The Doctor, Martha, and Jack rewound time during the Master's takeover of Earth, but all those memories from the Year That Wasn't had to go somewhere--and Luke Smith, with all his untapped telepathic/telekinetic potential, ends up making an unfortunately good lightning rod. Especially after a mysterious company snatches him up for experiments like they do with other enhanced humans, although in this case they've bitten off a little more than they can chew, because Luke is different...and his mother will do anything to get him back. Originally written in 2008 for dw_cross on LJ and sporadically (although not substantively) edited a few times between then and last year. It's a crossover with Heroes, but the vast majority of it is in the general Doctor Who universe. Canon through Doctor Who season 4 (so, Torchwood "Exit Wounds" and Sarah Jane Adventures "The Lost Boy" as well), and probably season 2 of Heroes.
I wrote this way back in 2008 for a DW crossover fic exchange, and for various reasons I never got around to re-posting it anywhere, partly because I knew it needed some editing, and then more DW and SJA came out and I would have had to do even more editing to keep it canon, and even when I gave up on that and went "look, I just want this stupid thing presentable so I can post it," I still didn't, for some reason. April Showers 2014 is my excuse, finally.

I actually hated "Last of the Time Lords" at least the first few times I saw it, and I also found the two-part S4 finale disappointing, so then of course I ended up writing a really long fic that depends heavily on "Last of the Time Lords" in particular and makes a lot of "Journey's End" references, because that makes sense. Any errors of science, weaponry, British English, etc. are my own fault, although I did try to do my research. I’m also not the biggest Torchwood fan (I never did watch most of S1 or anything after S2), so my impressions of the Hub’s layout are fuzzy at best and flat wrong at worst. I also originally wrote this before SJA S2 and Heroes S3, so a couple elements of this got canon’d as soon as the new seasons aired, and I had to edit a bit to deal with that…and then there was SJA S3 and the episodes that actually featured Ten, which was awesome but which also, of course, canon’d me again by making it pretty unavoidably obvious that 1) Luke and the Doctor had never met in person before and 2) Luke hadn’t seen the inside of the TARDIS before. So for purposes of this fic and the ridiculous prospect it would be to edit a six-year-old finished story, I’m just ignoring that.

At this point I don't even remember where on the Heroes timeline it was supposed to fall, either in terms of the show’s chronology or the seasons. Heroes wouldn’t even have been involved except the original request asked for SJA/Heroes and something to do with innocence, and this is where I went with it. All I know for sure is that I wrote this before the whole storyline about giving powers to ordinary humans. The Whoniverse timeline is probably all screwed up too--again, all I know for sure is that the bulk of it takes place after "Journey's End"--but see above re. "screw it, I just need to post the damn thing eventually" because seriously, it's been SIX YEARS.
Five days after coming home from Pharos and the Slitheen, Luke figured out for sure that Sarah Jane was tiptoeing around him a little. She stopped buying peppers entirely after he mentioned that Jay and Heidi said he liked them and made no more than a half-hearted attempt to send him back to school for two days after beating the Xylok. Then one afternoon after school she saw him reading with the telly on again, very clearly started to scold him for it, and just as clearly cut herself off before she said a word.

“It’s okay, Mum,” Luke said, reaching for the remote. “You can tell me not to waste electricity.”

She half-smiled. “You noticed that, did you? I just can’t help thinking what happened—well, last time I said that.”

“An alien conspiracy doesn’t make you a bad mother,” he said, surprised. “All that happened because of me, not you.”

“I nearly let Mr. Smith destroy the earth because I was foolish enough to trust an alien crystal I knew nothing about, so—” She shook her head sharply. “No. Let’s neither of us blame ourselves. Introduce yourself to the universe and get the unwelcome attention along with all the wonder.” She frowned at the telly. “Speaking of which—”

Luke had already turned up the volume. New prime minister Harold Saxon beamed at them from the screen. “My purpose here today is to tell you this: citizens of Great Britain, I have been contacted. A message, for humanity, from beyond the stars.” He nodded to someone off-camera, and the screen cut to a shining metal sphere, its tinny, childlike voice speaking of great gifts and wisdom its race would bring to Earth.

“That fool,” Sarah Jane said, staring at the screen in distaste. “UNIT should have shut him down months ago. Have to, now, and it’ll be ten times harder.”

“They’re called the Toclafane,” Saxon told them, “and tomorrow morning they will appear—not in secret, but to all of you. Diplomatic relations with a new species will begin. Tomorrow, we take our place in the universe.”

“Maria said her parents both voted Saxon,” Luke said absently, distracted by a sudden and specific unease he couldn’t identify. “I asked why and she didn’t know.”

“No one does,” Sarah Jane said tartly. “All as foolish as he is. I need to ask Mr. Smith about these Toclafane.” She hurried upstairs. Luke followed her, drumming his fingers on one leg, trying to pin down the source of his disquiet. Saxon had something to do with it, but he had no idea what—

“You’re absolutely certain?” Sarah Jane was saying as Luke ducked into the attic. “Nothing?”

“The name ‘Toclafane’ is not present in my records,” Mr. Smith said, his calm, computerized voice rather less soothing after—well, after. They’d disabled the headset and Mr. Smith was thoroughly reprogrammed, but at times Luke still found himself wishing they didn’t have to rely so much on a sentient computer that had made a very good go at using Luke to destroy the world. The Slitheen pulling the telekinetic energy from his head had been nothing compared to the Xylok using him to haul down the moon. Last night he’d woken up from a dream of dark and abstract colors and the same feeling of claws in his mind so intense it hurt. He’d lain awake for a long time after that, sweaty and shaking, and no logical argument that it was just a nightmare could banish the fear that this would happen again.
“A species that does not appear in my records is unlikely to exist in the present,” Mr. Smith continued. “Visiting alien ships bring records from millions of lightyears away, so my database is roughly equal to any elsewhere in the universe. If these Toclafane are not the products of a human hoax, it is possible they have come out of time from the future.”

“I suppose that’s one bit of good news,” Sarah Jane muttered. “One group of time-traveling aliens rarely appears without another particular time-traveling alien showing up. Can you tell us anything about this Harold Saxon?”

“Searching.” Color swirled onscreen. Luke stepped up to join Sarah Jane, hanging back from Mr. Smith a bit. No harm in being cautious, and he did feel better if he wasn’t alone with the computer.

“Harold Saxon: married to Lucy Cole, no children, recently elected prime minister on platform of bringing needed change to a struggling country. Verifiable records date back 18 months; previous data of childhood, schooling, and family appear to have been forged. There is no certain record of Saxon’s existence prior to 18 months past.”

“So he might have come from the future and brought the Toclafane with him,” Luke said.

“It’s possible.” Sarah Jane sighed. “Pull up any broadcast you find on or by Saxon. Any information you have on him—legitimate information—I want to see it. Particularly whatever UNIT have on him. Torchwood files, too. I want to know everything I can about him. Though I suppose we won’t know much until the next broadcast.”

“He doesn’t have any connections to other names, does he?” Luke asked. “Mr. Saxon could be a constructed persona for another ordinary human.”

“There is no evidence of that being the case,” Mr. Smith told him.

Luke nodded but edged away to put a little more distance between himself and the computer.

“You may want to see this, Sarah Jane,” Mr. Smith said, a television image appearing on his screen. “They are known to be armed and extremely dangerous,” the newscaster was saying; next to her, three pictures showed a young black woman and two men. “The man in the center calls himself the Doctor—no other name is known—and he is believed to be the ringleader of these fugitives.”


“With…Jack Harkness?” She frowned. “I don’t like this at all.” She bent over the giant computer, calling up more information, and eventually Luke went back downstairs to wait for the broadcast.

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Some hours later, Luke sat down to stare at the telly, turning the volume nearly all the way up. Sarah Jane stood beside him, and they watched: onboard the Valiant, a UNIT airship, President Winters made a speech, and then the Toclafane went offscript.

“You’re not the Master,” one said in a tinny child’s voice. Two more chimed in: “We like the Mister Master. We don’t like you.”

“The Master?” Sarah Jane repeated.

“The Doctor’s archenemy and polar opposite,” she said absently, attention on the screen, “in a nutshell—I’ve met him—but that isn’t possible, all the Time Lords died!”

But Saxon stood up and said, “I’m taking control, Uncle Sam, starting with you. Kill him.” A sphere swept toward the president and disintegrated him.

“If that’s the Doctor’s nemesis trying to take over the world, he might’ve just made a good start,” Luke said into a stunned silence.

“And then everything *shifted.*

Luke flung both hands out for balance, felt Sarah Jane grab his shoulder, but nothing was moving, though he could have sworn he felt the Earth shake. The telly exploded with static, an undefinable something washed through his head and was gone, and then the picture resolved again from a different angle to show the Doctor coming down the steps from the *Valiant*’s bridge, Martha Jones behind him. A sudden scuffle: Saxon bolted offscreen, Jack hauled him back, an unfamiliar black woman in a maid’s uniform pointed a gun at Saxon, now handcuffed; the Doctor talked it away from her, but then a dazed-looking woman in red (what could possibly have happened to Lucy Cole in the last several minutes?) scooped up the gun and fired. The picture finally cut to black and a BBC anchorman who clearly didn’t know whether to look puzzled or appropriately grave and concerned.

Luke shut the telly off, head spinning. “Did you feel that?”

“Something. I’m...not sure what.” Sarah Jane shook her head. “What just happened there?”

“Massive spatial-temporal shift,” Luke said. “That’s what it felt like.” He frowned in concentration, fingers tapping the armrest. “It wasn’t like the shift when the Trickster let you go—that was precise and localized. This was generalized, maybe even universal.” He looked up at Sarah Jane. “I think someone rewound time.”

“I don’t know whether the problem’s solved or it’s only just beginning,” Sarah Jane said, heading for the stairs again. Luke stayed on the couch, rolling the sensation of the temporal shift through his head, trying to work out its particulars, why it had left him so unsettled. A time-reversal with the Doctor at its center must have happened for good reason, so why had it felt so incomplete and…wrong?

When he finally gave up and attempted to put the question out of his mind, his disquiet lingered, and he couldn’t dismiss as paranoid the vague sense that something bad was coming for him.
And now the actual plot starts. This is at some not-very-precisely-defined point after "Journey's End." It's also one of only a couple times we actually get a Heroes character onscreen, so to speak.

Maria was in a fine mood—it was hard not to be at the end of the last school day before the spring holidays—and Clyde, having caught spring fever pretty thoroughly a few weeks ago, was even more hyper than usual. All told, it took her a bit longer than normal to realize that something was bothering Luke, even after Clyde suggested at lunch that Luke was glum at the idea of a whole week off school. She’d laughed at the time, but walking home with Luke now after seeing Clyde off for a week’s holiday with his mum, she had to wonder. He was never a chatterbox, but he’d barely spoken all day, and since Christmas break hadn’t bothered him at all (he might be a bit of a geek, but he also knew more than most of his teachers did, so he wasn’t obsessed with school), Clyde’s idea didn’t hold any weight. Then she had to ask twice if he was okay before the question registered with him, and when he looked up she saw the bruise-like smudges under his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Luke said, “I didn’t mean to ignore you. I’m just tired.”

“Really tired, apparently.”

He hesitated. “I haven’t been sleeping well. Since...since Saxon died, actually, but I guess it’s got worse lately.”

“Nightmares?”

Another pause, and then he nodded. “Some of those since the Xylok, but these keep getting more frequent and more specific. It’s like the world’s ending, over and over again.”

“What does Sarah Jane think?” An even longer pause from Luke. Maria frowned at him. “You haven’t told her?”

Luke folded his arms, pulling inward a little, the fingers of one hand tapping out a nervous rhythm on his elbow. “She’s been really busy—helping with the mop-up on the Saxon incident, and then trying to keep the Daleks out of the media, and after that there were some aliens stranded here from other planets in the Medusa Cascade, and now she’s helping mediate a disagreement between a couple of small delegations from Betelgeuse Three. If I tell her I’m having bad dreams, she won’t be able to do anything about it, but she’ll worry anyway, and...I don’t want to worry her over nothing.”

Maria opened her mouth to tell him that was silly, Sarah Jane would want to know, but she never got the chance because several things happened then in quick succession.

Luke staggered as if he’d tripped over a rock or a crack in the walk, only there weren’t any around, and something very like an inaudible explosion punched through Maria’s head. She grabbed for Luke’s arm to keep them both upright, because he’d clearly been hit harder than she had with whatever-it-was, and then an entirely visible flash and audible bang pulled her head round. Two people had appeared, a blonde girl gripping the arm of a man with dead eyes.

“Let him go!” Maria shouted, starting forward. The girl turned cold, indifferent eyes on her and raised her other hand, and then lightning leaped from her fingers to hit Maria like a fist in the chest, flinging her back ten feet into the grass. Blackness swarmed over her vision, and she lay still, stunned, struggling to stay conscious.

“Go, stupid!” the blonde snapped, gripping Luke’s arm in one hand and the dead-eyed man’s in the other, and with another flash-bang-silent-explosion that felt like it had spun Maria’s head off her shoulders, they vanished.

Maria started up at the sky, gasping the breath back into her lungs. Sarah Jane. Had to tell Sarah Jane. Had to...okay, staying awake would be good, first. Several long minutes passed before she could force herself to move, and then she struggled painfully to her feet and limped toward home.

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“Let me get this straight—these two appeared out of thin air with no visible means of transport, took Luke, and vanished? And the girl shot electricity from her hands?”

“Yes!” Maria stopped pacing the attic and stared at Sarah Jane. “You don’t believe me.”

“After everything I’ve done and seen, Maria Jackson, I hardly see how you can make that accusation,” Sarah Jane snapped. Then she sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just very worried, and I’m having a difficult time wrapping my head around this. I’ve never heard of humans with abilities like these. Aliens stealing human forms, possibly, but either way we have little to go on, and I’d be surprised if the Slitheen tried to take Luke again.”

“Sarah Jane,” Mr. Smith interrupted politely, “my databases of unusual occurrences and those involved in them are as complete as I can make them. I may be able to make an image match if Maria can describe the people she saw.”

Maria resumed her pacing. Her school uniform chafed against scrapes all up her back and what felt like a burn on her breastbone, but she couldn’t seem to stop moving. “The bloke was big and kind of scruffy, and he looked—he looked like he’d already died but he hadn’t realized it yet. Not like a cinema zombie or anything, just...I don’t know. Dead. And the girl——” She made a quick, frustrated motion. “Blonde and kind of pouty-looking—she looked a little familiar but I know I’ve never—oh! Veronica Mars! That’s who she reminded me of! Only a lot meaner.”

Sarah Jane blinked at her. “What?”

“American TV show. I’ve watched it a few times. Can’t remember the actress’s name—”

“I have a match,” Mr. Smith informed them. “The resemblance to this actress is striking, but based on Maria’s account, Elle Bishop is the only possibility.”

Maria looked. “That’s her! Who is she?”

“Elle Bishop and her father, Robert, have links to an organization known primarily as the Company; Primatech Paper, based in Texas, is one of its fronts. The Company seems to be involved with or made partially of those with superhuman abilities, though their number in the general population is low. However, I have only been able to ascertain this information from thorough cross-referencing of news stories and extrapolating from circumstantial evidence; the Company uses a computer system unlike any I have previously encountered, and thus far I have
been unable to access it.”

Maria and Sarah Jane stared at Mr. Smith, then at each other. Maria didn’t know which pronunciation shocked her more—that people like this existed, or that Mr. Smith couldn’t hack their systems. Sarah Jane found her voice first. “You’ve been aware of this Company and haven’t told me?”

“Data surrounding the Company itself and those linked to it is highly inconclusive and largely conjectural. Maria’s eyewitness account provided a key for correlating related events and developing a reasonably accurate profile. Elle Bishop, for instance, has been tentatively linked to a lightning strike, a few fires, and possibly a fatal burning in Ireland. There are also indications that some evolved humans can teleport.”

“Luke’s mobile,” Maria said suddenly. “They might’ve taken it off him, but even if they teleported and all, if Mr. Smith can find it, we’ll at least have a better idea—”

“Triangulating.” Colors swirled onscreen for a long moment, and then the computer spoke again: “Luke’s mobile telephone cannot be found.”

“So…what, you can’t get a signal from it because it’s out of range, or—”

“I have patched into the military satellite network for this search,” Mr. Smith said. “His mobile telephone should appear even if it is inactive or out of ordinary range, and if it has been destroyed, some remnant of the signal should remain for me to locate. It no longer exists.”

“What?” Maria said.

Sarah Jane opened her mouth, shut it again, closed her eyes, pulled a deep breath. Her face was very pale.

Maria grabbed her hand and squeezed. “We’ll get him back,” she said. “We’ll figure this out. We always do.”

Sarah Jane squeezed back, and after a moment she let go and said briskly, “Right. The first thing we need is more information, and even if his mobile’s somehow disappeared, we still have a place to start. Do you think you can remember the exact spot where they vanished?” Maria nodded. “We should be able to discover how they did it and maybe where they went, if we’re very lucky. I’ll just need...a few things...”

An hour and a couple of makeshift contraptions later, including the fastest change from her school uniform into normal clothes Maria had ever accomplished, they were dragging two old red wagons piled with what looked like random junk down the sidewalk. Sarah Jane frowned down at the display in her hand. “Was it much farther?”

“Just past those houses at the end of the street.”

“I’m already getting a reading. Major energy residue. Whatever they did exactly, it was big—”

“Sarah Jane?”

Maria looked up. A young black woman straightened up from a crouch a couple houses down, grinning broadly.

“Martha!” Sarah Jane said in a tone of pleased surprise. “Out on official business?”

Martha nodded and started to reply, and then Maria recognized her: “I saw you on the telly! Back
with—the whole Saxon thing, you were there—”

Martha grimaced. “Figures I’d be a fugitive my first time on TV, right? But I seem to get all my jobs from misadventures with the Doctor, so I can’t complain too much.”

“This is Maria Jackson, by the way,” Sarah Jane said. “Friend of mine. And Martha Jones works for UNIT, unless of course you’ve been swayed by Jack’s charms already—”

“Maybe,” Martha said. Her eyes fell on the intricate assembly of tubing, wires, and dials in their wagons. “I take it you’re not just out for a stroll either?”

Sarah Jane’s expression changed. “You remember my son, Luke. He was abducted here about an hour ago.” She explained briefly, Maria adding what she’d seen, and Martha’s face turned grave as she listened.

“I’m only here because we got a huge energy signature from this area,” she said. “Nobody knew what had caused it, but—” She eyed Sarah Jane. “Willing to work with Torchwood to get your son back?”

“So you are Torchwood now.”

“Only for the time being. They’ve—well, they’ve got an opening for a medical officer that I wish they hadn’t, and I worked there briefly before. I don’t always agree with their methods, but I don’t agree with all of UNIT’s either, and Jack’s a good man.” She half-smiled as if at a memory or some private joke. “I’d trust him to the end of the universe.”

Sarah Jane’s tone took on a touch of frost. “I like Jack too, but I’ve been doing quite well on my own, and I don’t particularly want a lot of guns in a situation that involves my son.”

Maria had to agree with that in principle, but in this case— “You said we’re going up against something new,” she reminded Sarah Jane in an undertone. “Maybe we can at least work with her and not with Torchwood?”

“And there’s another thing,” said Martha, who’d apparently observed this exchange. “I’m sorry, Sarah Jane, but...the real reason UNIT and Torchwood both sent me out to take readings here and find out what happened was that we didn’t just get an energy spike from this place. Torchwood picked up a Rift fluctuation as well, and between that and what UNIT’s instruments show, we know that these two didn’t just teleport somewhere else.” She met Sarah Jane’s gaze squarely, and the compassion in her eyes sent a sudden tingle of prescient fear down Maria’s spine. “The energy residue was temporal as well. Without a way to travel through time...you won’t be able to bring Luke back.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Bad stuff starts happening to Luke.

Luke’s first sensation was pain. Everything hurt before he tried to move or open his eyes, and that was bad, but it also meant he was neither dead nor unconscious, and that was good. He lay on his back on some hard flat surface, which could be either good or bad, depending on a lot of other factors.

Okay then, everything else: generalized ache, felt neural rather than muscular or skeletal, but no injuries as far as he could tell except for something that might be a patch of burned flesh on one wrist where—

He faltered.

The blonde had grabbed him there, and she’d done something—

Memory returned with a rush of panic that made his body tense and his eyes fly open, and he discovered simultaneously that he was in a small metal-walled room with instrument panels he could barely see behind him (someone could be watching him, right now), that he was wearing only his underwear and something quite like a hospital gown, that he was lying on a stainless-steel examining table, and that cold metal cuffs kept his wrists clamped to the table down by his sides. Similar restrains pinched at the skin of his ankles when he tried to move.

Luke lay motionless, heart pounding so hard he thought he’d throw up. This was bad. This was very, very bad.

The door hissed as a pressure seal released, and a man’s American-accented voice punched into the room: “No, I read the directive and all, and I got that it was something different—like, how often do we get a spike through time even with the new system, right?—but we’re talking brand-new here, something we’ve never seen before.”

A young woman’s voice: “I sort of figured that when Bob got interested.”

“Well, yeah—” The voices’ owners, both in white lab coats, slid aside the door and ducked into the room. “I don’t mean just the readings off him—which yeah, they’re weird, kind of on a different level from what we’ve always seen before—but I’m talking, like, kid doesn’t have a belly button.”

The woman rounded the table and started flicking switches on the panel next to Luke’s head. “Okay, now you’re just being stupid.”

“No, seriously. Take a look.”

She did, and cold air swirled over Luke’s abdomen, making his skin crawl. He flinched when she prodded his stomach with one finger as if trying to find where he might have hidden his navel. Finally she moved back to her instruments. “So...he got it removed or...what, he wasn’t born?”
“I know, right?” The male tech moved to Luke’s other side, unzipped a padded case, and pulled a tray down from the wall to begin unpacking it. “And that’s not all—just aside from the Walker System’s report, which was also weird seeing as he couldn’t be found two years before the spike, everything we’re getting says he’s physically a normal teenager, and it’s also telling us he’s just over a year old.” He plugged in something Luke couldn’t see, and a faint, high-pitched hum filled the little room.

“Faulty instruments?” the woman asked. She took Luke’s wrist and wiped the back of his hand with something wet and cold, and then a sharp sting made him gasp.

“Not after we ran it five times and recycled the system twice to clean out errors.”

He’d been out a long time, then. Luke tried to pull away, but the female tech’s hand and the restraints held him fast. He craned his neck to see her tape down an IV needle to his hand and hang a bulging sac of clear liquid from a stand, and finally he managed to speak over the fear drying his mouth. “What are you doing?” he asked, unable to keep a tremble out of his voice.

“So when did Bob want to see him?” the woman asked, ignoring Luke entirely. Another needle pricked the crook of his elbow.

The other tech picked up two electrode patches and stuck one to Luke’s chest under the hospital gown, the other to his temple. “Lot of tests to run first. See what we get, and if it’s any good, then when we push him harder Bob’ll show up to see.”

“So, just a preliminary battery of tests for now.” The needle withdrew from his elbow with a jerk, and she set aside a vial of Luke’s blood.

“Um, prelims A, B, and G, probably.” Fingers threaded through Luke’s hair and pulled, making him lift his head. Then something cold and metallic wormed under his neck, locking into place and keeping his head propped up at an uncomfortable angle. He tried to pull away; a wave of dizziness swept him, and his muscles refused to cooperate. She’d put something in his IV, and this was so very bad—


“Everything but the neural feed,” the tech said, reaching for a switch just inside Luke’s peripheral vision.

“Please,” he tried to say, “don’t—” But everything was responding sluggishly now, if at all, and his mouth couldn’t form the words, and then the tech threw the switch and something clicked and there was a clunk and snap of metal and something pierced the back of his neck where his spine met his skull.

Luke choked on a gasp of pain. A needle pressed in deeper, and then something connected and fire flashed through his body, leaving him dazed.

“Ready,” the male tech said. “And...mark.” He flipped another switch, and the faint hum began changing pitch, burrowing into Luke’s brain. Pressure grew behind his eyes until he was shaking with it, and this was the MITRE headset and the Slitheen all over again and only the memory of the Xylok told him how much worse it could get.

But he’d escaped then, the first time, with a burst of telekinesis he’d barely controlled, more from instinctive reaction than deliberate plan. He hadn’t been able to do it since, after Sarah Jane neutralized the headset neither of them wanted to deal with, but he remembered how it felt and if
they were testing him for psychokinetic ability, he might be able to do it again—

The pressure made an abrupt key change into real pain, stabbing through his head and down every nerve. He dredged up a last reserve of energy and flung it through the place in his mind that still remembered that burst of telekinesis, and there was nothing, like an echoing empty space.

He didn’t even know how to do anything and they knew how to block him.

“See that?” the female tech said, tapping a monitor. “These are just—”

“Crazy different, yeah. Plus strong and all kinds of unfocused. Bob’s gonna love this. Last prelim, and—”

If the tech said anything else, Luke didn’t hear it; something exploded in the very deepest levels of his consciousness, burning all the way up and through him, setting everything on fire, and he would have screamed if he could have found the breath for it. He was deaf and blind and nothing existed except the fire in his head.

Luke didn’t know when the fire finally bled back out of him except that it felt like a very long time, and that he felt his muscles begin to return to his control then too, but he was too wrung out to try to move or speak. The techs left everything hooked up to him when they sealed the door on their way out, talking about the levels of telekinetic energy they thought they could push him to next time.

They left Luke behind, too, without a word or a glance, and it was a relief when darkness washed over him and swept away the ache and the fear.

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Maria stared out the airplane window without really seeing the clouds or the countryside below. It was too bad she couldn’t tell her mum about traveling to Cardiff in a private jet; Chrissie would have kittens at the idea, even if its military purpose made it a little less glamorous. Alan would probably be impressed too, and she might tell him some details eventually; for now she’d only made a quick call to his mobile to say there was an emergency, Luke was in trouble, and she had to stay with Sarah Jane.

For her part, Maria couldn’t appreciate the jet for worrying about Luke, and what little she’d heard from Martha hadn’t helped.

“Torchwood’s the only people I know who’ve actually had dealings with the Company,” Martha had said as they drove to the UNIT airbase after taking readings with all of their equipment. (Maria knew well enough how to set things up and take them down, but the information from it was lost on her; Martha and Sarah Jane seemed to understand, though, if Martha’s smile of grim satisfaction was anything to go by.) “That’s the other reason. I only know what I’ve heard, which isn’t much; UNIT’s never tried to get involved with them since our interests are...more extraterrestrial. Although honestly, that’s the sort of oversight that makes me think Jack was right, I’m better in a smaller group. I was on my way to Torchwood for now anyway, which is why both Torchwood and UNIT asked me for those readings.”

“I still don’t like it,” Sarah Jane said tightly. “Mind you, I like Jack Harkness just fine” (Maria knew that was true, since Luke had told her everything he’d seen during the Dalek invasion), “but I’ve kept an eye on Torchwood too, and death follows them more than it does the Doctor. Is that just the Rift, or is it Torchwood?”

“You tell me,” Martha said. “You know what happens when you introduce yourself to the
universe.”

Now, nearing Cardiff, Maria couldn’t stop rolling that statement through her head over and over again, and it sounded a whole lot more sinister than it had done whenever Sarah Jane said something similar.

She shook herself and went to get a can of Coke from the galley, then headed back to where Sarah Jane and Martha sat, comparing UNIT stories.

“‘So,’ Martha was saying, ‘just curious, how much do you know about the Saxon incident? More than the public, I’m sure.’

Sarah Jane half-smiled. “Oh yes. Massive alien hoax masterminded by a deranged Harold Saxon, whose goal in the whole plot was to assassinate the president, only his abused wife killed him right after. Big scandal, press goes crazy, everyone goes home happy. No...I know the aliens were real; I know that you, Jack, and the Doctor were involved; I know a significant piece of time was reversed; and I know that UNIT gave considerable benefits and mandatory psychological services to everyone working on the Valiant at the time. I’m also fairly certain Saxon was the Master, especially after some stuffed-shirt at UNIT gave me a ‘can neither confirm nor deny’ on that one.”

Martha laughed a little. “Did you vote for him?”

Sarah Jane smiled. “I never used Archangel. Nor ATMOS, nor BubbleShock for that matter.”

“Smart woman,” Martha said. “I only knew about ATMOS in time because UNIT did.”

“Well, I’m hardly a conspiracy theorist, but I believe I’m entitled to a bit of professional paranoia. If it’s too good to be true and literally everyone is using it...”

“I would’ve voted for Saxon,” Maria mumbled. “Thought he seemed...good, I guess. Dad and Mum voted for him.”

“‘Wasn’t your fault,” Martha said quickly. “I would’ve too if I hadn’t missed the election. That’s what the Archangel network was for—mesmerized everyone.” She looked at Sarah Jane. “‘You’re right, by the way. Saxon was the Master. Impossible, but there he was. The Doctor wasn’t the last Time Lord anymore—and then the Master chose to die when he could have regenerated. The Toclafane were...’” She shook her head. “End of the universe, that’s the human race. And it wasn’t just a little time reversed, it was an entire year of the world ending in metal and flame, and only those on the Valiant when it happened remember the year that never was.” Her eyes grew a bit distant. “Wish I didn’t, sometimes.”

*It’s like the world’s ending, over and over again... “But it happened,” Maria said slowly. “Right? Time reversed, and no one remembers, and everything went back to how it was—but it still happened.”*

“For those of us on the Valiant, yes. Beyond that, I suppose it did, if you want to get really metaphysical about it. The science I’m familiar with doesn’t help much there.”

Maria glanced at Sarah Jane. “I think Luke might’ve been dreaming about it.” She explained what Luke had told her, avoiding Sarah Jane’s eyes so she didn’t have to see the doubled guilt and worry there.

Martha spoke first. “Archangel was a telepathic network...that’s how we used it to restore the Doctor. The use of that headset might have opened some sensitivity in Luke to a telepathic burst like that.”
“He should’ve told me,” Sarah Jane murmured. “I ought to have noticed—he did seem more tired than usual, but I thought—I don’t know what I thought.” She shook her head. “Does this change anything?”

Martha hesitated. “It depends on what the Company hopes to use him for.” She glanced between Maria and Sarah Jane. “I’m sorry, but if they’re aware of his potential abilities—and I can’t think why else they’d have taken him—then they’re probably...testing him to see what he can do. I’m not certain how they do that, but I don’t imagine it’s pleasant.”

The jet banked then, and Maria quickly buckled in, her stomach tightening with a nausea that had nothing to do with airsickness. She’d never thought she’d be eager to reach Cardiff, but now she didn’t want to wait another second.

Torchwood had better be good.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Luke’s day gets even worse, Jack Harkness is still captain of the Innuendo Squad although really not that much, and there’s a lot of nonsense about artificially enhanced humans and the limits of time travel. Also, there’s a pretty unsubtle Angel reference.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Since the moment he awoke in the BubbleShock! factory, even before he understood the concept of numbers, Luke could remember having a better-than-average sense of the passage of time and rarely needed to look at the watch he always wore. His estimates of time were often accurate to the minute, and occasionally, when he tried hard, he could mark time to the second. Even under significant disorientation, which happened not infrequently in the life Sarah Jane led, he could maintain an ongoing count of his heartbeats, adjusting for any factors that increased his heart rate, and at least have a good idea of how long he’d been in a place (though without a starting point as a frame of reference, it didn’t help a lot). He could remember losing that automatic count only twice: once when the Bane tried to kill him, and once when the Xylok’s presence in his head drove everything from his mind but blind terror and an animal need to escape.

The first set of tests had flung the count right out of his mind, and every time the techs returned and their instruments scraped through his brain, he found it harder and harder to get it back. It used to be an involuntary sort of thing, no thinking required, numbers flowing by at the back of his mind. Now it was a conscious effort; he clung to the numbers with desperate focus, as if only holding on to something that didn’t change would keep him sane, and even then his count kept slipping.

The techs had come to his cell—he couldn’t think of it as anything else—five times in all by now. Sometimes different lab-coated people showed up instead. They stayed long enough to run three or four tests, and then they left; sometimes one was just a scan of bran activity and that didn’t hurt, but everything else did. He thought they left him alone anywhere from three to six hours in the intervals, but that was a very rough estimate; between whatever they put in his IV and whatever they did to his brain, he didn’t usually stay conscious for long afterward. Even then he couldn’t rest—he dreamed in fractured shapes and colors, spheres and spikes and shiny blades, cacophonous voices and music that sang destruction, all backed by a faint rhythm like a drumbeat.

After the third time, he stopped trying to ask what the techs were doing; they ignored him completely, sometimes discussing whatever results they got as if he were nothing more than an interesting science project, sometimes chatting idly about office drama or plans for the evening. When he could speak, which wasn’t always, there were times he couldn’t keep himself from begging them to stop, let him go, tell him what was happening, but they never gave a sign of having heard him.

He knew they had, though. He could tell that much.

He hadn’t stopped trying to access the telekinesis that was giving them such good readings. That hadn’t changed either. He couldn’t touch anything in that place in his mind, nothing at all, and he didn’t even know how to try. The headache that never went away now didn’t help.
(Luke thought, at one point, dizzy with exhaustion after an especially long test, that this much not-knowing might just drive him mad if everything else didn’t. He’d survived a number of bad situations because he knew things, because he could figure things out faster than other people, because he had the memory of thousands of humans. Now he had nothing.)

The cuffs were sized precisely to his wrists and ankles, giving him no room to slip them even if he knew how to dislocate joints to change the shape of his hands, which he didn’t—and if he managed that, during the short periods he could stay awake, that needle in the back of his head held him prisoner more effectively than any restraints. He had no idea what it might do if he moved too suddenly or tried to pull away from it, and paralysis from severed vertebrae would not do much to help him get away.

And then there was the tag they’d put in the side of his neck, at some point early on; he’d been awake for it, felt the sudden sharp sting of a double-pronged pneumatic injection and lingering burn as it went in. Of course they hadn’t said anything, but he knew what it was for: something about the injection seemed to press on his senses, scraped raw as they were, like the nagging presence at the back of his mind of something he’d forgotten. It was a tracking device, and his certainty of that comforted him a little. Wanting to track him probably meant they already planned to let him go, eventually—but it also meant they’d be following him, they wouldn’t go away, and they’d have to make him forget all of this.

He didn’t want to forget. He didn’t want to forget anything. He already felt inhuman enough.

He just wanted to go home.

***

A giant round door rolled aside, and Martha led Maria and Sarah Jane into the Hub. “Try not to look at the computers or touch anything that seems alien or delicate,” she said over her shoulder, “and don’t go downstairs. House rules,” she added a bit apologetically.

“Well, my attic has much the same rules, so I don’t blame you,” Sarah Jane said. “Aside from the need for quite as much secrecy, at any rate.”

“Call it a holdover from the old days, if you like, since Torchwood’s pretty well independent by now. You’ve met everyone here, haven’t you?”

“Briefly, at least, but Maria hasn’t.”

Martha nodded and pointed out the rest of the Torchwood team, most of whom seemed too preoccupied with whatever was on their computers to do more than lift a hand in greeting. “Gwen Cooper, Ianto Jones, and—”

A door off to the side swept open, and a ludicrously clean-cut, handsome man in old-fashioned clothes and braces came striding toward them. “Welcome to Torchwood!” he said, his American accent just as pronounced as Elle Bishop’s had been. “Thought I’d see you down here eventually, Miss Smith, and I have to say, you’re looking just as good as the last time I saw you. Oh, and sorry if everyone ignores you a little, we’re not really that rude, just having a bit of a Weevil problem today.”

“And Captain Jack Harkness,” Martha finished, smiling.

“The one and only,” the American said. “Well, sort of.” He shook hands with Sarah Jane, holding on just a little longer than convention dictated, then turned to Maria. “And who’s this?”

“Nice to meet you, sweetheart,” Jack said, managing to sound chivalrous and gentlemanly rather than condescending. He offered his hand, and Maria took it, thinking he meant to shake it; instead he bent and kissed the back of her hand.

A surprised giggle left her mouth. Apparently Jack had a lot of practice charming people.

“Seriously, where do you find these kids?” Jack asked Sarah Jane. “Your son, and now her? They’re adorable!”

Sarah Jane gave him a look that had sent lesser men and not a few aliens running for cover. “And fourteen.”

“Relax, mama bear,” Jack said, lifting both hands in surrender. “I’m just making a completely objective observation and not being inappropriate at all. Just, you know—” He glanced at Maria with that movie-star grin. “In a few years, swing by Torchwood again, and bring your friends. At that point I might possibly hit on you when it would be no longer potentially illegal and also really gross.”

“I’ll, uh, keep that in mind,” Maria said.


“Right,” Jack said, and the easy smile never left his face, but something in his eyes changed. “I wasn’t expecting you just yet, and not with company, welcome as it might be. What’s up?”

Martha nodded toward a conference room of some kind off the main Hub, and after they were all seated, she said, “That energy spike you lot and UNIT sent me to check out? It’s just got a lot more complicated.” She explained what she’d found, bringing up detailed information Maria really didn’t understand on a screen at the front of the room, and then Maria found herself recounting her part of the story yet again with Sarah Jane adding what Mr. Smith and her instruments had told her. Jack’s face darkened as they spoke, his eyes going flat and hard and not a little dangerous, and Maria couldn’t help wondering why his eyes looked so much older than the rest of him did, what gave her the distinct impression he’d been through a war—no, more than one. More than just a couple of wars, even.

Jack Harkness wasn’t your average prettyboy, apparently.

He was silent for a few moments after they finished speaking, and then he said, “Yeah, this should be interesting.” He hit an intercom button. “Ianto, call up Raines and Petrelli, will you? I’m gonna need to call in a few favors. Lean on Raines a little if you need to; he’ll come around eventually but it might take a bit. Patch him in to me as soon as he’s being cooperative. Then Petrelli—he won’t put up as much of a fight, so he’ll actually call back if you tell him to.” He leaned back and regarded the other three in the room. “Claude Raines. That’s what he calls himself, anyway. Used to work for the Company until they figured out he was helping hide other evolved humans, and then they tried to have him killed. He’s been living invisible pretty much ever since, and I mean that literally. We’ve been helping hide him the last year or so, though—came back to England not long before that explosion above New York, you might’ve heard about that one, and I happened to run into him on the street when he was visible. If you think he looks familiar, imagine my reaction.” He pressed another button and a picture filled the screen: a slightly scruffy bearded man, all hard lines and piercing blue eyes.

Sarah Jane shook her head. “I don’t recognize—”
“Picture him without the beard.”

She looked again. “Oh!”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “You’ve probably seen photos of his incarnations between the ones you knew. I traveled with him.” He shook his head. “Anyway, he’ll be able to tell us something about the actual Company building and security, and Petrelli should be able to fill in whatever they’ve changed since Raines worked there. Probably. Torchwood’s dealings with the Company have been…a little erratic.”

Sarah Jane frowned. “You mean Torchwood has worked with them.”

“In the past, yes. Before Canary Wharf. When it came to them and, ah, similar organizations, some of which were of an even less dubious nature and pretty blatantly dedicated to bad stuff, like this one multidimensional law firm, seriously bad news—general policy was to deal with them if it was mutually beneficial, stop them if they represented a really obvious threat, and agree to stay out of each other’s way the rest of the time.”

“This Company,” Sarah Jane said in a rather deadly voice, “obviously thinks nothing of kidnapping children. And Torchwood works with them.”

“Before Canary Wharf,” Jack repeated. “I didn’t like it either, and it’s something else I’ve changed. Mostly now we keep an eye on them. But all due respect, ma’am, your son is hardly just a child. Grown by the Bane, genius-level intellect, bits and pieces of thousands of humans in him—even without his telekinetic potential, he’s something different, something new. That’s already attracted attention.”

“But they’ve got him right now,” Maria burst out. “We need to do something, not just sit here talking!”

Jack smiled at her, but something in his expression was a little bit sad. “We are,” he said. “We will. Just got a few things you need to know first, plus—” He touched an earpiece. “Gwen, new priority—I need a complete profile on that energy signature. We’re going to need it synched up for a quick trip. Should be plenty of spillover.” He nodded to Martha. “You too, actually.”

Martha left the room, slipping by Ianto, who stuck his head in. “Raines is ready for you. Only had to drop one really heavy hint about how much he owes us.” He glanced at Sarah Jane. “Also I may have mentioned there’s a 14-year-old involved. He acts tough, but he’s got a pretty big soft spot in there. I’ve sometimes wondered if he secretly has a thing for puppies too.”

“I’ll be just a minute,” Jack said, already heading out of the room. “See if you can’t get Petrelli—”

“Already waiting for your call.”

“Remind me to give you a raise. Or, you know, something. Oh, and these two need to know about the mules, okay?” Jack disappeared into his office.

“Guessing that doesn’t mean animals,” Maria said.

“That would make things simpler, and we can’t have that,” Ianto said, taking Jack’s chair. “No, they’re…you understand these so-called evolved humans have a huge range of abilities? No one person has more than one, of course, except a couple very specific cases, but they have powers right out of comic books. Like control of electricity. Like teleportation and time travel. The Company employs some of them and attempts to control others, which often means people with powers disappear. Temporarily, anyway.”
“So they might just let him go, you mean,” Sarah Jane said.

“Ordinarily, he’d probably show up again in a day or so with a tracking chip in him and no memory of where he’d been. But from the data we got, we think—well, the man was what we’ve been calling a mule. They experimented with a formula to give ordinary people powers at one point, which created an entirely different mess. A few years back, though, the Company figured out how to graft specific powers onto people who don’t have any at all, but they have to do it for very specific, short-term purposes because it’s something a normal human brain isn’t built to handle.”

“That’s why that man looked so dead,” Maria murmured.

Ianto nodded. “You’ve heard of thralls in mythology? That’s more or less what they are. They can use their power when ordered to and follow other direct instructions, but that’s about it. The one you saw will probably get two or three round-trip transportations before the stress on his brain kills him. But if he looked dead, it’s because he already was. There’s not much left when someone’s mind has gone through that.”

Maria’s thoughts made several jumps forward very quickly and reached a conclusion she didn’t like at all. Feeling a little ill, she said, “But they can’t do that to Luke. Could they?”

Ianto hesitated. Jack, coming up from behind him, continued as if Maria hadn’t spoken. “They used a mule to bring Elle Bishop forward in time. That’s important because it means they picked up on an energy spike from Luke—from the whole thing with the moon, I’m guessing—through time. It was powerful enough to reach them there and significant enough that they didn’t wait a few years to get him. But it also means we can track them—mules are incredibly sloppy, bleeding energy and leaving the clearest residue you could hope for. With those patterns, some alien tech we’ve picked up, and a little bit of Rift energy, we should be able to get to the Company’s building at the time Luke was taken, give or take a few days. It’s not exact.”

“If he’s in the past, can’t you just look at their records and get the right date? We could—I dunno, couldn’t we even show up right when they took Luke and get him back before they’ve done anything to him?”

“Good idea, but no,” Jack said. “Those mules are about the furthest thing from natural time-travel you can imagine. You’re not going to get lasting problems in the fabric of reality, but you also won’t get normal temporal activity. Time’s in flux.”

“Now I know you’ve traveled with the Doctor,” Sarah Jane muttered.

Jack’s half smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I just confirmed a lot of info with Raines and Petrelli—recent Company activity, where they keep people they’re testing, how to get in and out—so we’re good to go as soon as everything’s calibrated right. I’m thinking the fewer people the better, so probably just Sarah Jane and I—”

“Luke’s my friend too,” Maria said, “and I’ve been helping Sarah Jane for months. I want to go.”

“As much as I don’t want anyone put in danger,” Sarah Jane added, “the last time I tried to chase her away for that very reason, it backfired on me rather spectacularly.”

Jack hesitated, looking at them both, then nodded once. “Okay then. You do understand the risks pretty well by this point. Bathroom’s down the hall if you need to use it before we go, which might actually be a good idea, because this system’s a bit iffy and not exactly comfortable. I’ll just be a couple minutes grabbing things and then we’ll go from the center of the Hub—”
“Hang on.” Maria stood up. “Neither of you ever answered my question.”

Jack met her gaze squarely. “That’s right. I didn’t think it was necessary. You’re both already motivated to hurry, so expanding on a worst-case scenario, likely as it might be, didn’t seem wise.”

“Right then,” Sarah Jane said. She had turned very white at Jack’s obvious implication, but her voice didn’t waver. “Now you’ve confirmed it, so explain.”

“Follow me, then,” Jack said, heading for his office. He pulled an old-fashioned greatcoat from his desk chair and shrugged it on, then began hunting through drawers and cabinets. “Short answer’s yes, probably they could. That might well be their intention.” He holstered a handgun and dropped a few extra clips of bullets into one pocket, then spread a webbed utility belt out on the desk. “He’s new, completely different from the telekinetics they’ve seen before, but he can’t independently use his abilities. So if they can force his mind open enough to control him and yank his telekinesis to the front, they’d destroy everything else in his head doing it, but they’d get a powerful weapon who would probably give them hundreds of uses before dying. Glad I told you?”

The sick feeling in Maria’s stomach grew, but she said, “Yeah, I am. It’s important. Now we know why we have to get there fast.”

“Yes,” Sarah Jane said, eyeing Jack. “If we can. You can’t be certain when we’ll get there.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack said. What looked an awful lot like a couple small grenades and a little grappling hook joined the utility belt. “We can’t make this any more precise—or less dangerous. Could be we get scattered into atoms. It’s not easy to control, which is why we don’t really use it, and only when we have major energy residue like this to follow.”

“And if we don’t make it in time and they’ve already…” Sarah Jane swallowed hard. “Already made Luke into one of these ‘mules.’ What happens then?”

“We deal with that if it happens, and you have my word I’ll do everything possible to make sure it doesn’t. That’s all I can tell you.”

You mean, Maria wanted to say, that he’d be as good as dead, only more dangerous, and you’d keep him here, wouldn’t you? You’d be sorry, but you’d do it. She could see Sarah Jane reaching the same conclusion, but neither said anything.

“Okay then,” Jack said, sliding a black rubberized case into his pocket and clipping another pouch to the belt, “time to go, unless you wanted that pit stop—no? This way.” He buckled on the belt and strode out to a platform in the center of the Hub, his coat flapping at his ankles, and motioned for Maria and Sarah Jane to join him on a circle of metal maybe twice the size of a manhole cover. All three had just enough room to stand, facing outward, shoulders touching, their bodies forming a triangle.

“Powering up the field now,” Gwen called down to them. “Should be 30 more seconds. Starting the clock.”

“Probably a good idea to hold hands,” Jack said.

“So we, what, don’t lose each other in transmission?” Sarah Jane asked. Her fingers closed over Maria’s.

“Well, yeah, that too, but it makes things a little more fun, right?”
Maria rolled her eyes, but she didn’t release either of their hands.

“Good luck,” Martha said from beside Gwen, and then a lot of lights flashed, Gwen said, “Transmitting…now,” and Maria’s body dissolved into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I completely made up the whole “mule” thing; as far as I know, the Company hasn’t even thought of trying that. I also came up with this before the Heroes storyline about the formula that could give normal people powers (which I suppose doesn’t completely remove the possibility that they might have tried something like this), so this is basically all my own stuff.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Luke's day gets even worse. Some more. AGAIN. Another Heroes character actually gets a tiny bit of dialogue, but it doesn't last long because then we get to the part where it turns out the Company's bitten off way more than they can chew.

New voices came at Luke through a haze of dream-images. He managed to open his eyes for a fraction of a second before the bright lights, the bright reflections off metal, the bright *everything* sent stabs of pain up into his head.

He didn’t quite know what they’d done last time, but it had felt like massive sensory overload—all illusory, he was fairly certain of that, but still more than enough to blank out all his physical senses and leave him stumbling through an impossible mindmaze that gradually gave way to more nightmares. Now he wondered if bad reactions to recreational drugs felt anything like that—although the headache and sensitivity to light had to be a bit more like a hangover.

…and for all that, this was the clearest he’d been able to think in—well, a while. Maybe they were getting ready to let him go.

Or maybe, he thought as he slitted one eye back open and saw the unfamiliar people crowding into the room with the techs, it meant something a lot more ominous.

A rather round, balding man leaned over to smile at him. “Hello, Luke,” he said. “I’m Bob, and I’ve been hearing that you’re pretty special. I even came all the way out from New York to see you today.”

The rush of relief from having someone, *anyone*, talk to him was quickly lost in a far more powerful surge of renewed fear. Bob’s expression and tone were completely pleasant, even a bit gentle, his overall impression one of a harmless middle-aged professor or grandfather—and yet, something about him was intrinsically, fundamentally unsettling.

It was the eyes, of course, always the eyes. Bob’s were flat and very cold, eyes that could watch anything without blinking, could let him order anything done and sleep very well every night.

The techs had hurt him. Bob would never touch him, Luke was certain of that, but he was just as clearly in charge of all this, in charge of him and maybe hundreds of others.

“What do you want with me?” he asked hoarsely.

Bob’s smile didn’t change, and he patted Luke’s shoulder once. “Don’t worry. Soon it’ll be like nothing ever happened. You can handle a little more, can’t you? My daughter was younger than you when we brought her through a testing process like this. I think you can be tough like she was.”

This was not comforting. Luke tried to turn his head, hoping in these other people he might find someone a little more helpful or sympathetic, but most seemed to be more lab techs, and the single person other than Bob not wearing a lab coat was a silent black man near the door whose closed expression was just as forbidding. “I just want to know—”
One of the techs flipped a switch as Bob moved back to stand next to the black man, and a buzzing hum filled the air, so high-pitched it hurt, only he wasn’t really hearing it, it was all inside his head, just like everything else, and he couldn’t drive it out, and then everything started to fade under the onslaught of the splintered, madhouse mindscape their instruments seemed to produce. The humming pressed in on the back of his eyes, on every part of his skull, harder and harder, and every hallucinatory vision felt like claws inside his head, like acid pouring through him, he couldn’t breathe and he wanted to throw up and it hurt—

The pressure kept building, past any limit they’d driven it to before, and he could actually feel the needle growing hot in the back of his head, heat and pain expanding from its pinprick point in his neck going down his spine and branching out into every nerve, but that was nothing compared to his head, because it was melting, inside and out, if it got any hotter it might just melt physically (what exactly was the melting point of brain tissue? He’d never had a reason to wonder or care before) and all he could see now looked like lightning strikes in dayglow colors, across his vision over and over again, and each one hurt more, and the pressure was still building and they weren’t stopping. They weren’t stopping at all.

Something heavy and wrong and very, very bad was pushing against his mind, pushing to get in, bleeding through the places all this testing had opened up, and a flash of panic born of instinctive knowledge let him push back for a few seconds, almost frantic, knowing absolutely that things would get a lot worse if that something got in. Only then did he realize that he’d been protecting himself all along, just a little, in his subconscious resistance to the heat and pressure and pain, and once his focus left it even for a moment, that was more than enough opening and his control vanished entirely, sucked away, and everything burned, and he had nothing left to fight it anymore.

And then his skull cracked open and the end of the world came flooding in.

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Maria felt solid ground re-forming under her as her body took shape again, and just as her senses opened back up, her stomach made a sickening lurch and she dropped to her knees to throw up.

Everything else filtered in through a rapidly disappearing haze of dizziness—someone else being sick next to her, muted sounds of traffic in the distance, grass under her (at least that much was good). Slowly she raised her head to see Jack and Sarah Jane crouched nearby, both engaged in similar activities, and she wondered if she’d be sick again too—but no, she felt fine now, so she got up.

“God, what I wouldn’t give to be young again,” Jack groaned, and climbed rather unsteadily to his feet. “That kind of thing gets rougher every time. Except if you’re drunk, and then it still sucks, you just don’t care.”

Sarah Jane wiped the back of her hand over her mouth and accepted Jack’s help standing up. “Oh, stop whining. At least you’re younger than I am.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? Okay, we should be right outside Primatech, which—” He consulted the screen of a palm-sized map reader, probably a far more advanced version of GPS. “Yeah. Just past these trees. So let’s talk strategy for a minute—I’m thinking Sarah Jane with a fake ID can do the nosy-journalist thing up front, see if you can get in that way—worth a shot, anyway—and distract security while you’re at it. That’s right here, by the way—conventional security office, at least, and not much we can do about the other kind.” He tapped a spot on the display, then keyed down to a floor two levels below. “Holding cells are all the way underground, so our closest entrance is here in the back near the loading dock. I’ll break in here, take this maintenance stairway down. Raines said Luke was likely to be held here—” He tapped another
“Maria can open doors.” Sarah Jane produced the sonic lipstick from her purse and handed it to Maria. “Almost certain to be much quieter and less attention-getting than whatever you had in mind.”

Jack stared as Maria opened the lipstick, switched it on and off, and slipped it into her pocket, grinning. “Is that—”

“Sonic lipstick. It was a parting gift.”

Jack shook his head and began to laugh. “Only the Doctor could look at lipstick and think—well, no, I take that back, a lot of things could stand to be a little more sonic, lipstick included. Okay, well, that actually makes things simpler. No deadlock seals here, and that does computers, right? Should save time on finding out just when we are and where Luke is, and help us shut down their power, which was going to be one of my first steps.”

“The farther we can get without using any of your guns and grenades, the better,” Maria said. “I really don’t want to get trapped down there.”

“You’ll be glad I’ve got those guns and grenades if we do,” Jack said. “Trust me, I don’t want these clowns capturing me either. One more thing—” He unclipped a foam-padded case from his belt and opened it to reveal two sets of earpieces. “One of these and one of these for each of you. These are what my whole team uses to talk to each other, and this one—” He held up the other, a nearly transparent piece of some alien material that glittered faintly in the sun. “It’ll dampen the effect of any evolved human’s power on you, particularly any involving telepathic control—and trust me, that’s a good thing.”

Maria slipped the earpiece in and hooked the other, which looked like a slightly more high-tech Bluetooth headset, over one ear. “Aren’t you going to wear one?”

“I’ve already got one.” Jack snapped the case shut. “And the dampeners don’t work on me.” He jabbed a marker beacon in the ground and took off before Maria could ask anything else, leading them through the trees and toward a building that could only be called “nondescript”—big, white, industrial, very boring. It looked, as it should, far more like a paper manufacturing plant than a secret facility.

After picking an ID and giving Jack the rest so they wouldn’t be found if she were searched, Sarah Jane split off toward the main entrance, and Jack and Maria made their approach toward the back where the ground sloped down to a large loading dock. Workers busily loading and unloading the trucks at the dock paid absolutely no attention to them (“Act like you belong and you know what you’re doing,” Jack told her, “and the vast majority of people will assume you do”). One harried-looking man inside did look up from the cartons surrounding him and the paperwork spilling across—and off—his battered desk, asking if they needed help; Jack flourished a Primatech ID badge and said something vague about a young neighbor wanting to see where he worked, and the man waved them on.

They followed Jack’s map to a locked and seemingly seldom-used stairwell in the back, then down a few floors, through a hallway toward the building’s center, and into another stairway that required the sonic lipstick to bypass its security code. They walked down for what seemed a very long time, then, steps echoing off the metal stairs, and Maria couldn’t stop the sick adrenaline that kept her tensing at every sound. They’d definitely gone past the point of easy return by now.

And maybe it was just her imagination, but a sense of oppression in the air seemed to get heavier as they descended, keeping time with gradual changes in the facility itself. The second stairway
ended before long, forcing them to trick two more secured entryways—Jack took over the sonic lipstick on the second one, using it to open the entire panel and close the one circuit that would let them through without tripping an alarm for their lack of keycode, retinal scan, or approved voiceprint. Maria kept an uneasy lookout while Jack worked, staring up and down the bare white hallway. They’d seen fewer people the further down they went, which probably had a lot to do with the secrecy of Primatech’s other operation, but those they had seen—through narrow windows in doorways leading off the stairs, and once at the end of a long corridor Jack hurried them through—mostly wore lab coats, aside from a few who were clearly armed.

It didn’t help that Jack had started carrying his own gun rather than leaving it in its holster, stepping out first with it raised and ready to fire every time they had to go through another door. She just didn’t know what made her more nervous—the fact that she’d got herself into a situation where guns were involved at all, or that Jack’s obvious experience with such situations meant he thought the gun necessary in this one.

All the same, they managed to reach the level where Luke was likely being held, and Jack found a wall monitor that succumbed to the sonic lipstick and displayed a list of inmates. Luke’s name came near the end of the list, and Maria stared at it in dismay: he’d already been here nearly five days.

“They could be doing anything to him,” she said, her throat suddenly tight. “What if we’re—”

“If we were really too late, he wouldn’t still be on this list,” Jack said, transferring Luke’s information to his map reader. “One way or another.” He gave the sonic lipstick back to Maria and nodded down the hall. “This way. Stay behind me.”

Two other hallways branched off theirs after several meters; Jack checked both and headed left, where the corridor was wider and a bit taller. “If we get into trouble,” he said quietly, “I’ve got a couple smoke grenades, and I might need you to throw one to give us some cover. And if I tell you to run, do it. The sonic lipstick should get you back out the way we came.”

“I’m not leaving without Luke!”

“Oh yes you are,” Jack said. “This is Torchwood, and we’re going by my rules now, one of which happens to be that it’s a real bad idea to get two kids in deep trouble instead of one.” Maria opened her mouth to argue, and he silenced her with a look. “Like I said: this is Torchwood now, and that means you do what I say, even if you don’t like it. There’s no other way everyone’s getting out of here. I won’t leave without Luke,” he added. “Way too much death lately. But if you need to, you will.”

Maria subsided at that, and for several more minutes they followed Jack’s map in silence. Then two Company employees rounded the corner ahead and saw them, the lab-coated woman grabbing for the mobile on her belt and the uniformed man whipping up his gun. Jack reacted just as quickly—he shoved Maria behind him and toward the wall with one hand, raising his gun in the other, body shifting sideways into an unmistakable firing stance.

Neither man got the chance to fire. The lights flickered once, and then a nearby explosion rocked the building, throwing Maria off balance as something like a muffled second explosion she couldn’t hear tore past the edges of her awareness and all the lights went out.

Maria staggered against the wall, head spinning, half deafened—or maybe her ears were fine and everything was utterly, deathly silent. Emergency lights came up a few seconds later, filling the hallway with a dim reddish glow. All three adults had collapsed where they stood, apparently unconscious, but she couldn’t afford much time to understand why the dampener in her ear had protected her so well when people who worked here had no such protection. Whatever had just
happened, the Company hadn’t expected or planned it, and that meant she had to take advantage of it as fast as possible.

Jack lay on his side, handgun fallen from limp fingers. She scrambled to him and shook his arm. No response. “Jack, come on, wake up!” She shook him again, harder, and bent to shout in his ear as loudly as she dared: “Jack!”

That brought her close enough to his face to realize he wasn’t breathing.
EVERYONE is having a bad day at this point.

She froze, staring. No rise and fall of his chest, no air coming from his mouth. Hands shaking, she pressed two fingers to one side of his neck, then the other, then his wrist. No pulse.

Maria sat back on her heels, heart pounding, her breathing suddenly loud in the silent corridor. She could see the Company employees’ chests moving. Only Jack had died.

“Oh my God,” she mumbled, voice trembling. “What do I…” The other earpiece. She touched it once. “Sarah Jane? Are you there?” Quiet static filled her ear.

Jack was dead, she couldn’t reach Sarah Jane, and she couldn’t remember what little CPR she’d been taught in school.

But Jack couldn’t be dead. It wasn’t possible. He’d just been moving, talking, in control—protecting her, trying to help Luke, and now he was dead because he’d tried to save them—

Maria, there are two types of people in the world: those who panic, and then there’s us.

Okay. No panicking. She couldn’t save Jack, but she might still be able to help Luke. Jack had that map—she could get to his cell, hope the Company people stayed unconscious, and…what, get him out with the sonic lipstick? What if Luke was unconscious? And Jack, she couldn’t just leave him here—

“There are people who panic, and then there’s us,” she repeated under her breath, making herself move past the paralysis. She had half a plan, and that was something. Trying not to touch Jack’s body, she eased the map display out of his pocket and stood, gripping the sonic lipstick in her other hand. The display screen was blank—the power surge had somehow knocked it out too—but she pressed its power button and the map filled the screen again, to her immense relief.

She had to go past all three bodies, and that simple fact nearly brought back all the panic she needed to suppress—but without giving herself time to think about it, she relieved both Jack and the Company man of their guns, hanging onto Jack’s old-fashioned revolver, finger carefully away from the trigger, and sticking the other in one pocket. Only Jack had been fast enough to cock the hammer on his weapon, and she didn’t know enough about guns to know how to ease it off again.

Before she could think too much and stop herself, she broke into a trot down the hallway, leaving them behind as soon as she turned the corner. The map led her straight on for a bit, then around another turn and another, the hallways still dim and silent. She couldn’t even hear anything like ventilation, and this far underground—no, she was not going to add running out of air to her list of things to worry about. She couldn’t do anything about it except go faster anyway.

As she neared the spot marked on the screen, she began to see more people—all unconscious, sprawled in such a way she guessed they’d been out long before they hit the floor. None looked close to waking, but she picked up her pace anyway, thoroughly spooked.
How far had this…whatever it was…spread? Was everyone in the building unconscious, all the electricity offline? It might even have gone further, for that matter—

She turned down yet another corridor and stopped. “Luke!”

He didn’t look up. He was wearing a thin hospital gown of some kind—a lot like the way he’d been dressed when Maria had first met him, except then he’d looked alert and healthy, if confused. Now he was staggering, one hand on the wall for balance, the other pressed to his temple as if only that kept his head from splitting apart, eyes squeezed shut, face tight with pain. Both wrists and ankles were scraped nearly raw, and a trickle of blood came from his nose. As she watched, Luke doubled over, clapping both hands over his eyes. He stumbled against the wall and nearly fell.

Maria jammed the lipstick and map display in the pocket of her jacket and lunged to catch him. “Luke, oh my God, what did they—”

“Don’t touch me!” he cried, flinching back toward the wall. The quick movement seemed too much for him, and he slid down to his knees, still gripping his head in both hands.

The bottom fell out of Maria’s stomach. They’d come too late, maybe minutes too late—the Company had already made him their slave and harnessed his abilities, leaving him as good as gone, and Jack was dead for no reason at all—

Ruthlessly she crushed her panic, again, and crouched by Luke. He was shaking. “It’s me, Maria. I’m here with Sarah Jane and—and Jack came for you too. We’re going to get you out, okay?” She reached for his shoulder tentatively.

He twitched back, said hoarsely, “Don’t, I might…you could…” But his eyes opened then, and despite how bloodshot they looked, his obvious recognition when he looked at her made her want to shout with relief. He could remember them, then, he might be okay—and she nearly missed the next thing he said: “You died…you and Clyde both, and your dad, and—and the other kids at school—I saw it, I saw you die—but me and Sarah Jane, he kept us like—like pets, like toys—he wanted us to see—”

Alarmed all over again, she said, “Luke, we’ve got to get out of here—there was some kind of weird explosion and everyone’s knocked out, but—”

“I think…that was me.” He braced a hand on the wall and tried to stand. “I felt—everything was burning, and I couldn’t—couldn’t stop it, something snapped loose and—and went out of me, but I didn’t mean to—” He pushed himself upright, swaying, and Maria reached to steady him. Again he pulled back. “Don’t—I don’t want to hurt you—”

So Luke had accidentally released some kind of psychic blast that rendered everyone unconscious and knocked out all the electricity? Well, he had pulled down the moon, after all…

Luke had killed Jack?

Sickened, Maria shook off the thought, doubly grateful for the dampener she wore. It had to have protected Sarah Jane too, then. “I’m okay, see? I didn’t get knocked out or anything. I’ll be fine.” He nodded, finally, and she pulled his arm over her shoulders, her other arm wrapped around his waist, careful all the same not to touch skin against skin. She had to keep the gun pointed at the floor, too, which made things awkward and left no hands free for the map, so she’d just have to remember what turns to take.

Luke’s eyes flicked to hers, open only to slits, and she got the distinct impression he was seeing
something other than her. “Gun,” he whispered.

“What—?”

He tugged it from her hand, moved his fingers over it without even looking. The hammer clicked back into place, then the cylinder popped up to reveal its full load of bullets. He snapped it shut again and kept the gun, finger near the trigger, still not looking at it.

Maria decided she really didn’t want to know where he’d learned that. “Come on,” she said, fishing out the map reader, “this way…”

Luke began to shuffle painfully forward, and she kept careful pace with him, holding on tighter every time he stumbled. At this rate they’d never make it out in time, but judging by how much he was leaning on her, only her help was keeping him upright and moving: he couldn’t go any faster.

He staggered again, nearly taking her down with him, and his breathing went ragged, then turned into a barely audible moan: “Stop it—don’t—” More blood leaked from his nose as lines of strain deepened across his face.

“What did they do to you?” Maria whispered.

His eyes opened again, briefly, and she stared; they weren’t just bloodshot now but entirely red in places where a few tiny capillaries had burst. “Didn’t. Not…them. Not really.” He managed a few more paces, moving as if every step cost him. “I’ve got memories that aren’t mine, I’m remembering things that never happened—the end of the world and he’s killing everyone and everything’s full of fire and death—” He took a breath that sounded half like a sob. “My head…is killing me…”

“Okay,” Maria said, trying to take more of his weight, “we’re just going to keep walking, we’ll go as slow as you need, one step at a time, Sarah Jane’s waiting for us—” Sarah Jane. Where was she? Luke would never make it up all these stairs, and the lifts wouldn’t be working, unless she could fix them with the sonic lipstick which was a very distant possibility at best—and then they still had to get back, two years in the future, and she had no idea—

_No panicking. One step at a time._ She maneuvered them around two unconscious Company employees. At least none of them seemed to be waking up, and that was good, because Luke couldn’t possibly run in this state—

She froze.

Footsteps, loud in the silence, maybe someone running, getting closer very fast. Luke raised the gun; tremors up and down his arm made the muzzle waver.

Maria fumbled with the map. There had to be somewhere to hide, or another way out—but no, there was nothing until the hall where the footsteps were coming from, and they had to go that way. She backed up, very nearly pulling Luke off balance, and then the footsteps’ owner came around the owner and it was Jack.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Jack, Sarah Jane, and Maria get Luke back to Torchwood, but it doesn't actually help at all with the terrible day he's having. Time to call the Doctor.

Maria gaped at him. “You were dead!”

“I got better.” He took the gun back, then shrugged out of his coat, draped it over Luke’s shoulders, and swung the boy up into his arms.

Luke’s eyes flew open with a sudden harsh breath, and his entire body convulsed. “No,” he gasped, “no…hurts—”

“Whoa,” Jack said, looking down at him, pausing halfway through a turn back in the other direction. “You gonna be okay there?”

“You died,” Luke whispered. His eyes clenched shut again, hands forming fists under Jack’s coat. “So many times—he killed you—every day, all year, it never happened and it’s in my head, every last one—” He drew a shuddering breath. “I am everyone, and…now I’ve got all their memories, they’re all dying and the world’s ending—fires, and radiation pits, and fusion mills, and camps full of slaves, and—and those spheres—everyone’s dying—!”

Jack’s face went very white, and he muttered, “Oh, God.” He broke into a quick stride that forced Maria to run to keep up, and she was glad he wasn’t wasting time slowing down for her. “Reason number I-don’t-know-how-many to hurry. You get anything from Sarah Jane yet? My earpiece is dead.”

“Just static after the—when the power went—”

“You’ll have to reset it—try the sonic lipstick on setting, um…six? Six or seven. It’s been a while.”

Maria unhooked the Bluetooth-like device from her ear and tried it, barely managing to keep the lipstick steady while jogging. Something popped, and when she slipped it back on, the static was gone. “Sarah Jane? Can you hear me?”

“Maria! Where are you? I thought you two had tripped some kind of psychic defense, but it knocked everyone out up here and took out the power—”

“We’ve got Luke and we’re on our way back, we’ll meet you—where we came in?” She glanced at Jack, who nodded, eyes fixed straight ahead. “Yeah. In the woods.”

They made the stairs, finally, and Jack barely slowed his pace, boots ringing off the steps and echoing through the stairwell. Maria kept up as best she could; one of these days she should really take up running so she’d be prepared next time she had to do it in earnest. Adrenaline could only do so much.

Every door easily gave way to the sonic lipstick this time, although Maria had a bit of trouble on
the first one—she was shaking and breathing too hard to hold the lipstick steady. Luke was silent as she worked, as he’d been since they started, but the thought that he was getting better died the second she glanced at him. Every line of his body was rigid, his face drawn tight with pain.

Jack kicked the door open the instant she had it unlocked, and his expression as he passed her told her clearer than words that Luke wasn’t the only one suffering—but for Jack, it was guilt, and she didn’t know why.

They passed more bodies on the way up, some in the halls and a few on the stairs, all still deeply unconscious—except one man near the top level, a Primatech man who probably dealt in nothing but paper, who began to stir as they approached. Jack paused just long enough to give the employee a swift, practiced kick to the head, and the man went limp again.

Jack ignored the back exit this time, finding a side door on the map and bringing them out just past a wide parking lot. Maria squinted into the bright sunlight—had it been so glaring when they’d entered the building?—and followed Jack. Sarah Jane met them just inside the trees, and she paled when she saw Luke in Jack’s arms. “Is he—”

“That’s why we’re going back to Torchwood,” Jack said. “Right now.” He found the spot where they’d appeared and lowered Luke to the ground; Sarah Jane caught him as his knees buckled, and he flinched at her touch even through Jack’s thick coat. Jack scooped up the beacon, flipped up the top, and fired off a quick pulse of white-hot light. “Thirty seconds,” he said. “They’ll know to bring us back because on that end it should show us already on our way back—a high probability of it, actually, because it measures spikes in—never mind, it’s really complicated.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Maria muttered.

Jack pocketed the beacon, reached for her hand, and gripped Luke’s arm. “Circle up again, grab hands—I mean it this time, we don’t have a field to keep us together.” Sarah Jane took Maria’s other hand, holding Luke’s arm to make a circle, just in time for another flash of light that seemed to come from everywhere to swallow them. Then dark nothingness again, no body, no up or down, no light no dark no anything—and then she was on her knees on a cold metal grate in Cardiff, emptying her stomach over the edge.

“You found him!” Martha exclaimed, hurrying down to meet them.

Jack spat into the water one last time, stood, and picked Luke up again. “Yeah,” he said. “You’ve got a new patient, Dr. Jones, and we’ve got a problem.” He carried Luke up to the Hub’s main level, then down into an odd circular chamber filled with medical equipment, a bare metal table in the center (an _autopsy_ table? Maria thought, following him, fear twisting in her stomach). Martha hurried ahead of him and unrolled a thick pad on the table, making it look at least a bit more intended for live occupants. A pillow went at the head of the table, and Jack gently settled Luke on the makeshift bed, tugging the sides of the greatcoat up around him for warmth. “Make sure you’re wearing gloves,” he told Martha. “Could be important.”

Maria waited on the stairs with Sarah Jane, watching as Martha hooked Luke up to a few different monitors. A heart-rate display began to beep softly, and a faint crease appeared between the doctor’s brows when she glanced at it. “What have you got, Jack?”

“Theories,” Jack said. “The only one I’m almost sure of is significant psychic trauma from sustained telepathic assault, but we kind of expected that. Work from there.”

Martha nodded and returned her attention to Luke, sliding an IV needle into the back of his hand. He flinched at that, but he seemed to relax again—or, at least, return to being no more tense than he’d been before the IV—when Martha put a hand on his shoulder and began explaining quietly
what she was doing. He hadn’t moved otherwise except to curl up on his side, clenched fists shaking beneath the edge of Jack’s coat, breathing labored.

The entire time she tended Luke, Martha wore an expression of professional calm and competence, looking unflurried while she checked vital signs and gently cleaned the scrapes at his wrists and ankles, as much as she could get to without asking him to move. She found another patch of drying blood on the back of his head and paused over an odd mark on the side of his neck, finally touching a wand-like instrument to it. When Martha turned back to Jack, though, her carefully schooled façade fell away into unmistakable worry, and she said in an undertone, “What exactly am I dealing with here?”

Jack leaned against the wall, arms folded. “You’re the doctor. You tell me.”

Martha made a helpless gesture. “Very high heart rate, unusual brain activity, some kind of widespread neural damage…” She lowered her voice further, moving closer to the stairs. “From what I can see, the pain centers in his brain are going crazy, like his body’s under some kind of major attack, but from what little I’ve looked at him, I can’t see anything physical that could be causing it. He only has a few minor external injuries, and the other scans are coming up clean. I’ll notice if any of his vitals change, and I’ve got him on an IV, but…” She hesitated, glancing back at Luke, then looked up at Maria and Sarah Jane.

Jack tilted his head toward the stairs, and they both went up to the main level just inside the medical chamber’s entryway. Martha stayed nearest the railing, and Maria stepped up beside her, not wanting to let Luke out of her sight. She could sense the other members of Torchwood watching, distracted from their work, but she didn’t look at them.

“Here’s the thing,” Martha told them quietly. “I’ve seen plenty of weird stuff, working here, working for UNIT, and I’ve never seen this intense of a physical reaction from a telepathic attack, not after the actual attack is over. At this point, he should be showing signs of recovery. For all I know, there’s still something in his mind that’s causing it, but it’s unlikely to show up on a scan of his physical brain. I tried giving him a muscle relaxant and a mild sedative, but neither had any effect—whatever’s going on in his head, it’s got his body too wired to respond to anything like that. The Company must have injected a radioisotope in him, too, for tracking purposes, and I neutralized that, but…there’s not much else I can do.” She looked hard at Jack. “You said you’ve got theories. Let’s hear some.”

“Okay,” Jack said, “let’s say we’ve got this evil megalomaniac with an enormous telepathic satellite network. Let’s say he creates hell on Earth for a year, at the end of which that network is turned against him to make a huge burst of telepathic energy, enough to, I don’t know, restore this other alien to his normal age and allow the destruction of a paradox machine, completely reversing that whole year of hell on Earth like it never happened. Only it turns out the satellite network’s still there, and maybe all the telepathic energy directed through it was used up or dispersed, but guess what? All those memories are still there, even more powerful for being fueled by pain and fear—nothing like them for raw strength. And maybe it’s not a problem, maybe it just dissipates—or maybe somebody’s mind gets blasted open and draws it all in like a giant magnet, never mind the two years in the way.”

Martha stared at him. She looked stricken. “But…the year that never was…time reversed itself. It never happened.”

“Time and memory are funny things,” Jack said, his tone a good deal grimmer than his words.

Maria found her voice. “You mean he’s got an entire year of everyone’s—” She broke off. Jack looked at her steadily. “I am everyone…memories that aren’t mine, things that never happened…” She swallowed hard. “He said the world was ending. ‘He’s killing everyone.’
That’s what he said.”

“And the spheres,” Jack reminded her.

The color drained from Sarah Jane’s face. “We saw the broadcast—Saxon, the Toclafane, the Valiant—”

Jack nodded. “Here’s what I think: he’s been more sensitive since the whole business with the Xylok, so the memories started leaking in through his dreams. Probably harmless, ultimately, at that point. Then the Company goons start testing him, pushing his mind to its limits, trying to force it open so they can use him. Only they push a little too hard, and suddenly, he’s a human lightning rod for a year’s worth of horrible memories that didn’t happen, and it’s so powerful it overflows his head in a huge psychokinetic shockwave. And now, I’m guessing that not only is that flood of memories overwhelming his brain by sheer size alone, he’s probably also getting them as…first-person experiences.”

“And that means, what, a year’s worth of memories from each one of six billion people?” Sarah Jane rubbed a hand over her eyes. “That many memories…”

“And every last one of death, terror, torture, despair, all that fun stuff,” Jack said. “Doubly powerful in their own right, let alone combined.”

“That’s…one person can’t hold all that.”

“No.” Jack looked down then, breaking eye contact for the first time. “No, they can’t. Not for long. Luke, maybe longer than most. But going by the way his body’s reacting…all that horror is overloading his brain, and it’s killing him.”

Sarah Jane’s face grew even paler, and her eyes looked very wide and dark. “There is something we can do. There is always something.”

“Sarah Jane,” Jack said quietly, gripping her shoulder with one hand, “I am not letting him die if I can help it. Not after—” His eyes flickered toward another corner of the Hub, a room Maria had seen earlier that looked like a miniature morgue. “There has been too much death here, far too much death. But as of right now I have exactly zero idea how to help him.”

“You’ve got all this alien technology,” Maria cried, “there has to be something—”

Jack grimaced. “Sure. We’ve got a mind probe—”

“And if the backlash didn’t do it, the probe alone would kill him outright,” Martha finished.

“Exactly. We need to bleed off all those excess memories, whatever he can’t deal with, and nothing we have—none of the reasonably friendly aliens we can easily contact—can do that. I’d haul Petrelli in here but I don’t think any of them are capable of it either, not on this scale.”

Maria stared down at Luke, curled into a fetal ball on the table below. A shudder shook him, then another, and then his face twisted, and he let out a choked gasp. Martha hurried down the stairs to him and snatched a metal basin from one shelf; she held him up as he vomited into it, then helped him lie back again. She frowned at one of his monitors, rolled a small oxygen tank to the bed, and slipped an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. Maria watched, gripping the railing so hard her knuckles turned bloodless. “Okay then, that Doctor that Sarah Jane’s always talking about, can’t he do something if he’s so wonderful?”

“He is telepathic,” Sarah Jane said absently, all her attention focused on her son. “I don’t know how much…it might be enough…” She let out a long breath. “And we have no way to reach him.
Harriet Jones’s subwave network was a one-time operation.”

Martha straightened, her hand on Luke’s shoulder as his breathing calmed slightly, and stared up at her. “We have, though,” she said. “He’s still got my phone. I forgot because it didn’t work, last time, but that was only the Medusa Cascade.” She fished in her pocket and tossed the mobile up to Jack, who snatched it easily out of the air. He pressed a few buttons and turned the speakerphone on so they could all hear it ringing—one, twice, three times.

“Does he keep it in the TARDIS?” Jack asked.

Martha bit her lip. “Don’t know. I think he had it on the console last time. I told him to keep it on him. His pockets are more than big enough.” She adjusted the flow on the oxygen tank, frown lines reappearing as she looked down at Luke.

“Come on, pick up,” Jack muttered.

The mobile kept ringing, and then, finally, “Ah, whoops—Martha?”

“Not quite—”

“Jack, hi, thought you two looked awfully cozy last I saw you—kinda busy right now though, you know, the usual—” The voice on the other end was breathing hard, almost as if he were running—and if his encounters with other aliens at all resembled Maria’s, she guessed he was.

“Doctor, listen,” Jack interrupted, “it’s Sarah Jane. Her son’s in trouble.”

An abrupt silence, then, “You’re in Cardiff? What time is it?”

Jack glanced at his watch. “Eighteen-thirty-four local time.”

“Give me five minutes.” The line clicked.

Jack snapped shut the mobile. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard him shut up that fast.”

Maria pushed away from the railing, seized by a sudden restless energy. They couldn’t do anything but wait for an alien who only might be able to help? She joined Martha down by Luke, wishing she could do something to help. They’d got him away from the Company, and it wouldn’t matter at all if the Doctor didn’t show up to finish the job.

Sweat had plastered Luke’s hair to his forehead, and Martha brushed it back, tugging a bit on the oxygen mask’s strap to make it lie more comfortably. Maria watched her, arms folded, shifting from foot to foot. Under the mask, Luke’s breathing still rattled in his chest, and she could see a trickle of bright-red blood at his nose, another at the corner of one tightly closed eye.

Was this what it looked like to watch someone die?

Without thinking, she reached for his hand, curling her fingers over his clenched fist. She had just enough time to remember that nobody had made skin-to-skin contact with him since before the Company had taken him and that there was probably a good reason for this, and then everything vanished in a rush of heat and pain and she wasn’t Maria anymore, she was a young woman from Glasgow and she hadn’t even tried to run away, she’d been too scared for that, she’d done what they told her to, worked in the fusion mill until she was sick with exhaustion, and now she was really running, terrorized adrenaline giving her strength even as it choked out every thought but mindless panic—and she couldn’t run any faster, nor any longer, her breath was tearing through her lungs and throat and her body was going to give out any second but it didn’t matter anyway because the sphere flying behind her was faster than she was, it was playing with her, nothing
more, it could kill her at any time and it just wanted to make her run, make her so afraid she’d throw up if she had the breath for it—

Her foot caught on a loose stone in the road and she fell headlong, ankle twisting under her, knees and palms tearing open on the rough paving. She scrambled to get up, flee again, but her body had nothing left, and she could only roll over in time to see the sphere swoop down toward her, firelight glinting off its polished metal surface, laughter like that of a robotic child-demon echoing around her. Then its razor-sharp blades snapped out and it was on her, stabbing through clothes and skin and muscle into her stomach, between her ribs, fire exploding through her and she didn’t have the breath to scream as she died—

Luke flung Maria’s hand off, and she staggered, gasping, her head pounding. Phantom pain like thin knives sparked across her torso. Martha grabbed her shoulder to steady her, but Maria barely felt it, staring at Luke. She’d touched him for less than a second. This was what he was seeing and feeling, from billions of people, all at once?

She felt sick. Martha looked at her in concern. “What happened?”

“I think—I think I just caught a tiny bit of what Luke’s going through.” Maria swallowed, forcing down the nausea. “Jack was right. It’s first-person. It’s…” There really wasn’t a word for it. “Awful.”

“Yeah,” Martha murmured. “It was, and all of it at once—I don’t even want to think—” She raised her head then as if she’d heard something and broke out in a real smile. “Hear that?”

Jack and Sarah Jane apparently did, and they clearly recognized the sound too—an odd grinding sort of *whoosh*, coming from the center of the Hub and getting louder.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Telepathic nonsense, Luke is still having a bad day, emo Doctor is emo, Ten uses one of his catchphrases.

Luke had thought vaguely, at one point when the Xylok was in his head, that things couldn’t get worse. He’d thought it again during the Company’s last tests: what could be worse than the feeling of invisible, intangible claws prizing his brain apart?

This was worse. What had taken their place and blasted them away was worse.

Billions of memories churned in his head, rage and terror and destruction, boiling through him with a ferocity that hurt almost as much as the individual memories themselves, but every memory—flashing through his vision in eternally long nanoseconds—carried its own pain. Choking fear hammered him, stomach-twisting grief from parents who watched the spheres kill their children, the quick burn of those disintegrated, the gut-punch and searing pain of people knifed to death by the spheres’ thin blades.

And the music, an undercurrent to all of it, trying to drag him down deeper into a swirl of fire and black and red—the jangling disharmony of a hundred songs at once, snatches of words like “voodoo” and “poison” spinning into recognizable form now and then; a devil chorus of tinny, child-like voices chanting, “We will fly and blaze and slice! We will fly and blaze and slice!”

And behind it all, behind all the fire and death, a constant, faint rhythm, never changing, never stopping: tap-tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap-tap.

He couldn’t think, couldn’t force anything resembling rationality through the fire, but he knew with a bone-deep certainty that if the pressure and pain and memories didn’t kill him, didn’t overload his brain and force his heart to the bursting point, the drumming would drive him mad.

Sarah Jane’s voice pierced the cacophony in his head. “Luke, the Doctor’s here,” and he could hear her capitalize the title. Name. Whatever it was. The Doctor—she’d talked about him before, an absurdly long scarf or a yellow roadster, and they’d both seen him on TV, twice, then again on Mr. Smith’s screen, and those were real memories, he knew they were real, if he could just stay there—

He cracked one eye open to look at the man bounding down the steps, and saw first a brown pinstriped suit, trainers, crazy hair, and then everything dissolved. Grief, loss, pain, a thin and deadly rage (buried, sometimes denied entirely, but still very much alive because Luke could feel it like a thread of fire underlying everything else), an undercurrent of alien terror, a vast loneliness—the Doctor was bleeding all of it, radiating from him right through everything else into Luke’s head and it hurt—

don’t look at the eyes don’t look you’ll drown

He squeezed his eyes shut, curled tighter.

“Oops, sorry about that,” a vaguely familiar voice said close beside him, and the rush of alien
emotion cut off. “Wasn’t very clever, was it…” Chair legs scraped across the floor. “Mind you, lately I haven’t exactly… Never mind. I’m the Doctor, in case you don’t remember, which is actually kind of funny because normally it’s got all of nothing to do with medicine. And you’d be Luke Smith, man of the hour—I hear you’re nearly as brilliant as me, and I don’t often say that.” The chair scooted closer. “I’m just going to take a look inside that head of yours. Can you move your hands a little?”

An explosion behind his eyes. Gleaming metal spheres swooping toward a man at the edge of a burning pit, driving him back until he falls, body shredded by fire and radiation before he hits bottom, family watching, screaming. Tinny child voices laughing laughing laughing. With an effort of will Luke pulled his hands forward, fingers balling into fists in front of his eyes as if he might block out the images that way. Didn’t help any.

One hand settled on his temple, and another turned his head a bit to touch the opposite side. The Doctor’s fingers were cool against his skin, a slight but welcome relief from the firestorm in his head.

“Right then,” the Doctor murmured, “let’s see what’s going on in there,” and then he was inside Luke’s mind. There was no other way to describe it—the Doctor’s presence didn’t hurt, didn’t do the walking-nuclear-reactor trick like before because probably he was shielding himself now, and it felt nothing like any of the invasions earlier, but he was there all the same, an otherness Luke couldn’t ignore.

That was good, actually. It was new and different and if he could focus on that, he could keep his mind from flying apart for just a little bit longer and a little bit longer—

A scream shredded his senses, another sphere, more laughter, flashing metal, blood. A pregnant woman leaning against scorched cinderblock, back pressed to the wall, bleeding, terrified; three spheres hovering, laughing, razor-sharp metal glinting as one extends its knives, they want to have fun and no one needs new children anymore—

Luke’s eyes were already closed and he couldn’t block out what he knew was coming.

“Enough,” the Doctor said sharply, voice a little strained, and merciful blackness swallowed the woman and the spheres and the blackened concrete. Luke felt something happen, like a switch being flipped, and the tidal wave of new horror froze, vanished, and that still left millions of lives and deaths in his head but if this made his mind an open wound then the Doctor had just stopped the bleeding (he could even recognize that at any other time he’d call that a very imperfect analogy), and it still hurt, searing burning behind his eyes, but this was better, this was so much better he realized he’d forgotten what better felt like.

“Right then,” the Doctor said. “Now nothing new is coming in, we can actually do something about this private horror show you’ve got.”

“Thank you,” Luke managed. The oxygen mask muffled his voice, but the Doctor seemed to understand him anyway.

“Don’t thank me just yet,” the Doctor said, his tone light, but the disquiet and guilt that colored his presence in Luke’s head were unmistakable.

His awareness of the alien other in his head intensified as the Doctor pressed in deeper, gently, skimming just the surface of numberless memories. Luke didn’t want to follow him and couldn’t help it—the Doctor’s orbit might not be able to keep him safe from the storm, but there was power here, a thread of strange new music he’d never heard before, power enough to keep everyone else safe from him. So he saw it again, everything the Doctor saw, more fire and metal and terror and
“I’m sorry,” the Doctor murmured, and his voice seemed to come from inside Luke’s head, “I’m so sorry,” and the guilt was back again, stronger this time, not the vague sense attached to everything and everyone that Luke had caught from him before, but sharper and very, very specific: he had caused this, right here, this brilliant dying 14-year-old, this and all the horror in Luke’s head, had made them all and oh yes, this was his soul too, this and all the other deaths he remembered and Davros hadn’t, the ones Davros hadn’t even known to show him, all the ones that would come after—his legacy, death, the destroyer of worlds—and he’d failed them all, hadn’t he, over and over again, Donna, brilliant, amazing Donna, and all the others and time past present future it all ran together and it didn’t matter because he’d failed all of them, Koschei Jack Ace Rose Martha Fitz Romana Gallifrey

it’s burning it’s still burning always burning

“Stop that,” the Doctor said gently, and Luke got the distinct sense of someone shaking him off, as if he’d been riding piggyback and holding on too hard. “Bad enough for Reinette to step into my head, but you don’t need to start looking at the skeletons in my closet too. You’ve already got way too much in there to deal with.”

He’d slipped inside the Doctor’s head? He’d never done anything like that before. He wanted to ask where all that guilt and sorrow came from, especially since Mum had told him about Davros a little after they all brought Earth home, and she’d been happy, almost no guilt on her at all that he could see, but he didn’t have the energy to ask anything.

“Luke, listen to me,” the Doctor said, his voice quiet and urgent, and Luke wondered if maybe he was doing even worse than he thought, if his body was giving way under the pressure of memories already. “I’ve stopped more of these memories from coming in, but that’s all I can do on my own. You’ve got...I don’t even know what kind of brain you’ve got in there, to be honest, and if you knew me at all you’d know to mark your calendar because it’s not often I admit to not knowing things, but I think you’ve got a lot more than a genius brain and a whole lot of telekinetic potential. There’s stuff in here you should be able to use, telepathically speaking. Or not speaking. Whatever. But the thing is, you’re holding onto those memories hard and I don’t think you even know how you’re doing it, but they’re killing you, and I can’t help you unless you let them go.”

Panic flashed through him. “I can’t,” he said, and that took all the energy adrenaline had given him, but the rush of memories—real memories, his memories, only they weren’t good ones, they were drowned in the fire too—from the Company’s building gave the Doctor all the reasons he could possibly want. He couldn’t let go: someone would get hurt. He might hurt Mum or Maria or these people he barely knew who’d tried to help him and he couldn’t.

“No one’s going to get hurt,” the Doctor said. “I’ll take the memories. You let them go and I’ll deal with them.”

He didn’t want that either. Whatever had the Doctor thinking this was his fault, he didn’t deserve to take this on.

“This is not your burden to bear, Luke Smith,” the Doctor said quietly. “It’s far too heavy for someone who’s innocent of it. It’s my responsibility.”

Luke struggled a moment longer, and when he finally whispered, “Okay,” it felt like weakness, like giving up, and he didn’t know why. “I knew,” he said, and it was getting harder, saying anything, and he wondered if that meant he was starting to die—but he couldn’t, not now. “Felt it happen—a major temporal shift—so shouldn’t I have known something sooner? About Saxon?”
“No,” the Doctor said, “no. I told you, you’re innocent of this. Let it go.”

“Don’t...know how—”

“Just relax. I’ve got you.”

So he let go, finally, a mental release like unclenching fists he’d curled tight enough to cut open his palms, and it felt a little like dying: a flood of fire tearing out from behind his eyes, ripping him loose from whatever precarious moorings he’d made, but the Doctor said he was strong enough to take it and he was, if it was a storm then this alien was the only solid ground left. Luke felt the Doctor’s fingers on his temples shake, just a little, as the torrent went through, but his mental presence and its alien music held firm, the music here was stronger than the discordance and the death-melodies in Luke’s head, and the memories kept pouring out.

He felt the last ones go, dragging free reluctantly like they wanted to leave trailing tendrils behind, but the Doctor took all of it into himself and Luke was free again, emptied, and he didn’t have time to enjoy the sudden absence of pain or to thank the Doctor before he plunged into an exhausted sleep.

***

Maria stood at the railing, watching the Doctor and Luke below. Sarah Jane trusted this man completely, she’d learned that a long time ago, but everything she’d seen so far of mental powers—well, the Doctor was doing something with Luke’s mind, and that made her nervous.

So she knew something was happening when the Doctor’s shoulders grew suddenly tense with some invisible building strain, and then Luke went limp and she nearly leaped over the railing. The Doctor pulled his hands away and looked up at Sarah Jane. “It’s all right. He’s sleeping.” He carefully lifted the oxygen mask off Luke’s face, then rubbed one hand over his own eyes, hard, and stood up. “It’s all gone.”

“So he’s all right, then?” Sarah Jane asked, releasing her death grip on the railing and taking a quick step away from it. She was shaking. “He’s going to be fine?”

The Doctor nodded and climbed the stairs to their level. Sarah Jane hurried past all of them to take the chair next to Luke that the Doctor had just left.

“So what did you do, then?” Jack asked. “Technically we should probably be studying you, so as long as you’re here, I can at least ask—”

“TARDIS. Nap. Tea. In that order,” the Doctor said, brushing past him toward the blue box, one hand against the wall as if for balance. “Talk later.” He disappeared inside.

Jack and Martha exchanged a glance, eyebrows raised.

“What?” Maria asked.

“Well, here’s the thing,” Jack said. “There are a lot of ways you could accurately describe the Doctor. ‘Strangely sexy’ would be one of them—”

Martha rolled her eyes, but she was definitely fighting a grin.

“As would ‘talkative,’” Jack continued. “Or, less kindly, ‘has a giant mouth and never shuts it.’ But ‘laconic’? Never.”
“So...he’s tired.”

“Really tired, then,” Martha said. “I have no idea where he gets all his energy, because he almost never sleeps. Doesn’t need to much. It’s a Time Lord thing, apparently.”

“Well,” Jack said, “considering how many of us here have TARDIS keys, somebody can go in and bother him if we think he’s been in there too long.”

“You think he’s being concerned,” Martha told Maria, “but it’s just because he knows it’s the one chance he’s got for getting in bed with the Doctor.”

“What do you take me for?” Jack said, looking exaggeratedly hurt. “I wouldn’t cheat on Ianto.”

“That’s because it makes me grumpy, and I’m no fun when I’m grumpy,” Ianto said without turning from his computer.

“Impressionable ears are listening, gentlemen,” Sarah Jane said from Luke’s side, but she didn’t really sound annoyed, and if the Torchwood team’s joking meant they’d relaxed now, things really must be all right, or at least a lot closer to it.

“Are you accusing us of corrupting this innocent young girl?” Jack demanded, still looking aggrieved. He draped an arm over Maria’s shoulders. “I’m not that bad. Right now? Totally normal Uncle Jack.”

Maria glanced aside at Martha, fighting giggles again. Jack seemed to have that effect. “And he still makes it sound dirty. How does he do that?”

“You really don’t want to know,” Ianto muttered, at the same time as Jack said, “Centuries of practice,” and let her go with one last tousle of her hair.

“Ha,” Maria said, although knowing Jack, he might well be telling the truth. She went back to lean on the railing, kicking one trainer against the pole. Innocent. Funny he should say that. After everything she’d seen with Sarah Jane, did that even apply to her anymore? She’d exploded...no, killed...one of the Slitheen on her first day at a new school. That had to count for something.

Sarah Jane bent over Luke, her hand wrapped around his, and brushed his hair away from his forehead. Maria realized she hadn’t seen him asleep before, and thought that he looked—young, really young, and that surprised her, even when she knew he’d been born barely a year ago. When he was sleeping, you couldn’t see the genius intellect or the social awkwardness or the sometimes-scary intuitive streak; he just looked like a child...a child who’d come to the absolute end of himself, who’d nearly died today, who’d experienced a holocaust inside his head, who’d been bombarded by a year of pain and death and terror from billions of people.

Luke, Maria thought, wasn’t innocent anymore. Not after that.

Clyde would probably tell her to pull her head out of the clouds and leave the philosophical stuff for people dumb enough to think about them, and maybe it was just Torchwood giving her dark thoughts—but Clyde wasn’t here, and she was at Torchwood, and Luke had gone through things she really didn’t think she could ever understand entirely.

Feeling disturbed, Maria pushed away from the railing and went to bother Ianto for some tea.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Luke's day is finally improving! Emo Doctor is still emo. I make another unsubtle Angel reference.

Luke woke up around the same time the Doctor did, a few hours later; he registered the distinctive creak of the TARDIS door and a corresponding rise in the level of other voices, and then Sarah Jane nearly suffocated him in a hug.

“I swear,” she said against his hair, though he didn’t think that was responsible for the shake to her voice, “I’m never letting you out of my sight again. I just found you, I can’t keep losing you!”

He hugged her back, amazed to feel his body responding properly again. “You didn’t. I’m not going to get lost anymore.”

She pulled back, gazing at him, hands still on his shoulders. “How do you feel?”

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” he said, almost wonderingly. “I’m…I’m all right, I think.”

“And…your mind?”

He thought about it. The firestorm was gone, but it had still happened; he had his own memory of the experience, and that was bad enough. “I don’t know.”

“Your patient’s awake, Dr. Jones,” Jack called, coming to lean against the railing. “And you didn’t even notice? For shame.”

“Considering I couldn’t fix him, I’m not sure he counts as my patient anymore,” Martha said, but she came down to check him over.

Luke sat up (no rush of dizziness, even) to let her take his vitals as the Doctor appeared beside Jack, resting his forearms on the rail. Now he could get a decent look at the Time Lord, and he realized the Doctor looked almost nothing like his image on Mr. Smith’s screen anymore. He’d been smiling then, for one, but now he seemed…worn, even haggard, a little bit lost. Luke didn’t think all of that was from the transfer of memories, either.

Martha shined a bright penlight in Luke’s eyes, and he called up to the Doctor, “Are you all right?”

“Me?” Beat. “I’m always all right.”


The Doctor shrugged, but it seemed to Luke that he avoided meeting anyone’s eyes. “I’ve got the TARDIS, you know. I let a lot of the memories bleed off into her.”

That was a relief, though Luke wasn’t entirely sure why, but Jack wasn’t satisfied. “Only half what I meant, Doctor. Rose and Donna—where are they?”
“And your—clone, or whatever you want to call him,” Martha said, straightening and setting aside her stethoscope from listening to Luke’s heart and lungs. “Your human-Time-Lord double. You… have him knocking about the TARDIS still, or something?”

The Doctor went very still, and everyone watched him, waiting. Luke had a sudden feeling that he did not want to hear the Doctor’s answer, because obviously the question meant more than it should have, and nothing that could turn his expressive face so expressionless could be good.

After a long moment the Doctor said, “He’s with Rose, back home on her parallel world with her family. So’s Donna. With her family, I mean, not with Rose.”

Martha wrapped an alien-looking monitor around Luke’s wrist. “But all the walls are sealed again. We’ve checked.”

“No,” Jack said, still watching the Doctor, his expression changing as if he was figuring out something that hurt him. “The human-Time-Lord metacrisis…he was mortal. You gave Rose a mortal Doctor.”

He nodded.

“And Donna…”

A long pause. The Doctor, barely audible: “She’s mortal too.”


“Only more so.”

“I’m sorry.”

The Doctor exhaled. “Yeah.”

“Completely healthy, as far as I can tell, aside from some obvious fatigue,” Martha told Sarah Jane, packing away her medical supplies. “Make sure you eat well and get plenty of rest for the next few days—take a break from the alien-chasing—and you’ll be fine.” She glanced in the Doctor’s direction with a hint of a worried frown. “Doctor, you want to add a prognosis?”

“Hm? Oh, sure.” He bounded down the stairs, his relief at something else to focus on unmistakable, but Luke caught the look in Jack’s eyes before his expression smoothed over into opacity—whatever exactly had happened to Donna, Jack knew what it meant, and it was bad.

(Of course it was bad. You couldn’t take on memories like that willingly, even temporarily, unless you’d already seen something terrible. You couldn’t take them willingly unless you’d done something terrible, too, or the sudden shock of the guilt of it would drive you mad if it didn’t kill you outright.

Maybe you had to be a bit mad with guilt and horror already and still standing, still as sane as you could be, so you could look into those depths and survive.

The Doctor, Luke thought, had already lost everything. That was the only reason he could keep losing everything without destroying himself too. He hadn’t become immune to loss; he just kept surviving it because he’d already survived it, kept going because that was what he did.)

“Am I giving my professional opinion here, or what?” the Doctor asked. “Mind you I dunno professional what, unless you count time-traveling, running an ungodly amount, and meddling in
things people wish I wouldn’t, as professions. Maybe I should have business cards. “Time Lord, 
last of; comes complete with bicardial circulatory system—and yes, the box is bigger on the inside, 
any other questions?”

Sarah Jane waited for him to finish, smiling faintly, and said, “That’s why people like us are so 
versatile. Job description too big for a card. Do you think...the memories won’t come back, will 
they?”

The Doctor hopped up to perch on the nearest free counter, making a quick grab for the container 
of vials he’d knocked off. “Nope. All gone. No more year-that-wasn’t overload in the cranium. 
All things considered that was a pretty unusual situation anyway—it’s not your ordinary 
apocalypse that needs a paradox machine to sustain it, after all.”

“So what happens to him now?” she asked. “Could this happen again? I know he’s got some kind 
of latent telekinetic potential, ever since Pharos, but....”

“Well use it on your own?” the Doctor said, directing the answer to Luke, though he hadn’t 
asked. “To be perfectly honest I have no idea. You’re new, Luke Smith, new and a little bit 
impossible—how’s that feel? Anyway nothing quite like this ought to happen again; I’ve closed 
off the bit in your brain that got blown wide open to receiving this stuff in the first place, so that 
ought to protect you pretty well, and if you ever do properly come into those latent abilities, you’ll 
be able to remove the block if you want to.”

“I might be able to use telepathy and telekinesis someday?” He didn’t know whether the idea 
scared him or thrilled him, though he was pretty certain he should at least find it interesting. 
Instead he wasn’t sure if he even wanted to care.

The Doctor shrugged. “Don’t know. The potential’s there, but can you use it unaided? You’ll 
have to find that out yourself, I think.”

“Whether he can or not,” Sarah Jane broke in, “the fact remains that this is the second time—third 
in a way—that Luke’s telekinetic potential has attracted unfriendly notice. And they’re operating 
on a far different level where I can’t protect him. This Company might try again, or someone else 
—”

“We can help you there,” Ianto called down. “Between us and Mr. Smith, we can keep him out of 
the world’s computer systems—”

“Won’t be enough,” Jack said. “The Company uses people more than computers. Not quite a 
creepy girl named Files and Records, but close. That’s okay though—the Petrelli kid still owes me 
a couple big favors, including one he doesn’t even know about, so he’ll take care of it if I lean on 
him a little.”

“Thank you.” Sarah Jane smiled at all of them. “So much.”

There was a lot of hugging after that, between nearly everyone, as the Doctor made vague moves 
to leave and Sarah Jane realized she, Maria, and Luke might not get home by morning even if they 
left right away. Everyone seemed far more interested in catching up, though. Luke hung back; he 
liked seeing these people happy, having the kind of brief reunion they couldn’t have earlier in the 
crisis he’d caused, but he couldn’t join in. Having seen almost every one of them tortured and 
killed seemed to have that effect.

He drifted into the main part of the Hub, gazing around at the neglected computers and alien 
equipment with little interest.
Maria found him there. “Jack said they’ve got a pterodactyl in here somewhere, but I didn’t know whether to believe him or not.”

“It could have fallen out of the Rift. I doubt Captain Jack was just—tugging your ankle? Is that how it goes?”

She laughed. “Close enough.”

“That doesn’t make sense. At least expressions like having the wool pulled over your eyes have some logical basis in reality.”

“I dunno. We can look it up when we get home if you want.”


“Are you...actually okay?”

He was struck by a new thought: he didn’t know if he could lie to her, to Clyde, to his mother. He’d never had a reason to before. Now he wanted to lie the same way the Doctor had lied to his friends. “You heard Dr. Jones. Completely healthy.”

She frowned at him. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

He found a smile for her; it felt false, brittle, like it might crack if he held on to it too long. “I’ll be okay.”

Maria started to reply, but then something whooshed by overhead, high up near the Hub’s ceiling, something giant and batlike. “Did you see that?”

“Yeah,” he said, staring upward, straining for a glimpse of the dinosaur, and he thought he felt something inside him begin to wake up, something he’d started to think had died under the onslaught of destruction in his head.

He wasn’t okay. But if he could still feel a tiny leap inside of wonder at the world, at an impossible beast fallen out of time, then maybe he would be.

He turned quickly. “The Doctor hasn’t left yet, has he?”

“No, he keeps acting like he’s going and then finding something to distract him or ask the Torchwood team about.” She paused, studying Luke a moment. “Seems like there’s something he wants to say and can’t bring himself to, maybe.”

The lonely god. Luke had a good idea what that something might be. “I need to thank him,” he said, and hurried back to the TARDIS. The Doctor was leaning against the door, talking with Sarah Jane about something Luke wasn’t close enough to hear (he did catch a bit of conversation between Jack and Ianto on his way by that seemed to involve Jack insisting that the favors Petrelli owed him had absolutely come from incidents involving the Rift and Claude Raines, though not both at once, and since when had Ianto started getting jealous anyway?).

“...but you remember what I said last time, don’t you?” Sarah Jane was saying as Luke approached. “You do have a family, an enormous one, all over space and time. I know it’s different, and I didn’t know about Rose and Donna then, but it’s still—”

“No, yeah, I know,” the Doctor said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“The thing is, Doctor, I thought I was alone for years—and I was, really, keeping to myself and
investigating and all, maybe cultivating the image of an eccentric a bit too much. And within the
space of a few days I found a family when I wasn’t looking for one at all, knew it was too late for
me, didn’t think I even wanted one. And I know you’ll find someone too. You always do.”

“Maybe,” the Doctor said, and then he grinned at her. “Sarah Jane Smith, are you worrying about
me? You have turned into quite the mother.”

“Can I see the TARDIS before you go?” Luke asked, deciding now was as good a time to
interrupt as any.

The Doctor’s smile broadened, and this time it looked a little more genuine. After a last hug for
Sarah Jane, he unlocked the TARDIS doors and followed Luke in.

Hearing Sarah Jane talk about her travels and seeing bits of the TARDIS on Mr. Smith’s screen
didn’t remotely compare to the real thing. The entire control room seemed to pulse gently with a
golden glow, and despite the haphazard appearance of the controls, he could feel that the ship was
alive.

temporal anomaly, isn’t it? The interior does and does not exist within the confines of the
exterior.”

“Very good,” the Doctor said, leaning against the console. “You don’t want me to try explaining
how TARDISes are grown, though, do you? Because some of it’s not too obscenely hard to
follow but there’s a point in there where even I get lost in the multidimensional physics and all.”

Luke shook his head and stepped in further, reached to touch one of the coral-like supports.
“She’s beautiful.”

“See, I knew you were smart.”

Luke circled the console, gazing at the Time Rotor, the jumble of alien mechanics that he thought
would almost make sense if he had a little more time. “I didn’t know I was going into your head.
Earlier, I mean. I didn’t know that could happen.”

“Oh, yeah, not often, I think I’ve only had one other person do that to me and it wasn’t quite
this...intense, I guess. Things slip. It happens.”

The Doctor’s light tone was back, the one that he hid behind, and Luke looked up at him.
“Doctor...I was born running, but you’ve never stopped. Why is that?”

“Oh...” The Doctor wasn’t looking at him now. “Lots of reasons. Keeps things interesting. Can’t
bear standing still. Drives me crazy, you know? It’s kind of like—one of those sharks, you know,
has to keep swimming because it’s only that forward motion that keeps water moving through its
gills.” He eyed Luke then, speculatively, and after a long moment he added, “And the longer you
keep running and living, the more you’ve got to run from. Think you might’ve had a taste of that.”

“But you keep going. You always keep going. Forward motion isn’t easy even if you have to do
it.” Luke reached up and flattened a hand against the Time Rotor; it was warm against his skin,
almost like the touch of another human. “I think...I think maybe you can’t do that if you’re all on
your own.”

The Doctor was definitely looking at him now, but his expression was inscrutable. “Oh?”

Luke ran his hand over the glowing column, and the faintest touch of alien music brushed at his
mind. “She’s singing, isn’t she? Singing to you, all the time...I think that’s what I heard. When
you were in my head, there was just a little bit of music, and it sounded a bit like her, a bit like—well, like the universe. I think that’s what I was hanging onto.”

“The music of the spheres,” the Doctor murmured.

“I think,” Luke began, and as he said it he knew it was true, “that I’m going to be okay because I’ve got Mum and Maria and Clyde. And you...even if you’re always going to be the lonely traveler, and...do things that keep you that way so other people can be happy...you’re never really alone. Not as long as you’ve got the TARDIS. She does take care of you.”

The Doctor blinked at him, as if really seeing him for the first time, and then he smiled. “Funny how often I need the reminder. Thank you, Luke Smith.”


“Yeah, about that,” the Doctor said. “You’ve still got the memory of what happened to you; nothing I can do about that. You might—things might be different now. But you know, I saw plenty in that head of yours, and I think you’ll be all right.”

“I know,” Luke said, and this time he meant it. “Thank you.”

He rejoined Maria and Sarah Jane outside the TARDIS. “You’ll want to see this,” Sarah Jane said, taking his hand. Maria held on to his other, and together with his family Luke watched the TARDIS dematerialize until even the last whisper of it was gone.

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