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# Torchwood: Trace Memory

David Llewellyn

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# Torchwood Trace Memory

David Llewellyn



*November 1953*

It was a foggy night in Tiger Bay. The moon, jaundiced by the fumes of industry, reflected like a shimmering penny in the black sea of the channel, while the fog-smothered silhouettes of warehouses stood out like tombstones against the night sky.

It was a cold night, too, and the four of them shuffled from foot to foot and clapped their gloved hands together in an effort to keep warm. All of them - Frank, Wilf, Hassan and Michael - were thinking of hot baths and warm beds, and a few hours' sleep before they'd be back at the dock and waiting for another ship to come in. They shouldn't have been there at this hour, a little after midnight, but orders were orders, and besides, the boss had promised them extra pay for their efforts.

Even so, Frank, a burly man with a face full of burst capillaries and a tattoo of a naked woman on his right arm, had been complaining about it for much of the night. What was the point of a ship coming in to dock for one measly little crate? What was so bloody important about this crate in the first place?

Wilf was a little more complacent about being there. His wife was a dragon, and everyone knew it. No wonder he seemed more than happy to be standing on the edge of the dock at this ungodly hour, smoking Woodbines and talking about the football.

Hassan didn't say much, but then he never did. His English was still a long way from perfect, and when he swore it was usually in his native Somali. At twenty-six, he was closest in age to Michael, but tall and broad across the shoulders; quiet but handsome, with dark inscrutable eyes and a smile which, though it only made very rare appearances, lit up his face.

Michael was twenty-four, the youngest of the group. He was still referred to, by the others, as 'the lad' or 'the boy', being baby-faced and awkward; curly black hair and blue

eyes, and a faraway dreamy look, as if his mind were often elsewhere. Though they had worked together the best part of eight years, he was still the target of their occasional jokes, both verbal and practical. His first few weeks in the docks had been full of pointless errands, like the time they'd sent him away to buy tartan paint, or the time they'd told him to pick up an order of sky hooks. Tonight the focus of their ridicule was Michael's date with Maggie Jenkins.

It was a date he hadn't even wanted to go on in the first place, having been coerced into it by his friends and workmates. He'd taken her to the Capitol Cinema on Queen Street to watch a double bill of *Destination Moon* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. After the films, they had gone for a milkshake at Mario's on Caroline Street, where Michael had tried to do an impersonation of Richard Burton after Maggie told him how much she loved the actor's voice. Sadly it hadn't worked. She'd laughed and told him he sounded more like Paul Robeson with a cold.

'Didn't even get your hand in her blouse?' asked Frank, lighting up another fag and chuckling. The others laughed, even Hassan, who seemed to have an innate understanding of dirty jokes, if little else.

Michael blushed and shook his head. He didn't like it when Hassan laughed at him, but he was used to it by now.

'Look out, lads. Here she comes,' said Wilf, pointing out at the sea. There, coming through the shallow fog, was the grey hulk of the *Facklaträfat*, a Swedish cargo ship. It was only a small vessel, by the standard of some of the ships out there, but still, to Michael and the others, it seemed awfully big for just one crate.

Only a few hundred metres away, two men stood in front of the red-brick, gothic façade of the Pierhead Building, watching the progress of the *Facklaträfat* as it came in closer to the dock's edge. In physical appearance, they could hardly have been more different. The younger of the

two, Valentine, was tall, gangling almost, with his hair Brylcreemed back above a high forehead. A deep scar made a canyon of the left side of his face, starting in one corner of his mouth and travelling all the way up to the top of his ear. The older man, Cromwell, was short and stout, dressed in a trench coat and trilby. At a passing glance, he resembled the actor Orson Welles, all owl-like intensity and beady eyes.

'I still don't see why they couldn't wait for Nelson-Stanley to bring it back to London,' said Valentine, sniffing and rubbing his nose with the back of his hand.

Cromwell breathed heavily and looked up at his companion.

'Nelson-Stanley is in the Arctic for another three months. We couldn't leave it there that long. Not that close to the Russian territories. If the word from London is to be believed, those bloody Reds were already looking for it, although how they knew about it is anyone's guess. That bastard Philby, most likely, or one of his lot. Careless talk and all the rest of it.'

'Right you are, Mr Cromwell. Right you are.' Another sniff, another wipe of his nose. 'So how big is it?'

'How big?' said Cromwell, chuckling to himself. 'About the size of a football, so I'm told.'

'A football?' asked Valentine. 'A ship like that for something the size of a football?'

'Absolutely, Mr Valentine, absolutely. You know what they say. It's not the size that counts . . .'

Valentine smiled, but only on the right side of his face.

The crate was now only twenty feet off the edge of the dock, being lowered on a thick hemp rope. On the deck of the *Facklaträfat*, one of the crew hollered to the crane operator, 'Sakta! Sakta!'

'Can you hear something?' said Frank.

'Yeah,' said Wilf. 'Someone talking in Swedish.'

Frank tutted. 'No, not that, you bloody idiot, something in the crate.'

Wilf cocked one ear towards the crate and frowned. 'No, Frank, I can't.'

'Listen. Listen a minute. Can you hear it?'

Michael followed Wilf's example and tilted his head so that one ear was aimed towards the crate. Frank was right. He *could* hear something. A strange, throbbing sound; familiar and yet at the same time unlike anything he had heard before.

'Yeah,' said Michael. 'I can hear it.'

'Me too,' said Hassan.

The crate was lower now, low enough for Hassan, who was taller than the others, to be able to touch it if he stood on his toes.

'Shaking,' he said. 'Like inside, there is something shaking.'

'Look, mate,' Frank called up to the man on the deck. 'What's inside this thing? What's that noise?'

'Jog förstår inte,' the man replied, shrugging.

'Bloody marvellous,' said Frank. 'They all speak double Dutch. Fat lot of use that is to us.'

'It's getting louder,' said Michael.

The crate lowered further, so that it was now only a few feet from the ground.

'I still can't hear anything,' said Wilf.

'No, well you wouldn't,' said Frank. 'You're bloody deaf from your wife nagging you all the time.'

The others laughed, and that was when the crate exploded with a blinding flash of light, and a force great enough to rock the ship towards its starboard.

Michael was blasted across the edge of the dock, one side of the crate hitting him face-on and carrying him ten metres until he fell to the ground with a heavy thump. A plume of intense heat erupted from the other side of the crate, sending a shard of wood through Frank's throat and a heavy



iron nail into Wilf's chest. Hassan was blown from the dock into the side of the ship. He was unconscious when he landed, face down, in the water.

As fragments of burning wood and sawdust scorched into cinders rained down around the dock, another object came clattering down onto the cobbles: a metal sphere, no bigger than a football, and ruptured on one side. Had anyone been conscious to see it, they would have noticed a dull glow the colour of burning sulphur, and heard the sound of that throbbing as it grew quieter and quieter. The glow too died out, leaving just an empty metal shell.

It was mere moments before Cromwell and Valentine arrived on the scene. Cromwell was out of breath from running, but Valentine had barely broken a sweat. All about them were the bodies and the burning remains of the crate. On the deck of the ship, the Swedish crew were swearing and cursing, but neither man could understand them.

'A bomb?' suggested Valentine. 'The Russians?'

'I don't know,' said Cromwell, 'but we need to clear this up, and we need to speak to the crew of that ship.'

He stalked across the dock, toward the dull metal sphere that lay among the debris.

'They're dead,' he said, looking down at two of the bloodied corpses. 'Fewer witnesses.'

'Not all of them,' said Valentine.

Cromwell turned and saw Valentine lifting a heavy panel from on top of one of the bodies.

'This one's alive.'

Valentine hauled the panel clear of the unconscious young man and dropped it clattering to the ground. There was one word stencilled on its charred surface.

*Torchwood.*

# ONE

SUNDAYS WERE NEVER Sundays at Torchwood, or at least not most of the time. Jack couldn't remember the last time he'd had a Sunday which felt how Sundays were supposed to feel. Wasn't Sunday the day when normal people ate slap-up breakfasts, took the dog for a walk and then spent the rest of the afternoon reading the papers?

But then, Captain Jack Harkness wasn't 'normal people' and, at Torchwood, Sundays were more likely to be spent doing work which the people of Cardiff, and indeed most of the six billion people on the planet, knew nothing about.

This Sunday was different. On this particular Sunday, Jack had even had a chance to clean the SUV. This was normally a task he'd delegate to Ianto, or anyone except himself but, if today was going to be one of the few boring Sundays he'd ever get to experience, he was going to spend it doing all the things normal people did.

The Rift was quiet. He'd had Toshiko spend much of the morning and afternoon checking all the equipment, making sure there wasn't a fault. As it turned out, there wasn't. Everything was working, the readings were accurate. The Rift, it seemed, was taking a day off. Having checked and double-checked everything, and satisfied herself that Rift activity was at a minimum, Toshiko was now looking into what she described as a 'low-resonance electromagnetic pulse' coming from the basement.

'Anything for me to worry about?' Jack asked, as he walked aimlessly past her workstation in the centre of the Hub.

'No, Jack. Probably nothing. I've picked it up once or twice before. I'm just trying to work out which one of our extraterrestrial *toys* it's coming from.'

Though her endless fascination with the occasionally dull minutiae of her job was sometimes baffling to Jack, he found it curiously reassuring, and so he left her to her work.

What he couldn't understand was why Gwen was still here. It was now a little after eight on a Sunday evening, nothing was happening, and yet she was still here, searching through files on her computer with the listless look of a teenager browsing through YouTube in the early hours of the morning.

'Now come on, Gwen,' said Jack, placing one hand on her shoulder, and putting on his best 'concerned parent' voice. 'The rest of us have excuses. We don't have lives. You do. What are you doing here?'

Gwen looked up at him with a scowl and a sigh that he wasn't quite expecting.

'Rhys,' she said. 'I . . . I just . . .'

'Arguing?'

'Yes.'

'Let me guess . . . About work?'

'No, actually.'

She huffed again and returned her gaze to the dull glow of her monitor.

'So what was it about?'

'Sofas.'

Jack took his hand off her shoulder and laughed through his nose, before realising that Gwen didn't find it funny.

'Sofas?' he said, trying hard to sound serious.

'Yes. Sofas. We went shopping yesterday afternoon to look for a sofa. I wanted this red one, he wanted this cream white leather thing that . . . God, it was just so tacky . . . Anyway . . .' She sighed. 'Sofas.'

'So there's a part of the world that still argues about sofas?' said Jack, still maintaining a veneer of sincerity. 'In a

city which is home to one of the most active rifts in time and space this side of the Milky Way, you still argue about sofas?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean, Jack?’

‘I mean . . . It’s a sofa. Why don’t you go home to Rhys, and . . . I don’t know . . . get a takeaway and . . . do couply stuff. Aren’t you meant to be enjoying love’s young dream, what with that ring on your finger and all?’

‘Jack, I’m working . . .’

‘Gwen, there’s no work to do. I’ve just cleaned the SUV, I’ve tidied most of our hard drives, I even changed a bulb in my office earlier.’

‘You cleaned the SUV?’

‘Yes.’

Gwen laughed, putting one hand over her mouth.

‘*You* . . . cleaned the SUV?’

‘Yes. Is that so hard to believe?’

‘I’m just imagining you like Jessica Simpson in that video . . .’

‘Well, why don’t you take your mental image, and *go*. Go on. That’s an order. And where’s Owen?’

‘Down in the Vaults.’

‘Tell him he can go too. It’s the quietest night we’ve had in a year and you’re all still here. You’re insane. All of you.’

Gwen sighed and quickly shut down each application on her computer. She picked up her coat and, waving goodbye to Toshiko from across the Hub, made her way down to the Vaults.

Of all the parts of Torchwood, it was the Vaults that Gwen liked the least. She knew from past experience that it was possible for a place to physically soak up strong emotions. Somewhere in his safe, Jack had a machine capable of reading these things, but even without that device Gwen believed it was possible to sense the bad feelings left behind. When she was fifteen, she had gone on a history trip with her school to Germany where they had visited one

of the old concentration camps. The atmosphere had been chilling; no sound of birdsong, no sound of anything, in fact, except their footsteps. It had seemed colder, too, the minute they had passed through the gates.

Though the scale and context were quite different the Vaults in Torchwood reminded her of that feeling; the sudden plunge of temperature, and a strange melancholy which she couldn't quite place. It was as if she felt sad for all the people and creatures who had ended up in those cells; scared, and angry, lost and alone.

It made it all the more mysterious that Owen should want to spend the whole afternoon and evening down there, sat on a stool, peering through the glass of one of the cells at Janet.

Janet was a Weevil; that is, an occasionally carnivorous life form that had slipped through the Rift and into Cardiff's sewers. Occasionally, one or more of the Weevils would come up to the surface, and sometimes they developed a taste for something other than the effluent diet on which they usually survived.

'Hey, Owen,' said Gwen as she stepped down into the dark and narrow corridor that ran alongside the cells. 'What you up to?'

'I'm writing a musical about my experiences with Torchwood,' said Owen. 'I'm gonna call it "Weevil Rock You".'

'Oh, Owen, that's not funny,' said Gwen, laughing. 'What are you really up to?'

'I'm keeping an eye on Janet,' he said. 'Something's wrong with her.'

'Her?'

'Her. It. Whatever.'

'So what's wrong?'

Gwen looked into the cell. Janet was stood in the corner, shoulders hunched, facing the wall. Every so often, it would make a low, gurgling sound, and paw at the damp brick wall with one hand.

'That,' said Owen. 'She keeps doing that. Every twenty-six minutes. Then she'll sit down, and maybe try and sleep or something, and then bam - twenty-six minutes later, she's back up.'

'Exactly twenty-six minutes?'

'Yeah. For the last four hours.'

Gwen shook her head and sighed.

'Jack's right,' she said. 'We're all insane. It's a Sunday night, and you're here watching the resident Weevil, Tosh is upstairs doing . . . I don't know . . . Tosh things . . .'

'lanto?'

'I don't know. I haven't seen lanto.'

lanto Jones was at his station behind the run-down Tourist Information Centre that served as a front to the clandestine goings-on in Torchwood. His bare feet were on his desk, his tie slumped like a crestfallen snake next to an open pizza box, the top two buttons of his shirt undone.

'Taking it easy, I see?' said Jack, stepping out through the security door that led into the Hub itself. 'Well, at least someone has the right idea. Whatcha doing there, Sport?'

'"Sport"?' said lanto. 'Not sure I like "Sport" as a term of endearment. "Sexy" is good, if unimaginative. "Pumpkin" is a bit much, but "Sport"? No. You'll have to think of another one.'

'OK, Tiger Pants. Whatcha doing?'

lanto laughed.

'I . . .' he said, pausing to swallow a mouthful of pizza, 'am having a James Bondathon.'

'A what?'

'A James Bondathon. I'm watching my favourite James Bond films, in chronological order.'

'You're a Bond fan?'

'Oh yes. He's the archetypal male fantasy, isn't he? The man all women want to have, and all men want to be.'

'Are you sure it's not the other way around?'

Ianto raised an eyebrow and took another bite of his pizza.

'Hey,' said Jack. 'I'm sending everyone home. There's nothing happening here. The Rift is still giving out minimal readings. Gwen's going home, Owen's going home, and I think Tosh is almost done.'

'The place to ourselves?'

'Well . . .' said Jack, grinning.

'So long as it's not going to interrupt my James Bondathon. I've only just started watching *Goldfinger*, and I haven't even reached the bit where Shirley Eaton gets painted gold yet.'

'OK . . . Well, I'll just say goodbye to Owen and Gwen, and tell Tosh to wrap up, and then—'

Jack didn't have a chance to finish his sentence. Even if he had, it was doubtful Ianto could have heard him, as the air was pierced by the shrill sound of the alarm.

'What is it?' Ianto asked, his fingers in his ears. 'Fire?'

'Jack . . .' It was Toshiko, speaking over the comms. 'We've got an intruder.'

Gwen and Owen were leaving Janet and the holding cells when the alarm rang out and they heard Toshiko's voice.

'Owen, Gwen, I need you up here immediately. We have an intruder. Hurry!'

Owen bolted out through the door and Gwen followed. Together, they ran through the dark, dank corridors of Torchwood until they came out into the Hub. Toshiko was standing at her workstation, pale and stunned.

'What is it?' asked Owen. 'Who's here?'

'There's somebody in the basement,' said Toshiko. 'I was monitoring the pulse, and then . . . I checked one of the cameras, and there's a man down there. Where's Jack?'

On cue, Jack entered the Hub with Ianto. Seeing Ianto with bare feet and a dishevelled shirt, Owen turned to Gwen and raised an eyebrow, but it did nothing to calm her nerves.

How could somebody have got into the basement? More importantly, who or *what* was in there?

As Toshiko turned off the alarm, Jack ran across the Hub to her workstation and looked down at the monitor.

'It looks like a man,' he said. 'It looks human, at least. Tosh . . . How the hell did he get in there?'

'I don't know, Jack. I was tracing the pulse, and I narrowed it down to Basement D-4. There was nothing there, and then . . . and then the image turned to static, and when the picture came back he was there. I've scanned the whole room; he's definitely human.'

The image on the screen showed the basement, filmed from an upper corner. In the dim light, Jack could just about see a man, sat on the ground and hugging his knees.

'And the pulse,' said Toshiko. 'It was temporal before, coming and going, but now it's constant. I thought it might be an electromagnetic wave, like radiation, but I'm not sure. It's not like any kind of radiation I've seen before.'

'OK,' said Jack. 'I need to go down there.'

'I'm coming, too,' said Owen.

'No you're not,' said Jack. 'We could have the human equivalent of Chernobyl sitting in our basement if Tosh's readings are correct. I need to go down alone. I need a Geiger counter.'

Toshiko ran to her workstation and opened a drawer, rifling through her collection of screwdrivers, soldering irons, and pliers.

'Here,' she said eventually. 'It's charged.'

Jack took the counter from her and headed out of the Hub. As he ran past, Ianto tried to say something, but couldn't. It was no use; none of them could stop him at a time like this. It was times like this that reminded them exactly whose organisation this was. They might be a team, and a team that had coped without him, but he was still the one in charge.



'I was so bored,' said Gwen. 'I actually thought at one point, "Please let something interesting happen, I'm so bored".' She shook her head, and turned to Owen. 'Remind me never, ever to think that again. I was so much happier when I was bored.'

'Liar,' said Owen.

Jack stepped down towards Basement D-4. It was the first time he'd been there in a very long time. Even in a building this sealed off from the outside world, there was still a lot of dust. Dust, and spiders' webs, and all the evidence, if it were needed, that life finds a way of getting into even the most apparently sterile environments. It unnerved Jack a little to think, if spiders could get in, what else might be able to get out.

Worse still, the Geiger counter was picking up next to nothing. If the electromagnetic waves weren't conventional radiation, that left only one possibility as far as he was concerned, and he didn't want to consider what that meant. As he neared the entrance to D-4, a metre-and-a-half-thick steel door, he brushed those thoughts away as easily as he had the spiders' webs. Someone was on the other side of the door. Someone that didn't belong there. He had to stay focused on that. Someone had got in through a room that hadn't been opened in thirty years or more. Someone was in there, and alive, in a place where the oxygen itself was stale and about as old as his staff.

Jack punched a code into a panel at the side of the door, and waited four seconds before he heard the locks clank open inside. The door opened, and it sounded as if the room itself were breathing in. A gust of cool, fresh air (or as fresh as the air in Torchwood could be) swept in, and that old, dry, dusty air came out. Jack had, in his time, been in far too many crypts and sepulchres, of many different kinds, on many different worlds, and that was exactly what this felt like. It felt dead.

'Hello . . .' said Jack, taking his revolver from its holster and holding it at his side. 'Hello . . . Can you hear me?'

His voice echoed around inside the room, but no reply came.

'OK . . . I'm going to come in now. But I warn you - I'm armed.'

As he stepped into the room, he saw the same figure that he had seen on Toshiko's monitor, a man hunched over on the floor, still holding his knees to his chest.

'Hello?' said Jack.

There was something about the man's clothes that was familiar to him. They didn't belong in Cardiff in 2008, that was for sure. He'd seen clothes like that many years before, the kind of utility clothes that everyone had after the war; drab and grey and lacking in any kind of ostentation.

'Are you OK?' said Jack. 'I'm not going to hurt you.'

He thought he could hear sobbing.

The man on the floor looked up with eyes bloodshot from tears and an expression of absolute terror, and Jack gasped. He dropped his gun to the ground, and fell back against the wall of the vault.

'Michael . . .' he said.

## TWO

'JACK?'

He'd been sitting alone in his office for ten minutes, while Owen and Gwen were taking Michael from Basement D-4 to the Boardroom; ten minutes in which he had done nothing but think, and yet those thoughts were still so clouded. How could he have allowed himself to be blind-sided like this? How could he not have known this was going to happen?

Decades spent knowing the future had, he supposed, left him with a kind of complacency; a resignation to the future and the concept of destiny. There was no point in fighting the future, or destiny, and so very little surprised him these days. Why had this hit him so hard?

'Jack?'

He looked over at the door. Gwen was standing in the entrance to his office, leaning against the doorframe, smiling softly.

'You OK, Jack?'

He shook off his mood, at least on the outside, and smiled back.

'Yeah. I'm fine,' he said. 'I'm just glad our guest doesn't have six arms and a penchant for human flesh.'

Gwen laughed.

'You sure you're OK? I was watching the monitor, when you were down there. You looked like you'd seen a ghost.'

'Yeah.' He paused, and then, with greater certainty, said 'Yeah. I'm fine. How is he?'

'Michael?'

Jack took a deep breath. 'Yeah. Michael.'