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Torchwood: Slow Decay

Andy Lane

TORCHWOOD

SLOW DECAY

Andy Lane

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*To Dave, Alison and Jamie Trace,
for providing me with a Hub of my own in Plymouth
And dedicated to the memory of Craig Hinton
– best friend and best man*

Also available in the Torchwood series:

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ONE

The sky was taking on the appearance of an old bruise as the sun slipped inevitably toward the Cardiff skyline. Yellows and purples were layered across it, each sliding into the other in a cascade of disturbed colour, like an Edvard Munch painting. Lights were beginning to come on across the city, in buildings and on streets, gradually replacing the actual city with a pointillist copy of itself.

The top of the tower block where Gwen stood was covered in weeds, moss and grass. The vegetation had drifted up, in seed or spore form, from the countryside beyond Cardiff's suburbs. From where she stood, by the top of the stairway that led down towards street level and the rational world below, the far edge of the building was an impossibly straight cliff edge and the man standing there was poised on the edge of the void, coat eddying around him in the breeze like wings. Ready to fall or to fly.

'Where can I get a coat like that?' she asked.

'You have to earn it,' Captain Jack Harkness said without turning around. 'It's a badge of office. Like bowler hats in the Civil Service.'

'They don't still wear bowler hats in the Civil Service,' she replied scornfully. 'That went out back in the 1950s,

along with tea trolleys and waistcoats. And I speak as someone who worked alongside loads of Civil Servants when I was in the police force.’ She caught herself. ‘I mean, when I was *really* in the police force, not just *telling* people that I’m in the police force to avoid having to tell them that I hunt down alien technology for a living.’

‘I bet they still wear them,’ Jack said. The wind ruffled his hair like a playful hand. ‘I bet when all the Civil Servants arrive in their offices in the morning they lock the doors, unlock their desks and take out their ceremonial bowler hats to wear where nobody else can see them. Like a kind of administrative version of the Klu Klux Klan.’

‘Have you got some kind of downer on the Civil Service?’

He still didn’t turn around. ‘In an infinite universe,’ he said, ‘there are undoubtedly planets out there where the entire population has grey skin, wears grey clothes and thinks grey thoughts. I guess the universe needs planets like that, but I sure as hell don’t want to have to visit them. I prefer the thought that if there’s a planet of Civil Servants then there’s also a planet where everyone has an organic TV set built into their back, and you can just follow people down the street, watching daytime TV to your heart’s content.’

The colour was slowly bleeding from the sky in front of Jack Harkness: yellows dissolving into oranges, oranges melting into reds, and everything dripping from the sky, sliding off the back of the night and leaving velvet darkness behind.

Gwen gazed at Jack’s back, trying once again to try and separate out the complex mess of feelings she felt for this man. When he talked about Civil Servants wearing bowler hats, it was almost as if he had only recently seen them. When he talked about alien planets, she could almost

believe that he'd been to them. Almost. But that would have been mad. Wouldn't it?

She wondered, not for the first time, how her life had managed to take such a right-angled turn without any warning. One day she was taking statements and guarding crime scenes whilst technicians in overalls scraped evidence up into plastic bags, and the next she was part of Great Britain's first and last line of defence against... what? Invasion. Incursion. Infiltration. A whole bag full of words beginning with 'In', because that's where things were coming. In - to her reality. In - to Cardiff.

And it was all because of this man standing on the edge of a roof twelve storeys above the ground. This man who had arrived in her life like a flash flood, drowning her in strangeness and adventure.

Impulsive. Impressive. Impossible. A whole dictionary of words beginning with 'Im'.

'Most people spend their time looking up,' she said eventually, 'looking at the stars. You seem to spend far too much time looking down. What are you looking for, exactly?'

'Perhaps I'm looking for fallen stars,' he said after a moment.

'It's the people, isn't it? You just can't help watching them.' She caught herself. 'No, that's not it. You're not watching them; you're watching *over* them.'

'Ever seen a two-year-old tottering around a garden?' he said softly, without turning around. 'There might be poison ivy, or rose bushes, or hawthorn around the edges. There might be spades or secateurs lying on the lawn. The kid doesn't care. He just wants to play with all those brightly coloured things he sees. To him, the world is a safe place. And you might want to rush out and cut back all those sharp, spiky plants so they can't hurt him, and you might

want to clear away all those dangerous tools just in case he picks them up and cuts himself on them, but you know you shouldn't, because if you keep doing that then he will either grow up thinking the world can never hurt him, or he might go the other way and think that everything is dangerous and he should never go far from your side. So you just watch. And wait. And, if he does get a rash from the poison ivy, or if he does cut his finger off with the secateurs, then you get him to hospital as quickly as you can, in the reasonably sure knowledge that he'll never make that mistake again.'

Small points of light were appearing in the darkness beyond Jack. Within the space of a few minutes, it seemed to Gwen that he had gone from being a solid figure silhouetted against a slowly shifting backdrop of colour to a black shape against blackness, defined only by where the stars weren't.

'Is that what we are to you?' Gwen asked. 'Children?'

'That's all *we* are,' he replied. 'To *them*.'

'And who are *They*?'

'Who are *They*? They are the ones who live over the walls of the garden, in the wilderness outside. Me - I'm just a child as well, playing in the garden with the rest of you. The difference is, I'm just a little older. And I've already had my share of poison ivy rashes.'

Gwen gazed around at the top of the building, at the grasses and the weeds that occupied the spaces between the ventilation ducts and antennae, swaying gently in the evening breeze. 'Life survives, doesn't it?' she said, apropos of nothing. 'Finding little nooks and crannies to grow in. Putting down roots where it can, eking out some kind of existence in the cracks.'

'And that's what we do.' The wind caught his coat, billowing it out behind him, but he seemed oblivious to the

possibility of being blown off the building. 'In Torchwood. We look for the things that have been blown in on the breeze between the worlds, and if necessary we eradicate them.'

Caught by a sudden premonition, Gwen looked at her watch. 'Jesus! I've got a dinner appointment.' She'd arranged to meet Rhys in a restaurant nearby - an apology of sorts for the amount of time she seemed to be spending away from him at the moment. Time she was spending with Jack. She turned to leave, then turned back, curiously unwilling to leave. 'Are you coming down at all tonight, or are you going to stay here until dawn?' she asked.

'I'll see how the mood takes me. How about you? Want to give dinner a miss and come join me on the edge?'

'Thanks, but no. Gotta go.'

'Just out of interest, why did you come up here in the first place?'

'Oh...' She racked her brain. It all seemed so long ago - the echoing space of the Hub, the conversation with Toshiko, the ride to the top of the building where she knew that Jack tended to hang out when he wasn't with them - and now the memory was strangely obscured by the image of a muscular body and a huge coat wrapping itself around the wind and billowing like a leather sail. 'Yeah... Tosh asked me to let you know something. She's picked up little bursts of electromagnetic energy somewhere in the centre of Cardiff. It's not one of the standard frequencies. She's keeping an eye on it.'

'OK.' He paused. 'Keep your mobile handy. Just in case.'

A sudden flush of anger at Jack's casual assumption that she would come running when he called brought a bloom of heat to her cheeks and forehead. 'What - just in case I actually manage to get a few hours to myself? Just in case I actually get a life?'

‘You can walk away any time you want, Gwen,’ Jack chided, a dark voice speaking to her out of darkness. ‘I don’t own you. Go back to the police, if that’s what you want. But you know what will happen. You’ll be on the outside again. You’ll see us walking past you, pushing through the barriers, taking control of your crime scenes and stripping them of whatever we want, and you won’t be part of it any more. Can you stand that? Having taken that peek over the garden wall into the wilderness, can you really pretend that it doesn’t exist and that the garden – the nicely ordered garden – is all there is?’

‘Go to hell,’ she said bleakly. ‘You know I can’t.’

‘Go to your restaurant. Make small talk with your friends. Fashion, politics, house prices, sport... It really doesn’t mean anything. Not when it’s compared with the stuff that’s drifting in through the Rift. *This* is real life. Down there – it’s just fantasy.’

She turned away and pushed open the door that led down through the interior of the building. Twenty minutes to get to the restaurant, and she still had to get back to the Hub and retrieve her handbag and her high heels. Just for once, couldn’t they each get the chance to take one thing from the shelves and the storerooms in the Hub – one thing that would make their lives easier? A teleporter. That was all she wanted. Something to get her from A to B without having to go to all the tedious trouble of crossing the intervening ground.

The wind suddenly gusted around her, pushing her roughly against the doorframe. She thought she heard a flutter behind her, like cloth being blown away. She turned back, but the sky was completely black now, and if Jack was there then she couldn’t see him.

Owen was daydreaming, sitting at his bench in the darkened underground space of the Hub and letting his

mind drift away into the higher levels of the empty atrium, up where the brickwork wasn't quite so damp and the blanked-off ends of Victorian sewer pipes projected from the wall.

Sometimes, in the quieter moments - the moments between frantic chases around Cardiff in search of some piece of alien technology and long periods spent at his bench or in his lab dissecting out the form and function of the biological things they found - Owen daydreamed about writing up some of his stranger investigations in a magazine of some sort. The magazine didn't exist, of course. There was no *Journal of Comparative Alien Anatomy*, nor even an *Extra-Terrestrial Biology Quarterly*. There was no convention he could go to where he could present his results. There was nowhere for him to get any recognition for the things he had discovered. Or even to record them for posterity before he started forgetting, went mad, or died, unremarked.

It made him feel angry and frustrated, sometimes, the amount of stuff that he knew but could never tell anyone. And who else was there to tell? Torchwood Cardiff: five people, rushing around trying to solve all the problems they could, with barely enough time left over to get on with their own personal lives, let alone sit down over a cup of coffee and chat about chlorine-based enzyme chemistry and anomalies in osmotic transfer rates.

And only one of them had any medical training.

It was a waste. A real waste. Owen had discovered so much during his time working in the Hub. Things nobody else on Earth knew. The bizarre secrets of Weevil sex, for instance, which had almost made him throw up the first time he learned about them but went a long way towards explaining the expressions on the faces of the creatures. The various senses that creatures could have in place of sight and hearing, including things like biological radar

that Owen would have thought impossible unless he'd actually experienced them. The way that vast diaphanous creatures could slip through rock with the same ease that whales slipped through water. The existence of single beings that took the form of flocks of bird-like creatures, with each little part being an irreplaceable part of the whole.

There were times he felt he knew so much about alien biology that he would burst, and yet he was just scratching the surface.

And that was just with the equipment he had: cutting edge, of course, but cutting edge for Earth. There were alien things on the shelf in Torchwood that would allow him to watch biochemical reactions on the cellular level like he was watching a movie, or to guide minute robotic scalpels along arteries by the power of thought alone. And they would stay on the shelves. Nobody was allowed to touch them. The risk was too great.

After all, they all remembered Suzie, and what had happened to her when she discovered that she could temporarily raise the recently deceased.

Thoughts of Suzie led Owen on to thinking about the other members of the team. Owen probably spent more time in their company than anyone else in his life, but he still felt as if he knew virtually nothing about them. What about Captain Jack Harkness, for instance: the enigmatic leader of the team? From things he said, and more things he left unsaid, Owen sometimes suspected that Jack was as alien as some of the things that drifted through the Rift, and yet there were other times when he seemed more grounded, more part of the moment than anyone else he knew. And Toshiko, the technical expert who could strip a device she'd never seen before down to wires and bits of metal, then put it back together again just the way it had

been, but who didn't know the first thing about how people worked. And Gwen. Beautiful Gwen...

The sound of the main door bursting open broke his concentration. Gwen rushed in, unbuttoning her blouse. For a moment, Owen was stunned. It was as if his dreams were coming to life.

'Gwen... er... this is... Look, I thought...'

She glared over at him. 'Down, Rover. I'm running late, and I need to get changed to go out. I left my glad rags here earlier.' She dashed across towards one of the side rooms. 'I completely lost track of time.' She vanished out of the Hub, but he could still hear her voice. 'Bloody Jack. I just went up to deliver a message from Tosh, but he kept me talking. Where is Tosh, by the way?'

'She's out trying to triangulate some signal she discovered.'

'Great.' She appeared again in the Hub, buttoning up a jacket over a silk blouse. She looked taller, and there was a *tock-tock* as she walked that suggested she'd exchanged her trainers for a pair of heels.

'So what are you all dressed up for then?' smirked Owen.

She glanced over at him. 'You know the Indian Summer?'

'Up on Dolphin Quay?'

'That's the one.'

"Contemporary Indian cuisine with a special touch, derived from the intimate geographical knowledge of our chefs". That one?'

'That one. I'm meeting... some people there tonight. I'll take the scenic route, I think. It'll save me a twenty-minute walk. In high heels.'

Without any hesitation, Owen said, 'Hold on, I'll come with you.'

'To the Indian Summer? Dream on!'

'No - out the scenic route.' He looked at his watch. 'It's time for me to go, anyway.' Getting up from his bench, he crossed to an area of flagstones in the centre of the underground space, picking up the remote control from a nearby bench as he went.

After a few moments, Gwen joined him. They had to stand close together to fit onto the flagstone, and Owen couldn't help noticing that Gwen was holding her body tense, ensuring that nothing touched him, no folds of cloth and no bare skin. Fair enough - if that's the way she wanted to play it. He pressed a button on the remote and suddenly the Hub was falling away from them as the flagstone rose noiselessly into the air. Within seconds they were high enough above the ground that a fall would have seriously injured them, but a faint pressure pushed them towards each other. A faint pressure that Gwen was obviously resisting.

A faint breeze stirred Owen's hair. He glanced up, to where a square of darkness was approaching them, set in between the lights of the ceiling. The dark square grew larger, and then they were plunging into it: a slab-sided tunnel which took them upwards, the stone passing fast enough to rasp the skin from their fingers if they touched it.

And then they were somewhere else. They were standing together in the Basin, shadowed by the massive sheet-metal waterfall that stood in the centre, sprayed by the wind-borne water that curved away from it. The sky was dark and starred, with wisps of cloud floating on the breeze. Owen could smell baking bread, roasting food and, strangely, candy floss. Crowds parted around them like a

shoal of fish moving to avoid an unfamiliar presence in their ocean, not looking at them, not even aware that they had appeared from the depths of the earth.

‘Jack told me that something had happened here, once,’ Gwen said softly. ‘Something was here that had the power to make people ignore it. The thing left, but some echo of the power stayed. That’s why nobody can see us until we step away.’

‘Whatever it was,’ Owen said, ‘he’s obsessed by it. It’s scarred him.’

‘Thanks for the lift,’ Gwen said. ‘You can find your own way back, can’t you?’ For a second he could smell her skin, her perfume, her soap, and then she was gone, running off across the square.

‘Actually,’ he said, ‘I think I need a drink.’

The Indian Summer was half-full, and Gwen spent a few moments standing in the doorway and scanning the interior before she spotted Rhys.

The restaurant walls were painted white, the artwork hanging on the walls was big and abstract, the furniture stark black, and the entire effect about as far away from the standard ‘flock wallpaper and sitar music’ stereotype of Indian restaurants as it was possible to get. And that was before one even saw the menu. The Indian Summer had opened less than a year before, and it had soon established itself at the forefront of Cardiff restaurants. Gwen and Rhys had been there enough times for the waiters to start to recognise them. Or, at least, they were polite enough to pretend to recognise them, which was a start.

Rhys was sitting at a table near the bar, and Gwen had to look twice before she was sure it was him. For a start he was with another woman, which she hadn’t been expecting,

but there was more than that. Rhys just didn't look like Rhys.

Once or twice, when she had first joined the police, Gwen had been patrolling through one of the shopping arcades in Cardiff when she had caught sight of her own reflection in a shop front. For a few moments she had found herself wondering who that rather severe person in uniform was before she realised with a sudden shock that it was her, hair drawn back in a bun and striding along the line of shops in her clunky shoes. She had the same reaction now, watching Rhys without him being aware that she was there. When was the last time he had shaved? When had his face got that chubby? And when had he started wearing his shirt untucked from his jeans in an attempt to disguise his growing beer belly?

It was bizarre that Gwen could find herself standing there, surprised at the appearance of a man she spent every night sleeping with, but how often did one look - really *look* - at one's friends or partners? She and Rhys had been together so long that they had slipped into a comfortable routine. Part of that routine, she now realised, was that they were taking each other for granted. Not even looking any more. And that was horrible - really horrible.

Waving away the waiters, she weaved through the tables, and by the time she had got to where they were sitting Rhys was Rhys again and Gwen was wondering where that sudden disconnection had come from.

And yet, part of her was asking herself what Rhys saw when he looked at her, and whether she had changed as much as, for that long moment, she had realised he had.

Rhys stood up as she arrived, grabbed her round the waist and kissed her. 'Hi, kid. I was beginning to wonder if you were going to make it tonight.'

'I promised I'd be here,' Gwen said, and turned to where Rhys's companion was determinedly avoiding watching them as they hugged. 'Hello,' she said, extending a hand, 'I'm Gwen.'

The girl was younger than Gwen by a few years: black-haired and slim. Very slim. She smiled at Gwen. 'Hi,' she said, taking Gwen's hand. 'Nice to meet you.'

'This is Lucy,' Rhys said. 'We work together. I hope you don't mind, but we bumped into each other outside. She's going through a bit of a rough time, and I thought she needed cheering up. Is that OK?' His voice contained a hint of a plea, and there was something in his eyes that made her wonder what he thought her reaction was going to be.

'That's fine,' Gwen said, aware that this wasn't the time to point out that she had been hoping for a quiet evening out, just the two of them. Time to talk, and share experiences, and shore up their rather fragile relationship. 'Have you ordered?' she added, seeing a plate of poppadoms on the table and a set of dishes containing lime pickle, raita and chopped onions.

'We thought we'd wait for you,' Rhys said as they both sat down. 'We just ordered some stuff to keep us going.'

Gwen picked up the menu and quickly scanned the familiar dishes. 'I'll have the Karachi chicken, lemon pilau rice and a sag paneer,' she told Rhys. 'And a bottle of Cobra.'

As Rhys turned to pass the order on to the hovering waiter – including, she noticed, ordering food for Lucy without having to ask what the girl wanted – she turned and said, 'So how long have you and Rhys worked together?'

'About six months. I moved here from Bristol. Rhys looked after me when I arrived: showed me how the job worked and where everything was kept. He was very

patient.' She smiled. 'Rhys tells me you're something special in the police.'

'Rhys talks too much.' She smiled to take the sting out of the retort. 'I'm on plain-clothes duties now, but I used to be in uniform. That was when we met.'

'How's your day been?' Rhys asked as the waiter walked away.

'Not too bad. Pretty quiet, in fact.'

'You see,' he said, turning to Lucy: 'I can spend hours telling her about the intricacies of logistics and routing, and all I get back for my trouble is "Not too bad. Pretty quiet".'

While they waited for the food to arrive, the conversation flickered back and forth around subjects they could all contribute to: work, holidays, nightlife in Cardiff... nothing that would have excluded one of them, which meant that Gwen never got a chance to talk to Rhys about their own lives, how they felt about each other, where they were going and what was happening to them. All very superficial.

At one point, Lucy said, rather shyly, 'You probably don't remember, Gwen, but we have met before.'

'We have?'

'At a party.'

Gwen thought back. She and Rhys had always socialised with his workmates quite a bit, but that had all died away recently without her really noticing. She remembered all the parties, but she didn't remember Lucy.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I was probably drunk at the time.'

'It was over in Ely. There was a barbecue, and some of the guys were busking in the garden.' She looked over at Rhys, and Gwen was disturbed to see something in her eyes, something warm and melting. 'Rhys borrowed

someone's bass guitar, and they all played some Kaiser Chiefs stuff. He was very good.'

And then Gwen remembered. It had been a hot Saturday afternoon, and she had been wearing a long cotton dress and a straw hat, just to keep cool. Rhys had been wearing black jeans and a green T-shirt. She hadn't even realised he played bass until he picked up one belonging to the man who was throwing the party, plugged it into an amp and just started playing along with the other guys. The next-door neighbours had banged on the door to complain, but had ended up staying and getting drunk in the kitchen. It had been a magical evening.

And yes, she did remember Lucy, but not the way she was now. The hair had been the same, but she had been about three dress sizes larger. A size sixteen, at least.

'But you were—' she blurted, and caught herself.

'I was a bit bigger then,' Lucy said, blushing and looking down at the tablecloth. 'I've lost quite a lot of weight recently.'

Two waiters turned up with a trolley of food, and there was silence for a moment as they deftly crammed the metal plates of food into every spare inch of space on the table. Gwen looked across and noticed, with a little twinge of some unidentifiable emotion, that Rhys had ordered a lamb dish that was heavy with cream. And he'd replaced his empty bottle of Cobra with a full one while she hadn't been looking.

'I'm sorry,' Gwen said when the waiters had retreated, 'I didn't mean to—'

'That's all right,' Lucy said. 'I'm a lot happier now. Rhys remembers what I was like before. Don't you, Rhys?'

His gaze flickered from Lucy to Gwen and back, reflecting his dim awareness that he'd blundered into a

conversational minefield. 'Um... any more drinks?' he asked.

'So,' Gwen continued, 'how did you, er...'

'I went to a clinic,' Lucy explained. 'I was desperate, and I saw an advert. Actually, I think it was a flyer at a club, or something. So I went along, and they gave me a consultation, and some herbal pills. And they worked - they really worked! The weight just melted away from me!'

Gwen winced, not liking the sudden image conjured up by Lucy's words. She glanced sideways, looking to meet Rhys' eyes and share a silent moment with him, but he was looking directly at Lucy's face. And he was smiling.

And that was, of course, the perfect moment for Gwen's mobile to bleep, alerting her to an incoming text message.

She knew what it was before she even opened up the mobile to look at the screen.

Torchwood, it said. *Alien presence at nightclub. Deaths occurred.*

Gwen looked up from the screen, with its bitter message, an apology on her lips, but neither Rhys nor Lucy had even noticed the disturbance. She could probably have left the restaurant there and then without them even knowing.

So she did.

TWO

‘Turn right here!’ Toshiko called out, trying to make herself heard above the roar of the engine.

The Torchwood SUV swung round a corner, almost spilling her from her seat. She grabbed hold of a strut with one hand whilst the other used a trackball to keep crosshairs centred on a map on the computer screen in front of her.

Jack was driving. That was always a bad thing as far as Toshiko was concerned. Especially when she was navigating. He seemed to assume that when she said ‘right’ or ‘left’ then that abrogated any responsibility he had to check for other traffic, pedestrians, buildings or, in one instance a few minutes ago, the existence of a roundabout which he then went the wrong way around.

‘Any sign of that alien tech?’ Jack yelled from the driver’s seat.

‘Nothing,’ she called back. ‘I’ve not seen any signals since the one half an hour ago.’ She glanced sideways, towards the front of the SUV, but the sight of tall buildings whipping past against a black sky made her feel sick, so she concentrated on her display.

‘That’s the one you triangulated to the nightclub?’

‘To the block in which the nightclub is located,’ she corrected. Toshiko glanced back at the map display. ‘Left!’

The SUV veered again, and somewhere behind them Toshiko heard a squeal of brakes, a blaring horn and a sudden *crump* as two heavy metal objects came into an unexpectedly close proximity.

‘Have you ever thought about getting hold of a Torchwood helicopter?’ Owen called out. ‘We could probably get there faster, and cause fewer accidents on the way. Two benefits for the price of one.’

‘If I had a helicopter,’ Jack yelled back, ‘then I couldn’t do *this*!’ He threw the SUV into a screeching two-wheel skid around a corner. Falling sideways, Toshiko caught a glimpse of a red traffic light turning the windscreen the colour of blood, then they were past and straightening up again.

‘Where’s Gwen?’ she asked, more to distract Jack from his stunt driving than anything else.

‘She’s gone out to dinner,’ Owen and Jack answered in harmony.

‘I texted her,’ Jack added. ‘She’s meeting us there.’

‘She went to the Indian Summer,’ said Owen, just to prove that he knew something Jack didn’t. ‘I think she was meeting Rhys.’

‘And even if we did have a Torchwood helicopter,’ Jack continued, ‘where would we land it? SUVs are easier to park.’

‘Last time we went out in this vehicle,’ Toshiko said quietly, ‘you parked it in the foyer of an office block. The time before that, you parked it in the middle of the Taff Bridge. I can’t help feeling that finding suitable parking spaces is not high on your list of priorities.’ Catching a glimpse of a flashing red set of arrows on the map display, she called out: ‘Stop anywhere along here.’

The vehicle slowed and then slewed sideways into what Toshiko fervently hoped was a parking space, as opposed to someone's front garden. Owen broke the sudden silence by saying, 'Wait for a moment while my stomach catches up with us. And wait... and wait... and yes! We're back together again. Thanks for holding on.'

Jack jumped out, while Owen pulled open the SUV's side door and gestured for Toshiko to go first.

The SUV was parked across the mouth of an alleyway off St Mary Street. They were obviously in the middle of a crime scene: the nearby shop fronts reflected the flashing lights of police cars between each other in a crazy neon chiaroscuro. Uniformed officers were standing around, staring at the Torchwood team with barely disguised hostility. It was something Toshiko was used to. Nobody liked to be outranked, especially when they didn't understand what was going on.

The street ahead of them was closed off with red and yellow striped incident tape. Turning, Toshiko could see that the street behind them was closed off as well; at least, it had been until the Torchwood vehicle had driven straight through. Now the tape just lay limply on the ground. None of the police officers standing around made any attempt to pick it up again.

Owen slid the door shut behind him, and Jack led the way down the alley to what appeared to be the entrance to a nightclub, to judge by the sign suspended from the brickwork above the door. Policemen around the doorway moved away as they approached.

'Bloody Torchwood,' one muttered as they passed. 'Who do they think they are?'

Jack sighed. 'They'd better not clamp it while we're gone.'

The nightclub was empty of living people, although Toshiko could smell their presence in the humidity of the atmosphere: sweat, stale tobacco, cheap aftershave and cheaper perfume. The overhead lights had been turned on, and their glare transformed what had probably been something high-tech and impressive in the near-darkness into something that Toshiko felt was rather tawdry. Not her kind of place. She wasn't really sure what her kind of place was, but this wasn't it.

A long bar took up most of one wall, stocked with hundreds of upside down bottles of spirits, beer taps and drink dispensing hoses left limp across the bar. The surface of the bar was translucent acrylic, and it was lit from beneath. When the overhead lights were turned off, it would form the major source of illumination in the club, but now it just served to highlight how much the walls needed a new coat of paint.

The central area was reserved as a dance floor. It was scuffed by too many pairs of feet, and stained by years of spilt drinks, but none of that would have been evident with the lights off. Scaffolding hung from the ceiling, and spotlights hung from the scaffolding, fitted with motors so they could rotate and pan around, randomly picking dancers out of the crowd. Elsewhere, tiny video cameras could follow the spotlights, transmitting their images to flat-screen monitors that were located around the walls.

Tables were scattered around various platforms on different levels separated from one another by chrome rails and steps.

'Nice place,' Jack commented as he strode in. 'I wonder who did the decor for them. I might just have them redo the Hub in the same style.'

'What, with a bar?' Owen asked.

‘Or maybe I’ll just get Laurence Llewellyn Bowen to come in and put swags of velvet and stencilled oak leaves everywhere,’ Jack continued. ‘Just for a change.’

‘Swags?’ came a voice from the doorway.

“Swag” – an ornamental drapery or curtain that hangs in a curve between two points. There’s a proper word for everything, you know, and a lot of them are falling into disuse. I’m thinking of making it a Torchwood rule that every conversation has to include at least one word that nobody else knows. Thanks for turning up, by the way. How was dinner?’

Gwen walked into the club. ‘What little I had of it was great. Hi Owen. Hi Tosh.’

Owen nodded once, then glanced away. Toshiko gave her a friendly smile.

‘What have we got?’ Gwen asked.

Jack walked over to the bar and pulled himself smoothly up until he was standing on it, looking down on the team. ‘A quick recap. Tosh has been tracking an intermittent energy surge of a frequency and modulation that doesn’t match anything in use on Earth at this point in time. She triangulated it to this area of Cardiff where some suspicious deaths had just occurred. The two seem linked, so I’ve thrown the local coppers out, allowing us to take a look around. I can’t imagine that aliens living in Cardiff would choose to come *here* for a night out – there are clubs nearby that cater far better to the discriminating traveller – so I suspect that someone here was human and was dabbling with something they shouldn’t have been in possession of. Swag, in fact, which is a word also used to mean “stolen goods”.’

‘Where are the bodies?’ Owen asked.

Jack looked around. ‘There’s a couple of overturned tables over there,’ he said, pointing. ‘The smart money says