

Accepting her argument of the passing time, if not the rest of them, Jack reluctantly relinquished the keys, stepping swiftly around the bonnet to climb into the passenger seat.

The drive to the hospital, even though Suzie – at their urging – broke more than one speed limit, seemed interminably long to both Jack and Tosh. They knew, just from the looks that had passed across Owen's face in the Hub, that there was a very real

possibility that Ianto might not make it through this, and not being right there with him was killing them.

They were out of the SUV and running into the Accident and Emergency department foyer almost before Suzie had brought the vehicle to a stop.

The waiting area was crowded, but Jack took no notice and strode right up to the reception desk.

“Torchwood. Our colleague was just brought in, where is he?” Jack barked at the frazzled young woman behind the counter.

“If you could just calm down for a second, sir, I can find out for you,” the girl said, clearly used to dealing with angry and anxious friends and relatives. “Now, what’s his name?”

“He came in with our medic just a little while ago. He's the only bloody Torchwood staff member you've admitted; just tell us where he is!”

“I'm sorry sir, but I'm going to need that name, or I can't tell you anything.”

“Jones. Ianto Jones,” Jack answered, the frustration evident in his voice. “What's happening to him?”

“Just one moment sir while I look it up...”

“Look it up? Why can't you just *tell us*?” Jack's worry had clearly started to override logical thought.

Luckily for the harassed receptionist, the double doors swung open at that moment and a tense looking Owen strode out.

Forgetting the receptionist completely, Jack and Tosh ran over to him, joined a few moments later by Suzie.

“How is he?”

“What's going on?”

“When can we see him?”

“Is he going to be okay?”

Jack and Tosh's questions came thick and fast, and Owen held a hand up to silence them.

“They've taken him straight into theatre. He's lost an awful lot of blood, and I was right, he has damage to several of his internal organs. The surgeons are doing their best though, I promise. And look, I can't stay; I have to get back up there to help. I'll make sure you're told as soon as there's anything to tell, though, yeah?”

Without another word, he swept back through the doors, leaving the rest of the team slightly stunned.

Despite Jack's earlier behaviour, the receptionist took pity on them, guiding them to a quiet waiting room with surprisingly comfortable seats.

Not that Jack or Tosh put them to much use. Two hours later, with no additional information forthcoming from theatre, Jack hadn't sat down once. He alternated between staring out the window into the darkness and pacing across the small room.

Tosh sat down intermittently, but was unable to stay settled and often joined Jack in his pattern across the floor.

Suzie was the only one able to show any modicum of calm, but her colleagues' worry was palpable in the room and had even her a little restless.

They all turned with a start when the door suddenly opened.

An unknown doctor came in, his face grim.

"You're here for Ianto Jones, yes?"

Jack cleared his throat. "Yes."

"Mind if we have a seat?"

Chapter Forty-Two

With his heart in his throat as he digested the doctor's words, Jack sank into one of the chairs that lined the room. Tosh and Suzie took those around him; the three of them huddled together as if that could ward off any bad news the doctor might impart.

The sombre doctor pulled a chair out from the wall, dragging it around so he could face them.

"Damn it, just *tell* us already," Jack burst out, unable to stand the silence. "If he's... if he's... you know... I, we, want to know."

The doctor nodded. "Let's not talk of that quite yet. As you know, Mr Jones had lost an awful lot of blood before he came in, and there was significant damage internally too. Now, we did manage to patch him up..."

Tosh closed her eyes, a little relieved, but the doctor was still talking.

"... and we've given him a transfusion, but he's still in a critical condition. The next few hours will be crucial."

"When can we see him?" Jack's voice was unusually deferential.

“We’re currently transferring him to the ICU, but we’ll let you know when he’s settled and you can see him then.”

Busy digesting all the information they’d been given, they barely noticed when the doctor slipped back out the door.

Unlike the time spent waiting while Ianto was in surgery, the next twenty minutes flew past for Jack and Tosh, who weren’t completely aware of their surroundings.

Their heads snapped up when the door swung open with a bang and Owen came in, looking haggard.

“They’ve gotten him sorted out in ICU now, I can take you up,” he sighed. “It’s...” He shook his head. “It’s not looking very good at the moment, though.”

Even though he had a habit of teasing the younger man, and did his best to maintain his gruff reputation, it was clear from the look on his face now how much he’d grown to like and respect Ianto. He, and the surgical team at the hospital, had done pretty much everything they could for Ianto medically. Now it was just a waiting game, to see if Ianto’s body would start repairing itself, and waiting had always been a part of medicine Owen hated.

Although Owen had warned them, and they already knew it was bad, actually walking into the ICU and seeing Ianto was a bit of a shock for the rest of the team. While he wasn’t on a ventilator, he still had an oxygen mask on, and there were various wires and tubes connected around him. Machines beeped, and every few seconds another tiny droplet fell in the intravenous drip.

“We’re hoping that he stabilises in the next few hours,” Owen said tiredly.

“Is he likely to wake up?” Jack asked, his eyes fixed on all the medical equipment helping his young team member cling to life.

Owen shrugged uncomfortably. “There’s no way to know. The anaesthetic should be wearing off soon, but we can’t say for sure if he’ll wake up right away.” The words ‘*if at all*’ weren’t spoken, but were heard loud and clear nevertheless.

The four stood around awkwardly for a few minutes, not quite sure what to do next. Knowing there wasn’t much they *could* do but wait. Wait and see.

“Look,” Suzie eventually said. “Why don’t I take care of watching the Hub tonight? Someone needs to, and...” She trailed off. They all knew that Jack lived there, and that, as a result, he took the vast majority of the overnight shifts. It was also clear that neither Jack nor Tosh would easily be torn from Ianto’s bedside tonight, and Owen would remain in a medical capacity.

Jack nodded his agreement, not really paying proper attention but some part of his brain aware that Suzie’s offer would free the rest of them to carry on looking after Ianto.

After she was gone, Owen managed to procure an extra chair, and the three of them arranged themselves around the unconscious form of their teammate.

Two and a half hours later, Jack and Tosh had barely moved an inch, despite the hard plastic of the chairs. Ianto's vital signs had begun to stabilise, but he had still yet to awaken.

When Owen and the doctor from before returned with a set of test results, they knew from their faces what they were about to face.

Ianto had slipped into a coma.

Chapter Forty-Three

While Jack, Tosh and Owen were all loath to leave the hospital, it became apparent less than twenty-four hours later that it just wasn't feasible for them all to stay.

Rift and Weevil activity didn't stop just because they were a man down.

Suzie had called in over the comm. late the following afternoon. There had been a Rift spike a couple of miles outside of Cardiff, and it looked bigger than she could handle on her own.

Reluctantly, Jack and Tosh had left Owen to watch over the patient, and gone to help Suzie. When they returned a few hours later, they looked at Owen hopefully.

Owen shook his head. No change.

Between the three of them, they made sure that Ianto was never alone.

The Rift wasn't making things easy, and one or two of them were often being called away to deal with some new incident, but they refused to all leave at the same time.

Ianto's condition seemed to have stabilised, but there weren't any signs of him awakening. They all knew that the longer the coma continued, the smaller the chance there was of Ianto waking up.

Still, they refused to give up hope, and there was someone at his bedside twenty-four seven. If – no, *when* Ianto woke up, he wasn't going to be alone.

As two days turned into three, and three into four, it started to become harder and harder to be quite so confident.

Tosh resorted to pleading with Ianto's unconscious form to wake up, hoping that the doctors were right when they said he might still be able to hear them. Jack tried everything from flat out ordering him to open his eyes to waving a cup of poorly made coffee beside his head.

They even had Lisa record an audio message for him, in the hopes that he might show some response. Telling Lisa about the attack, and Ianto's injuries, had been hard. Convincing her that it wasn't her fault had been harder still.

Jack knew that as tough as this was on the team, it had to be even worse for Lisa. Having a loved one so seriously ill and being completely incapable of being there with them, of watching over them with your own eyes, had to be torture.

Very early on the sixth morning, Jack was slumped in the hard plastic chair next to Ianto's bed, attempting to make his way through a budgeting report. He'd been taking the majority of the overnight 'shifts', letting Tosh and Owen get some sleep.

He was puzzling over an expenditure figure when he thought he caught a movement from the corner of his eye. Dropping the report to the floor beside him, he shot to his feet, resting one hand on the bed.

"Ianto?"

There was no response.

He swept his hand across the edge of the bed, taking Ianto's hand in a loose grip.

"Ianto, if you can hear me, try to squeeze my hand."

He stared down at Ianto, his gaze switching between his face and where their joined hands lay, willing there to be a response.

What seemed like an interminable wait later, there was a very faint fluttering of Ianto's fingertips against Jack's palm.

"Ianto!"

He waited, not even daring to move, to see if it would happen again. A few minutes later, they fluttered again, this time a little stronger.

With his free hand, Jack stretched across to hit the call button. Ianto's fingers tightened almost imperceptibly around Jack's hand just as the nurse came in.

"He squeezed my hand a little," Jack told the young man hopefully. "That's a sign he's waking up, right?"

The nurse smiled but was clearly trying not to give Jack false hope. "It can be, but even if it is, it could still be some time before he's actually awake."

Jack nodded, but reached for his comm. anyway, slipping it over his ear and hitting the call button. "Owen? Tosh? Are you there yet?"

Despite the early hour, two groggy responses came back.

“You might want to come to the hospital. I think Ianto may be waking up.” He could hear muffled sounds as both of them obviously started rushing around to get ready to leave.

Muting the comm., Jack looked back down at Ianto. His eyelids were flickering, ever so slightly.

He bent down a little. “Ianto? You with us?”

Ianto’s eyes fluttered open, and he looked around, clearly disoriented.

“Wh...” His voice ground to a halt almost immediately.

The nurse handed Jack a paper cup of water with a straw, and helped him raise the head of Ianto’s bed a little so he was in a semi-sitting position.

“Here...” Jack held it out for Ianto, who took a long sip.

“Where am I? What happened?” Ianto’s gaze flickered around the room, struggling to focus on anything.

“You’re in the hospital. You had a bit of an... accident,” Jack told him, mindful of the nurse still standing by.

Ianto’s eyes finally settled and focused on Jack.

“Sorry... do I know you?”

Chapter Forty-Four

Jack’s whole body just stopped for a second as Ianto’s confused words hit him. He shot a brief alarmed look at the nurse.

“I’m Jack,” he said, eyes boring into Ianto’s anxiously. “We work together.”

“We do?” A haze of panic was starting to descend on Ianto, over and above the disorientation. “I... I don’t remember. Why don’t I remember? What’s... where...?”

The nurse stepped forward, her voice calm and soothing. “A little amnesia is quite common after being out for a while. Please don’t worry too much about it. Most people regain their memories within the first twenty minutes or so. Just stay calm and don’t try to force it too hard.”

Ianto calmed down a little, and the nurse looked over at Jack. “Just talk to him, like you normally would. It will help. I’ll be at the nurses’ station if you need me.” She gave them a friendly nod and left the room.

Unsure as to quite how far back Ianto’s memories had disappeared, Jack carefully skirted around any mentions of Torchwood, the Battle of Canary Wharf, Lisa’s condition or how they had met.

Instead, he told light-hearted little stories about Tosh, Owen and Suzie; told Ianto how they all adored his coffee – how he kept them all running at ‘the office’.

Jack had almost never been as relieved as he was when the fog started to lift. Recognition started to dawn in Ianto’s eyes, and he was clearly sorting through all the memories that were flooding back, working out if they were real or not, when he asked, bemusedly, “Did I really use a pterodactyl to get a job?”

Fifteen minutes later, when Tosh and Owen arrived, he was fairly coherent, and had regained most of his memory.

He still didn’t remember the incident with the creatures that had landed him in the hospital, but Jack really wouldn’t be all that upset if he never remembered that.

Once he had regained some semblance of coherency, one of Ianto’s first thoughts had been for Lisa. When he learned that he’d been out for nearly a week, he was even more worried. All that Jack could do was assure him they were taking good care of her in his absence.

He wasn’t entirely mollified, but resigned himself to the reality that there was nothing he could do but trust the team to make sure she was okay until he was recovered.

The discovery that said recovery would likely involve at least another few weeks in the hospital had him even more displeased. He’d sustained very serious injuries, he’d been told both by the hospital doctors and by Owen, and they wanted to keep a close eye on him until he was properly out of the woods.

He tried to bargain that he could go home and Owen could check in on him, but Owen was having none of it.

“I know you’re worried about Lisa and want to get out and back to her,” the doctor told him firmly, “but you’re staying put until the consultant is completely happy releasing you, okay?”

Ianto frowned, and Jack noticed a flash of pain sweep momentarily across his face at Owen’s words.

He didn’t say anything about it, though, until later that day, when they were alone. Ianto was grumbling once more about being all-but-forced to stay in the hospital for any extended period.

“You really don’t like hospitals, do you?”

Ianto raised an eyebrow in what Jack recognised as a ‘duh’ look.

“Okay, so there aren’t many people who actually *like* hospitals, but you *really* don’t like them, I can see it in your eyes.” Jack sighed softly. “Plus, most people tend not to argue *quite* so much about staying in one when they *really need to*, like you do now.”

“I just... I don’t have very good associations with hospitals,” Ianto mumbled after a few silent minutes of contemplation. “Not since my dad...”

Jack wracked his brain to remember if Ianto’s file had mentioned anything about his father, anything about his family at all. He could remember reports on Ianto’s scholastic achievements, his criminal record, employment history... but he didn’t recall anything about his personal history at all. The only personal note in the file at all had been about Lisa.

And that, for Torchwood One, was very odd.

Chapter Forty-Five

With no information coming to him from his recollection of Ianto’s file, Jack wanted to ask for more details, but knew that if he pushed, there was a strong possibility Ianto would clam up and not say anything more. Instead, he stayed silent, trying his level best to look open and sympathetic; someone Ianto could talk to about this, if he needed to.

For several long moments, it looked like Ianto wasn’t going to elaborate on his statement anyway.

When his voice finally sounded in the quiet room again, it was soft, almost tentative. “He...uh... died... when I was fourteen.”

Jack no longer needed to expend any effort to look sympathetic; the expression was completely genuine. He knew all too well what it was like to be in that situation. “Yeah?”

Ianto nodded absently. “He...he was in the hospital for a while first. We went to visit him every day, but all I can remember now from the visits is being in the hospital. The sounds, the *smells*, just the *feel* of the place. I hated it, but I couldn’t *not* go.”

His looked away, his eyes fixing on the window at the other side of the room. “Every day, we hoped they would have good news for us; that we’d go in and they’d say he was getting better and could go home soon. But he wasn’t... he just kept getting worse until...” His voice broke off and he stifled a snuffle.

Jack placed a warm palm on Ianto’s forearm, hoping Ianto could take some small comfort from the contact.

He started to cough a little when he attempted to take a deep calming breath, his remaining chest injuries making themselves known.

Jack rubbed Ianto’s arm soothingly. “It’s okay, Ianto. Just calm down, you’ll be alright.”

Ianto looked at him gratefully as he began to get his breath back. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to fall apart on you there, I just...”

“Ianto, stop,” Jack interrupted. “You don’t need to apologise for getting upset sometimes, especially not about something like that. I know how hard it is to lose a parent like that, and you haven’t even...”

“How old were you?” Ianto cut in abruptly. For a few seconds, Jack was confused – how old was he when *what?* – but then it dawned on him.

He vacillated for a very long moment over whether to tell Ianto the truth – tell him the story (or an edited version of it anyway). He hadn’t told anyone any truly significant personal details or life experiences for such a long time.

Ianto was the first person in decades that’d even been told when he was from, and even that had been somewhat obliquely. Jack wasn’t even sure if Ianto remembered it, or believed it if he did.

“Thirteen,” he answered eventually, almost absently, his gaze drifting away from Ianto. His mind had taken him back to that fateful day - the invasion that had come over so suddenly, running, running. Losing Gray. A wave of shame swept over him as he realised how long it had been since he’d truly thought of the fate of his brother. Finding his father, back at the house...

“There was a war,” he said quietly. “The attack that day came so suddenly, and then there was nothing to be done. He was gone.”

He felt a supportive squeeze around his hand; lost in memory, he hadn’t even noticed Ianto sliding his arm out from under his palm. The grip was weak, but the sentiment was strong. Jack stifled an exclamation at the thought that Ianto was *still* trying to take care of everyone else, even in his current situation.

“It was a long time ago,” he told the younger man, turning his hand over to squeeze back very gently in acknowledgement of the offered support. “A very long time, actually, and I probably wouldn’t be here today if it hadn’t happened. Everything changed for me after that day, and it set me on the path that eventually led me to Torchwood.”

Ianto attempted a humourless laugh, but it only resulted in another minor spluttering fit.

“Yes,” he breathed, when he had recovered. “Mine too.”

Chapter Forty-Six

“Yeah,” he breathed, when he had recovered. “Mine too.”

Jack waited, silently, to see if Ianto would expand on his statement.

“I know you’ve seen my file,” Ianto started, “so you know about the trouble I got into as a teenager.”

He paused, and Jack realised he was waiting for a sign from him that he remembered what Ianto was talking about. He nodded slightly.

“Well... if you'd known me before my father died, you would never have believed it. I was the model son... at least, as far as a teenage boy *can* be. Never got into trouble with the law, or at school.”

He shrugged almost imperceptibly, his movement clearly limited by his badly torn muscles. “But after my tad died... I went a bit off the rails, really.” There was another long pause, while Ianto clearly contemplated whether to continue or not. Jack wondered if Ianto had ever really talked through this with anyone before.

He was, under normal circumstances, such a private personality that he rather doubted it.

“My mam... had a sort of breakdown when she lost my tad. She'd never been completely stable, but that really was the final straw. Social services decided she couldn't handle looking after us anymore...”

Jack swallowed hard. Ianto had, in reality, lost both parents in one fell swoop. No wonder the memories still distressed him. A few seconds later, one word from Ianto's story hit him. “Us?”

“Me and my little sister, Rhiannon. She's four years younger than me, at uni in Manchester at the moment.”

Jack smiled, imagining a younger female version of Ianto, and wondered why he'd never heard Ianto mention her before. “Are you close, you and Rhiannon?”

Ianto sighed shallowly and shook his head. “Not really, not anymore. We were, once... back when we were kids, but then...”

“Then?” Jack said, trying not to push but desperately curious to hear the rest of the story, to get to know Ianto just that little bit better.

“After... everything, Rhi went to stay with my aunt Catrin near Barry. She couldn't take me - she didn't think she could handle raising a teenage boy, so I was sent to live with one of my dad's cousins in Essex. He had a couple of grown up kids of his own, so they figured he'd know what to do with me.”

Ianto broke eye contact, his attention again being drawn to the grey skies outside the window. “Who knows, maybe if I'd been the same boy I had been before, he would have, but as I already said... I went a bit crazy myself. I was mad at a universe that had just ripped my whole world away, and I didn't care anymore.”

Jack swallowed a lump in his throat as he thought of Ianto as a scared teenager who didn't think he had anything left to lose. It was a feeling he'd experienced a few times himself, and it very rarely led anywhere good.

“I fell in with a pretty bad crowd – the worst one that would take me, if I remember correctly. Skipped school, smoked, drank cheap beer on street corners. Experimented with drugs, although I was such a mess back then that I don’t even know which ones.” Ianto’s voice was faraway as he recalled what Jack hoped was one of the very worst periods in his life.

He turned his head slowly back to look at Jack drowsily. “You already know I was arrested for shoplifting not long before my sixteenth birthday, but that was a long way from the worst things I got myself caught up in, and even further from the first crime I committed.” There was silence for a few seconds, and Ianto yawned, the involuntary action clearly paining him.

Nevertheless, he continued the story, his voice slowing as he tired. “I did a lot of things in those years I’m not proud of, but actually getting arrested was a wake-up call for me. I was sent to jail – well, a young offenders’ institution – for five weeks. Terrified the wits out of me, and when I got out I decided to get myself sorted out.”

A slight smile graced Ianto’s lips for the first time since he’d woken up, just as his eyes began to drift closed. “And a few months later... when my life was slowly getting back on track... I met... Lis...”

The name went unfinished as Ianto slipped into a natural sleep for the first time in a week.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Ianto looked around blearily when he woke up, wondering who it would be today.

He’d been stuck in the hospital for six days so far – well, six days that he had been conscious for – and he had yet to wake up without at least one of the team being there. They never stayed all day, usually just popping in and out to visit with him for a little while, but they had apparently decided that they didn’t want him waking up in the morning alone.

Sure enough, as his eyes scanned across the window, they found Tosh’s back as she gazed out at the morning sun, for once undimmed by thick cloud.

Almost as if she had sensed his gaze on her, she turned around, smiling to see him awake. “Hey,” she said, crossing the room to take the seat next to his bed. “How do you feel this morning?”

Ianto lifted his shoulders slightly, and Tosh helped him raise the head of his bed so he could rest comfortably in a semi-upright position. “Pretty much the same as I did yesterday: thankful for this,” he waved weakly at the morphine drip that was still dispensing doses at regular intervals, “and looking forward to being able to get out of here.”

Tosh nodded sympathetically. Ianto had been fairly open and blunt in his dislike of being stuck in a hospital bed, unable to even get up to visit the bathroom yet. She assumed it was all part and parcel of the ‘doing, not waiting around’ part of his

personality. “Owen’s been talking to your doctors; says that maybe you’ll be allowed up into a wheelchair in a few days.”

“Fantastic,” Ianto replied, deadpan.

“I know you hate this,” Tosh said, “but please, just this once, let the doctors have their way. For the sake of my peace of mind – and Jack’s, and Owen’s – if not for your own health. You gave us all quite a scare.”

“I know. I know.” Ianto had been the recipient of this speech several times over the last days, in various forms, and from all of his colleagues - even including Suzie. “Are you any closer to working out what actually happened yet?”

While initially, even when his post-coma amnesia had receded, he had been unable to recall any of the attack, flashes had started to come back to him after a few days. Unsatisfied with these tiny snippets of information, he had made Jack tell him the whole story.

Tosh had spent quite a bit of time in the last week running scans and searching for data to explain how the creatures had found their way inside the Hub. She would have started sooner, she explained when Ianto asked, but they had all been a little preoccupied with waiting to see if Ianto would make it.

Once he was awake, and seemingly out of immediate danger, they had been able to channel their efforts into finding out how, and why, it had happened.

Owen had autopsied one of the creatures to look for anything particularly unusual in their physiology that might make a difference, as they weren’t of a species any of them recognised. He had a few tests still left to run, but he hadn’t found anything spectacularly unique thus far.

Tosh had been running endless diagnostics and simulations, scraping every morsel of data she could from the period shortly before the attack from the mainframe. Just the day before, she had finally come upon some potentially illuminating information.

“Actually,” she told him, “I think I have it. I can’t *prove* that it’s what happened – yet – but it is definitely a plausible scenario.”

She turned the chair around so she could sit comfortably while she launched into her theory. “Okay, so the only feasible explanation for how the creatures got into the Hub was that they came directly through the Rift, since Owen hasn’t found anything in the autopsies that would suggest they had any way of getting in from outside in Cardiff.”

Ianto nodded weakly when she checked that he was following her so far so she continued. “We’ve been acting under the assumption that the Rift manipulator prevents anything from coming through the Rift inside the Hub. I’ve been doing more detailed scans and tests this week than I ever have before, and that just isn’t true. The Hub itself sits on a very quiet portion of the Rift, but there’s nothing actually stopping things from getting through there.”

“Then why...?”

“Why didn’t the Rift alarms go off?” Tosh finished for him. Ianto nodded again.

“Now that *is* down to interference from the Rift manipulator. It warps the readings the monitor picks up ever so slightly for an area that almost entirely encompasses the Hub. We haven’t ever recorded anything coming through the Rift inside the Hub, so we had no reason to suspect anything was wrong until now.”

She leant forward and grasped hold of the hand closest to her. “I really wish it hadn’t taken this - you getting hurt so badly - for us to discover the problem. I’m so sorry...”

“Hey, stop apologising,” Ianto interrupted quietly. “It wasn’t your fault. I’m going to be okay, and we know for the future, so everything worked out in the end.” He didn’t sound particularly convinced by his own argument, but Tosh appreciated his effort.

“It’s not going to happen again, that’s one thing I’m determined about,” Tosh told him. “Suzie and I are working on some modifications to the manipulator hardware that should let it retain its current function, but will stop it interfering with the monitor. It’s just too dangerous not to have the Hub under monitoring.”

Ianto nodded, and was about to reply when something in Tosh’s pocket buzzed at her. Pulling out her PDA she checked the message on screen and looked up apologetically at Ianto.

“Sorry, Ianto, Rift alert. I’m going to have to go.”

Chapter Forty-Eight

Ianto had grown used to the team dropping in on him at random times throughout the day. So, when he hobbled carefully out of the tiny hospital room bathroom, it was no surprise to find Jack sitting in the chair beside the bed, flicking idly through one of the magazines one of the nurses had given Ianto to while the time away.

As he shuffled quietly back towards the bed, Ianto wondered briefly how Jack was finding the time to actually run Torchwood Three. He’d come to the hospital almost every day since Ianto had woken up, sometimes twice, and often lingered for an hour or more. The Rift hadn’t exactly been quiet in the last week or so either, not to mention the strange disturbances with the Weevils that Jack had mentioned during his last two visits.

Ianto just couldn’t imagine how he was doing all that and also keeping up with the seemingly never-ending stream of paperwork that Jack had complained about on a regular basis for all of the four months Ianto had been at Torchwood Three. He barely seemed to stay on top of it during quiet periods, despite his assertion that he didn’t sleep much. He didn’t see how he could be sleeping *at all* at that moment.

As he neared the bed, Jack finally looked up and spotted him. Dropping the magazine on the bedside unit, he pushed to his feet and offered Ianto a hand the rest of the way.

Ianto stopped for a moment and hesitated. It wasn't that he was surprised at Jack's offer – Jack had been lending him a steady arm to lean on while he got around ever since the doctors had allowed him onto his feet – but that he wasn't sure he should take it. He had allowed the assistance when he'd really needed it. But he was doing a lot better now, and it wasn't entirely necessary.

Still, there was something in him that was oddly reluctant to start rejecting Jack's kind offer now. Quashing the little voice that told him he shouldn't, he reached out and grasped Jack's outstretched hand, letting him guide Ianto back to the bedside.

“So,” he asked once he was settled onto the bed once more, “anything new with those Weevils?”

Jack grinned triumphantly as he sat back down. “Yeah, actually. We cracked it. Ran in, shut it down, saved the day. It's over. At least, it is unless some other bright spark gets the idea to try it again.”

Ianto just looked at Jack and raised his eyebrows; a satisfying explanation that was not. It took Jack a few seconds, but he eventually interpreted Ianto's look correctly and started to explain properly.

“Well, part of it was luck, I suppose. We were on our way back from a second scan of that warehouse where we found the dead Weevil yesterday, when we got a report of one just outside the City Centre. Imagine our surprise when we get there to discover said Weevil being bundled into the back of *someone else's* van.”

“What?”

“Yeah, exactly. We tried to follow but they lost us. Their driver made even Owen's driving look cautious and careful. Luckily for us, Tosh is a genius.”

Ianto smiled; she really was.

“We'd managed to catch the number plate of the van. And, while searching for the details on the DVLA database only told us that the vehicle was illegal, Tosh didn't give up.”

Ianto wasn't even vaguely surprised that Tosh had gained access to the DVLA's systems. There probably wasn't a network out there secure enough that Tosh couldn't hack into it if she was determined enough.

“She ran it through a program she's been working on with the CCTV network, managed to follow it after we lost it in the SUV. Turned up at another warehouse down by the docks.”

“I'm assuming that's where you found them, then,” Ianto filled in when Jack paused.

He nodded in response. “Oh yeah. Warehouse full of Weevils, beer and idiots with a death wish. Apparently just beating chunks out of each other wasn't enough for these guys anymore.”

Ianto looked astonished. “You’re not seriously telling me they were fighting Weevils. *By choice?*”

Jack quirked an eyebrow. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. As I said, idiots with a death wish. We shut them down, and I can only hope that’s the end of it.”

Ianto shook his head. “Some people just aren’t safe to be left out in the world on their own...”

He was just finishing his sentence when Owen stuck his head through the door. “Not talking about me there, I hope, Mr Jones.”

Ianto tilted his head in mock contemplation as Owen fully entered the room. “Well... If the shoe fits...”

Owen scoffed.

“I was just filling him in on last night’s case,” Jack told him.

“Ah. You may have a point then,” Owen nodded at Ianto.

“Please say you’re here to tell me I can go *home*,” Ianto pleaded, fixing Owen with an entreating gaze.

Owen shook his head. “Sorry, mate, not quite yet.” He picked up Ianto’s chart from the end of the bed, flipping through it. “Maybe in a couple days though, if these numbers keep improving.”

He looked up at Ianto and had to suppress a grin at the uncharacteristic pout gracing Ianto’s face. “Look, I know you don’t like being here, but it’s for your own good. You can handle another few days, right?”

Ianto closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath – the fact that he could do this at all without doubling over in pain was a good marker of his recovery. When he re-opened his eyes, he nodded. “Yeah, if I have to.”

Owen fixed him with his best ‘I am a doctor, I do actually know what I’m talking about’ look. “You have to.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

“And just because you’re being discharged does *not* mean you’re fit to be back at work yet,” Owen was telling him for what Ianto was sure was at least the 4th time. “You need to take things easy; let your body finish healing.”

“Yes, Owen, I know,” Ianto said, yet again.

“Really, don’t push yourself. We’ll come ‘round and give you a hand until you’re completely recovered. Don’t want you re-injuring yourself because you tried to do something too soon.” This, too, had been repeated a time or two. Or three.

“If I see you step foot in the Hub one moment before I say you’re ready, there will be Hell to pay.”

Ianto sighed.

If Owen had had his way, Ianto would have been leaving the hospital in a wheelchair and going to stay with one of his colleagues while he finished recuperating. Ianto had flat out refused on both counts. The resulting conversation had been a battle of the wills; the current situation was the best compromise both would agree to.

Ianto was walking out on his own two feet, and going back to his own flat. But he had Jack and Owen on either side of him, barely more than a hair’s breadth away, and he’d allowed an extra spare key for his flat to be cut so that the team could drop by to check on him. He had made sure that they understood it was to be returned to him as soon as he was able to come back to work.

Ianto wasn’t entirely happy with the agreement, but given the choice between that and staying in the hospital for another several days at a minimum, it had been an easy decision.

He paused for a few seconds when they got a few steps outside the hospital building, his hyper-protective colleagues coming to a halt beside him and sending worried glances his way.

“I’m fine, stop looking at me like that,” he told them, looking between them. He half-closed his eyes and took a deep breath, enjoying the cool Cardiff breeze on his face. “Just taking a moment to be happy that I’m finally out of there.”

“Well, let’s keep it that way, huh?” Owen said. “I don’t want to see you back in here any more than you do.”

Ianto smiled half-heartedly.

The trip back to Ianto’s flat would have been quiet if it weren’t for Owen’s never-ending list of things Ianto shouldn’t be doing for himself while he was still recuperating. Ianto stopped listening after the first four or five items. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about looking after himself and staying out of the hospital, more that Owen had already *given* him this list before they left the hospital.

It was nice to know he cared, but this repetition of all his instructions was getting very old.

He’d already been put through a battery of mental tests after the amnesia he’d suffered upon waking from the coma, and they’d concluded that there were no lingering problems with his memory. Ianto was one step away from snapping and yelling that at Owen.

Ianto realised with dismay that he really was going to have to rely on help from his team mates for a while when they got back to his flat and he couldn't make it up the stairs.

It was a slow process to finally make it up the single flight, with extensive assistance from Jack and Owen, and he was suddenly very relieved that he didn't live any higher than the first floor.

The door to his flat opened before they reached it, Tosh leaning against the doorframe as they crossed the landing.

As happy as he was to see her, Ianto wondered why his colleagues apparently thought it took three of them to get him settled back into his own flat. All this attention was a little bit much.

"I brought you over some groceries," she told him as she stood back to let them cross the threshold. Ianto nodded his thanks.

He could see Jack and Owen looking around and assessing his flat from the corners of his eyes as Tosh closed the door behind them.

"I know it's not much, but..." he started defensively.

"But what?" Jack interrupted. "I know for a fact that you can afford to live somewhere better than this. It's not a bad area, but..." He looked around again, grimacing slightly, probably without even realising he was doing it. "There isn't enough room in here to swing a cat."

"Well, luckily for me, I don't make a habit of swinging cats," Ianto retorted waspishly. Jack looked a little taken aback at the harsh reply and Ianto consciously composed himself. "Sorry, it's just... I moved into this flat when I first came back to Cardiff, and it really was all I could afford at that time. Most of my money was going to supporting Lisa."

"But what about now?" Tosh asked gently. "We're here to help you with Lisa now. You could move somewhere a little better, a little bigger..."

"And I will," Ianto said. "When she's better." He blew out a breath and nodded absently. "When Lisa is better, we'll move somewhere nicer. Together."

As none of the others could bring themselves to argue with this, they turned their attentions to checking that Ianto had everything he might possibly need for his recuperation.

Despite their good intentions, Ianto heaved a sigh of relief when they were finally satisfied that there was no reason left for Ianto to overexert himself and left him to the quiet.

Chapter Fifty

After a few days of being cooped up in his flat, Ianto wasn't convinced that it was all that much better than being in the hospital. The décor was better, and his bed was definitely comfier, but he was just as bored and felt just as restricted.

He'd tried watching some of his DVD collection – there were quite a few he'd bought and just never managed to find the time to watch – but after getting to the end of the first one with no idea of what had just happened, he reluctantly admitted that he wasn't quite up to watching them yet. He just couldn't concentrate for long enough to catch all of the plot details.

Daytime TV was much less taxing, but that was about all it had going for it. There were only so many inane talk shows, home improvement programs and ancient repeats of shows that weren't very good in the first place that Ianto could stand before he began to wonder if he might not have a better time just scratching his own eyes out.

Even worse, he'd inadvertently found himself drifting into his old unemployment habit – Neighbours. As much as he knew it was drivel, it still made compelling viewing; although he did wonder who all these new characters were, and what had happened to all the Scullys?

He wasn't sure if he was relieved or upset that it was Jack who walked in early the first evening, halfway through 'The Little Mermaid' – the only DVD he'd managed to follow so far, bought one long weekend when he and Lisa had been babysitting her niece. He had the awful feeling that the other film bought that weekend – Beauty and the Beast – might be on the menu for tomorrow.

Thankfully, or perhaps worryingly, Jack didn't comment on the film choice, simply joining Ianto on his couch and watching the last twenty minutes of musical Disney fun with him. It wasn't until the credits were rolling that he turned to Ianto with a raised eyebrow that said both, 'Is there a reason you were watching this?' and, 'Why do you even *own* this?' just as clearly as if he'd actually said the words aloud.

"We babysat Lisa's niece sometimes, and my brain was having trouble keeping up with anything more complicated," Ianto admitted quietly. "And it seemed like a better option than 'Hollyoaks'."

Jack just laughed.

At the end of the first week, Ianto was glad to discover that, along with his increasing mobility, he was once again able to follow the plot of a proper movie without straining his brain. Between limited and tiring excursions to the outside world - which hadn't yet included anything further than the front door onto the street at the bottom of the stairs - he was making a dent in his backlog of unwatched movies.

He was dismayed to discover that some indescribable urge still had him pausing his DVD and flicking to BBC One at 1.40pm each day. He would be glad to get back to work if only to rid himself of this renewed addiction.

Jack, Owen and Tosh continued to drop in on him with a frequency increased even from his time in hospital. Whenever any of them were there, he had to fight even to be allowed to make himself a sandwich. He didn't refrain from pointing out that he was managing to feed himself just fine when they weren't there, so they didn't need to coddle him so much.

He was also, he told them, perfectly capable of walking – more and more each day in fact – so as kind as they thought they were being in continually offering to fetch things for him from the other room, could they please just *stop*?

He had no objections to them visiting; he looked forward to it, in fact, enjoyed the company, and yes, he *knew* he was still recovering, but that *didn't* mean he needed to be coddled.

When he woke up on the 11th morning - and for the second day in a row *didn't* ache all over - he decided that he'd truly had enough. He wasn't fully fit yet, but he could definitely be doing more than hanging around his small flat uselessly.

A small voice in the back of his mind whispered that Owen was going to give him Hell, but he didn't care. He was bored, and he wanted to see Lisa. It felt like he hadn't seen her in months, and as he pulled his front door closed and descended to the waiting taxi, he wondered if she was missing him just as much.

It was still early when he got to the Hub and no one else seemed to be around. As he walked past the Rift Manipulator, a wave of intense familiarity swept over him; it almost, *almost*, felt like he'd never been away.

There was a very slight spring to his step as he started down the short corridor that led to Lisa's room; he really was looking forward to seeing her again.

When he reached the entrance to her room, the door was open.

While this was unusual in and of itself, nothing could have prepared him for the sight that would greet him beyond the doorway.

Chapter Fifty-One

Jack's voice was low and soothing as he turned a page of the paperback he was holding.

Ianto barely dared breathe, not sure if he wanted to draw their attention to himself.

If he listened carefully, he could recognise some of the characters in the story Jack was reading from the series he himself had started reading Lisa shortly before he'd been injured.

What could only have been a minute or so later, Jack flipped the book closed, turning it over in his hand as if he couldn't quite believe that was the end. "And that's the end. I'll have to go look in the bookshop tomorrow, see if they have the next one in."

There was a short silence, but neither Jack nor Lisa looked up to spot Ianto, still motionless and silent in the doorway.

A few moments later, Lisa spoke up. “Did you manage to figure out what produced all that gloop down at the docks, then?”

Ianto recognised the case she was referring to – Jack had been telling him about it just two evenings ago. Jack launched into a story, or maybe an explanation, but Ianto didn’t hear any of it. He was too busy staring at Jack in astonishment, in awe, almost in adulation.

He’d reached the end of a book that was definitely at least a book or two further on in the series from the one Ianto had started. Lisa knew all about the current case files – probably knew as much or even more than Ianto himself did about them, in fact.

All of the signs pointed to one conclusion: Jack had been spending a lot of time down here. Keeping Lisa company, reading to her, telling her what was going on. In short, a lot of the things Ianto had been doing for her in the months they’d been here. Ianto hadn’t been aware that Jack had been paying such close attention, but obviously he had.

When he considered how much time Jack had spent over at his flat checking up on him in the last week and a half, as well as how much time he’d spent at the hospital before that, adding in running Torchwood and the number of hours he must have spent being there for Lisa in his absence, left Ianto wondering - not for the first time - if Jack hadn’t been telling the truth all those weeks ago when he’d claimed not to sleep much.

The words were still muffled in his ears, but he watched as Jack smiled and gestured expansively as he continued whatever story he was telling. His heart beat a little harder.

Jack had assured him that they were taking care of Lisa, but he’d never expected this. He’d never asked this of Jack, and yet here he was, doing it anyway.

Ianto felt something melt a little inside. When it came down to it, it’s what Jack had been doing all along. He’d asked for help for Lisa, months ago now, and Jack had surpassed all of his expectations; being there for him when he’d needed a friend in a way he had never dared imagine.

Whenever Ianto had felt hopelessness creeping up on him, Jack had been there beside him, helping him ward it off with a friendly ear, a comforting word, an encouraging smile that warmed his heart and made him feel he could go on.

He felt a smile begin to spread across his face as his eyes tracked Jack’s gesticulations.

When Jack froze for a moment to listen to something Lisa had said, Ianto realised he was staring. Had been staring for several minutes: staring, and enjoying the view far too much.

Forcing his eyes shut, he consciously gathered up all the feelings he *shouldn't* be feeling, and pushed them to the back of his mind. Lisa was the important one here, not Jack, and not him.

When he opened his eyes again, he realised that he must have made some small sound, as both Lisa and Jack had looked up to see him. He smiled at them and took a step forward, trying to act like he hadn't been standing there watching in silence for the last several minutes.

“You do know you're risking Owen's wrath just by being here, don't you?” Jack said, shifting as though to get up and offer Ianto a hand. The look on Ianto's face dared him to try. “He'll have your hide for putting one foot in this place when I know for a fact he hasn't cleared you yet.”

“I don't care,” Ianto replied. “I'm feeling a lot better, and I've missed Lisa.” He smiled at her, brushing a knuckle across her cheek when he got close enough to do so. “I needed to be back here.”

“Are you absolutely sure you're well enough, doodlebug?” Lisa asked, worry shining through in her eyes. “You only got out of hospital last week.”

“I'm okay, I promise,” he told her, lifting his gaze to make sure that Jack, too, recognised his sincerity. “I was going insane stuck at home.” He caught Lisa's eye again. “You know what I'm like.”

Lisa smiled and nodded as much as she could with her restricted movement. She had been the recipient of most of his griping during his spells of unemployment before he started at Torchwood. “Neighbours?”

He nodded grimly. “Neighbours.” She chuckled softly.

“Here.” Jack stood up and pushed the stool towards Ianto. “You two clearly need some time, so I'm going to leave you to it. I'll try to waylay Owen if by some miracle he appears before I see you.”

Ianto nodded and thanked him. He sat down and took Lisa's hand as Jack swept out of the room.

“I've missed you so damn much.”

The Hub was surprisingly empty when Ianto emerged some time later and went in search of Jack. For a moment he wondered if there'd been an emergency and he somehow just hadn't heard it, but the theory was dispelled a moment later when he spotted a light and movement in Jack's office.

As he neared the transparent partition that separated the office from the rest of the workstations, he suddenly realised quite how Jack had managed to make the time to look after him and Lisa.

“Jack!”

Chapter Fifty-Two

“*Jack!*”

Jack looked up, dropping the piece of paper he had been moving from one pile to another onto what was probably his desk. “Yeah?”

Ianto frowned slightly and Jack looked around. “Oh... yeah.” There was paperwork stacked several inches high covering most of his desk, and several more piles on the floor. “I’m a little behind.” He looked almost bewildered as to how it had quite reached its current level.

Ianto pointedly looked around and raised an eyebrow. “*A little behind* is when you have a bit of a pile of paper on your desk, not when your entire office is buried under a mountain of the stuff.”

“Well, I’ve had other things on my mind the last few weeks,” Jack said defensively. “Satisfying mindless bureaucracy wasn’t exactly high on my list of priorities.”

“I know,” Ianto replied, holding his hands up in a gesture of contrition. “I was actually coming to thank you for that.”

He shook his head slightly as he dropped his arms back to his sides. “Although, I don’t know if I have the words to express it. What you’ve done for Lisa this past month, I just... I really can’t tell you how much it means to me that she hasn’t been alone.”

“You don’t need to thank me. Do you really think we would have left her to suffer alone, just because you weren’t here?”

“No, of course not,” Ianto dismissed. “You all told me she was being looked after, and I believed you, but... I really didn’t expect so much. You didn’t have to.”

Jack sighed gently. “Maybe I didn’t; but I wanted to. She matters a lot to you, and you matter a lot to me. To us,” he quickly corrected himself. “I just wanted to do what I could to help, especially since it was, in a way, my fau...”

“Stop,” Ianto interrupted. “Don’t even try to claim that any of this was your fault. I’ve already had Tosh trying to apologise; I don’t need you too.”

“But...”

“No. You didn’t know it could happen, it won’t happen again, and it’s not like there was a whole lot you could have done. I knew what I was signing up for when I asked

for a job here, Jack; I knew the dangers. Please stop coming up with excuses to minimise everything you've done for me and just let me thank you for it!"

Ianto's voice had risen as he spoke, and Jack sat back a little in his chair, nodding his acquiescence. "You have to admit, it gave me a good excuse to avoid doing things I hate."

Ianto shrugged. "Like absolutely *all* of your paperwork, it would appear."

Jack grinned. "Exactly." The grin slipped a little as he surveyed his office. "Unfortunately, now that excuse has run out, I should probably start doing it again. I don't know why I bother, though. I'm pretty sure most of it is of no use whatsoever to anyone."

"Some of it, perhaps," Ianto responded. "But incident reports could be useful to future teams; the same goes for information and scans on tech. And if you don't do the budgets and accounts, our funding will disappear and none of us will get paid. And that's not even counting the supplies this place goes through."

Jack just stared at him for a minute.

A crestfallen expression took over his face. "Damn. You mean I might actually have to do some of this?" He waved at the scattered piles.

Ianto nodded soberly. "Yes."

Jack picked up the top sheet from a random pile and looked at it for a second before putting it back down. "But where do I even *start*?"

"I'd suggest with the most important and urgent, sir," Ianto said mildly. "Last month's budgets and expenses, for example."

Jack spun around in his chair and looked between a few of the piles on the floor. "Now, I'm sure I remember seeing that somewhere not that long ago." He looked back at the desk. "Or was it...?"

"If you like, I could organise all of this into decreasing order of importance and urgency for you," Ianto offered, sensing that if left to his own devices Jack might just flounder about all day and get *none* of it done.

"Really?" Jack's eyes brightened as they turned to him.

"Yes, really. Even Owen surely can't have a problem with me sitting and moving pieces of paper about all morning. Unless he thinks I'm in danger of bleeding out from a paper cut."

Jack smiled and stood. "Right, okay then." He rounded the desk. "I'm just going to pop out to Coffee Mania. I'll bring you back a cup."

Ianto took a tiny step to the side, preventing Jack from leaving the office without squeezing through a small gap between him and the door. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Jack looked at him quizzically.

“There’s no need to go out. I can still make perfectly good coffee here.”

A smile spread across Jack’s face as it finally hit him that their resident coffee master was actually back in residence. “Ianto Jones, you are a lifesaver.”

Chapter Fifty-Three

Lisa smiled back at Ianto as he poked his head around the door to her room and called out a cheery greeting. He stepped into the room, holding a hand behind his back. “I come bearing gifts. Well, just one gift, really. But one I *know* you’re going to love.”

Lisa’s smile widened and she looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, it can’t be too big, as you can hold it in one hand behind your back. And,” she sniffed, “I don’t *smell* a plant. So I’m going to have to go with a new book or a DVD.”

Ianto stayed silent and just smiled.

“Since you only just started a new book last night, it’s probably a DVD. And since you’re so sure I’m going to love it, that can only mean one thing.”

“Oh yeah?”

Lisa’s eyes sparkled. “Hand over the Johnny Depp and no one gets hurt, Welsh Man.”

Ianto pulled his hand out from behind his back and looked down at the ‘Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest’ DVD, still in its shrink-wrap. It had only just hit the shop shelves that morning. “Either you’re too good at that game, or you just know me too well.”

“Nah,” Lisa said as he put the DVD down on the small table and sat beside her, taking her hand in his. “I just know that *you know me* that well.”

He leaned over and pressed a warm kiss to her lips, lingering to look into her eyes. “Lisa, we lived together for nearly four years. I would have to have been *blind* not to notice your... fondness... for Johnny Depp.”

“Go ahead and just call it an obsession. I know you want to,” Lisa teased.

Ianto shook his head good naturedly as he sat back onto the stool, pulling it closer to Lisa’s head. “Now that you mention it, even obsession might be a little weak...” he teased back. “What is it about him anyway? Yes, objectively speaking he’s a good-looking man, but what is it that has the majority of the adult female population of the Western world so smitten? No man stands a chance against him.”

Lisa squeezed his hand gently. “I’m not sure what it is, but I can tell you one thing I do know; Johnny Depp, fantasy fodder that he is, has some serious competition in Ianto Jones.”

A blush spread up Ianto’s neck and he leaned over again, kissing her firmly, lovingly. “While I love that you’d say that,” he said as he pulled back, “I think we both know the truth. If he showed up on our doorstep, I’d be finding somewhere else to spend the night.”

Lisa hummed in admittance. “Well, maybe for one night...” Her eyes flicked downwards over Ianto’s body. “Although... you wouldn’t have to leave, if you didn’t want to.” There was a slightly dreamy look in her eyes as she obviously imagined the scenario. “I know I’d enjoy it, and don’t even try to pretend that you wouldn’t too.”

Ianto tilted his head slightly to the side. “Well, yeah... although...”

Lisa laughed. “Yes, yes. I know. You’d prefer it was Tom Cruise.”

Ianto chuckled affectionately, rubbing a finger over the back of her hand. “You know me so well.”

Although, he thought to himself, it wasn’t like he had hidden his ‘fondness’ for Tom Cruise any better than she had hers for Johnny. A whole section of their DVD collection was devoted to films one of those two actors had appeared in. Ianto knew that, if there was a film out there with both of them (there wasn’t, he’d checked), it would rarely leave the DVD player.

He sighed happily, watching Lisa’s eyes twinkle, listening to her continuing to laugh softly. He loved to see her laugh, see her look so happy, for once. He hadn’t seen it enough lately.

“So,” she said, breaking him out of his reverie. “What about that DVD then? I need my fix.” She was smiling as she said it.

His own smile undiminished, he pulled over the little portable DVD player and started a fight with a cellophane wrapper.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Jack was lounging on the couch, watching Myfanwy dart around the water tower at the top of the Hub, when Ianto appeared from the direction of Lisa’s room with a contented smile on his face.

Jack felt a smile grow across his own face; Ianto should look happy more often. That was the first time Jack had seen Ianto really smiling in the week and a half since he’d returned from his injury. The first time in a lot longer than that, actually, if he thought about it.

He opened his mouth to call him over, but Ianto had already spotted him and was making his way over to the couch. Still smiling, he dropped down next to Jack – just

close enough that Jack could *almost* feel his thigh brushing against his own. Even that faint whisper of contact sent a tiny tingle through Jack.

Didn't Ianto know what he did to him by sitting that close? He'd been attracted to the younger man since that first meeting in the park that night, and it wasn't abating at all as time went on. Worse, as he'd grown to know Ianto better, he'd discovered that it wasn't only lust he was feeling; there was something deeper there, something akin to real, actual, honest-to-god feelings.

Which scared him, a little. He'd already found himself telling Ianto things he hadn't spoken of for years, decades even. In his attempts to get Ianto to open up a little and let him in to help, he'd inadvertently started to let Ianto in himself. He was surprised at how highly he'd come to value the younger man's friendship.

A slight movement at his side, Ianto's leg coming into contact with his own for an ever-so-brief tantalising moment, had him shaking off the contemplative mood and turning his head to grin at Ianto. "You're looking cheerful tonight. Lisa doing well?"

Ianto nodded. "Yep. We actually laughed together today for the first time in so long. It makes me feel good when she's smiling."

Jack hummed an agreement wistfully. He could only just remember being in love like that; where a single smile could lift your spirits even on the worst day. He was pleased for Ianto that he still had that, but couldn't help wishing it for himself.

"So what were you laughing about, then? Or shouldn't I ask?"

Ianto chuckled. "Oh, we were just discussing who is the more appealing: Johnny Depp or Tom Cruise. It's a bit of an ongoing argument with us; we've been at it for years but neither of us can ever convince the other."

"Oh really?" Jack was intrigued; was this revealing what he thought it did about Ianto? He'd had brief moments when he'd thought he'd seen something in the younger man's actions, but brushed them off as wishful thinking and told himself to stop thinking about it. There was no point torturing himself with those thoughts. Even if it was true, Ianto loved Lisa and that was that.

But now, in the face of what seemed to be obvious evidence, he was curious again. "So, ah... whose side do you come down on then?"

"Tom Cruise," Ianto answered immediately. He cocked his head and shrugged, still smiling. "It's the jaw line. Johnny Depp just can't compete with that."

Jack tilted his head up a little and stared unseeingly at a spot on the wall behind Ianto's head as he considered the options. "You have a point there, but I think I'm actually going to have to side with Lisa on this one. Johnny Depp just has a certain something."

Ianto shook his head and sighed dramatically, rolling his eyes. “Not another one. God.” He laughed quietly. “Still, I guess it means I don’t have to listen to her go on about him, now. I can just send you and you can obsess together.”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh too. “Any time.” He sobered a little. “I actually mean that. If for any reason you can’t go see her one day, just ask. I... I actually sort of miss her.”

He shrugged minutely. “Although I wasn’t happy with the reason I was there instead of you, I liked spending time with her. I enjoyed her conversation.” He smiled at Ianto. “I can see why you fell in love with her.”

Ianto was looking at him with an odd expression; he didn’t recognise it. “What?”

Ianto shook his head. “Sometimes, sir - Jack - you really are an idiot.” He paused and his eyes widened. “I mean... um...”

Sensing that Ianto was worried he’d offended him, Jack held up a hand to stop him. “While I completely agree, I *am* an idiot sometimes, do you mind if I ask what idiotic thing I’ve done this time, specifically?”

Ianto visibly relaxed. “Just because I’m back doesn’t mean you can’t still go see Lisa if you want to. I’m pretty sure she misses talking to you too. You did so much for her when I couldn’t, and she’s mentioned you a few times in conversation. She’d be glad to see you.”

Despite the sincerity in Ianto’s tone, Jack was still a little hesitant. “Are you sure?”

Ianto smiled. “Absolutely. In fact, if nothing comes up to stop you, why don’t you come down with me tomorrow morning? You can drool over her new Johnny Depp DVD together.”

Jack smiled back at Ianto and nodded. “I’d like that.”

Chapter Fifty-Five

“And you’re completely sure this is okay with her?” Jack asked as he and Ianto walked down the short corridor from the Hub.

Ianto stopped dead, putting a hand out to swing Jack around to face him. “As I’ve told you several times already, *yes*, this is okay with Lisa. More than okay, in fact. I told her yesterday morning, when you had to go out on that Weevil alert, that you wanted to visit her when you had the chance.”

“She said that she’d have gotten you back down here for a chat sooner or later, whether you wanted to or not. So stop worrying and just come on.”

Lisa was drowsy but awake when they reached her room. Ianto, as was his habit on the mornings when she was awake when he arrived, walked directly over to her and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips; murmuring a soft ‘morning’ when he pulled back.

She smiled tenderly at him, responding in kind, before she looked past him to notice the third person in the room. "Hey there, stranger. I hope you brought me something to make up for suddenly not coming to see me anymore. If it's Johnny related, I promise I'll share."

The smile on her face as she spoke reassured Jack that she wasn't *too* upset with him, but he couldn't help but give in to the urge to explain himself. "I'm sorry, I know I sort of disappeared on you, but I didn't want to interfere with your time with Ianto. You hadn't seen each other in a month, after all."

He caught the look she was giving him. "And yes, your boyfriend has already informed me that I'm an idiot."

Her eyes flickered back to meet Ianto's. "Well, in this case, I'm rather inclined to agree with him." She looked back at Jack. "If you can just help me convince him to change his mind about this insane Tom Cruise issue, we'll be perfectly in sync."

Jack grinned. "I'm guessing Ianto told you that I agree about Johnny Depp, then?"

She smiled back. "Yes. And I mean it, you know. Maybe with two against one Ianto will finally back down."

Ianto shook his head vehemently, but he was grinning wildly as he did so. "Never." He stroked a finger down the side of Lisa's cheek. "Besides, whatever would we find to argue about if I did?"

"I don't know." Lisa looked thoughtful for a second. "How about you putting the peanut butter in the fridge?"

"Hey! I like it cold." Ianto mock-glared at her. "What about you putting CD albums by the same artist into alphabetical order instead of chronological?"

"It makes more sense. You might forget what order they were released in, but you're not going to forget the alphabet."

"Some people around here seem to be able to," Ianto mumbled under his breath, his eyes still twinkling light-heartedly.

Jack had been standing back, watching the couple bicker affectionately, until Ianto's soft words drifted to his ears. "Oi! I resent that remark."

Ianto looked at him obliquely. "You *have* seen the state the archives were in, haven't you, sir? That mess was *not* created by someone with a working knowledge of alphabetical order."

"We've been busy!" Jack defended. "Besides," he continued, lifting his chin, "clearly we were just waiting for someone with your organisational expertise to come and show us how it was done."

Ianto raised an eyebrow sceptically, but Lisa laughed outright. “Ah yes, flattery,” she chuckled. “The last resort of someone who has run out of logical arguments.”

Jack pouted. “It’s always worked for me in the past.”

Ianto looked down and met Lisa’s eyes for a second before they flickered back to look at Jack. “Yeah, I’ll bet.”

Jack just looked at them for a moment, Ianto standing close to Lisa’s head, smiles on both their faces, for once. They made a nice couple, and Jack was getting the distinct feeling that, together, they could be quite formidable if they wanted to. He already knew that Ianto alone could be quite the force of nature when he put his mind to it.

“Now that isn’t fair. I have no chance if you’re going to team up against me.”

Ianto shrugged and he and Lisa exchanged another look. “Nope,” they said in unison.

Jack couldn’t help it; he laughed. After a moment, Ianto and Lisa joined in. It was several minutes before they calmed themselves.

Lisa eyes shot between Jack and Ianto. “You know, this is ni...”

She trailed off mid-word, her eyes becoming unfocussed for a few seconds. Ianto froze for just a moment, startled and worried, his helpless gaze meeting Jack’s as the older man took the few steps across the room to stand at Lisa’s other side.

There were no obvious ill-effects visible when she recovered, but Ianto knew her well enough to recognise when she was fronting. Something had just happened, something that had her distressed and scared.

Ianto quickly sat down beside her and gripped her hand tightly. “Lisa? What is it? What’s wrong?”

She squeezed his fingers and he could see the fear shining through in her eyes. “Ianto, I think something’s happening to me.”

Chapter Fifty-Six

“Ianto, I think something’s happening to me.”

If Ianto had been mildly worried before, he was bordering on terrified now. Once the words had been released, Lisa let go of her mask and let him see all of the fear and anguish she had been holding inside.

Ianto’s heart was racing and he couldn’t move; couldn’t make his mouth work to comfort her or ask what she meant.

“Tell us.” Jack’s voice was gentle from Lisa’s other side. “Maybe we can do something to help; something to stop it - whatever it is.”

Lisa's grip on Ianto's hand loosened slightly and he could see her consciously trying to centre herself. Knowing that she would probably need his support for this conversation, he tried to do the same. Although he was still shaken on the inside, he offered her his best encouraging smile. She smiled back tremulously.

"I... it's..." she started hesitantly. "I don't know."

"Take your time," Ianto said, finally finding his voice. "And don't worry about not making sense. Just explain it as well as you can."

"It... I don't know how to describe it. It's... the first time it happened... well, I think it was the first time anyway. Maybe it was... but no, I think it was the first time..."

She shook her head very gently as she tried to gather her thoughts into some sort of coherence. Ianto's thumb stroked across the back of her hand, a small silent gesture of his support.

"The first time I know for sure was a few weeks ago. It might have happened before then and I just didn't realise it, because it's felt stronger and more definite every time." Although Lisa's voice sounded calm, the look in her eyes and the minute trembling of her fingers told Ianto she was far from it.

"The first time what happened?" Jack asked softly.

"It's... I... It was like... It was like there was someone else in my head."

Jack and Ianto shared a worried look over Lisa's head. That didn't sound good.

"What do you mean 'someone else'?" Ianto prompted, meeting her eyes again.

"There were just these... these *thoughts* in my head, and they weren't *mine*. They didn't feel like mine. It's just... weird. I don't know how else to describe it."

"It was like something - or someone - was taking over your thoughts, is that what you're saying?" Jack asked, growing more and more worried by the second.

Lisa nodded hesitantly.

"How do you know?" Ianto asked quietly. "What are the thoughts like?" When Lisa's gaze darkened, he hurried to clarify and comfort her. "You don't have to say if it's too hard to describe; only if you feel you can tell us."

There was a long silence, and Jack and Ianto had almost decided that Lisa wasn't going to be able to explain it, when her voice broke through the quiet.

"They were harsh. Cold. I'd go so far as to say... emotionless."

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Both Jack and Ianto stopped breathing when the possible implications of Lisa's words really hit them. Neither of them wanted to admit it, but it could potentially be very, very bad news.

That one single word, 'emotionless', could send a shiver right down both of their spines. Memories of the cold, ruthless logic employed by the Cybermen flooded their brains; memories of their lack of reason and single-minded pursuit of their task.

Ianto was momentarily transported back to the horror that had been the battle at Canary Wharf, even before he'd discovered Lisa's condition.

If what they suspected was true... Ianto didn't even want to think about what that meant. Not yet.

It had always been a possibility. But after the initial scan months before had shown no effects, and Lisa had steadfastly remained *Lisa*, he'd allowed himself to think they were in the clear.

"Why... Why didn't you say anything before?" he asked tentatively, remembering Lisa's fear and panic from a few minutes before; knowing that it she had probably had more or less the same reaction when it had happened before. He didn't like to think of Lisa being that scared and alone, with no one to talk to about it.

"The first few times..." Her face scrunched a little. "The first times, you were still in the hospital."

She turned her head to look at Jack. "I know I could have told you but... I don't know. I couldn't. And we were both a little pre-occupied with worrying about Ianto. It didn't really seem important."

"Nothing is ever unimportant when it comes to you, Lisa," Ianto said fiercely. "Nothing. *You* are important, which means what you're going through is important too."

Lisa turned back to him and matched his fierceness with her own. "So are you, Ianto Jones, and don't you forget it. Perhaps I should have said something. But at the time, what was happening to you seemed more important."

"You're *both* important," Jack said firmly. "And whether Lisa said something before or not isn't what matters. What matters is that we know now, and we need to figure out where to go from here."

"We need to know if it really is..." Ianto trailed off, unwilling to put the terrible suspicions into words.

"It could be the cyber-programming, couldn't it?" Lisa said quietly, saying what neither Ianto nor Jack had been able to. Her eyes flickered between them.

Jack nodded silently. "It's possible that something we did - or didn't do - has caused another part of the intrusive system to activate, but we don't know that for sure. Let's

not jump to conclusions. There could be another completely different explanation.” Although he couldn’t think of any right at that moment.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Ianto said softly. “I know that I, for one, would rather know - one way or the other - as soon as possible.” He looked questioningly at Lisa.

She nodded. “Me too.”

“Then we have to talk to Tosh. Get her to do another scan.”

All it took was a short exchange of glances to confirm that they were all in agreement.

* * *

If coming to terms with it in his own mind had been difficult, explaining the situation to Tosh, Owen and Suzie was nigh on impossible. Ianto had stayed with Lisa, doing his best to keep them both calm, and leaving Jack to make the uncomfortable communication to the rest of the team.

The shock and dismay on their faces when he finished matched what he was sure was still evident in his own expression.

“Do you want me to repeat the scan I did before we brought her to the Hub?” Tosh asked when he told them that they needed to know exactly what was going on.

Jack nodded. “It’s the only way we can be sure.”

Owen stood up as Tosh disappeared to get the scanner. “I’m going to head down too, give her a check over.”

Jack opened his mouth to say something but Owen cut him off when he continued. “I know I’ve been checking in on her every afternoon, but for the most part that’s just been monitoring her vitals, checking that nothing has become infected. If this has changed, I should check that nothing else has started to change unexpectedly.”

He shook his head. “We don’t understand this technology properly; we can’t say anything about it with complete certainty.”

In the end, the whole team ended up crammed into Lisa’s room as Owen took new blood samples and discussed the possibility of a new complete body scan with her and Ianto. Tosh stood slightly apart from them as she ran through the brain activity scan.

The machine beeped to indicate the end of the scan, but Tosh’s deep breath alone would have been enough to draw everyone’s eyes to her as they awaited her verdict.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Tosh hesitated, looking worried.

“It’s not good news, is it?” Ianto asked before she could even say a word.

She shook her head slightly. “I’m so sorry, Ianto. Lisa.”

“How...” Ianto cleared his throat. “How bad is it?”

Tosh looked back down at the screen on the small scanner and stepped around to the side so that when she looked back up she could meet Lisa’s eyes. “I can’t say precisely - I’ll need to do a few modifications for that - but right now.”

She sighed. “Right now, only around 80 to 85% of your brain activity is completely human.”

“Which means there’s up to 20% that isn’t,” Lisa said dully. “Twenty percent of me isn’t *me* any more because of all *this*.” Her voice got higher and louder as she spoke, verging the edge of breaking. “It just isn’t fair!”

Although her movement was limited by the support unit, Ianto could tell by the way her fingers tightened around his that she would have been flailing in frustration if she could, gesturing angrily at the metal casing around her body.

“I know it isn’t,” he said helplessly, as he leant over her and caressed her cheek. “It really isn’t, but I promised to do whatever it takes to help you, and I’m not breaking that promise. I won’t stop until I find a way to fix this.”

Jack stepped forward and rested a hand softly on Lisa’s shoulder. “None of us will.”

* * *

It had been late in the evening when Ianto left Lisa’s side, and she had long since fallen asleep before he reappeared in the Hub. Jack had finally convinced the rest of the team to go home an hour or so ago; they would be no use to Lisa if they didn’t get some rest.

Jack had been minutes away from hunting Ianto down to tell him the same when the younger man had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere.

He looked haggard and Jack found himself hopping down the steps from the office area, quickly crossing the Hub to meet him.

“Hey.” He reached over and rubbed a comforting hand down Ianto’s arm. “You should go home. Get some sleep.”

Ianto grunted an assent and nodded. However, given the faraway look in his eyes, Jack wasn’t entirely sure that he had comprehended – or even heard, really – the words.

“Ianto?” He gripped him gently by the shoulders, trying to bring Ianto’s gaze back to him, bring him out of his daze.

When Ianto's eyes cleared a few minutes later and focused finally on Jack, the unmasked pain in them almost made Jack wish he hadn't.

"Ianto..." The name was a sad sigh on his lips as his hands dropped uselessly to his sides. "I am so very, very sorry."

He'd hoped the words would be comforting, but he wondered if that had backfired when he saw Ianto's eyes begin to shimmer a little as he bit his lip as if trying to stay in control of his emotions.

It didn't last long. "She's right, this just *isn't fair*," he burst out moments later. "Why her?" A single tear escaped and tricked down his cheek. "Why her?"

For once, Jack was stuck with nothing to say. Ianto was right. None of this was fair, and nothing he could say would make it so. Another tear leaked from Ianto's eyes and Jack did the only thing he could think of; he pulled him into his arms.

At first, Ianto resisted, his body stiff and tense as Jack rubbed a hand over his back comfortingly. And then, as if a dam had burst, all of the tension flooded away and he sagged against Jack, hands gripping his shirt loosely.

His shoulders shuddered as he finally released the tight rein of control he'd been keeping on his emotions all day. Jack just held him, letting him bury his face in his shoulder as, at long last, he allowed himself to sob.

Jack rested a hand on the back of the younger man's head, trying to provide what scant comfort he could. He found himself absent-mindedly murmuring comforting noises in Ianto's ear, encouraging him to just let it all out, like one would with a small child.

Barely even realising what he was doing, he pressed a kiss into Ianto's hair before resting his chin on top of his head. He closed his eyes and rocked slightly, one thought repeating in his mind; this wasn't fair on any of them.

He had no idea how long they stood there, swaying very gently, before Ianto's sobs began to subside. Ianto pulled back slightly; not far enough to slip out of Jack's hug, but enough for Jack to see the shaky expression on his tear-stained face.

"I'm sorry, I..." Jack shushed Ianto gently before he could complete what was, at least to Jack, a completely unnecessary apology.

Dropping his arms, he carefully turned Ianto around, steering him towards the Hub sofa.

Ianto sank onto it gratefully, looking drained. Jack dropped down close beside him, and was surprised to find Ianto wearily leaning into him a little. Glancing down again and noting exactly how wiped-out Ianto looked, he realised that the young Welshman simply didn't want to lose the comfort of human contact quite yet.

Shuffling closer, he wrapped an arm back around Ianto, who slumped against him even further. He suspected Ianto was half-asleep when he drew him closer and rested his cheek on Ianto's head.

He took a deep breath, trying to repress the little voice in the back of his mind that was jumping up and down and rejoicing at the sensation of Ianto relaxing in his arms. It had been a guilty fantasy for months; one he thought he had done a good job of quashing.

*He's upset over his girlfriend, Jack told himself firmly. You should **not** be enjoying this.*

Nevertheless, his arms tightened fractionally around Ianto, holding him protectively close and guiltily savouring the feeling.

He would be there to hold Ianto and comfort him for as long as the younger man needed him to, even if that meant sitting there all night.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Ianto read the short description on the next item on the list displayed on his screen, sighing as he clicked the button to discard it. *Thirty-seven down...* He skimmed over the remaining list. *A whole lot more to go.*

With no timely brainwaves from anyone, Ianto had set himself the arduous task of scanning through all of the information already on the database about items in the archives to see if anything hopeful turned up. Knowing that the details recorded in the log were often sketchy at best, his search parameters had, by necessity, been broad: they had given him a list of thousands to examine.

And that didn't even cover all those items for which a use had never been ascertained. There were very few of those from the last couple of decades, with Torchwood's own technology advancing significantly enough to allow for much more reliable tests to be done on recovered artefacts. Nearly a quarter of items from the 1950s or earlier, however, were of unknown origin and function.

He selected the next item on the list, expanding it to read the full description.

Possible medical applications; could prove useful in accelerating healing of broken bones but...

He stopped reading, adding the item to the growing virtual pile of items that would be no help.

This task would be infinitely easier once the organisation of the archives was complete, and proper keywords and cross-referencing were in place. But Lisa simply couldn't afford to wait that long.

They didn't know how quickly the effects would take hold, and Ianto had the sinking feeling that, unless he found something in this search that would halt or reverse it, it might be all too fast.

Several hours and hundreds of not-always-very-informative item descriptions later, Ianto was exhausted, frustrated, and had only two items on his 'possible' list.

And even those he was fairly sceptical about.

For the most part, at his request, the rest of the team had given him peace to search and left him to it – the large jug of coffee he'd prepared earlier probably helped – but when he dropped his hands from the keyboard and sighed, his head falling forward, Tosh immediately appeared at his side.

"How's it going?" she asked quietly, unobtrusively. He looked up and met her sympathetic gaze. Whatever answer she was looking for, she must have found it in his eyes because she rested a hand on his shoulder and smiled sadly. "That bad, huh?"

"Am I fooling myself here, Tosh?" he asked despondently. "Am I stupid in thinking that I have any chance of finding something useful in time to help her?" His gaze dropped back to the desk in front of him.

"You better not be telling me that you're giving up, Ianto," Tosh said, a hint of a challenge in her voice.

The logical part of Ianto's brain recognised the words for the deliberate goad that they were, but the emotional part responded indignantly to it anyway. He looked up again, leaning back slightly in his chair. "Of course not! I promised Lisa I wouldn't and I meant it!"

He blew out a long breath. "It's just a little demoralising to keep searching and coming up with nothing." He indicated his short handwritten list. "Those two are the only things I've found so far with even a small chance of being useful, and their chances really are pretty much non-existent."

"I know you said earlier you didn't need one," Tosh started, "but are you sure you don't want a hand with this?"

Ianto shrugged a little. "I don't know. I'm beginning to wonder if maybe I wouldn't be better off just searching the physical archives myself." He waved at the long list still displayed on the screen. "Even if I do find something good in this lot, I'll still need to locate it down there, anyway."

Tosh nodded as he continued, "I've been making some headway with sorting them out, but still... I just got lucky the last time finding what I wanted in a couple of days. I could easily spend several days looking through this database for something that might be useful, and then another week looking for the actual item."

He shrugged again. "At least if I find an object just on a shelf then that's it *found*. I'm not sure I can take much more of sitting here flicking through a list like this." He

raised a questioning eyebrow at Tosh, his voice turning a little unsure. “What do you think?”

She smiled encouragingly. “I think it sounds like a great idea. And you know, I can carry on with the computer search too, if you want. It can’t hurt to approach this two ways at once, right?”

The tiniest spark of hope and motivation reappeared in Ianto’s eyes. “Really?”

“Absolutely.”

Chapter Sixty

Ianto startled a little when he heard footsteps approaching from behind him. He’d been sorting through one particular shelf for over an hour, since shortly after his conversation with Tosh, and he hadn’t been expecting any visitors.

He was more than a little bit surprised that any of them might be approaching him down there – the archives had all but officially been declared as ‘Ianto’s domain’, and each of his co-workers had, at one point or another, confessed a fear that if they came to see him down here they might be put to work.

The footsteps grew closer, and Ianto turned to face their owner.

Jack. He *definitely* hadn’t expected *him* down here. If he was required for something, which he suspected was the reason behind this visit, Jack generally just contacted him through the comm. system.

“Good afternoon, sir,” he said quietly. “Is there something you need me to do?”

“What?” Jack appeared momentarily flustered, which was unusual. “Oh, no. Actually, I’m here to help.”

Ianto was stunned, and a little bit worried. “Help?”

His reservations must have shown on his face, because Jack immediately qualified his statement. “I promise I won’t move anything. I won’t even touch anything if you don’t want me to. I didn’t mean help with your grand re-organisation plan.”

Ianto squinted slightly at Jack, puzzled. “What sort of help *are* you offering then?”

“Well, Tosh mentioned that you thought maybe some of the masses of unidentified artefacts might actually be useful in this situation, if only we knew what they were.” Ianto nodded.

Jack grinned. “That’s where I come in. I’ve been around, and I’m pretty sure I’d recognise a lot of things that the rest of you wouldn’t, and that the Torchwood teams from the past almost certainly didn’t recognise or have the equipment to identify.”

Ianto considered these words. *'I've been around.'* What sort of places had Jack been around that he'd gained a vast knowledge of alien and futuristic technology? He knew that Jack had been at Torchwood Three for quite a while, but Ianto knew how Torchwood worked, and some of the things Jack said seemed far too specific to have been learned through Torchwood's research procedures. And then there were his madcap stories of adventures and... encounters... with aliens.

Something didn't quite fit somewhere; there was at least one piece of the puzzle missing. Ianto shook his head a little and filed the thought away for future consideration. They had a job to do, and if Jack really could identify some mysterious objects, then all the better.

"All right," he nodded at Jack. "But really, please, *please*, don't move anything. This section hasn't actually been sorted through yet, but I have a system, and..."

"Hey!" Jack interrupted. "I just said I wouldn't move anything, didn't I?"

Ianto raised an eyebrow. "Yes, sir, you did. But you forget that I *have* actually met you."

Jack narrowed his eyes, but there was no actual malice in the look he shot Ianto. "Ianto Jones, you wound me, you really do. I'm a man of my word; I keep my promises, and I promise not to move a single thing in this archive unless you specifically ask me to."

Ianto, despite the disastrous situation he'd found himself in, found himself smiling slightly at the earnest expression on Jack's face, and the insane urge – quickly dismissed – to ask his Captain to 'cross his heart and hope to die' came over him.

"Right." He turned back to face the shelf of artefacts and picked up one he'd been pondering for a minute or two before Jack had interrupted him. The label on it gave only an item number, a physical description and a hastily scribbled message that nothing unusual or useful had turned up on the tests done by Torchwood 1934.

He passed it to Jack. "What do you make of this one, then?"

Jack turned it over in his hands a few times, examining it from all sides. After a minute, he sighed and handed it back to Ianto. "I have no idea. Never seen one before."

"I thought you said you could help?" Ianto responded, at least partially teasing.

"I can! Just... not with that particular item," Jack defended himself.

Ianto tilted his head and looked again at the object. "It doesn't look like it's likely to be of any use in the current situation anyway, so I guess it's not all that important."

He picked up his clipboard, recording the item number and the current location of the object. "I'm going to put it on the list for possible future re-examination though, because you never know what they might have missed back in the 30s."

A few items further down the shelf, they came upon another unidentified artefact, this time from the 20s.

Jack's face lit up when Ianto handed it over. "Oh, now *this* one, I know..."

Chapter Sixty-One

The team were extremely grateful that both Rift activity and Weevil sightings were down over the next several days, as all of their efforts were being concentrated on helping Ianto help Lisa. After all of the time and effort they had put in before into helping the young woman, none of them wanted it to be all for naught.

Not to mention the effect they all knew failure would have on Ianto.

Tosh's perusal of the rest of database search listings didn't yield any more fruit than Ianto's beginnings had. There were a few extreme long shots, but nothing that really stood out and looked helpful.

She wrote them down anyway, and gave Ianto the item numbers, but between them, they decided that none of them were worth actually mounting any sort of search for. If he happened to come across them along the way, then that was all very well, but an actual search was pointless.

For Ianto's part, he had been splitting his time between Lisa and the archives, only appearing in the main Hub periodically to brew a new pot of coffee or when Tosh or Jack forced him to; reminding him that he had to eat sometimes.

If Jack didn't physically walk him to the door in the late hours of each night, it was a very real possibility that he would spend the whole night in the archives, forgoing sleep to sort through another batch of artefacts.

Jack had spent countless hours down in the archives with Ianto, doing his best to identify mysterious unknown artefacts in the hopes that one of them might turn out to be something they could use to help Lisa.

Nothing definite had turned up yet, although Ianto was at least gratified that a few items could be taken off the huge unidentified list. He had scribbled notes on the labels of any items Jack identified, as well as on his location list, so that he could input the extra information into the database and make sure the items were put into the right places when he came back through the section later to move things into their new categorised locations.

And while they had yet to find anything identifiable as something that would almost definitely help, they had assembled a small but growing pile of items that warranted further investigation. These items, while Jack didn't recognise them, either looked vaguely similar to something he did recognise, or just generally had the look of something that could be useful.

These items had been, bit by bit, brought up into the Hub – usually when Ianto came up to work his magic with the coffee machine – and Suzie and Owen had started running them through the wide variety of scans and tests that had not existed in the 20s, 30s and 40s, when the majority of the items had been brought in. They repeated many of those that *had* been available for decades too, just to be absolutely certain.

Only been three of the items had been completely tested by the time Tosh finished going through the database, so she, Owen and Suzie each took one artefact and its associated test results to examine further.

Owen, after winning a game of rock-paper-scissors for the dubious pleasure of having first choice, decided on a strange metallic spidery clamp-like device that, according to Torchwood 1926, had ‘an odd effect when placed on the head’. He hoped that with the benefit of the latest tests, he might be able to refine ‘odd effect’ into something definite and possibly useful.

Tosh, when given second choice, had chosen the most obscure of the three items, a small dense ball of unidentified composition, picked out by Jack and Ianto because of the plethora of leads sprouting from it, some of which had connectors at the other end that strongly resembled those used for contemporary EEG scans. She knew there was at least an even chance that its use would be completely unrelated, but there was always the chance that it could prove instead to be exactly what they were looking for.

Which left Suzie with the third item. From appearances, it appeared to be some sort of glove or gauntlet, but the peculiar readings it gave out led to the suspicion that it was far more than just an item of protective clothing or armour.

Chapter Sixty-Two

A week and a half later, they didn’t seem to be any closer to finding anything from the archives that would help. Owen and Tosh had gone through numerous possible items, running scans and tests, with no luck.

For some of the items they had been able to pin some sort of identification on. Many of them would prove useful for other situations, some were nothing more than interesting curiosities, and a few, it was decided, should be put away and never, *ever* used.

Many other items, even with all of the latest tests, they were still unable to identify. It was with a heavy heart that these were handed back to Ianto to be returned to the ‘unidentified’ section of the archives.

Thanks, however, to Ianto and Jack’s continued exploration of the archives, there were more artefacts in the ‘to be tested’ pile daily, so, determinedly, none of them were giving up hope, least of all Ianto.

He was especially resolute in his determination to stay positive whenever he was with Lisa. Otherwise, he feared that she would give up, and she really couldn’t afford to do that.

Despite the unusually late hour of his visit, Lisa was still asleep when he got there that morning, so Ianto just took his seat and sat quietly and watched her sleep; watched her take even, measured breaths, her face relaxed and peaceful. He cast his mind back, thinking of how many nights he had lain awake just to watch her sleeping beside him in the weeks after they'd first moved in together. How many nights he'd done the same in the years since.

How many nights he might not get the chance to do it in the future if they couldn't find something soon.

Shaking his shoulders, he pushed the negative thought away. He couldn't let himself start thinking like that. This wasn't the end. It wasn't.

Lisa's eyelids started to flutter slightly several minutes before she awoke fully, and Ianto had shifted closer and taken her hand in his by the time she opened her eyes.

"Hey, how are you feeling this morning?" he murmured softly as her drowsy gaze met his.

"I'm okay," she mumbled unconvincingly.

Ianto squeezed her hand lightly. "You sure? You don't have to lie to me if you're not," he told her gently.

"I'm okay," she repeated, no more believably than the first time. Her eyes darkened under Ianto's caring but sceptical look. "Well... mostly okay." Ianto raised an eyebrow. "A little okay, at least."

Ianto rested the back of his hand against her cheek. "You really don't have to pretend with me, Lisa. *I'm* not okay; I don't expect you to be."

"I'm just so scared, Ianto," she confessed, her eyes becoming glassy.

"I know," he nodded. "I am too, but we're going to beat this. We'll stop at *nothing* to fix this." He willed her to believe him.

"I hope so," she whispered, "because I don't want to know what could happen if we don't." Her gaze burned into his. "I think it's getting stronger, Ianto. I can feel it in my head more and more – it's like it's trying to get out."

She gripped his hand more tightly. "Whatever happens, you can't let me do anything to anyone, Ianto. If... if you can't stop this, then you have to stop *me*. Don't let me hurt someone."

Ianto shook his head. "It's not going to come to that, cariad."

Lisa was adamant. "Please, promise me, Ianto."

"I promise."

There was a buzzing in his ear and a moment later Tosh's voice came through. "*Ianto, you might want to come out here and see this.*"

Chapter Sixty-Three

Ianto quickly took his leave of Lisa and hurried back out to the Hub floor to find Tosh. She hadn't mentioned what it was she wanted him to come and look at – whether it was good or bad, even – so he wasn't sure if he should be worried or anticipatory.

Tosh looked up and grinned at him as he climbed the small steps up to the area where she was examining something on a table. "Ianto!"

"What is it you wanted me to look at? Good news?" he asked as he approached her worktable, his hopes lifted by the smile on her face. The rest of the team were only moments behind him, obviously having been summoned by Tosh just after she'd called down to Lisa's room for him.

"Yes, I think we could tentatively call this good news," Tosh said as they gathered around the table.

Ianto looked at the artefact on the table, which looked a little like a bowl, and vaguely remembered pulling it out of the archives several days previously. "It's something that might actually help?"

Tosh nodded. "Possibly. It would need some work, but the test results are positive."

Ianto frowned slightly. "How much work are you talking about?" he asked worriedly. "Cos, it's just..." He looked around at his team-mates who were now all looking at him with concerned expressions. "When I was talking to Lisa this morning, she said... she said she was really scared, because she thinks the cybernetic thoughts are getting stronger again."

He swallowed hard. "She said it felt like they were trying to escape, trying to take over. If she's right... whatever we do to stop this, we need to do it soon or..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

Tosh stepped over and put a gentle hand on his arm. "Do you want me to run the scan again? Just so we know for sure."

Ianto bit his lip as he considered the offer. On one hand, the scan could show that Lisa had been mistaken, and the cybernetic intrusion into her thoughts was no worse than it had been ten days ago – or that if it *was* increased, it wasn't a significant increase, which would indicate that they still had time to do something.

On the other hand, it could prove that Lisa was right. Hearing her voice her suspicious had been hard enough. Were either of them ready to have them confirmed? Were *any* of them, really?

But then again, if the situation really was that bad, they wouldn't gain anything from hiding from it. If something needed to be done *now*, then now was when they had to know.

He smiled weakly at Tosh and nodded. "I think that would be a good idea, yes."

"Okay." She spun around, heading back to her desk as she talked. "I've actually been doing a few minor modifications on it in the last week, while I was waiting on test results."

She picked up the scanner, which did look slightly different to the last time Ianto had seen her use it. "The core function hasn't been modified much at all, I just tweaked it so it would give a more accurate result. The main things I've added are to, well, I supposed you could call it the user interface."

She twisted it in her hands so they could see the additional monitor she had installed on the device. "If I'm done this correctly, then this should now read the data output by the main function and convert it into an easy to read percentage."

Ianto set his shoulders. "Right, let's get this over with, then."

Chapter Sixty-Four

A few minutes later, Ianto, Jack, Tosh and Owen were crowded into Lisa's room once more while Tosh explained the new modifications she had made to Lisa.

"Would you be able to...?" Lisa started falteringly.

"Would I be able to what?" Tosh prompted gently.

"Well... I've been thinking. If this says that it's worse, then you should probably be scanning me regularly, and that got me wondering. Is there any way you'd be able to set it up so it was constantly monitoring?"

Tosh nodded slowly. "Sure, it wouldn't need much work to make it do that, but... are you su...?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Lisa interrupted. "If it suddenly accelerates or something, I don't want you, us, to miss it just because it happened when there wasn't a scan scheduled. I couldn't bear it if something bad happened to any of you because of it, and..."

She looked hesitant. "And I'm not sure that if *it* took over, that it would let you know that it had. I don't want to even consider what that might mean for the rest of you."

"I've already told you we won't let it get that far," Ianto told her, "but if you'll feel better with a constant monitor, we can absolutely set that up."

Tosh nodded in agreement and looked over at Ianto. "If you give me a hand with it, Ianto, I can probably get it set up to do that in about half an hour once we're done here."

“Of course.” Ianto took a deep breath. “We should get this going, then.”

Tosh moved around to Lisa’s head and turned the scanner on. They were all waiting anxiously by the time it beeped softly and Tosh turned it around so they could read the number displayed on the newly added screen.

Ianto felt his heart sink into his shoes as he read it.

32%

“What does it say?” Lisa asked nervously. Ianto couldn’t make his voice work and looked entreatingly at the others.

Jack cleared his throat a long moment later. “Thirt... thirty-two percent.” He didn’t sound much better than Ianto felt.

“Oh.” Lisa’s voice shook.

Ianto pushed past the lump in his throat to reassure her. “Tosh thinks she might have found something that could help, though.”

Lisa’s eyes flew to his, a tiny spark of uncertain hope appearing in the despair. “Really?”

Ianto nodded as Tosh answered verbally, “Yes. I’ve been running extra tests on it all morning. It’s the reason I called Ianto out of here earlier, to explain it all. I didn’t actually get around to that, but maybe this works better anyway. You should hear this too.”

She paused for a moment and stood up a little straighter, as if she’d had a sudden thought. She took a step backwards. “Actually, I’ll be right back.”

Jack, Ianto, Owen and Lisa watched her go in astonishment as she disappeared out the door.

Less than two minutes later, she reappeared, the item in question in one hand and a folder, presumably full of test results, in the other. She set the artefact down on the small side table. “This is, well, I don’t really know what the name given to it by its creators was – there’s no way we can find that out without somehow finding out who they were – but I’ve been calling it the mind probe.”

“I’m assuming from that oh-so-imaginative name that it... probes minds?” Owen said dryly.

“As far as I can tell, yes it does,” Tosh replied, sending Owen a withering look. “Now, obviously, I haven’t actually been able to test it properly in action, but I’ve run every scan we have on this thing. I invented a few extra ones we *didn’t* have to run on it too.”

“And?” Jack asked, looking thoughtful.

“There are high levels of both electrical and psychic energy coming from this thing. And more than that, they can be directed very accurately. I believe that it would be able to go into the thought processes and separate them out, revealing separate or hidden consciousnesses, uncovering concealed memories or personalities that the person or creature in question might not even be aware of.”

The others looked at her in astonishment, allowing a new sense of hope to flood through them.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Just as Tosh had predicted, she and Ianto had the modifications on the scanner completed within the half-hour, and another half-hour saw it completely set up in Lisa's room.

An updated number appeared on the screen every few minutes, as it started a new scan just as soon as it had calculated the number from the previous one. The beep that the device had previously made to indicate the end of a scan had been hurriedly muted when they realised just how annoying it would quickly become otherwise.

Ianto was relieved to find that the number had not increased from 32.0% in the time between the earlier scan and the first of the continuous scans, but dreaded the possibility of checking in on her that evening to discover that it had grown.

As soon as the scanner was installed and they had checked it was functioning correctly, Tosh returned to her work on the ‘mind probe’.

As she had already established from her previous scans and tests that it could accurately read thought patterns from brain activity, the next step was to test its ability to split two consciousnesses, or find hidden thoughts among many others.

As its untested status, and the lack of any suitable candidates, precluded her doing ‘live’ studies, these tests would need to be entirely simulated.

That meant she would have to find a way of simulating the activity patterns of a brain under a variety of thought conditions. And that required a much more thorough knowledge of neurology than she had, despite the work she'd done recently on the scanner for Lisa.

She found Owen, predictably, in the autopsy bay, tinkering with something. For some reason he preferred it down there to working at his desk – possibly because the rest of them tended to avoid the autopsy bay, except when something important was going on there.

“Hey, Owen? I need your help.”

Between Owen's knowledge of the human brain, Tosh's technological know-how and a few hours of concerted effort, they eventually had something they could begin to work with.

They had several different sets of simulated data, one of which was their attempt to recreate something similar to what was going on in Lisa's mind. It was nowhere near an exact replica, but it was the best they could do with the time and equipment they had.

With the tricky neurological part over, Tosh and Owen started on what should, in theory, be the easier part – running Tosh's pre-defined tests. Owen tried to lend a hand, but within twenty minutes of starting to run the tests, Tosh had banished him back to the autopsy bay, telling him thanks, but he was just getting in the way now.

She worked methodically, as she was wont to do, running each set of simulation data through each test, recording the results diligently.

The probe correctly identified every case where two or more distinct activity patterns were present, even where one was subtly hidden within or beneath the other.

It accurately predicted when it was reaching a barrier between one area of activity and another, identifying also if it passed back through into an area previously explored.

So far everything was going well, and it did everything Tosh had asked of it.

The final, and most important test, was to ask it to modify or remove one section of activity without harming any other area. That was the most important function they required of it, and Tosh knew it would be the most difficult to trigger, if it was possible.

Four hours later, Tosh had exhausted every possible combination of commands and stimuli.

It probed, it identified, but it simply would not remove or change. She re-ran several combinations just to be sure, but with no luck. It just wasn't designed for this.

Despite the setback, Tosh didn't immediately give up hope. She worked almost non-stop for several days before she finally had to admit defeat. She'd made as many modifications to the probe as she dared, but no matter what she did, it wouldn't do what they needed it to.

She had no doubt that the probe could prove useful in the future, but it wasn't going to help Lisa.

Both Ianto and Lisa assured her that it wasn't her fault, but she couldn't help but feel like she had failed them.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Ianto glanced at the scanner display with trepidation. It had grown higher every time he looked, and it seemed to be accelerating at an alarming speed.

In the wake of Tosh's bad news, that really, really wasn't good.

"It's higher again, isn't it?" Lisa's voice was strained. The higher the number got, the harder she was finding it to stay in control.

He nodded as he walked around back into her line of sight.

"How bad?" Ianto hesitated, but Lisa was firm. "Just tell me, Ianto. I... I need to know."

"Forty-one point six percent," Ianto sighed. Less than ten percent more and it have an equal grip on Lisa's brain to Lisa herself.

"I suspected as much," Lisa pushed out. "I can feel it in the back of my mind all the time now. Tapping away. Waiting for me to give up; waiting for me to just cede control."

Her eyes were wide as she stared at Ianto. "The worst thing is that sometimes it is so tempting. It's so tempting just to stop fighting, because I'm so tired and it's getting so hard." Ianto stroked his fingertips down her cheek, his eyes full of sympathetic sorrow. "Please help me, Ianto."

"In any and every way I can," he murmured hotly. "What do you need me to do?"

"Remind me why I'm fighting?" Lisa asked plaintively. "Talk to me, tell me a story. Help me hold on to all the emotions and feelings this thing wants to take away from me. Take me back to a time when I wasn't fighting this all the time."

Ianto nodded and gripped her fingers. "I can do that." He thought for a second. "How about the story of Ianto and Lisa's Moving In Day?"

She smiled weakly. "I think I know that one already."

"Maybe." He mustered his own best smile. "But you can't deny it, it's a good one."

Her smile grew a little stronger as she let herself remember. "Yeah, it is."

Ianto shifted on the stool to get comfortable before beginning the story. "Once upon a time, not so very long ago..." He paused when Lisa scoffed at him. "Hey! What's that for?"

"Enough of the cliché fairy tale bit. Just tell the story."

"Oh, alright. If you insist."

"Lisa! Is this the last of them?" Ianto called breathlessly through the open front door as he climbed the last few stairs.

He couldn't be entirely sure that the cardboard box in his arms didn't contain building bricks or rocks, even though the label on the side said 'books' in Lisa's loopy handwriting.

Next time, they were getting moving people in to do this stuff. Now that they actually owned furniture – ignoring the fact that none of it was assembled yet – he felt justified in making this one small decision about the future without consulting Lisa.

*“Are there any more boxes in the car?” Lisa asked in response as he stepped across the threshold into their new flat. **Their** new flat. He still liked the sound of the words when he thought them.*

“Nope.”

“Then that's the last of them.”

Ianto put the box down next to the stack of other boxes marked 'books' and 'DVDs' and smiled at Lisa where she stood unpacking cutlery and crockery on the other side of the kitchen counter. “Oh thank God. I think my arms will fall off if I make them cart up anything more.”

*“Well, Tracey and Colin offered to stay longer and give us a hand with the rest, but **you** insisted we were fine. So you only have yourself to blame,” Lisa retorted, grinning back. Tracey, Lisa's friend from university, and her boyfriend Colin had stopped by earlier that afternoon and helped them cart their IKEA purchases up the two flights of stairs.*

*“That was before I realised how much **stuff** we have between us.” Ianto looked around at the piles of boxes around the room. The bedroom was full of boxes too. “Are you sure all of this is actually going to fit? I mean, we only bought two of those bookcases, and this looks like more than two bookcases' worth of books and DVDs.”*

“If they don't fit they don't fit,” Lisa said, dropping the last of the spoons into the drawer and coming around the counter. “Stop worrying and start opening boxes.”

“Shouldn't we assemble some of the furniture before we start trying to unpack some of this?”

Lisa smiled and leant over to kiss his cheek. “You know, for once, Ianto Jones, you might actually be right.”

“Oi!” Ianto reached out and, snagging a hand around Lisa's waist, pulled her to him. “I'll have you know that I am frequently right. You just suspiciously never remember it.”

“If you say so,” Lisa mumbled against his lips.

Ianto pulled back slowly, tempted back for several more soft kisses before he drew away. “Right then. Erm... side table or bookcase?”

Lisa considered the two boxes. “Well, a table can’t be **that** hard to assemble, right?”

An hour later, they’d proved that yes, a table **could** be that hard to assemble. Privately, Ianto thought he might have had it put together by now if he was on his own, but instead of speeding the process up, having two of them had slowed it down. They simply couldn’t agree on what the sketches in the instructions booklet actually meant.

“No, look, it goes through part 12, into part 9, and then that little twisty thing goes in the side.”

“I’m sure that’s part 6, not part 9. Part 9 is too long.”

“No, part 6 would be too short. It must be part 9.”

“You know, actually, I think it might be part 11. With one of those longer screws. The... ‘D’ ones.”

“Are you sure?”

“**Yes**, I’m sure. Now hand me that Allen key.”

With a similar debate over almost every instruction, it was no surprise that it was over three hours later before they had completely assembled the table and one bookcase.

Not wanting to subject themselves immediately to the building of the second bookcase, even though they knew how to do it now, they decided to start unpacking and sorting their DVD collections.

They should have guessed really that this would lead to more good-natured bickering - most importantly on the subject of whether their now extensive joint collection of movies starring either Johnny Depp or Tom Cruise should be segregated into a special section of their own or if they should be alphabetised with the rest.

By the time the DVDs were sorted to their satisfaction, it was early evening and, over a meal of takeaway (as they had unpacked kitchen utensils but had yet to stock the fridge), eaten at the counter on the stools the previous occupant had thankfully been happy to sell on, they simultaneously realised that they hadn’t even started on the bedroom furniture yet.

Comfortably full, they headed into the other room, armed with a screwdriver and the Allen key.

Ianto took a long look at the large box of parts on the floor next to the mattress and made a decision. He tossed the tools onto the floor beside the door and turned to face his new live-in girlfriend.

Wrapping his arms around her, he caught her mouth in a passionate kiss and swivelled them around, backing towards the bare mattress.

“I still can’t believe it took us four days to finally get around to putting that bed together,” Lisa smiled. Ianto noted with pleasure that some of the tension had left her voice.

“Well, as we discovered that night, the mattress was quite comfortable enough for us on its own.”

“Oh yeah...” Lisa sighed happily, but Ianto detected a hint of melancholy beginning to seep back in.

“We’re *going* to have another day like that, Lisa. We just need to keep fighting for it.”

Chapter Sixty-Seven

“We just need to keep fighting for it.”

“I want to, Ianto,” Lisa replied. “And I want to believe that will be enough, but the stronger it gets, the harder it is to hold onto that belief.”

“Lisa...”

“What happens if it gets too strong for me to fight? I’m barely holding on at the moment. If it gets a lot stronger it might start to beat me.”

She fixed Ianto with a serious look. “I know what will happen to me if it manages to take hold of me. I remember what they were like, what happened at... in the battle. I could hurt you. Hurt Jack, Tosh, Owen. I don’t want that to happen; I *won’t let* that happen.”

“None of us will let that happen,” Ianto said fiercely. “We won’t let it get control of you like that.”

“I know you won’t. And that’s really the whole point of what I’m about to ask of you.”

Ianto was worried by the look in her eyes as she spoke. “What?” he asked cautiously.

“I know that your first instinct is going to be to refuse, because that’s just the type of person you are, but this is something I really need you to do for me.”

That didn’t exactly do anything to abate Ianto’s worry.

“You know what the percentages are right now, and you know that I’m more or less holding my own against this thing for now, but if those percentages were reversed... I don’t think I’d really be in with a chance.”

”But...”

Lisa smiled thinly. "I'm not giving up, and I know you aren't either, but I do think we need to be prepared. We need to make plans for the worst case scenario. You have to admit that there's a growing chance that this isn't going to end the way we want it to."

Ianto shook his head as a realisation started to dawn on him. "No... please say you aren't asking what I think you're asking. Please."

"I'm sorry, Ianto, but I have to. If it gets to the stage that this monster inside my head is significantly more in control than I am, you have to... to... eliminate the threat."

Ianto was shaking all over, his eyes glassy.

"Please, Ianto," Lisa begged.

"I just... can't." Ianto's voice wobbled. "How can you ask me to do this to you?"

"Because I know it's the right thing. You will too, when you really think about it. If it comes down to it, my life is not worth dooming the world by handing it over to the Cybermen again."

Ianto dropped his gaze to the floor, trying not to admit to himself that her words held more than a trace of horrific logic.

"I..." He trailed off; he didn't actually know what he wanted to say.

"I, more than anyone, hope that it won't come to it, but I need you to promise me that you'll do it if you have to, Ianto."

Ianto nodded tearfully. He hated this, he hated even the idea of this, but he couldn't deny Lisa this one shred of control over her own future. "I promise."

With Ianto's word secured, the long day caught up with Lisa shortly afterwards, and she was sleeping fitfully less than half an hour later. Ianto knew that, even in sleep, she was having to battle to remain in control of her own brain, so the rest wasn't really all that restful or rejuvenating.

Checking one last time to make sure she was sleeping as peacefully as was possible, he made his way back to the main Hub.

"How is she?" Jack asked when the team noticed his arrival.

"She's holding on, but it's hard." Ianto sighed. "She... she asked me to do something for her, and I promised I would, but..." He worried his lip a little between his teeth. "If the worst actually happens, I'm not sure I could."

"What did she ask you to do?" Owen queried.

"If... if the percentage gets high enough that she has no chance of remaining in control, she asked me to..."

He could get the last words out, but the rest of them could easily infer what he meant.

Tosh's voice finally broke through the silence that had fallen in the wake of Ianto's announcement.

“As much as I really hate to say this, I think she's right.”

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Ianto watched with dread as time passed. The percentage of Lisa's brain that was overtaken rose daily, and no new object of hope was found.

43.0%

One of them would now be sitting with Lisa throughout the day, with Ianto and Jack, naturally, taking the majority of the shifts. Their chatter helped, Lisa told them, giving her not only something to hold onto, but also something to take her mind off the struggle.

Ianto strongly suspected that, after he had forced Ianto to go home for a few hours of sleep each night, Jack was going back down to Lisa's room to keep a watchful eye over her while she slept.

If it wasn't for the fact that Jack didn't *look* sleep deprived, he would be utterly sure.

46.3%

Whenever he wasn't with Lisa, Ianto was desperately scouring the archives, hoping against all hope that he would find something that would prove the magic bullet they were in such dire need of.

He did find one item from the list he and Tosh had compiled from the artefact retrieval database, but – as they had strongly suspected when it had been found originally – a short examination told them that it wasn't going to be any help at all.

With every day, every hour that passed where he turned up nothing in the archives, he grew more desperate. He knew that time was running out on actually being able to do anything to help.

Time was running out on Lisa's self-imposed percentage limit. At the rate the numbers had been increasing, Ianto knew that it could be as little as a matter of days before it reached 60%.

50.7%

Ianto wasn't the only one with tears in his eyes the first day they looked at the scanner screen and realised that the number had topped 50%. He would deny it furiously if asked, but even Owen had been blinking suspiciously quickly that morning.

Lisa's struggle was becoming more evident daily; the tension was etched on her face constantly. The smiles that Ianto so loved to see on her face were all but gone as she directed all the energy she had left into staying on top of the new consciousness invading her brain.

Even Ianto's sweet tales from the past and Jack's outlandish stories of his various escapades could do little more than raise a grimace.

Every day, the cyber-programming grew stronger, and they still hadn't found any way of stopping it.

55.1%

Ianto knew that something was wrong from the look on Toshiko's face when she came to find him at the coffee machine after Jack had relieved her at Lisa's bedside.

"What is it, Tosh? What's wrong?"

Tosh hesitated before answering, which told Ianto more clearly than any words could that whatever it was, it was bad. He put down the coffee mug he had been about to fill as his hands started to shake.

"I think she's starting to lose the fight," she eventually said quietly, regretfully.

If he had still been holding anything, Ianto would have dropped it as his heart fell into his shoes. "Wh... wh... wh... what happened?"

"Just for a few seconds, a completely different expression came over her face. I know I don't know her as well as you do, but it didn't look like Lisa."

Tosh put a hand on Ianto's arm, trying to imbue what comfort she could. "A second later, she was herself again. I... I didn't say anything to her about it; I don't know if she even realised it happened, but I thought you should know."

"Thank you for telling me, Tosh," Ianto replied politely, the automatic response the only thing he could muster when his thoughts were in such turmoil.

Terrifying enough as he found it to hear about it second-hand, it was worse to experience it himself, and he didn't have to wait long for it to happen.

Yet, worse than the completely un-Lisa expression on her face was the voice that erupted during those few scant seconds. Grating and harsh, it was the anti-thesis of Lisa's own soft tones.

Lisa came back to herself to find Ianto in tears, but she didn't know why.

His watery-eyes almost obscured his vision as Ianto tilted his head to look at the number on the scanner. What he saw made him wish he hadn't looked.

59.8%

Chapter Sixty-Nine

“Please. Just another few days. Maybe we’ll find something that could help. Please.” Tears streaked down Ianto’s face as he pleaded with Lisa, gripping her hand, stroking down her face.

Lisa’s face was tense with the effort of holding on. She’d had more than one brief lapse of control since the one Ianto had first witnessed, and they were getting longer. “You know we can’t take that chance, Ianto,” she pushed out. “You know what’s been happening. It’s... it’s already gone above 60. A few more days and...”

“I know, but I don’t want to lose you,” Ianto whispered hotly. “I can’t.”

The others stood around the room, trying desperately not to intrude; knowing there was nothing they could do or say that would make this easier on either Ianto or Lisa; wishing there was something that could be said to make this easier on *them*.

“I don’t want to be lost,” Lisa whispered back, and Ianto might have laughed had the situation not been so devastatingly tragic. “But it’s getting too strong. I can’t fight it much longer. You’re going to lose me either way.”

Ianto’s body shook as he tried to withhold a sob. “*I know*, I just...”

“Please, Ianto. Let me go while I can still say goodbye.”

Ianto took a step back, not letting go of her hand, and nodded slowly, tearfully. “Okay.” He looked around at his co-workers, his friends, the meaning clear.

Owen was the first to step forward. He made a show of re-checking the readings on all her monitors.

“You understand how this is going to happen, right?” he said, falling back on the comfort of medical distance.

Lisa nodded fractionally; Owen had already explained the procedure to her in full.

“You’ll be out, it will be painless. You won’t even know it’s happening.”

“I know,” she whispered.

Owen finally looked at her properly and his eyes filled with emotion. He stepped back before it could overwhelm him. “I’m sorry,” he told her, utter sincerity in his tone as he turned away and walked over to the wall where he could hide the pain it was causing him.

Tosh didn’t beat about the bush, her hands enclosing Lisa’s free one between them. “I am so very sorry. I wish I could have done more.”

“Not your fault,” Lisa croaked.

Tosh nodded, collecting herself. "I'm going to miss you." Nodding again, shortly, she pulled back, biting her lip as she joined Owen at the side of the room.

Jack wasn't even attempting to mask his emotions as he stepped up to take her place.

"The world is going to be a sadder place without a beautiful woman like you in it," he said in a choked voice, making a failed attempt at a grin. "I wish it didn't have to end this way." He swallowed hard.

"You did everything you could," Lisa assured him adamantly. He squeezed her hand tight, taking everything he could from the contact.

He bent low over her, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "I'll look after him for you, I promise," he whispered fiercely, just loud enough for her to hear.

"You've been a good friend to me, Jack Harkness," Lisa told him as he straightened. "Thank you." The look in her eyes told him that her gratitude was for more than everything he'd been to her in the last months; she was acknowledging everything he'd vowed to do for Ianto in the future.

Jack nodded, reaffirming his promise. "It's been an honour to be your friend, Lisa Hallett." He stepped back, releasing her hand. He opened his mouth to say something else, but found that he couldn't get the words out. She understood though; with a slight tilt of her head, she let him know that she had heard every word he couldn't say.

He joined the others, and Ianto was vaguely aware of him ushering them all out of the room to let Ianto and Lisa say their goodbyes in private. He wiped the tears from his cheek with the back of his free hand as he moved closer again.

Lisa's eyes met his, and with the same hand, he stroked a single finger down her cheek in what had become a very familiar gesture in the last months.

"I... I don't know what to say," he said quietly. "There's so much I want to tell you, so many things that I thought I had years to say." A tear trickled down his cheek, dripping from his chin, but he barely noticed. "I love you so much, Lisa. My sweet, sweet cariad, I love you so very much, and..." He shook his head slightly.

"I love you too, Ianto, more than I've ever been able to tell you." Lisa's voice was fierce beneath the strain; she needed him to believe. "Which is why I need you to promise me that you won't grieve me forever."

"But..."

"Don't let your life end with mine, Ianto. You have to go on without me, find a way to be happy again."

"I don't know if I can," Ianto wept. "You've been a part of me for so long."

“And I always will be,” Lisa whispered. “That part of me will always live in you. When you’re happy, that part of me... will be happy with you.”

She squeezed his hand. “We’ve found out the hard way that life is too damn short. When you find something, or someone, that makes you happy again, grab onto that, Ianto. Grab on and hold it tight.”

Ianto nodded through his tears. “I will. I’ll try.” He bent low, putting all of his emotions into his kiss. “I’m going to miss you so much, but I’ll try.”

He took a deep breath, trying to compose himself as he stood up. Their eyes met, and they knew that this was it.

They stood in silence, letting their eyes say the final goodbyes, as the others crept back in.

Ianto looked up and nodded at Owen, biting his lip in a futile attempt at holding back the floodgates on his tears.

Efficiently, mechanically, Owen disconnected the fluid drip and connected up a syringe. He blew out a calming breath of his own before depressing the plunger.

Within seconds, the strong sedative started to take effect, Lisa’s eyes beginning to droop. She briefly locked gazes with each of them for one last time before they flickered closed.

Owen checked with Ianto once more before he started to disconnect or switch off the myriad devices that supported Lisa’s life. Monitor readings went haywire as Lisa’s body started to shut down.

The final switch was that on the breathing device they’d connected up all those months ago.

After it was turned off, Lisa took a couple of shallow, stuttering breaths before stopping.

A few seconds later, the heart monitor flat lined.

Even though there was no sound, they could hear it in their heads just as surely as if there was.

Beeeeeeeeeeep

There was no sound at all in the room for a long moment, a moment that felt like it stretched on forever.

It was broken by Ianto’s gulping sob as his legs gave out beneath him. Jack caught him before he fell and they slid to the floor together, both in tears.

Lisa was gone, and nothing, now, would bring her back.