

Chapter Forty Nine

The snow moved. It lifted and buckled as if of its own volition. Small drifts fell away from the larger humps that formed and then cracked open. From the broken snow a gloved hand reached out. Fingers only just warm enough to function wrapped themselves around the shiny black object their motion slow enough not to disturb the plump white plumed bird recently settled to scrape at a more promising section of snow. With the same, languid pace the hand withdrew from view the object firmly held to the centre of its palm.

Corporal Jones, inside his tunnel of snow, looked at the device for a long minute. Just moments ago he had watched as an object the size of an aircraft carrier disappeared before his eyes to expose the cloudy sky behind it. Now he'd crawled well over a couple of hundred meters to snag one of the objects. He looked at the shiny black case.

"Doesn't look worth the effort." His voice wasn't loud enough to penetrate his snow packed hidey-hole but sometimes it was good to hear a human voice. He studied it for a moment longer and then carefully pulled the clam like object open. At once the device came to life. A small screen glowed blue and the small keypad on the other section of the shell glowed with a back light that illuminated the keys.

The music, loud and somewhat brassy, made the sniper swear out loud and cover the device with his body to muffle the electronic tune. Corporal Jones felt a trickle of sweat run down the back of his neck. He'd just given away his position to anyone who might be listening. He waited for those imagined others to act on this information. He waited a while longer before he felt brave enough to lift the now silent object out from beneath his body and the insulation of multiple layers of clothing designed for the arctic.

The screen remained lit but the tune no longer came from the device's tinny speaker. Jones squinted at the screen and read the instructions carefully. He pushed the device away and waited. Ten minutes later he picked it up again. The instructions remained as inviting as they

had originally. He pushed it away again. Corporal Jones was a very patient man and managed to resist again for close to fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes when his mind was focussed on only one thing, resistance.

At the end of the fifteen minutes his hand reached hesitantly towards the black device. Slowly he brought it back to rest in his hand just below his face. He read the back lit instructions once more, progressed halfway through following them and then slid it beneath his body once more. Twenty minutes late he completed the instructions as specified. He listened to the electronic bell simulation. The voice in his ear sounded as though it was a long way away, it was weak and quiet but it was one he recognised.

“Hello mum,” Jones said, “how are you?”

“You were wrong the last two times.”

“Hey, I never claimed to be an expert on tardis. It’s not as if I spent a lot of time in one.”

“I told you, this is not a tardis. Not a real tardis anyway.”

“It dematerialised, it had a console with a strangely arousing column in the centre, it seems to go on for ever.”

“It might be like a tardis but it’s not a real tardis.”

“Will you two stop bickering like an old married couple.”

Both Sarah and Jack stopped and turned to look at Maggie on this comment.

“Old married ...” Jack started.

“Couple.” Sarah Jane completed.

“Do I look old?” Jack sounded slightly concerned.

“We’re not a couple.” Sarah’s voice was more strident than the Captain’s.

“Oh for goodness sake.” Maggie’s voice contained all the exasperation of someone who had listened to the same conversation repeated over and over. “Do we know where we are or not?”

Sarah straightened up and pushed her shoulders back. “I’m sure it can’t be far from here.” She glanced up at another of the diagrams on the wall. “It’s just ...” she paused, “I’m not exactly sure how many dimensions these maps show. Oh.” As Sarah Jane stepped around a corner she entered an open space with a distinctly marked circle in the centre. “I think we’re here.”

The three humans on board the alien vessel looked at the circle. A rack on the wall behind the circle held the small units that allowed the teleportation set up to work. Sarah moved quickly to them and removed three from the rack.

“I think I can remember the settings the Master used to get us on board but I’m not certain of the arrangement he used to get me back to the factory.” She stared at the device disconsolate. “I don’t know how these really work.”

“Maybe we don’t have to know. Maybe it’s set up for an automatic transfer.” Jack took one of the units from Sarah’s hand.

“That’s a bit of a risk.” Sarah looked up at the Captain. “If you’re wrong we could end up anywhere.”

“Or nowhere,” The Captain added. And then he smiled. “What’s life without a bit of risk?” Maggie snatched one of the remaining small black boxes from Sarah’s grasp. “Give me that. I’m going home to my boys.”

The ground shifted awkwardly under foot. It was the waste land on the edge of the town, its top layers composed of removed fill from a long defunct mine, now covered with spindly larch and birch in a haltingly successful attempt to reclaim it as a social amenity. After rain

small pools formed on the scraggly grass covered surface and slowly fell inwards to create small, foot-sized sinkholes across the land. Peter stumbled as the footing became increasingly unpredictable.

His ankle twisted beneath him as the soft ground caught his foot as he attempted to zig-zag around a group of trees. With a cry the boy crashed to the soggy ground. For a long while he lay there. He hadn't slept for over a day and he spent most of that time hiding from or avoiding the police. Everything about him felt heavy and he couldn't even summon the energy to move from his face down position on the muddy ground. The mud smelled rotten and metallic now that his nose was close to the surface. Even the bad smell was not enough to force him from the position.

He knew he should be afraid. The phone call had been a strange affair. He'd phoned the number and despite the click that indicated the phone had been answered there was only silence on the other end of the line. He'd swallowed nervously before he spoke. Even so when he delivered the code word his voice sounded far too soft and scratchy for anyone on the other end of the phone to register what he had said.

Peter had cleared his throat to have another go when the phone line clicked again and a single word followed. "Activated."

The voice that delivered the single word was a woman's and the accent a BBC correct accent. She didn't say anything else. Peter nervously said hello and waited once more but there was no response to his greeting. He didn't know whether to hang up or not. It would have felt wrong and rude to do so under normal circumstances but he couldn't even hear any breathing on the other end of the line. So, slowly and gently, he lowered the hand piece back to the receiver. He waited for a moment longer as though he expected the phone to ring. It remained silent.

Justin's instructions came to the boy's mind and reluctantly he left the shelter of the house, closing the door carefully behind him and began walking out of town. Despite himself, Peter felt as though eyes were watching him as he walked along and his walk became faster and faster until eventually he broke into a half walk- half jog and finally into a run. The open waste ground had looked more appealing to his eyes than the closed streets full of places where people and machines with multiple legs could hide. Peter chose the waste ground. A few steps in and he was already slowed by its marshy surface.

Now he lay on the boggy ground. Sucking sounds came from the mud as he moved his arms and legs listlessly. Other than that the waste ground was almost silent. It was within this silence that Peter heard the distant sound of jet engines.

Mr. Major ran for the factory while the controlled police kept the body of invited reporters back. The blue line gave way slowly and fell back towards the factory where they could concentrate on the access points alone and not spread themselves so thinly. The police officer who had delivered Peter to his home on the previous evening lifted a small black box and spoke into it.

"There's a bit of trouble here, Sarge, you might want to let the Super know."

The unit spoke back to him and the officer nodded. "Over and out." He returned the device to a pocket in his coat and then moved to speak to the officers who stood before the door to the factory.

Wilkinson watched the movement of the police and their subsequent blocking of the entrance to the factory from behind a smaller building near the factory perimeter. He shook his head in bemused wonder as Justin detached himself from the mob of reporters and jogged over towards him.

“I never would have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.” He continued to shake his head while he smiled at the young producer.

Justin shrugged. “Journalists,” he said, “it’ll be a very sad day indeed when they can be bought off with champagne, canapés and the chance to hobnob.” Then the young man burst out laughing. “When I asked that first question I thought they’d just throw me out. If he hadn’t mentioned cancer I don’t know what would have happened.”

“Just as well he did. Now time we were leaving I think.” Wilkinson took a firm grip on the still giggling younger man and half led, half pulled him towards the breach in the fence. “We got everyone else out as Ms. Smith and Captain Harkness instructed.” Wilkinson kept talking as he helped Justin through the hole in the fence. “But I haven’t seen either of them since they split off. I thought I’d hang on here for a while longer, just in case they need a hand getting out.”

“Could you use some company?” Justin asked.

Wilkinson squatted down by the fence but out of sight of any casual observers. “I wouldn’t say no to a bit of company.”

Even though the noise of the shouting journalists was softened by distance it took both men a moment to hear the other sound and a moment longer to realise what the sounds were.

“Jets?” Wilkinson removed his hat and scratched his head. “But we’re not on any air routes.”

Justin’s smile faded quickly. “Peter,” he said.

Inside the factory Major’s face was luminescent with rage. “How could we have lost the whole shipment?”

The unfortunate subordinates left in the factory with him braced themselves against his roar.

“I want the commander of the Dreadnought Court Martialled over this.” He continued to display his displeasure at loud volume for several minutes longer while the rest of the Time

Lords looked down at their shoes or anywhere else than at their leader. Only the white-coated scientist looked somewhat amused by the display.

“Do you find this catastrophe amusing?” Major rounded on the scientist.

She took a step backwards, something that wasn't a usual response in time lord society.

Major prowled towards her his hands behind his back one palm cupped inside the other.

“Well?” He frowned down at her.

The scientist took a deep breath and allowed her gaze to meet his. “I repeatedly provided you with my opinion and my opinion was we had not tested these humans thoroughly enough. We needed far more data before we engaged in a mission like this.”

Major's back stiffened and he stood a little straighter as he regarded his subordinate. He sniffed. “We had plenty of data about these humans. You forget the Doctor has interacted with these beings in the past and future. All of his encounters were documented by his tardis. The High Council was granted access to the memories of every tardis when the current emergency was declared.”

“The Doctor's records.” The scientist waved a hand derisively.

“Yes, the Doctor's records. I would have thought he would have been a hero of yours.” The Major leaned in more closely.

“He may be a genius by any measure but he is merely a meddler. He has no real experimental data and, more importantly, he is the Doctor.”

“Speak sense. His tardis recorded every encounter with humans and one thing stood out above everything. The military of this planet are incompetent when dealing with superior technology” Major barked the words as he rocked backwards and forwards on the balls of his feet.

The Scientist shook her head and then looked directly into Major's face. “You have behaved like a fool and it may cost us everything. I will present my report directly to the High

Council. The Doctor is the doctor. His goal is to heal not to fight. He regards anyone with a military mind as inflexible and ultimately incompetent. You may well have proved him correct.”

Major turned his back on the scientist. “Remove her.” He spoke directly to the soldiers.

“Take her back to the Dreadnought and confine her to her quarters. She no longer has any authority on this mission.”

Two soldiers took up position on either side of the scientist.

“We should leave now before they find out who we are. Those same qualities we identified as necessary to defeat the Daleks would work even more effectively on our civilization.” She spoke calmly.

“We will replace our losses soon. The humans will eventually manufacture them for us. This is merely a delay. Our plan will go on.” He turned around with a sharp snap of his heels. “Get me in touch with the Dreadnought.”

The soldier looked puzzled for a moment.

“The battle tardis, man.”

The soldier fled up the stairs towards the factory office.

“Major.”

The call from one of the soldier brought the leader of the time lord expedition to a stop.

“Yes.” He turned around and for a time could not think of a thing to say.

“We’re not interrupting anything, are we?” Captain Jack took a half step forward from the transporter platform in the centre of the factory floor. “Don’t mind us. We’ll find our own way out.”

Jack, Sarah and Maggie quietly began to move towards the factory wall.

The soldiers had their weapons trained on the three humans but with no instructions they merely watched as the three moved quietly away.

Major opened his mouth to issue an instruction but was immediately interrupted. He turned towards the office and looked up at the soldier who had shouted out. “What is it now?”

Frustration filled every word.

“I’ve contacted the battle tardis, sir, and there have been some casualties.”

“From the human attack?” Major was clearly incredulous at the thought.

“It was the Master, sir. He has escaped. There were some deaths mostly among the pilots.

Replacements are being brought into position right now.”

“The Master.” Major clenched his fists and teeth. “How did he escape?” He directed the question towards the factory ceiling and then turned back to the three humans. “Stop them.”

The soldiers ran forwards and the three raised their hands under the threat of the weapons.

“Who’s the Master?” Captain Jack tried a disarming smile.

Major stepped quickly towards them. “Is there anything you want to tell me, Ms. Smith?”

“Not that springs to mind.” Sarah smiled nervously.

Major looked at her more closely. “I can see him all over you, Ms. Smith. He had you do his bidding.”

“He mind controlled her.” Jack pushed his way around one soldier to stand between the diminutive journalist and the Major.

The time lord looked at Jack and shuddered. He turned to the scientist between her own two guards. “This is the abomination you spoke of?”

The scientist nodded. “Time ignores him.”

“Maybe he has use in weapon development. At least we should know how he came to be this way.”

This time Sarah pushed her way to the front. “I don’t know who you are or why you pretend to be time lords but there’s one thing you should know. The Doctor protects this planet.”

“Major.”

The Major turned back to the raised office. “Yes, what now?”

“The humans have launched an attack, sir. The battle tardis is tracking five aircraft on a trajectory to us. The time lines point to an attack of sufficient capacity to destroy the entire town.”

“Peter.” The single word fell from Jack’s mouth and then he quickly turned to Sarah and Maggie. “Run to the transporter. We’ve got to get back aboard that tardis, it’s our only hope.”

“Stop them.” As soon as Major issued the command three of the soldiers fired and the three humans dropped to the ground. He once more turned his attention to the soldier in contact with the battle tardis. “Inform the Dreadnought that I want her here and those aircraft knocked form the skies.”

The soldier frowned. Major sighed. “Tell the battle tardis crew to instigate a long range attack on the aircraft and then materialise above the factory.”

“At once.” The soldier disappeared from view.

The Major turned back to the scientist. “Command in battle can be so exhilarating,” he said.